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Religious Matters: African (Vodoun) Materialities and the Western Concept of Religion

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MTS, Harvard Divinity School, 2009

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Abstract

Religious Matters: African (Vodoun) Materialities and the Western Concept of Religion
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This dissertation examines the interrelationship between the Western concept of religion, Euro-Western materialist philosophies, and African religious and material metaphysics. This project specifically explores: 1) the history and ideology of Euro-Western materialist discourses (as articulated through such concepts as "fetish," "idol," "thing," "object," etc.), and 2) specific ideations of African religious materialities. Through an analysis of Vodoun religious-material cultures in the Porto-Novo region of the Republic of Benin, this dissertation proposes that African religious experiences, philosophies, and practices are deeply immanent and material and offers a materialist re-theorization of the Western concept of religion. Yet, deeply critical of attempts to conceptualize African religious cultures through the category of the fetish, or other Euro-Western ontological notions, this dissertation highlights the ideological history of the fetish concept and related terms as deeply entrenched within the imperialist and colonial agenda of the Euro-Western world. Historically, materiality has been a site of political and religious contention among Euro-Western intellectuals, missionaries, administrators, and travelers about the supposed *right* relationship between "objects," "persons," and "gods." Yet, this dissertation proposes that among indigenous Vodoun communities, *matter* has been the site of essentially immanent metaphysical experiences that question and blur these Western normative distinctions. This project thus specifically challenges materialist discourses regarding non-Western religions. Rather than reiterating the Western ontological typology of inanimate "objects," human "persons," and wholly other "gods," this dissertation reveals instead a Vodoun world organized around nature "beings," human and non-human "persons," and ontological "mothers." This work argues then that when scholars imagine religion as not the ephemeral spirit of a wholly other, but rather as the actual substance of "nature," "persons," and this-worldly "mother" deities and gods, then *matter* is the very quintessence of religion.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1
Introduction:
The Matter of Religion

Section I: **The Politics of Materiality**

Historically, *matter* has been the embryonic and primordial Other of the modern

construction of religion. One can locate the conceptual construction of this oppositional

binary in the following four normative western epistemological oppositions: *matter* versus

spirit, *immanent* versus *transcendent*, *object* versus *subject*, and *nature* versus *culture*. These

oppositional binaries highlight philosophical, theological, and epistemological debates

central to the formation of the Western self as *modern*—as enlightened, civilized, and

Christian (or agnostic)—and as a "person" intellectually capable of constructing

seemingly *right* relations with a material world of "things," "commodities," "idols," and

"fetishes." Yet, in the words of Bruno Latour, "we [or better yet, 'Western selves'] have

never been modern." In an attempt to create a purified world, of *objects* and *subjects*,

commodities and *persons*, *gods* and *fetishes*, the Moderns have merely succeeded in creating

hybrids, the interbreeds of nature and culture, objects and persons, humans and non-

humans, and the list goes on.[1] Nonetheless, ideologies of modernity and their projects of

purification[2] continue to reify the theoretical binary between *religion* and *matter* and persist

in creating and recreating "objects," "things," and "fetishes."

A rehashing of this modern conceptual dilemma, contemporary debates between

sui generis religionists and naturalist-oriented scholars of religion—that is, intellectual

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[1] See Bruno Latour, *We have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10-13; Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom & Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), xxiii, 79.

[2] For his elaboration of this Modern "purification" project, see Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 10-11, 33, 53, 56.

conflicts regarding religion as the domain of the transcendent, *wholly other* and religion as the domain of the social, cultural, political, and/or natural—are centered around this fundamental concern for and problematic regarding the relationship between *religion* and *materiality*. More precisely, this contemporary religious studies conundrum reflects the workings of a modern politics of materiality whereby the discursive power to construct *religion* is predicated upon its relationship to *matter* and the *material*. For the *sui generis* school, the domain of matter is a substructure for the superstructure of the sacred (e.g., Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Mircea Elaide), and for naturalist scholars, matter has often been the foundation for conceptualizing more abstract social, political, and cultural human relations (e.g., E.B. Tylor, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim). Yet, in both cases, the construction of materiality is the product of a modern politics of epistemological privileging and othering through which the Western (and particularly Protestant) ontological typology of "persons," "things," and "gods" is produced and enforced.[3] As Webb Keane suggests, the Protestant legacy has bequeathed the Moderns with a world in which "the value of the human is defined in its distinctiveness from, and superiority to, the material world."[4]

If we define politics, in the words of Robert Dahl, as "any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves to a significant extent, power, rule, or authority,"[5] or as

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[3] See Keane, *Christian Moderns* (2007).

[4] Webb Keane, "Sincerity, 'Modernity,' and The Protestants," *Cultural Anthropology* 17, no. 1 (February 2002), 71. For an extended discussion of this Protestant legacy, see also Dick Houtman and Brigit Meyer, "Introduction," in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, edited by Dick Houtman and Brigit Meyer (New York: Fordham University, 2012), 10-13.

[5] Robert A. Dahl, *Modern Political Analysis*, 2nd Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970), 6.

Kate Millett suggests, as "power-structured relationships,"[6] then the conceptual relationship between *religion* and *materiality*—which is sustained by asymmetrical relations between the civilized and the primitive and ongoing conflicts between religious believers and irreligious skeptics—is necessarily political. It creates and sustains certain domains of power, authority, agency, and privilege. As various scholars have alluded (e.g., Charles Long; Talal Asad; Saba Mahmood), religion is more than a concept, a category, or even a theory. It is a politics, an ideological relationship of power, privilege, and authority between "religion" and its Others—whether primitives, savages, agnostics, idol worshippers, or fetishes.

In this dissertation, I explore this material politics of religion, by which I mean the historical, discursive, and actual interactions between *materiality* and power that participate in the construction of *religion*, *religions*, and the *religious*. Yet, not content with exploring religion as merely a Western concept and construction, I am concerned with how religion's Others, precisely its African (Vodoun)[7] Others, demonstrate and construct their own material politics of religion. I investigate, therefore, how the agentive relationship between the categories of *matter* and *religion* is reframed, imagined, and lived in ways that construct different ontological categories that conflate, co-mingle, and/or even dissolve so-called "persons," "things," and "gods."

When Saba Mahmood first published *The Politics of Piety* in 2005, Mahmood sought to reframe the liberalist understanding of the subject, freedom, and of human

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[6] Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 2000), 23.

[7] I utilize the phrasing "African (Vodoun)" to signify the central interrelationship between the particular and the general. This phraseology, moreover, identifies the constructive work that this present work is attempting in drawing upon Vodoun as the particular but pondering its wider implications, particularly the construction of indigenous generic theories and concepts in the study of Africa.

agency and to destabilize the normativity of liberal feminist politics. Through an ethnographic analysis of an Egyptian women's mosque movement, Mahmood challenges feminist scholars to consider the fallacy of assuming that women, in general, should intrinsically oppose non-liberalist practices and values. In reflecting on this theoretical supposition within feminist scholarship and liberalist discourse, Mahmood suggests,

> If we recognize that the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times, but is also profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions, then the question arises: how do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of bodies, knowledges, and subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics?[8]

Similarly, if we, as scholars, understand that the relationship between *religion* and *matter* and the defining of these respective terms is contingent upon Western norms and philosophical challenges regarding distinctive categories of being, namely, "persons," "things," and "gods," then reframing Mahmood's question, demands asking: "[H]ow do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of bodies, knowledges, [agencies], and subjectivities" that are inconsistent with the norms of Western ontological-epistemologies? How do we then re-evaluate the Western episteme that has created and constructed these very "persons," "things," and "gods" as distinct categories and existential domains?

I argue, therefore, that through varied processes and relationships of social, metaphysical, and civic influence and authority, Vodoun devotees in the Republic of Benin construct their own material politics of religion, their own means of framing the material world and material culture vis-à-vis the *religious*. By the *religious* and *religion*, I simply here mean metaphysics, that is, a community's understanding of the essential

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[8] Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 14.

nature of the totality of being and existence, including its categories, structure, character, origin, and dynamics.[9] Thus, just as Mahmood has contested the constructed ideal of the Western liberal subject, through a privileging of Vodoun conceptions of the *religious* (i.e., the metaphysical), in this dissertation, I argue that the normativity of religion as a dematerialized and essentially transcendent experience of the sacred must, too, be challenged. Like other scholars (e.g., Daniel Miller; David Morgan; Birgit Meyer; Dick Houtman) equally concerned with facilitating the "material turn" in religious studies, I insist that this construction of religion has produced a politics of materiality by which religious subjects, places, experiences, and concepts have been dematerialized. This process of dematerialization has resulted in multiple materialities being ignored, denigrated, and/or regulated to totems, fetishes, idols, and "objects." Yet, ultimately concerned with a process of dematerialization that decenters normative Western epistemologies and ontologies and redistributes the domain of agency, I challenge scholars to move beyond Western frameworks (e.g., "object," "thing," and "fetish") for "materializing the study of religion."[10]

Section II: **The Triad of Bad Objecthood**

In the modern history of the study of religion and its peculiar politics of materiality, the conceptual triad of "bad objecthood," as termed by W.J.T Mitchell,

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[9] See Munyaradzi Mawere, *African Belief and Knowledge Systems: A Critical Perspective* (Oxford: African Books Collective, 2011), 1-4; G.O. Ozumba, "African Traditional Metaphysics," *Quodlibet Journal* 6, no. 3 (July-September 2004).

[10] See Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate, "The Origin and Mission of Material Religion," *Religion* 40 (2010): 209. Meyer, Morgan, Paine, and Plate state, "A materialized study of religion begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricably from it."

epitomized in the totem, the idol, and the fetish constitutes the "negative space" [11] *par*

excellence around the disciplinary object of religion. Yet, these terms do not merely signify

"particular *human* attitudes toward and modes of using 'things,'"[12] as Brigit Meyer and

Dick Houtman would have us believe nor are they simply "names of three different

relations to things,"[13] as Mitchell himself asserts. Rather, these concepts point to distinct

Western attitudes rather than *human* inclinations concerning matter and materiality. The

totem, the idol, and the fetish, thus, represent three distinct relations to "objects" and

"things" *particular to* Western epistemological and ontological norms.

While this inconspicuous substituting of the "Western" for the "human" may

seem innocent and harmless, I insist instead that the hegemony of Western epistemologies

has confined and distorted our understanding of the *human*, in general, such that, as the

sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi poignantly argues, "Western manifestations of the human

condition" have, too, often been mistaken for "the human condition itself." Leveling her

critique against African scholars in particular who are often thoroughly inculcated in

modern Western intellectual traditions, Oyewumi additionally suggests that in

"misapprehend[ing] the nature of human universals," these scholars continue to reify and

reaffirm Western knowledge systems to the detriment of its Others.[14] Effectively, the

Western episteme goes unchallenged, and its Others remain handmaidens at the service

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[11] See conceptualization of the notion of "negative space" in Jason Josephson, "Reflexive Religious Studies: A Note," *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* (April 18, 1014), Accessed January 5, 2015, http://www.equinoxpub.com/blog/2014/04/reflexive-religious-studies-a-note/

[12] Houtman and Meyer, "Introduction," in *Things*, 14 (emphasis added).

[13] W. J. T. Mitchell, "Totemism, Fetishism, and Idolatry," in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 188-189.

[14] Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 21.

of Western civilizing and modernizing projects. Yet, these indentured servants do not realize the lie of modernity. In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Bruno Latour discloses:

> We too are afraid that the sky is falling. We too associate the tiny gesture of releasing an aerosol spray with taboos pertaining to the heavens. We too have to take laws, power and morality into account in order to understand what our sciences are telling us about the chemistry of the upper atmosphere.
>
> Yes, but we are not savages; no anthropologist studies us that way, and it is impossible to do with our own culture—or should I say nature-culture?—what can be done elsewhere, with others. Why? Because we are modern. Our fabric is no longer seamless. Analytic continuity has become impossible. For traditional anthropologists, there is not—there cannot be, there should not be—an anthropology of the modern world (Latour, 1988a). The ethnosciences can be connected in part to society and to discourse (Conklin, 1983); science cannot.[15]

In splitting nature from culture and breaking the seams between "religion," "science," and "superstition," Western realities have been fabricated as human realities, as outside of the domain of traditional anthropology—a domain historically reserved for anomalies among *homo sapiens*, or better yet, *homo religiosus*, that is, non-Western, non-modern, non-Christian seemingly human communities.

Thus, *totems*, *idols*, and *fetishes* are explanations for human and religious irregularities—relationships and modes of being that pervert modern Western notions of the Christian (particularly Protestant) and the agentive human subject. By shoring up the myth of modernity, these concepts legitimize and delegitimize particular types of relationships and ways of being in the world. Yet, in unraveling this myth of modernity and undoing this privileging of Western epistemologies, this discussion suggests the following questions: How are material relations, or better yet relations, in general, conceptualized, constructed, and lived within classically[16] oriented African communities?

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[15] Latour, *We have Never Been Modern*, 7.

[16] My use of the adjective "classical" is in the same sense that one might refer to classical Greek or Roman culture. By using this adjective, I maintain that ancient African

What ontologies, that is, types and categories of being, mediate daily interactions and relationships? Yet, before we consider these questions, let us return to our consideration of the triad of bad objecthood so we might better understand what we are confronting and challenging.

The *totem*, the *idol*, and the *fetish* are "bad objects" precisely because they point to interactions with matter deemed inappropriate and incongruous with the ideals of the modern West. These "special things"[17] create the boundaries around the concept of religion that determine both inclusion and exclusion, and thus, according to the philosopher Nelson Goodman, are "ways of worldmaking,"[18] meaning, in our case, stratagems for constructing a modern conceptual and actual world of *religion*, *religions*, and the *religious*. Yet, as Mitchell alternatively argues, these special things are also "ways of unmaking the various worlds in which they circulate"; mapping the voids and negative spaces that constitute the triangular relationship between religion, science, and superstition,[19] these "bad objects" are "sites of struggle over stories and territories."[20] Even so, as sites of contested narratives and terrains, whose stories are these special objects telling and whose territories are being mapped, claimed, conquered, and/or seized?

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religious cultures, traditions, and though systems are established standards of value and excellence.

[17] Mitchell, "Totemism, Fetishism, and Idolatry," 193.

[18] See Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1978).

[19] See Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), for a discussion of how this triad of western concepts influenced the invention of "religion" in Japan.

[20] Mitchell, "Totemism, Fetishism, and Idolatry," 196.

Section III: **The Totem as "Outside the Question of Materiality"**

Seemingly situating the *religious* within a material landscape by defining religion as

"a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred *things*,"[21] in his *Elementary Forms*

of Religious Life (1912), Émile Durkheim instead reduces the totem to a symbol. He states,

> …it was not the intrinsic nature of the thing whose name the clan bore that set it apart as the object of worship. Furthermore, if the emotion elicited by the thing itself really was the determining cause of totemic rites and beliefs, then this thing would be the sacred being par excellence, and the animals and plants used as totems would play the leading role in religious life. But we know that the focus of the cult is elsewhere. It is symbolic representations of this or that plant or animal. It is totemic emblems and symbols of all kinds that possess the greatest sanctity. And so it is in totemic emblems and symbols that the religious source is to be found, while the real objects represented by those emblems receive only a reflection. The totem is above all a symbol, a tangible expression of something else.[22]

Ultimately, things and their materiality are superseded by the symbol, an abstraction of

collective norms and values enshrined within the clan. The totemic plants and animals—

these special sacred things—are thus not religiously significant in and of themselves; they

are merely placeholders for ideas and collective thoughts. Accordingly, Durkheim

furthermore asserts, "to express our own ideas even to ourselves, we need to attach those

ideas to material things that symbolize them. But, here, the role of matter is *minimum*. The

object that serves as a prop for the idea does not amount to much as compared to the

ideal superstructure under which it disappears."[23] Hence, in Durkheim's symbolic

theorizing of the totem, its materiality is rendered trivial and opaque. As Meyer and

Houtman propose, the totem reveals itself as "placed outside the question of materiality"

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[21] Émile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 44.

[22] Ibid., 207-208.

[23] Ibid., 229-230 (emphasis added).

and as not essentially concerned with material *objects* in and of themselves.[24] While

providing a framework for conceptualizing relationships between human persons and

things, the totem, in actuality, neither challenges the status quo of the object nor suggests

a serious attention to a lifeworld of things. As a result, though initially a concept

indigenous to the Ojibwe[25] (deriving from the word *ototeman*), meaning that which belongs

specifically to the community or family,[26] in the end, the *totem* materializes as a

nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western intellectual narrative consistent with the

modern project of mapping the borders and boundaries between *religion* and *matter*.

Section IV: Facticius— The Manufacturing of *Idolo* and *Feitiço*

While the materiality of the *totem* neatly disappears under the burden of collective

meanings, the *idol* and the *fetish*, on the other hand, chart quite different stories and

distinctive theological, legal and even commercial landscapes. To understand the

relationship between the idol and the fetish, and yet the conceptual inadequacies of the

idol in accounting for, what William Pietz terms, the "untranscended materiality"[27] of the

fetish, I begin this short genealogy by bringing attention to the pre-Christian Roman

concept of *facticius*. Originally employed in the context of commercial exchanges, Pietz

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[24] Houtman and Meyer, "Introduction," 14.

[25] For a short summary of their history and culture, see James B. Minahan, *Ethnic Groups of the Americas: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 273-276. The Ojibwe are a Native American ethnic group commonly called Chippewa in the U.S. and Ojibwe in Canada. However, these native peoples often refer to themselves as Anishnabe meaning the "true people." Their language is called Central Algonkian and is shared with related ethnic groups in the North American region.

[26] Alexander F. Chamberlain, "Algonkian Words in American English: A Study in the Contact of the White Man and the Indian," *The Journal of American Folklore* 15, no. 59 (1902): 263.

[27] William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I" *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (Spring 1985): 7.

elaborates three distinct and yet related connotations of the Latin *facticius*, the adjective

form of the past participle of the verb *facere*, to make. A modifier utilized to describe the

value and quality of a particular commodity, *facticius* meant: 1) "manufactured" rather

than "naturally formed," indicating a man-made commodity as opposed to a good

unaltered by human means; 2) "artificial" rather than "natural," suggesting the synthetic

production of a product as well as the quality and value of said product; and, finally, 3)

"fraudulent" rather than "genuine," indicating a product deceptively and deliberately

fabricated.[28] While originally irrelevant to religious concerns, as Pietz highlights, the

conceptual diversity of *facticius*, a Roman mercantile concept, would later be appropriated

by and become the theoretical basis for Christian theological discourse concerning the

idolo and Christian law regarding *feitiçaria* (i.e., witchcraft). It would also eventually

influence fifteenth-century Portuguese mercantile lexicon, which included the concepts of

feitiço, *feiticerio*, and *feitiçaria* (respectively referring to witchcraft objects, persons, and

practices) utilized in the Portuguese encounter with non-Christian peoples on the so-

called "Guinea Coast"[29] of West Africa.[30]

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[28] William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13 (Spring 1987): 24-25. Hartmut Böhme similarly identifies the etymological origins of the term fetish with the Latin conception of *factitious*, meaning "what is made," in contrast to *terrigemus*, "what grows naturally." See Hartmut Böhme, *Fetischismus und Kultur: Eine andere Theorie der Moderne* (Reinbek: Rowoholt, 2006), 179.

[29] See William Pietz, "Bosman's Guinea: The Intercultural Roots of an Enlightenment Discourse," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 9 (Fall 1982): 2. "Guinea" did not merely name a geographical place, but rather the European perspective that West Africa was the prime archetype of non-Enlightenment. As Pietz explains, "We might take the word 'Guinea' as an emblem of the novel problem constitutive of Enlightenment discourse and theory. 'Guinea' was the word used to designate black Africa—a non-European, non-monotheist land not covered by the histories and cultural codes of old Europe or classical antiquity."

[30] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, II," 24-25, 31.

In the context of early Christian discourse regarding the idol and idolatry, as particularly evident in the writings of Tertullian and Augustine, *facticius* became a theological rather than mercantile concept for describing the "manufactured," "artificial," and "fraudulent" manipulation of souls, bodies, and religious objects. Idolatry developed as a heresiographical discourse to distinguish, as Pietz states, the "willful alteration of material bodies for religious purposes" from religious bodies and sacramental objects sanctified through the church and, additionally, to differentiate "fraudulent spirituality" (i.e., superstition) from proper ecclesiastical faith and priestly divine authority.[31] While the *idol* was conceptualized as a resemblance, as an image (*simulacra*) and as manufactured (*facticii*), ecclesiastical objects, on the other hand, though themselves manufactured images and not simply natural products, were nonetheless understood as distinct and genuine objects of priestly power and authority.[32] Therefore, the Roman mercantile connotation of *facticius* as an object deceptively fabricated as opposed to genuinely produced was refashioned in accordance with Christian theological concerns to differentiate between orthodox, ecclesiastical objects, persons, and practices, on the one hand, and objects, persons, and practices of superstition, and idolatry, on the other. The discourse and narrative of idolatry did not, therefore, forbid the use of religious images but rather became a heresiography that determined and restricted their proper domains.

Whereas the province and heresiographical status of sacramental images was at stake in the discourse of idolatry, *feitiçaria* introduced a new problematic that was a question of "law and order" rather than simply theological orthodoxy. While heresy concerned "pagans" and "heretics," witchcraft, *feitiçaria*, defined a novel problem that

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[31] Ibid., 28, 30.
[32] Ibid., 27, 30.

"indicate[d] the conceptual failure of the theory of idolatry," a theory of fraudulent iconic resemblance.[33] Even still, in medieval Christianity, *feitiçaria* (witchcraft) and *feitiço* (witchcraft objects) did not point to an essentially material problem, rather as Pietz explains,

> The basic components of the idea of the fetish were not present in the medieval notion of the *feitiço*. The notion of the *feitiço*, as conceived within church doctrine on witchcraft, did not raise the essential problem of the fetish: the problem of the social and personal value of material objects. It failed to do this because the logic of idolatry displaced the status of the material object to that of an image, a passive medium effecting relations between spiritual agents according to a principle of resemblance… The concept of the material image attributed no significance to the fetish-object's unique origin, that is, to the historical process of its production. Based on a logic of resemblance, it was the likeness of the end product as image that mattered… Beyond this, there was no problem in Christian medieval culture regarding the ability of material objects to embody social value and human-oriented powers (which is the basis of the problem of the fetish).[34]

Feitiçaria and *feitiço* instead, as Pietz elaborates, raised the problem of *maleficia*. Often translated as "sorcery," "magic," or "witchcraft," the concept denoted practices involving maleficent supernatural agents. Accordingly, as a Christian legal concept, the discourse of *feitiçaria* distinguished malicious magical observances from lawful practices and rituals.[35] As such, in the context of Christian legal discourse, the pre-Christian Roman concept of *facticius* took on an entirely new meaning that went beyond the discourse of idolatry in describing an unorthodox religious object, person, or practice as "manufactured," "artificial," or even "fraudulent" and developed into a moral and legal qualifier that signified certain persons, objects, and practices as unscrupulous and criminal. This novel conception of *facticius* would, in the Portuguese encounter with peoples on the "Guinea Coast," become a defining characteristic of the fetish-object.

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[33] Ibid, 31.
[34] Ibid., 35.
[35] Ibid., 32.

Section V: **The Fetish as a Problem-Idea**

The religious lexicon of the fifteenth-century Portuguese, who encountered

African religious-material cultures on the "Guinea Coast" of West Africa, incorporated

this substantial Christian distinction between the *idolo*, as a fraudulent, heretical icon and

therefore a false god, and the *feitiço*, as a maleficent and unlawful magical object, an entity

of witchcraft. Even still, as Hartmut Böhme emphasizes, in this encounter context, the

concept of the *fetish* was often utilized interchangeably with the notion of the *idol*, and

therefore was subsumed within the rhetoric of superstition.[36] Nonetheless, given the

conceptual inadequacy of the discourse of idolatry in accounting for Portuguese

encounters with non-Christian African communities, in particular, Pietz iterates,

> While the religion of heathen peoples was automatically termed 'idolatry' by
> medieval Christians, the greater descriptive accuracy of *feitiço* over *idolo* for
> characterizing the sacramental objects of African religion led in time to the
> classification of African religion as *feitiçaria* rather than *idolatria*. The use of a term
> meaning 'witchcraft' to characterize the religion, and thus the principle of social
> order, of an entire people was unprecedented.**[37]**

The discourse of *feitiçaria* and *feitiço* essentially defined African religious cultures as, not

merely *heathen* (i.e., non-Christian), but as *primitive* (i.e., depraved and unlawful). Yet, since,

as Böhme suggests, the discourse of *feitiçaria* was partly supported by the discourse of

idolatry, which was concerned with heresiographical religious images,[38] I contend that the

actual materiality of African religious cultures was still not the essential problematic. For,

as our earlier discussion revealed, the Catholic discourse of idolatry did not condemn

religious icons in their entirety, but rather determined the theological legitimacy of

sacramental images. By conceptualizing African religious cultures as *feitiçaria*, the essential

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[36] Böhme, *Fetishismus and Kultur*, 182-185.
[37] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, II," 36-37.
[38] Böhme, *Fetishismus and Kultur*, 182-185.

problematic of the so-called "Guinea Coast" was framed as lawlessness and disorder,

which in the context of mercantile relations with local traders would become a central

anxiety regarding facilitating and sustaining lucrative commodity exchanges (whether

gold, slaves, or other products of trade).

As Dutch merchants confronted African societies on the coast of "Guinea"

beginning in the late 1590s and early 1600s, the pidgin term *fetisso*, conceptually

distinctive from both *idolo* and *feitiço* (as outlined above), began to take shape as a novel

European theory of materiality. In this context of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century

mercantile exchanges, the concept of the *fetish* was born.[39] Described by Pietz as "self-

conscious agents of secular economic enterprise," these Calvinist Dutch merchants (and

subsequently French and English Protestants) utilized the notion of the *fetisso* to identify

problematical continuities between Catholic sacramental objects and practices and

African materialist predispositions.[40] Given the dual influence of their normative

Protestant ideals, which denied the religious significance and utility of material objects,

and their mercantile ideologies, which framed material things as either actual or potential

commodities, for Protestant merchants, as Pietz explains, "material objects came to be

identified as proper to economic as *opposed* to religious activity."[41] In this mercantile

religious context, these Protestant merchants defined the problem of the *fetisso*, that is, the

fetish, with regard to two central concepts: 1) the *trifle*, suggesting mental confusion

regarding the religious as *opposed* to the economic valuation of material things, and 2)

fancy, implying the complete social chaos of African societies.[42] With respect to these

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[39] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," 5; "The Problem of the Fetish, II," 23.
[40] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, II," 39.
[41] Ibid., 40 (emphasis added).
[42] Ibid., 41-42.

concepts, I would like to note that through the discourse of *fancy* the pre-Christian Roman adjective *facticius*, as the manufactured commodity, was reframed in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century discourse of the *fetisso* as simultaneously a mercantile and religious descriptor that defined African materialities as products of irrational religious imagination rather than proper human reason. Furthermore, as the concept of fancy suggests, while continuous with the fifteenth-century *feitiçaria*, namely, witchcraft, and its narrative of lawlessness and immorality, the concept of the trifle, on the other hand, indicates that the *fetisso*, as Pietz suggests, marked a significant departure from the earlier discourse of idolatry.[43] While the concept of idolatry was concerned with heresiographical sacramental images—that is, mere iconic resemblances—that provided the appearance of an independent spiritual agent, the fetish alternatively pointed to the material object *as* the religious agent. The fetish introduced the novel "problem-idea" of "irreducible [and agentive] materiality."[44] Yet, even still, as Meyer and Houtman poignantly remind us, "The partly overlapping discourse of the fetish and the idol are a symptom of the fear of matter… that has long haunted the study of religion."[45]

In its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mercantile Protestant environment, the *fetish* developed into a cross-cultural translational concept for comparing normative European materialist notions—that assumed a necessary distinction between the commodity, on the one hand, and the social and the sacred, on the other—to African materialist perspectives—which unbeknownst to European merchants and missionaries embraced continuity and overlap between the economic, the social, and the religious. However, in 1703, it was Willem Bosman's *A New and Accurate Description of Guinea* that

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[43] See ibid., 45.
[44] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," 7.
[45] Houtman and Meyer, "Introduction," in *Things*, 14-15.

provided the descriptive narrative for the *fetish* to develop into an Enlightenment concept. In the context of a European readership encountering a literary world of African fetishes, trifles, and fancy, as Pietz elucidates, "For eighteenth-century Europe, the figure of the African fetish worshipper was a paradigmatic example of what was *not* enlightenment."[46] Hence, with Bosman's conception in mind, various philosophers and social theorists began to frame their understandings of the so-called "primitive" and "primitive religion."

Since the ideological development of fetish discourses, matter and materiality have presented Western scholars with a central problematic: How can material things hold social, religious, erotic, and/or aesthetic values rather than solely retain their "real" value as instruments and "objects" for market exchange?[47] First, this question presupposes a particular understanding and organization of existence. It implies that "persons," "objects," and "gods" are necessarily distinct entities. Second, this question privileges the Euro-Western subject as having the sole capacity to determine what is real/false, enlightened/unenlightened, rational/confused, and religious/superstitious. Yet, as William Pietz has poignantly argued, the *fetish* is first and foremost a "problem-idea" and a "factitious universal."[48] The *fetish* is fictitious precisely because, as Pietz reiterates, it has always reified the "false objective values of a culture from which the subject is personally distanced."[49]

Various post-colonial theorists (e.g., William Pietz, Charles Long, David Chidester, Tatsuo Murakami) have attempted to highlight and deconstruct these "false objective values" as ideological stratagems for fabricating, in the words of Charles Long,

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[46] Pietz, "Bosman's Guinea," 2.
[47] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish II," 24
[48] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," 5, 10.
[49] Ibid., 14.

"a negative structure of concreteness"[50] that has provided a conceptual and political basis for constructing *Others* as primitive and Western selves as *civilized*. A product of imperialist and Enlightenment thinking, the fetish as a problem-idea has been utilized to recreate and violently reimagine indigenous religious materialities and institutions as primitive, uncivilized, and Other. The fetish as an inappropriate religious "object" and the primitive as the paradigmatic Other are interconnected and coexisting phenomena. Hence, critically situated in the theoretical and methodological intersection between 1) the study of materiality and material culture, 2) modern fetish discourses, and 3) theories and methods in comparative religious studies, this dissertation is essentially concerned with identifying the politics of materiality, namely, the praxes of agency, material power, and authority, by which present-day African (Vodoun) communities counter and challenge Euro-Western, normative materialist assumptions that participate in the proliferation of "bad objecthood" and that map the boundaries between personhood, divinity, and materiality.

Section VI: **Towards a New Materialism**

If in our attention to material religion, we are to imagine a path beyond these totems, idols, and fetishes—these "bad objects" of religion—then perhaps it is not sufficient simply to shift our attention, as Meyer and Houtman suggest, to "more positive categories of religious things" and "how things matter in religion."[51] Rather, we must begin to investigate a new basis for exploring the relationship between *matter* and *religion*.

In the June 2000 issue of *The Journal for the American Academy of Religion*, David

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[50] Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1995), 101.

[51] Houtman and Meyer, "Introduction," in *Things*, 16.

Chidester articulates his manifesto for a new materialism in religious studies. He invites

fellow scholars of religion to develop theoretical frameworks for the study of religious

materiality. Through his analysis of the edited volume *Critical Terms in the Study of Religion,*

Chidester suggests three routes for a materialist development: 1) "reconstructing the

genealogy of dematerial religion"; namely, addressing and articulating the historical

trajectory by which colonized peoples in particular have undergone a process of

dematerializion and deterritorialization resulting in "the production of a dematerialized

religion," 2) recovering the animated life of materiality in the study of religion, and 3)

focusing on "the political economy of the sacred" by which material objects, material

relationships, material forces, and material conditions produce religious worlds.[52] This

dissertation seeks to respond to this charge towards a new materialism through an

attention not only to the dematerialization of or even negative materialization of African

religious Others, as our discussion of the totem, the idol, and the fetish has highlighted,

but also to the larger project of recovery—a reawakening of materiality in the study of

religion and a reclamation of the centrality of matter in our theorizations of African

indigenous persons, communities, practices and institutions. This reawakening thus

necessarily includes Chidester's third charge, for only through an attention to the

workings of the economy of the sacred, that is, for me, the metaphysical, can we come to

understand and articulate how matter is actually *lived* and not only lived with or through.

In this textual analysis of religious studies, materiality studies, and Vodoun art and

anthropological discourses and this ethnographical analysis of present-day Vodoun

religious cultures in the Porto Novo-Adjarra region of the Republic of Benin, I seek to

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[52] David Chidester, "Material Terms for the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 2 (June 2000), 376-378.

pave a way forward towards a new materialism in the study of religion that begins by

engaging and yet deprivileging Western ontologies and epistemologies to instead highlight

African, and in this case, Vodoun metaphysical norms, categories, and concepts. In

attending to African indigenous metaphysical philosophies, practices, and norms, I

explicitly answer the call put forward by Afe Adogame, Bolaji Bateye, and Ezra Chitando

for the proliferation of "African traditions" in the study of religion that evaluate and

negate and/or revise colonialist and imperialists theories of religion and that

simultaneously propose new methodological and theoretical paradigms for the study of

religion in Africa.[53] While, these scholars recognize, "Africa" is a European "invention,"

at least to a certain degree,[54] the image of Africa cannot be limited to its colonialist

imagining or defined only according to the Western gaze. As a primary restorative

symbol of post-coloniality, particularly for those persons and communities ancestrally

connected to its modern diasporas, as Charles Long proposes, the image of Africa, as the

image of originary space and ancient beginnings, is "invested with historical and religious

possibilities" that have often offered these persons and communities a self-determined

basis for legitimacy in the modern world.[55] Moreover, although Africa and its Diasporas

constitute diverse worlds and world-senses,[56] as various scholars have attested, there are,

nevertheless, guiding principles and fundamental characteristics that materialize (though

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[53] See Afe Adogame et al., eds., "Introduction: African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa," in *African Traditions in the study of Religion in Africa: Emerging Trends, Indigenous Spirituality and the Interface with Other World Religions* (Farnham: Ashgate, Ashews and Holts, 2012), 1-13.

[54] V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

[55] Long, "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," in *Significations*, 190.

[56] I have adopted the concept of a "world-sense" rather than a "world-view" from the sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi. See Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*, 3.

in different manners) across ethnic, national, cultural, and geographic differences.[57]

Hence, developing "African traditions" in the study of religion partly necessitates

elaborating these guiding principles and characteristics into generic theories and concepts

that can shift the disciplinary horizon of the field. The development of these African

generic theories and concepts is, therefore, not meant to limit, confine, or essentialize, but

rather is intended to offer new theoretical frameworks for theorizing the Africana[58] world

in all of its diversity. Hence, these concepts and theories themselves are to be revised and

re-theorized. Therefore, if Jonathan Z. Smith is correct in insisting that there is no

disciplinary study of religion without the conceptual horizon that the concept of religion

produces,[59] then the question is: what concepts and theories are necessary to the

establishment of "African traditions" in the study of the Africana sacred world?

Therefore, in giving attention to the particular and the general, I am concerned with not

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[57] See for example Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 70-71; Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24; Emmanuel Yartekwei Amugi Lartey, *Decolonializing God: An African Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 25-31. Magesa delineates the main characteristics of African religion as: 1) embraces the whole of life, 2) communal, 3) religious leaders are responsible for ensuring continued bond between the living and the dead, and 4) religious leads are responsible for maintaining right relationships between the visible and the invisible worlds. Likewise, Stewart identifies six fundamental characteristics of African religions that can also be observed in various African Diasporas: 1) a communotheistic conception of the divine, 2) ancestral veneration, 3) possession trance and mediumship, 4) food offerings and animal sacrifices, 5) divination and herbalism, and 6) a belief in neutral mystical power. Similarly, Lartey distinguishes seven characteristics: 1) the sacredness of all life, 2) the plurality of the divine domain, 3) mystical connectivity through communal ritual, 4) the desire of cosmic harmony, 5) creativity and adaptability, 6) the affirmation of life, and 7) pragmatic spirituality.

[58] See Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction of Africana Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1. I employ the term "Africana" in accordance with Gordon's meaning, that is, to refer specifically to "'Africans' and their diaspora[s]… includ[ing] the convergence of most Africans with the racial term 'black' and its many connotations."

[59] Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 194.

only elaborating the metaphysical particularities of Vodoun but also developing generic

concepts and theories for the study of African religious cultures and for the re-

imagination of religion in Africana worlds.

This shift in perspective is necessary precisely because of the colonial and modern

contexts in which African religious Others have been constructed, defined, and often

dismissed. If Charles Long is correct in inferring that the origins of religion can be located

somewhere betwixt and between the invention of the civilized and the primitive, then, as

Tatsuo Murakami reminds us, the theoretical and historical search for the origins of

religion occurred first through *negation* of the primitive and then through the *invention* of

this primitive Other as literally "the *material* origin of religion."[60] Accordingly, it is

precisely through this colonialist and imperialist invention of religious Others as *primitives*

that matter was constructed as the primordial Other of the modern concept of religion.

Therefore, to begin to engage these religious Others seriously, we must do more than re-

imagine Western intellectual norms or even look for Western philosophical alternatives.

In reaching for a post-coloniality, we must take seriously the intellectual traditions of

those "primitives" and "savages" that were reinvented and fetishized through the

civilizing and modernizing projects of the European West. Thus, in my attention to

materiality in the study of religion, I ask not: What are the relationships between African

(Vodoun) devotees and "things"? Rather, I ask the more fundamental ontological and

epistemological question: How do African (Vodoun) devotees and community members

construct and understand their cosmos, namely, their life-world? What ontological types

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[60] Tatsuo Murakami, "Asking the Question of the Origin of Religion in the Age of Globalization," in *Religion and Global Culture: New Terrain in the Study of Religion and the Work of Charles H. Long*, edited by Jennifer I. M. Reid (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), 21; also see Long, "Primitive/Civilized: The Locus of a Problem," in *Significations*.

(e.g., "persons," "gods," and/or "things") even determine the social intercourse of the sacred, of the metaphysical with the physical, of the quasi-material with the material? Yet still, to respond properly to Chidester's materialist mandate, I must reflect on the very domain of the study of religion in which these African religious Others were initially materially perverted. Hence, in this dissertation, I ponder and explore: Can an attention to religion even facilitate such a reawakening of materiality?; To what extent can the study of religion overcome its legacy of dematerialization and negative objecthood?

Section VII: **Outline of the Study**

In this first section of my dissertation, moving beyond the history and conceptual legacy of "bad objecthood" in the study of religion, I analyze and expose the history of the Western politics of materiality by which religion has been dematerialized and African religious Others have been invented as its material negations (i.e., its bad objects). Building on this introductory chapter, in chapter two, I explore the basis for a new materialist orientation in religious studies through an interrogation of critical categories in the study of "religion" and "matter." In continuity with the contemporary scholarly attention to critical terms, key concepts, and disciplinary categories, this chapter explores the matrix of meanings produced in the formation and construction of "religion," "African religion," "African religions," the "fetish" and the "thing." Through an examination of this network of concepts, I frame a new materialist orientation for the study of *religion*, *religions*, and the *religious* that explores materiality as an agentive landscape that challenges the Western, particularly Protestant, construction of human "persons," transcendent "gods," and immanent, inanimate "things," and instead posits a terrain of diverse creatures, dynamic beings, and eclectic persons. Then, giving attention to

problems of translation that are inherent in any study devoted to communities, societies, and traditions defined as essentially Other, in chapter three, I provide a general historical overview for my qualitative study of Vodoun in the Republic of Benin and discuss problems of interpretation particular to this religious cultural context. In this chapter, I explore the "violence of translation"[61] through which Vodoun bodies and persons are destructively translated and transfigured into *objects*, *idols*, and *fetishes*. I develop this notion of the "violence of translation" to theorize the discursive political processes and methods through which Euro-Western ontological norms not only inform "our" understanding of the *other* but moreover displace and often at best paraphrase indigenous ontologies and world-senses in ways that participate in the continued, as Engelbert Mveng states, anthropological impoverishment[62] of indigenous cultures, traditions, philosophies, and languages. Chapter three then concludes by suggesting a translational praxis that privileges African (Vodoun) idioms, practices, philosophies, and linguistic-based ontological structures.

The second section of this dissertation theorizes a Vodoun praxis and philosophy of materiality, meaning a network of relations and dynamics in which "material objects," "persons," and "gods" are overlapping and interrelated ontological types within a dynamic, immanently metaphysical, cosmo-social landscape. Giving attention to Vodoun metaphysics, including a consideration of Gun and Fon indigenous terms, I elaborate

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[61] See my article Elana Jefferson-Tatum, "The Violence of Translation: An Indigenous World-Sense & The Western 'Prostitution' of Dahomean Bodies," *Journal of Africana Religions* 3, no. 3 (2015): 279-324.

[62] Engelbert Mveng, "Third World Theology—What Theology? What Third World?: Evaluation by an African Delegate," in *Irruption of The Third World,* edited by Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 220.

three central themes and categories/characteristics—nature (*gbè*), personhood (*sé*), and motherhood (*nɔ̀*)—that materialize an ontological process of *being*, *belonging*, and *becoming*.

Chapter four explores the theme of nature and the relationship between *vodoun* and nature. While "matter" is not an indigenous concept, this chapter proposes the presence of a Vodoun immanent metaphysics that is necessarily grounded in and materialized through the nature world (*gbè*) as the primordial foundation of community and ultimate existence. Yet, concerned with exploring and reimagining the conceptual relationship between "religion" and "nature," this chapter also provides a historical overview of the development of the Western notion of "natural religion" to offer a Vodoun re-imagining of the concept and its respective relation to the construction of religion more generally.

With an attention to African philosophical constructions of normative personhood and the indigenous Fon- and Gun-based concept of *sé* (often translated as personal destiny), chapter five explores the material formation of "persons"—that is, efficacious moral beings—within the nature community. My discussion of personhood is related, therefore, to wider metaphysical debates within African philosophy. However, in challenging African philosophical conceptions of normative personhood, I propose that persons include beings and entities, whether *vodoun*, humans, "objects," or kola trees, who participate in the social intercourse of daily life and are deemed responsible members of the community. Blurring the Western ontological lines between so-called "gods," "persons" (i.e., human persons), and "things," this chapter reveals a *vodoun* world in which "persons" are instituted by acts of eating and drinking and by practices of sacrifice and offering. I, therefore, analyze personhood not as a static *state of being* only attainable by humans based on a religio-cultural system of bio-anatomical privileging, but rather as a

spectrum of belonging that is attainable by any being and that is often shifting and changing with the fluctuating demands of the nature community (*gbὲ*) at large.[63]

Finally, exploring mothers (*nɔ̀*) as concrete and materialized religious ideations of authority, chapter six examines motherhood not as a gendered structure but rather as a sacred institution that provides a basis for understanding Vodoun cosmology and social hierarchy more generally. This chapter will utilize the metaphysical archetype of the mother-owner (*nɔ̀*) to explore, for instance, the monarchal institution, the *vodoun* as models of motherhood, and "our mothers" (the *minona*, that is, the powers, persons, and institutions often connected with anti-social aspects of motherhood, or in other words, "witchcraft"). In this chapter, I argue essentially that motherhood (*nɔ̀*) is a metaphysical institution of materialized power and authority that principally precludes notions of gender or sex.

Last but not least, in the concluding chapter, I highlight materializations that suggest the historical operation of a generic Africana theory of materiality. Providing a short overview of similar material phenomena in other Africana contexts on the continent and in the diaspora, I explore the Kongolese *nkisi* and the Haitian Vodoun *nanm*. While this chapter is limited in its scope, I suggest a need to further explore not only how the European West *imagined* Africans as material *Others* but also how various African peoples themselves imagined their material realities and experiences based on their own religio-cultural categories for meaning-making. Finally, in concluding this dissertation, I reflect on how a deeper attention to varied African materialities and embodiments could reveal

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[63] I am referring here to the notion of community elaborated in chapter four, which is inclusive of the varied modalities of nature such as the *vodoun*, human beings, the natural elements, and the list goes on.

how they have re-imagined and even re-invented[64] the Western modern categories of

religion, *religions*, and the *religious*.

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[64] Jason Josephson in his *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (2012) historically explores how the Japanese officials participated in the modern invention of the category of religion. I am here suggesting that perhaps in the contemporary period, post-colonial period, we should give attention to how religious Others are re-inventing the category and concept of religion.

CHAPTER 2
Critical Concepts in the Discursive Formation of Religion, Materiality, and African Religious Others

In the preceding chapter, I offered a historical and conceptual foundation for this theoretical examination into the politics of materiality in the study of religion. Giving attention to 1) the conceptual formation of the "material" vis-à-vis the "religious," 2) the historical and intellectual formation of the fetish as an idea-problem that contributed to the "bad matter" of religious studies, and 3) the relationship between religion and matter in the formation of the religious Other, I provided a foundation for a critical examination into the conceptual categories and concepts that have *disciplined* and oft dematerialized the study of religion. I suggested, moreover, a way forward in the contemporary impetus towards "materializing the study of religion"[65] that begins from religious frontiers between the civilized and the primitive and yet, rather than remaining beholden to the ancestors of the European-West, privileges religious Others in the redefinition of the ideological matrix between "religion" and "matter."

In the chapter at hand, I intend to interrogate critical concepts in the discursive and material politics concerninng the construction of "religion," "matter," and its African religious Others. The critical concepts under interrogation include: "religion," "African religion," "African religions," the "fetish," and the "thing." Instead of addressing "matter" as a singular intellectual concept, I explore "matter" as constructed through and around these critical terms and conceptual framings of the religious and religious Others. In keeping with the intellectual attention to and critical investigation of key words, concepts, and terms in the study of religion as modeled by such works' as Mark C.

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[65] See Meyer et al, "The Origin and Mission of *Material Religion*," 209.

Taylor's edited volume *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998) and a special issue of the

Journal of Material Religion (2011) dedicated to key words,[66] this chapter explores a network

of critical concepts in consideration of the central question: Why does (or better yet, why

should) *matter* matter in the study of religion? This discussion is not intended to be

comprehensive. Rather, I provide a conceptual milieu for considering and challenging the

relationship between matter, religion, and politics of othering. Lastly, through an

attention to this conceptual system of critical categories, I query how we might reimagine

the categories of *religion*, *religions*, and the *religious* that are at the very center of the

discipline of religious studies.

Section I: "Religion": From Religious Frontiers and Empires to Indigenous Religious Imaginations

Bosman's "Guinea" and the Frontier of Religious Studies

In the early eighteenth century, Willem Bosman's *A New and Accurate Description of

the Guinea Coast*[67] created the imaginative discourse for the construction of the African

Other as the material and paradigmatic negative space around the concept of religion.

Revealing the insidiousness of Euro-Western-frontier comparative religion

methodologies, in his encounters with Akan peoples on the Gold Coast of "Guinea,"

Bosman recounts the following regarding their "religion":

> *Fetiche* or *Bossum* in the Negro Language, derives itself from their False God, which
> they call *Bossum*.... They cry out, Let us make *Fetiche*; by which they express as

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[66] See Brigit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate, "Key Words in Material Religion" *Material Religion* 7, no. 1 (2011): 4-9.

[67] Bosman's text was originally published in Dutch in 1703, but subsequently published in French and English in 1705 and in German in 1706.

much, as let us perform our Religious Worship, and see or hear what our God saith.[68]

Through the invention and imaginative discourse of the *fetiche*, Bosman perverts and renders false the practices and experiences of the Akan peoples on the "Guinea Coast." Similarly, in his encounter with the peoples of the kingdom of Whydah on the "Slave Coast"[69] (of "Guinea"), seeking to establish their "religion" as essentially "superstition," he narrates this implied "insider" account,

> I once asked a Negroe, with whom I could talk very freely, and whom I had also a good Opinion of… how they celebrated their Divine Worship, and what number of Gods they had? He laughing, answered, That I had puzzled him; and assured me that no Body in the whole Country could give me an exact Account of it… [However,] He obliged me with the following Answer, That the Number of their Gods was endless and innumerable: For (said he) any of us being resolved to undertake any thing of Importance, we first of all search out a God to prosper our designed Undertaking; and going out of Doors with this Design, take the first Creature that presents itself to our Eyes, whether Dog, Cat or the most contemptible Animal in the World, for our God; or perhaps instead of that any Inanimate that falls in our way, whether a Stone, a piece of Wood, or any thing else of the same Nature. This new chosen God is immediately presented with an Offering; which is accompanied with a Solemn Vow, that if he pleaseth to prosper our Undertakings, for the future we will always worship and esteem him as a God.[70]

Through invoking the discourse of the *trifle* and *fancy*, by which Euro-Westerners believed that any trifling thing could become an object of fancy and religious devotion, Bosman provided Enlightenment thinkers proof of the social chaos and irrationality of African peoples, in general, and African religion, in particular. By conjuring narratives of fetishes, trifles, and false gods, Bosman's comparative religion methodology became a formative basis for Enlightenment formulations of the proper domain of religion and alternatively

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[68] Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Guinea Coast*. 1705. Reprint, with introduction by J. R. Willis and notes by J. D. Fage and R.E. Bradbury (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 1967), 147-148.

[69] See my discussion of this misnomer in chapter three.

[70] Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Guinea Coast*, 367-369.

the improper sphere of superstition.[71] In Bosman's *A New And Accurate Description*, African peoples on the coast of "Guinea" are not only rendered empirical others in general. Through Bosman's "daydreams,"[72] that is, his fantastical imagination, these African peoples become the essential Others of religion and the seemingly "accurate" *material* datum for religion's counter-concept, superstition.

Yet, at stake for Bosman was not merely or even primarily the comparative religion project but rather, providing an ideological justification for Euro-Western economic interests. In this vein, Bosman reveals:

> I have already informed you of the Significance of the word *Fetiche*, that it is chiefly used in a Religious Sense, or at least is derived from thence: Before I proceed to inform you how they represent their Gods, I shall only hint that all things made in Honour of their False Gods… are called, *Fetiche*: and hence also the Artificial Gold mentioned in my sixth Letter derives its Name.[73]

Bosman's discourse of the *fetiche* was, therefore, a stratagem for undermining local values and knowledge systems and legitimizing Euro-Western interests. As Pietz explains, "Throughout Bosman's book, fetish worship appears as the key to African society considered as a theoretical problem. Bosman's explicit thesis was that fetish religion was the perversion of the true principle of social order: interest."[74] Religion, as previously discussed, thus became a convenient domain and concept for valuing Euro-Western

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[71] See Pietz, "Bosman's Guinea," 1-22. While Bosman was not the sole contributor to this insidious history and frontier comparative religion methodology, his text presented the central narrative that linked African peoples to the concept of the fetish as a problem-idea in the eighteenth century. Given its extensive distribution in European intellectual circles, Bosman's account also became, as Pietz argues, the most formative work in framing the Enlightenment conception of the fetish and constructing African peoples as the most objectionable materializations of superstition.

[72] See William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 16 (Autumn 1988): 118. Pietz here notes that Bosman's narratives and so-called accounts "function much as daydreams do in waking life, as wish-fulfillments revealing the desires and problems that underline the interpretation of experience."

[73] Ibid., 155.

[74] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, II," 121.

(particularly Protestant) merchant commodity-minded ideologies as superior to the seemingly irrational, immoral, and false materialist religious proclivities of coastal African peoples. Through the discourse of religion, as Pietz suggests, "Institutionalized superstition—the religion of fetishes—was interpreted by Bosman as the social force that blocked otherwise spontaneous and natural market activities."[75] Thus, while Bosman, a merchant and slave trader, cannot be defined as a scholar of religion in the strictest sense, as previous academics (e.g., Charles Long and David Chidester) have echoed and my reading of Bosman's text suggests, the origins of religion and its comparative imperialist projects must, nonetheless, be situated within this frontier context—within the creation of the primitive and the civilized,[76] within the frontier encounters between the agents of European imperialism and African societies,[77] and within the historical formation of the fetish as a problem-idea.

From Bosman's "Guinea" to De Brosses's Fetishism: The Fetish Concept as a General Theory of Religion

While Bosman's 1706 publication provided the frontier comparative discourse for the proliferation of the fetish concept within Enlightenment thinking and its construction of the discourse of superstition, by the 1750s and 1760s, the problem of superstition was

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[75] Ibid.

[76] See Long, "Primitive/Civilized: The Locus of a Problem," in *Significations* (1995).

[77] See David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1996); David Chidester, "Classify and Conquer: Friedrich Max Müller, indigenous traditions, and imperial comparative religion," *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*, edited by Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Routledge, 2004), 71-88; David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

explicitly framed as the problem of "natural religion," or more precisely, in this context, "primitive religion."[78] In this period, David Hume published his central work *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) elaborating his theory of religion as the impetus not of human rationalism, but rather, to the contrary, of irrational human hopes and fears. Subsequently, in the 1760 publication *Du culte des dieux fetishes*, the French philosopher Charles de Brosses coined his neologism "fetishism" to articulate a general theory of religion as the cult of things. Building on Hume's central thesis (and even explicitly plagiarizing portions of his text),[79] by locating the origin of religion in the worship of terrestrial and material objects, de Brosses established fetishism, according to Pietz, as "the pure condition of un-enlightenment" that "identified religious superstition with false causal reasoning about physical nature."[80]

Yet, in establishing fetishism as a general theory of religion, de Brosses expanded the fetish concept beyond its initial cross-cultural context on the West African coasts and its original etymology to include the religions of the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks and Romans and the various practices of nature worship.[81] He concluded that these diverse religions and religious practices were in essence the same and, therefore, that fetishism was the primitive and originary form of religious life. Thus, through de Brosses' fetishism, religion, in general, even Christianity—often imagined as religion's proper heir—, is implicated within the Enlightenment-based material conceptual problematic that the

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[78] Pietz, "Bosman's Guinea," 16.

[79] See ibid., 13-15.

[80] William Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx," in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, edited by Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 136, 138.

[81] See Tomoko Masuzawa, "Troubles with Materiality: The Ghost of Fetishism in the Nineteenth Century," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 2 (April 2000): 244.

fetish concept identified—that is, the superstitious ascription of agency and desire to materialities of the natural world. It is on this basis that in 1842 Karl Marx adopts de Brosses' concept to articulate his initial ideological definition of fetishism as the "religion of sensuous desires," as precisely, in the words of Pietz, "the pervasive submission of intellect and moral will to a sort of libidinal aesthetic."[82] While the notion of fetishism was ultimately rejected as the origin of religion (by such scholars as, Émile Durkheim, E.B. Tylor, and F. Max Müller), de Brosses' fetishism, nonetheless, established the fetish idea-problem—first elaborated in Bosman's text—as an academic, indeed, "scientific," comparative concept.[83]

"Classify and Conquer": The Imperial Formation of Religious Studies

Bosman's frontier comparative methodology and de Brosses's enlightenment-based scientific concept of religion as fetishism provided the ideological foundation for the imperial formation of the study of religion that was firmly established through Friedrich Max Müller's inauguration of the science of religion in 1870. Though, as Chidester explains, such diverse intellectuals as anthropologists E.B. Tylor and James Frazer and the folklorist Andrew Lang equally nourished the imperialist study of religion in the nineteenth century,[84] Max Müller's four lectures at the Royal Institution of Great Britain represented a fundamental division of intellectual power and knowledge production in the formation of the empire of religious studies. That is, in his scientific approach epitomized

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[82] Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism," 133-136, 140

[83] Masakazu Tanaka, "Fetishism: A Double Denial," *ZINBUN* 42 (2009/2010): 136.

[84] Chidester, "Classify and Conquer," 83; also see Chidester, *Empire of Religion* (2014).

by the ancient Latin dictum "*Divide et Impera*" (translated as "Classify and Conquer"),[85]

and through his three-fold taxonomy of language—Aryan, Semitic, and Turanian—Max

Müller instituted the "world religions" of the Semites, the Aryans, and the Turanians as

the domain of the "historical school" (and the present-day discipline of religious studies)

and simultaneously established the study of "the primitive population of Africa"[86] as the

province of the "anthropological school." It is, therefore, no coincidence that the African

Others of Bosman's "Guinea" still signify the essential religious Others of the study of

religion and that, in the Euro-Western neo-colonial empire, the study of African religious

cultures is still primarily the protectorate of anthropology. Thus, the aphorism "Classify

and Conquer," as Chidester maintains, was "more than merely a rhetorical flourish, this

motto signaled Max Müller's imperial project, the promotion of a science of religion that

generated global knowledge and power."[87] Yet, anticipating potential critiques of such a

staunch claim, in his recent publication *Empire of Religion*, Chidester propounds,

> Perhaps, in his inaugural lectures on the science of religion in 1870, Max Müller's
> use of the phrase *divide et impera*—divide and rule, classify and conquer—was in
> fact merely a rhetorical flourish, a figure of speech bearing no relation to imperial
> policy or the kind of colonial practice of *divide et impera*… in the British control and
> management of Africans in South Africa. After all, he changed his gloss of *divide et
> impera* from "classify and conquer" to "classify and understand" in the revised
> version of his lectures published in 1882. Nevertheless, it was the horizon of
> empire that enabled his expansive global collection, collation, and classification of
> data about religion from the furthest reaches of the colonial periphery to the
> deepest recesses of human prehistory.[88]

This complex history of the frontiers and empires of religious studies has facilitated the

formation of *religion* as a political stratagem for defining and solidifying colonial and

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[85] Friedrich Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institute in February and March 1870* (London: Spottiswoode & Co., 1870), 19.
[86] Max Muller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 32.
[87] Chidester, "Classify and Conquer," 75.
[88] Chidester, *Empire of Religion*, 85.

imperial domains of power and authority whereby religion's Others are created, imagined, and invented. These religious Others, these so-called primitives and savages, thereby, force us, as Charles Long suggests, to "ponder the meaning of the *other* in the interpretations, descriptions, and understanding presented" in the study of religion.[89]

Religion as Orientation: Beyond Religious Others in the Study of Religion

In his seminal 1986 work *Significations*, Charles Long defines religion as orientation, "That is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's existence in the world."[90] Yet, Long's notion of religion as orientation addresses not only empirical experiences of materialization within the world, but additionally the analytical and ideological function of the concept of "religion" itself. Whatever definition of religion that we as scholars appropriate for the purposes of comparison, classification, and analytical investigation, we must remember the matrix of signification and the history of frontier and imperial religious comparisons by which "religion" has been utilized as a political tool for articulating the meanings and empirical values of "us" vis-à-vis "them." As Charles Long elucidates, "Signifying is worse than lying because it obscures and obfuscates a discourse without taking responsibility for so doing. This verbal misdirection parallels the real argument but gains its power of meaning from the structure of the discourse itself without the signification being subjected to the rules of discourse."[91] Religion, as our discussion has highlighted, has often been, therefore, a tool of signification, used for "verbal misdirection" and often abused by the "us" to place, orient, and re-orient as well as classify and conquer the "them."

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[89] Long, "The Study of Religion: Its Nature and Its Discourse," in *Significations*, 28.
[90] Long, *Significations*, 7.
[91] Ibid., 1.

As a signifying analytical devise, "religion" has no one stable status or authoritative definition. Through reflecting on the analytically ambiguous genealogy of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith outlines how the term "religion" evolved from a Catholic emphasis on practice to a Protestant focus on belief, which subsequently shifted the conversation also from an attention to "religion" in the singular to an interest in "religions" in the plural. With this latter shift, as the history of imperial comparative religion demonstrates, the concepts of "religion" and "religions" became means of "scientifically" signifying non-Western (as well as non-Aryan and non-Semitic) peoples, practices, and beliefs as, in the words of Charles Long, "empirical others," that is, as negations, as literally non-persons vis-à-vis so-called civilized Euro-Western selves.[92]

Through this complex signification, various bodies, peoples, ideas, and practices have been violently reoriented vis-à-vis their scholarly interlocutors. As Jonathan Z. Smith poignantly argues, "'religion' is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' plays in anthropology."[93] While Smith's statement is at least partially valid, as Russell McCutcheon reminds us, there is more than a neutral or apolitical practice of *imagining* going on in the intellectual production of religion.[94] In his text *Manufacturing Religion,* McCutcheon specifically highlights how the process of signification has often historically participated in a manufacturing of mindless and disembodied Others that can be manipulated and controlled for the benefit of

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[92] Long, *Significations*, 90.

[93] Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," *Relating Religion*, 193-194.

[94] See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

Western intellectual imperialist pursuits. Accordingly, for the purposes of this present work, McCutcheon's attention to the manufacturing of religion and Long's notion of religion as orientation provide a means of elucidating the concepts, theories, and ideologies by which African (Vodoun) "persons," "objects," and "gods" are oriented, imagined, and manufactured within modern Western intellectual discourses.

As this discussion has highlighted, scholars of religion have variously theorized the modern notion of "religion" as: a conceptual and political tool for signifying the Other (Long); a non-native term created for the intellectual purposes of scholars and their theoretical imaginations (Smith); and a product of material interests that *manufactures* "disembodied believing minds"[95] (McCutcheon). While these theorizations of religion differ in various respects, each highlights the political schemes and discourses through which our modern concept of "religion" has been constructed. Yet, rather than primarily focusing on the genealogy of religion in its Euro-Western context, I am committed, first and foremost, to indigenous and local meanings and imaginings of *religion*, the *religious*, and the *sacred*. As Jason Josephson (2012) poignantly argues in his *Invention of Religion in Japan*, the invention of the concept of religion has not merely been a Western intellectual enterprise or a Western imperial imposition. Rather, the concept also reflects local efforts and energies to contend with and invent for themselves the term "religion" within their own historical, cultural, and linguistic milieus. While Josephson's text focuses on the invention of religion in the context of diplomatic relations between Euro-Western countries and Japan, this present work gives explicit attention to the colonial and post-colonial context of African indigenous religious communities. In particular, this

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[95] Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13, 24.

dissertation explores Vodoun communities in the Republic of Benin, where, too, "religion" was and continues to be *invented* by priests, devottees, and community members.

Contextualizing the invention, or perhaps reinvention, of religion in the Republic of Benin in the midst of Western materialist agendas and Vodoun material ideals, I argue that the conception of religion is part and parcel of a politics of materiality through which "objects," "persons," and "gods" take on contested meanings and forms. Yet, an analysis and a re-imagining of Vodoun as *religion* first necessitates an attention not only to the ideological and historical formation of the concept of *religion*, but also to the very history of invention by which "African religion" and "African religions" were constituted, imagined, and created.

Section II: "African Religion," "African Religions": The Politics of Religion in the Study of Africa

Christian and Western Legacies in the Study of African Religions

While ethnographic and historical texts that explore African religious cultures, both past and present, abound, there is in general a lack of theorization about the categories and concepts through which indigenous philosophies, theologies, histories, and ritual practices are understood and articulated. Largely neglecting to expand upon previous scholarship in innovative and creative ways, many African religious studies scholars still rely heavily upon the frameworks of European "sympathetic" theorists of the twentieth century (e.g., Wilhelm Schmidt, Placide Temples, Geoffrey Parrinder, and E.E. Evans-Pritchard) and 1960s and 1970s African theological scholars (e.g., John Mbiti, J.B. Danquah, and E. Bolaji Idowu) who framed their colonialist and/or apologetic

scholarship based on Western religious and philosophical standards. Additionally, given the history of frontier encounters that created, for instance, Bosman's "Guinea" and the Enlightenment's "Africa" of primitives and fetish-worshipers, as Jan Vansina reminds us, "our present perception of Africa and our understanding of its past are conditioned by the epistemological categories well established by 1900" and derived from the suppositions of slave traders, missionaries, and colonial administrators.[96] Thus, by and large, the study of African religion and religions has been plagued by a privileging of Euro-Western and especially Judeo-Christian discourses that continue to present Christianity as the religion *par excellence*. Yet, as I and other scholars, such as Okot p'Bitek and David Westerlund, have suggested, as long as academics continue to accept the Judeo-Christian religion as the central paradigm of religion, African religious cultures will always only be quasi *religious* and *religions* to the extent that they provide a negative concreteness, in the words of Charles Long, to religion proper, namely, Euro-Christianity.

Stating the central problematic of the field, the Ugandan anthropologist Okot p'Bitek has maintained that historically African religious cultures have not been the *actual* objects or subjects of study in Western scholarship and intellectual discourses.[97] Rather, as he states, African cultures have been "used as mercenaries in foreign battles, not one of which was in the interest of African peoples."[98] As our earlier discussion highlighted, frontier and imperialists studies of African religious cultures were thus utilized to establish

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[96] Jan Vansina, "Knowledge and the Perception of the African Past" in *African Historiographies: What History for Which Africa?* eds. Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David Newbury (London: Sage Publications, 1986), 29.

[97] See also Jan G. Platvoet, "From Object to Subject: A History of the Study of the Religions of Africa," in *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects*, edited by Jan Platvoet, James Cox and Jacob Olupona (Cambridge: Roots and Branches, 1996).

[98] Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in European Scholarship* (New York: ECA Associates, 1990), 102.

and solidify the domains of power and authority between the "civilized" and the

"primitive." In an exploration of the genealogy of "civilization," Long expounds,

> The self-conscious realization of the Western European rise to the level of civilization [particularly in the eighteenth century] must be seen simultaneously in its relationship to the discovery of a new world which must necessarily be perceived as inhabited by savages and primitives who constitute the lowest rung on the ladder of cultural reality… The problem surrounding the usage of the term "primitive" as a proper designation for certain cultures, histories, and religions must therefore be seen as a crisis of the term "civilization."[99]

The emergence of a Euro-Western "intellectual curiosity"[100] regarding the cultures and

religiosity of African peoples, as such, occurred just as "enlightened" and "modern"

Western persons were concerned with establishing and reimagining themselves as

"civilized." The emergence of "African religion" and "African religions," therefore, must

be understood as part and parcel of a civilizing and primitivizing project whereby

Western persons were imagined and remade into the bearers of civilization and authentic

religion, while African communities and peoples were violently re-created and objectified

as savage, primitive, and fetishistic.

Given, thus, the civilizing rhetoric embedded within the Western concepts of

civilization, *primitive*, *fetish*, and *religion*, as Long woefully highlights, "the champions of

civilization still speak in continuity with the rhetoric of imperialists and mercantile classes,

and its victims clamor for recognition and authenticity of their histories and heritages in

the name of civilization."[101] In the field of African religious studies, this has meant that

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[99] Long, *Significations*, 94, 101.

[100] See ibid., 5. Long suggests, "the differences that bring a culture or a people to the attention of the investigator are not simply formed from the point of view of the intellectual problematic; they are more often than not the nuances and latencies of that power which is part of the structure of the cultural contact itself manifesting itself as intellectual curiosity. In this manner the cultures of non-Western peoples were created as products of a complex signification."

[101] Ibid., 95.

"African religion" and "African religions" continue to be imagined and manufactured as *religion*, *religions*, and *religious* vis-à-vis Christianity as the supposed essential norm and prime archetype. For example, as p'Bitek describes,

> When students of African religions describe African deities as eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, etc., they intimate that African deities have identical attributes with those of the Christian God. In other words, they suggest that Africans Hellenized their deities, but before coming into contact with Greek metaphysical thinking…. The African deities of the books, clothed with the attributes of the Christian God are, in the main, creations of the students of African religions.[102]

P'Bitek's critique importantly highlights the violent translational processes by which African sacred ontologies have been converted and invented as Christianized Gods. This present work similarly suggests that a fuller appreciation of African religious cultures must entail discontinuing processes of translation and interpretation between African material realities and Euro-Western metaphysical assumptions that continue to reproduce imperial discourses of *religion* and the *religious*.

Yet, even still, I contend that p'Bitek is equally unaware of the influence and impact of Western epistemological and ideological norms on his own theoretical reflections, when he states,

> No genuine metaphysical speculations are attached to [African 'deities'], and there is no thought of another world. It follows then that, in so far as Africans believed in certain 'powers', they may be called religious; but, as most of them did not hold beliefs in any deities similar in conception to the Christian God, we may refer to traditional Africans as atheistic in their outlook.[103]

First, both the concepts of "religion" and "atheism" are Western notions with specific Euro-Western genealogies and, thus, neither can fully express African thoughts, practices, or materialities. Second, contrary to p'Bitek's privileging of a Greek conception of

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[102] p'Bitek, *African Religions in European Scholarship*, 80, 88.
[103] Ibid., 100.

metaphysics, as the Akan philosopher Kwasi Wiredu suggests, "a people can be highly metaphysical without employing transcendental concepts in their thinking, for not all metaphysics is transcendental metaphysics."[104] Not all metaphysics transcends the corporeal, material, geographical, and experiential. Alternatively, the concept of a non-transcendental metaphysics presupposes two main ideas: one, that creation (whether sacred or supposedly mundane) is not conceived of as occurring outside of history or concrete time, and two, that the supposed dichotomy between the material and the natural, on the one hand, and the spiritual and the supernatural, on the other, is not universal and is, therefore, irrelevant to an African non-transcendental metaphysical model.[105] We will elaborate upon this metaphysical conception further in chapter four. However, what is significant at this junction is that even as Wiredu's philosophical theorizations demonstrate that metaphysics can be conceptualized as broader than its Greco-Roman and European heritage, Wiredu, like p'Bitek, ultimately argues that religion is essentially a Christian project and that Akan "culture" therefore cannot be considered a "religion."

While I am not suggesting that either Wiredu or p'Bitek are necessarily wrong, I would contend that both privilege theocentric definitions of "religion" and by doing so miss the opportunity to explore *religion* and the *religious* in ways that decenter and even displace the Judeo-Christian understanding of proper religion. To accept African expressions as "culture" and "philosophy," for instance, but to reject the category of "religion," merely allows the concept of religion as a Western construction to continue to be protected from scrutiny and hermeneutical suspicion by those very persons,

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[104] Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 87.
    [105] Ibid., 99-100.

communities, and materialities that have been violently converted, colonialized, and fetishized in the name of the Christian God.

The Problem of Transcendence in the Study of African Religious Cultures

Given the intellectual supremacy and authority of the Christian imagination of "God" in the *sui generis* approach to religious studies and the study of religion in Africa, more generally, I contend that the central problematic in African religious studies is the prevailing presumption of transcendence. By this I am referring to the extension of Christian metaphysical norms concerning a transcendent God and *wholly other* sacred reality to *religion*, *religions*, and the *religious* more generally, such that, the overriding conjecture is that religion necessarily points to a wholly transcendent reality and domain. As Josephson explains, there are two primary ways of defining religion: 1) a theocentric notion of religion, which presupposes that religion is essentially monotheistic (either explicitly or implicitly) and is thus centered around the worship of God; and 2) a hierocentric notion of religion, which supposes that religion is concerned with the sacred as both separate and transcendental and with human beliefs and doctrine concerning the sacred. Moreover, as Josephson contends, the second hierocentric definition of religion is a secularized and globalized notion of religion that develops as a *partial* de-Christianization of religion to account for non-Western cultures.[106] It is, therefore, true that this hierocentric definition has allowed for non-Abrahamic traditions to be partially imagined and invented as *religions* and thus, for instance, has sanctioned the invention of the category of "Japanese religion" and, in our case "African religion." Yet, this definition is still essentially dependent upon and presupposes the primary theocentric definition of

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[106] Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, 8-11.

religion that privileges the dominion and authority of God. Thus, even as scholars (e.g.,

Kofi Asare Opoku, David Westerlund, Afe Adogome) have critiqued the study of religion

in Africa as an "imported product"[107] in need of undergoing Africanization, these same

scholars are oft unwilling to forgo the categories and concepts of religion that are part and

parcel of the baggage of its Euro-Western and Judeo-Christian legacies.

In his essay "The Study of African Religions in Retrospect: From 'Westernization'

to 'Africanization'" (1993), David Westerlund surveys religio-phenomenological and

anthropological approaches to the study of African religions, concluding that:

> Although scholars of religion have primarily aimed at description and
> understanding, or depicting an 'inside view' of African religions, they have clearly
> been influenced by theological bias and thus tend to 'Christianize' these
> religions…. Anthropologists, on the other hand, who have primarily concentrated
> on monographic works and aimed at theoretical explanations, have been
> influenced by secular biases and have thus tended to 'secularize' these religions.
> Albeit in different ways, both groups of scholars have, in other words, had a
> tendency to 'Westernize' African religion.[108]

Westerlund contends, therefore, that both scholars of religion and anthropologists have

participated in the "Westernization" of African religious cultures. Yet, throughout his

entire survey, there is never a discussion of what *religion* is in and of itself. In Westerlund's

account, religion remains a seemingly empty modifier. Or, perhaps it is, in fact, not.

Shortly prior to his conclusion, he makes the following claim:

> The most obvious and important transcultural element in African religions is the
> belief in God, the Creator. Such a belief is found among hunters and gatherers as
> well as among pastoralists and different kinds of agriculturalists. In other words, it
> seems to exist in all types of cultures. Yet this belief may mean different things in

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[107] Adogame, et al., "Introduction," in *African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa*, 1.

[108] David Westerlund, "The Study of African Religions in Retrospect," in *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honor of John S. Mbiti*, edited by Jacob Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 59.

different contexts. Hence it should not be abstracted from other aspects of African religion or from the socio-cultural context in toto.[109]

Here, Westerlund inconspicuously translates "Creator" as "God" without either justification or explanation and without seriously considering the potential discrepancies in meaning and connotation between indigenous notions of a creator-deity and Euro-Christian conceptions of God. Thus, despite the Christian legacy of the concept, Westerlund unsuspectingly participates in the problematic Christianizing of African religions that he himself critiques. By avoiding an attention to the conceptual problematic of the very notion of religion, which both scholars of religion and anthropology suggest, Westerlund inadvertently renders invisible how the concept of *religion* functions as a form of reductionism that imposes a Christian theological lens, through such concepts as God, transcendence, and the supernatural. Yet, Westerlund is not unique in this respect. There is, in general, a disciplinary lack of attention to the category and concept of religion that participates in the invention of "African religion" and "African religions." Thus, in the same vein, Friday Mbon has cautioned other African scholars against "too much concern with methodological issues" for fear that such concerns will "defeat the purposes of which methodology is needed, namely the understanding of religion in general and African religions in particular."[110] And yet, here too, there is no discussion about either the concept of "religion" or its derivative "African religions." Both terms remain empty modifiers or rather, imperceptible signifiers of Euro-Western *religion* that can continue to inform the discourse on African religious studies without either being examined,

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[109] Ibid., 56.

[110] Friday Mbon, "Some Methodological Issues in the Academic Study of West African Traditional Religions," in *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present, and Prospects*, edited by Jan Platvoet, James Cox, and Jacob Olupona (Cambridge: Roots and Branches, 1996), 173.

questioned, or re-imagined. While an investigation of this central problem will be examined throughout the course of this dissertation, at this junction, I merely seek to highlight a theoretical fissure that has participated in the codification and disciplining of the study of religion in Africa.

Beyond the Problem of Religion as Ontology: A Metaphysical Understanding of African Religious Cultures

If we are to shift our conception of religion from transcendence to a material mode of immanent metaphysics, I am suggesting, then, that we must give attention to religion as ontology—a metaphysics through which modes, means, and methods of being and existing are imagined, constructed, and created. Yet, various scholars have pointed to problems with ontological conceptions of religion and the sacred. For instance, J.Z. Smith argues that Mircea Eliade's ontology problematically subsumes varied and multiple hierophanies within an all-consuming theological hierarchy that is both transcendent and outside of history,[111] and Okot p'Bitek argues that a focus on a static ontology obscures the dynamic functionality of indigenous entities, like *jok*, who can be "known through the senses" and who can be "many different things or powers" including (but not limited to) ghosts, ancestral spirits, ritual emblems, and calamities.[112]

In essence, I do not disagree with either one of these perspectives. However, with respect to African religious cultures, rather than discarding the ontological mode all-together, I argue instead that ontology should be seen as a means of comprehending the whole expression of a peoples being, existing, and knowing in their cosmos-world. For, it

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[111] Smith, "Acknowledgements: Morphology and History in Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1949-1999), Part 2: The Texture of the Work," in *Relating Religion*, 94.

[112] p'Bitek, *African Religions in European Scholarship*, 72, 79.

is my position that understanding religion ontologically is problematic if and when this ontology is understood as fixed and integrated into a transcendental theological framework wherein other modalities of being are conceptualized as *merely* manifestations (i.e., hierophanies) of a higher transcendent form. Even when and where African communities and persons construct their religion according to Christian ontological norms, a theo-ontological model limits our conception of African Christianities for example, to the Judeo-Christian monotheistic structure without considering how other ontological models may contribute to the construction of these religious movements. Hence, despite explicit Christian theological biases in the seminal text *African Religions and Philosophy*, this text builds on John Mbiti's theorization of religion as an ontological orientation. Mbiti's theorization provides an important means for understanding religion as not merely a theory, belief system, or practice but as a mode of being-in-the-world. Indeed, rather than defining and thus delimiting religion, John Mbiti chooses to theorize African religions as ontological phenomena wherein "religion" is a system of *being*.[113]

This dissertation explores ontology—whether "persons," "gods," "objects," or other ontological forms—as modes and formations of *being* that are dynamic, functional, varied, multiple, and material. Similarly, rather than choosing between the rhetoric of the singular "African religion" and the plural "African religions,"[114] this present study takes a both-and approach. My approach, therefore, holds "African religion" and "African religions" in tension to acknowledge the particularity and variability of local traditions and experiences and, simultaneously, the commonalities and congruencies among those particular expressions. Through espousing a dynamic ontological methodology that does

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[113] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1992), 15.
[114] See Magesa, *African Religion*, 17-18. Magesa argues that despite variations among particular African religions that they are essentially one in essence.

not privilege the Judeo-Christian conception of religion or existence, I seek fundamentally to destabilize the manner in which both "African religion" and "African religions" are conceptualized, imagined, and theorized.

In reevaluating both "African religion" and "African religions," this project asks several questions: What does one assume about what constitutes and defines *religion* and the *religious*?; How have specific African communities imagined and *invented* "religion" according to their own established practices, ideologies, philosophies, and political agendas?; How might Vodoun ontological categories provide a basis for re-imagining and re-theorizing the modern Western concept of religion?

Yet, an attention to an African (Vodoun) ontology and immanent metaphysics that is materially realized, lived, and embodied first necessitates a serious consideration of matter and materiality, in and of themselves. I must consider, therefore, the following questions: What, for instance, is the relationship, if any, between the Western conception of "fetishes" and "things" and African materialists philosophies and practices? Do present-day fetish discourses and the materialist turn in religious studies have anything to contribute to the study of African religious materialities? Or, do African religious materialities suggest instead new theories of matter and materiality?

Section III: Fetish-Things: Materiality Studies and the Revolution of the Fetish

While this present work privileges and has been inspired by the theories and practices of materiality as expressed and experienced in African religious cultures, it seeks to broaden conceptions of religious materiality through comparatively exploring Western materialist philosophies and theories in relation to African lived and embodied

materialities and theories of matter. Moreover, even though African religious cultures have by and large not constituted the subjects or objects of materiality studies discourses, this present discussion on material cultural studies is essential to our concern for reawakening materiality in the study of religion and overcoming the hegemony of transcendence in the study of African religion and African religions.

The Western turn towards materiality has been marked by a particular dissatisfaction with the notion that ideas, theories, theologies, and ideologies are essentially immaterial and abstract. This dissertation explores this materialist turn as articulated through contemporary re-readings of the fetish idea-problem as revolutionary[115] and through attention to a newly emerging interest in materiality in the study of religion.[116] Yet, while the materialist turn became popular in the humanities and human sciences in the mid-1980s, I argue an indigenous form of materialism—a valuing of materiality as essential to the social lifeworld—was already fundamental to various pre-colonial African religious cultures. Moreover, as our discussion has demonstrated, I argue that it was this indigenous materialism that was misunderstood and denigrated as fetishism and idolatry. While materialist advances in Western thought represent an important ontological shift, Western materialist theories cannot and will not be substituted for the indigenous materialist theories of African (Vodoun) practitioners themselves. Despite innovations, these materialist discourses continue to be primarily

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[115] See for example Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I" (1985); Patricia Spyer, ed., *Border Fetishisms: material object in unstable spaces* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

[116] See for example Chidester, "Material Terms for the Study of Religion," (2000); Manuel A. Vasquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Houtman and Meyer, eds., *Things* (2012).

dialogues *about* the Euro-Western subject through an imagined objective *other*—whether

the "object" or, in our case, the religious Other.

The Fetish Concept as a "Cultural Revolution"?

Between 1985 and 1988, in three seminal essays each entitled "The Problem of

the Fetish," William Pietz provided a genealogy of the fetish as an idea-problem that

emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the cross-cultural spaces of

mercantile exchange between European explorers and merchants and coastal West

Africans. According to Pietz, the problematic of the fetish "could originate only in

conjunction with the emergent articulation of the ideology of the commodity form," a

form that was defined as absolutely contrary to the social and religious values of the non-

capitalist societies encountered in the context of cross-cultural exchange.[117] Nonetheless,

Pietz clearly states,

> Unlike, say, the *suman* in Ashanti society or the *nkisi* in Kongo society (or, for that
> matter, the Eucharist in Christian culture), the fetish has never enjoyed the social
> actuality of being an institutionally defined object within a particular culture or
> social order. (I would, however, argue that *Fetisso* was a central term in routinized
> practices and discourses on the West African coast from the sixteenth-century—
> but these cross-cultural spaces were not societies or cultures in any conventional
> sense.) From this standpoint, the fetish must be viewed as proper to no historical
> field other than that of the history of the word itself, and to no discrete society or
> culture, but to a cross-cultural situation formed by the ongoing encounter of the
> value codes of radically different social orders. In Marxist terms, one might say
> that the fetish is situated in the space of cultural revolution, as the place where the
> truth of the object as fetish is revealed.[118]

Since Pietz does not adequately delineate the context of this "cultural revolution," to

clarify his assertion, we must turn to his engagement of Fredric Jameson's *The Political*

Unconsciousness (1981). Jameson elaborates cultural revolution as:

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[117] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," 7.
[118] Ibid., 10-11.

> …that moment in which the coexistence of various modes of production becomes visibly antagonistic, their contradictions moving to the very center of political, social, and historical life…. So the Western Enlightenment may be grasped as a part of a properly bourgeois cultural revolution, in which the values and discourses, the habits and the daily space, of the *ancient régime* were systematically dismantled so that in their place could be set the new conceptualities, habits and life forms, and value systems of a capitalist market society.[119]

Based on this interpretation, Pietz could be read as implying that the fetish idea-problem reveals itself as a product of the antagonistic merchant relations and social orders of the cross-cultural contact of the "Guinea coast" and yet as a new cultural innovation that facilitated the production of the cultural revolution through which bourgeois intellectuals established the regime of the Enlightenment. Pietz distinguishes, therefore, between the *Fetisso* of Bosman's "Guinea" and the fetish concept of the Enlightenment. While originating in a context of cross-cultural exchange, the concept of the fetish, as Pietz notes, was essentially an Enlightenment idea-problem that provoked modern social theory including the philosophies of Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel. Yet, from Pietz's Marxist perspective, the fetish idea-problem is a site of cultural revolution that not only participates in the establishment of the Enlightenment, but also reveals its actual fallacy. It is in this sense that Pietz states that the fetish idea-problem, as a cultural revolution, is "the place where the truth of the object as fetish is revealed." Accordingly, Pietz inquires: "In what sense, then, is there such a thing as a fetish? If the 'fetish' does name some specific 'problem-idea,' what is the truth it names?" In response, he declares, "the fetish is… first of all, something intensely personal, whose truth is experienced as a substantial movement from 'inside' the self… into the self-limited morphology of a material object

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[119] Fredrick Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Cornell University, 1981), 95-96.

situated in space 'outside.'"[120] In other words, Pietz's "object as fetish" is revealed as an

objectification, or in this case, fetishization, of personal desires and fears, namely, social

values. Thus, in understanding capital as a species of the fetish, as a materialization and

fetishization of social value that renders invisible capital as a form "of rule, of social

government,"[121] Pietz explains,

> As with all his key words, Marx's usage of "fetishism" enacts a dialogical
> subversion of the way his predecessors and contemporaries theorized social
> reality. Marx took advantage of the radically historical, materialist problematic
> implicit in the Enlightenment discourse about fetishism to travesty the idealist
> and, at best, abstractly materialist social philosophies of his time by means of their
> own deepest preconceptions.[122]

However, while Pietz's Marxist interpretation suggests that the historical and theoretical

location of the fetish as a European problem-idea positions it as a site of cultural

revolution, Hartmut Böhme reminds us that fetish discourses originally posed no

challenge to European rationalism but rather provided ideological and theoretical

support for the discourse of "superstition," that is, religious practices and beliefs deemed

offensive and peripheral to Christianity. According to Böhme, the idea of the fetish as a

challenge to rationality only emerged in the eighteenth century. [123] Specifically, that is,

the fetish concept materialized as an affront to European rationalism in the context of the

publication of Charles de Brosses' *Du culte des dieux fetishes* (1760) in which de Brosses

coined the neologism "fetishism" that, as noted earlier, was later adopted by Karl Marx

in 1842. Unlike, Bosman's 1706 text which situated the fetish idea-problem firmly within

European merchants encounters with "Guinea" coast peoples, de Brosses' text, as our

previous discussion highlighted, expanded the discourse and ideology of the fetish concept

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[120] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," 11-12.
[121] William Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism," 129-130, 147.
[122] Ibid., 130.
[123] Hartmut Böhme, *Fetischismus und Kultur*, 182-185.

to, as Pietz states, "the entire field of ancient and contemporary religious phenomena by identifying primitive fetishism throughout the world, from ancient Egypt… to archaic Greece… to contemporary black Africa… to the Holy Bible itself."[124] Accordingly, constructed on the basis of Marx's adaptation and reinterpretation of de Brosses' "fetishism," it is Pietz's notion of the fetish as a site of cultural revolution that has generated contemporary interest.

In the 1998 edited text *Border Fetishisms: material objects in unstable spaces*, the intent of the authors (Webb Keane, Susan Legêne, Robert Foster, Peter Pels, Adela Pinch, Patricia Spyer, Peter Stallybrass, Annelies Moors, and Michael Taussig) is to expand upon the theoretical contributions of William Pietz through an engagement and assessment of, as the editor Patricia Spyer states, "border fetishisms in which different economies of the object and distinct valuations of things, persons, and their relations are played."[125] Developing Pietz's position that fetishism establishes a "space of cultural revolution,"[126] Spyer contends that while the various contributors are attuned to the derogatory nature of the term, they are especially concerned with exploring the fetish as a border phenomenon that crosses, negotiates, transgresses, and exposes distinctions not only between subjects and objects but also of gender, class, ethnicity, race, and nationality.[127]

While providing productive analytical insights for exploring Euro-Western values in border contexts, the fetish concept is first and foremost a second-order asymmetrical theoretical construct that forecloses the possibility of rendering visible and viable indigenous materialities beyond the confines of their initial uneven material and social

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[124] Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism," 138.
[125] Patricia Spyer, "Introduction," in *Border Fetishisms*, 1.
[126] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," 11.
[127] Ibid., 3.

exchange. Rather than producing spaces of intellectual collaboration, fetish discourses continue to define the parameters of the cultural exchange as imbalanced and essentially self-interested. In this respect, the fetish idea-problem, even in its Marxist re-imagination, continues to render opaque the actual materialities originally fetishized in the initial frontier encounter context. These scholars have left unresolved and under-theorized the actual materialities and social contexts that were transfigured through the concept and idea-problem of the fetish.

For instance, providing a bibliographical depiction of the life of two *obeah*, namely, ritual materialities proper to the *winti* religion of Suriname, that were displayed in the 1986 Frankfurt exhibition, Susan Legêne demonstrates the historical and ideological processes which transfigured the materials in question from "obeah," into "brooms," and then into "fetishes." Through the gaze of Dutch planters, as Legêne recounts, these two *obeah* were transmuted into "brooms" and then, in the context of Dutch museums, into "fetishes," that is, relics of "primitive" ritual practices. She importantly notes, therefore, that it was not until these *obeah* were distanced from their respective communities that they could "become visible [to Euro-Western eyes] as religious symbols" (whether, as emblems of slave conversion, by missionaries and European elites, or, as "relics of a rejected animistic religion" by museum collectors and curators.)[128] Yet, I would add, their visibility was contingent upon these *obeah*, these "border objects," reinforcing the civilized/primitive dichotomy. As border objects, these *obeah* "emerge as fetishes as an aftereffect of having crossed borders" and, thus, as Legêne further explains, "inform the conversation about the effects of European perceptions and representations of Otherness

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[128] Susan Legêne, "From Brooms to Obeah and Back," in *Border Fetishisms*, 36, 46-47, 51.

regarding slave culture and Creole identity in Suriname—and also tell us something about Dutch identity as a Christianity-motivated civilizing power."[129] Thus, Legêne compares the transmutation of these *obeah* into "fetishes" and "border objects" with the conversion of enslaved Surinamese Africans and Creoles "into (de-Africanized) Western Christian citizens and disciplined workers."[130] In both cases, Africana materialities are transmuted and fetishized in accord with Euro-Western civilizing and modernizing projects that establish asymmetrical domains of authority, power, and privilege.

While Legêne explores the concept of the fetish to highlight historical processes of identity transformation and the Dutch orientation towards African materialities, Peter Pels, in his essay "The Spirit of Matter," on the other hand, employs the concept of the fetish as a means of getting at the place of materiality in contemporary cultural and social theory. Accordingly, Pels exclaims, "The fetish foregrounds materiality because it is the most aggressive expression of the social life of things: not merely alive, it is an 'animated entit[y] that can dominate persons' (Taussig 1980: 25). Fetishism is animism with a vengeance."[131] Giving particular attention to Pietz's conceptualization of the fetish as "untranscended materiality,"[132] Pels argues that as an object of "abnormal traffic" the fetish is not a derivative agency or the "spirit *in* matter" as the notion of animism suggests but rather "the spirit *of* matter" with its own direct agency. Pels therefore additionally positions the fetish as a radically "other thing" that is *other* in relation to "accepted processes of defining the thing by its use and exchange value."[133]

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[129] Ibid., 52-53.
[130] Ibid., 36.
[131] Peter Pels, "The Spirit of Matter," in *Border Fetishisms*, 91.
[132] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," 7.
[133] Peter Pels, "The Spirit of Matter," in *Border Fetishisms*, 98.

Peter Pels' acknowledgement of the "untranscended materiality" of the fetish as the "matter of spirit" provides a significant reevaluation of fetish discourses in ways that challenge Western standardized theories and notions of representation and signification. However, Pels fails to grapple with the fact that the fetish concept is only a "space of cultural revolution"[134] from the perspective of the Enlightenment-based Euro-Western world—meaning, from the viewpoint of those who participated in the colonizing and fetishizing of the Other and who only later invented and reimagined the fetish as a revolutionary critique of themselves. Yet, from the historical vantage point of those colonized and fetishized, the fetish concept is instead a Western idea-problem that has participated in a cultural genocide by which African peoples were and continue to be anthropologically impoverished.[135] The materialities that were violently relabeled fetishes were not merely "border objects" that, as Pels would contend, challenged an "accepted process of defining the thing by its use and exchange value" nor were these objects "apart from everyday use and exchange."[136] Rather, originary materialities mislabeled "fetishes" were and are part and parcel of the everyday life of various African indigenous communities in which social relations between different materialities/ontological formations (human and non-human) were (and often still are) normative and naturalized. Thus, Pels positions the Euro-Western world as the normative basis for our understanding of fetish discourses rather than exploring the underside, if you will, of the fetish concept—that is, how indigenous materialities might perhaps challenge the

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[134] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," 11.

[135] See Engelbert Mveng, "Third World Theology," 220. Mveng, an African theologian, coined the phrase "anthropological poverty" to describe the colonialist and imperialist process by which peoples are not only despoiled of their wealth and material assets, but of their cultural identity, traditions, history, language, and so on.

[136] Pels, "The Spirit of Matter," In *Border Fetishisms*, 98.

conceptual imagination of the fetish idea-problem. Thus, in exploring the fetish as

embodying a "double consciousness,"[137] Pels exclaims, "fetishism tells us to move in

rather than escape, the sensuous border zone between ourselves and the things around us,

between mind and matter."[138] However, an evaluation of the fetish's "double

consciousness" from the perspective of W.E.B. Du Bois reveals that the fetish as an idea-

problem facilitated the creation of a "double consciousness"—a two-ness—among

African peoples themselves.

> Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question… How does it
> feel to be a problem?... After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and the Roman,
> the Teuton and Mongolian, 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.[139]

From this perspective, in the mercantile and colonial encounter with Europeans, African

materialites (both human and non-human) were reimaged as "fetishes," as "border

objects," with dual identities as African and European, as natural and preternatural, and

as normal and problematic. Hence, the fetish concept marks Africans and African

materialities as "problems" to be solved and then discarded. While Pels would like to

reimagine the fetish idea-problem idealistically as a medium of revolution—as a direct

material agency and as a the "spirit *of* matter" rather than merely the "spirit *in*

matter"[140]—our discussion has highlighted that for many the emergence of the fetish

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[137] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," 14.
[138] Pels, "The Spirit of Matter," 102.
[139] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 7-9.
[140] Pels, "The Spirit of Matter," 98.

concept paralleled and supported the reimagining of various indigenous peoples as "savages" and "primitives" in need of Western "civilization." In this regard, any theorization regarding the fetish will be limited indefinitely by its vantage point in the Euro-Western world. The fetish concept, as a second-order category, whether revolutionized or not, is, therefore, of no value to either the comparative study of religions or to African religious studies in particular.

While the fetish concept represents an idea-problem that eventually countered the assumptions of the Enlightenment to a certain extent (as our discussion of Pietz's cultural revolution and Marx's fetishism highlighted), the fetish is nevertheless still a discursive concept and product of the same intellectual context it presently critiques. The fetish concept, as such, continues to participate in rendering actual materialities invisible, opaque, and obsolete, and, moreover, still imposes a double consciousness that privileges the perspectives, opinions, and theories of the European West. If we carefully examine contemporary fetish discourses, their subject is not the indigenous materialities and peoples mutated in the fetishizing process but rather the social world of the Euro-Western subject. For example, in "The problem of the fetish, IIIa, Bosman's Guinea and the enlightenment theory of fetishism," William Pietz notes, "The 'fetish worship' examined… pertains not to the real West Africa of the eighteenth century but rather to Enlightenment Europe's image of 'Guinea.'"[141] Similarly, in her bibliography of two Surinamese obeah, Susan Legêne discloses, "the focus here, however, is not directed primarily at the place of these obeah and the role of *winti* in processes of identity creation within the diaspora slave community, but instead at the role these objects played in

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[141] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa," 105.

contesting, confirming, or negotiating European control of these identities."[142] The fetish concept, therefore, is only meaningful within the Euro-Western social value system that created Bosman's "Guinea" and European imaginings of "obeah" as "fetishes." The fetish idea-problem, therefore, can neither speak *to* or *about* the actual materialities and realities that were transmutated and fetishized in the cultural contact between European interests and African religio-material sensibilities.

While acknowledging the double consciousness of the term fetish to a certain extent—its derogatory history and heritage, on the one hand, yet, on the other hand, its ability to mark a space of revolution and destabilization—contemporary fetish discourses continue to reify the concept and thus persist in contributing to an erasure of the actual materialities behind the original historical misnaming. In their concern for the border spaces and border phenomena, that is, the places and things of cultural contact, that the fetish concept highlights, these scholars continue to privilege understandings of various indigenous materialities from the historical vantage point of the European West rather than from the perspective of the indigenous communities themselves. As an idea-problem, the fetish concept may name a historical encounter experience, but it does so merely from the perspective of those *who colonized* rather than the perspective of those *who were colonialized*. Hence, the term continues to reinforce the construction of the empirical other even as it attempts to illuminate the process of ideological construction through which this Other was created.

Rather than seeking to find salvageable theoretical materials from the leftovers of colonialist, capitalist, and imperialist ideologies, this dissertation privileges the indigenous insights of local community members as theories-in-practice and theories-lived that can

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[142] Legêne, "From Brooms to Obeah and Back," In *Border Fetishisms*, 36.

provide a renewed conceptual and empirical foundation for feeling, embodying, and thinking about materiality. While appreciative of the analytical pathways paved by the work of William Pietz on the genealogy of the fetish, I argue ultimately that his genealogy is limited by a singular concern for the fetish as a European encounter construction that leaves unexamined the actual materialities and indigenous matter-philosophies that were fetishized in the process of this encounter.

"The Thing": The Materialist Turn in Religious Studies

Though a part of materiality studies, fetish discourses, by and large, do not in actuality theorize matter and materiality but rather, as Webb Keane notes, "the problems that *objects* pose for *subjects*."[143] Yet, the expansion of materiality studies into disciplines that engage religious contexts, persons, and practices beyond the limiting notions of fetishism, animism, and idolatry have begun to proliferate. In his 1991 essay "Matter and Spirit: A Reorientation," Charles Long advocates for an attention to materiality and its significance to human spirituality that places "the locus of matter and materiality precisely at the point of relationships, contacts, and exchanges."[144] Then, following in Long's footsteps and marking a central "materialist turn" in religious studies, in his 2000 review of the edited volume *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998), David Chidester introduces his "manifesto for a new materialism in the academic study of religion,"[145] which demands scholars take up a new material mandate in the study of religion.

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[143] Webb Keane, "Calvin in the Tropics," In *Border Fetishisms*, 13 (emphasis added).

[144] Charles Long, "Matter and Spirit: A Reorientation," in *Local Knowledge, Ancient Wisdom: Challenges in Contemporary Spirituality*, edited by Steven Friesen (Honolulu, HI: The East-West Center, 1991), 15-16.

[145] Chidester, "Material Terms for the Study of Religion," 378.

Chidester's new materialism, as Meyer and Houtman explain, is "not a critique of religion in the name of sheer matter but rather a critique of the study of religion from within that advocates coming to terms with materiality as part of (the study of) religion."[146] In the same year, Charles Long published his theoretical appraisal of Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* and introduced the notion of a religious "imagination of matter."

In his re-reading of Eliade's *Patterns*, Long identifies an underlying theory of religious imagination whereby materiality reveals itself as the *a priori* foundation for religious consciousness. Highlighting Eliade's fundamental concern with questions of religious epistemology, that is, how people *know* the sacred, particularly in relation to materiality, Long explains, "[*Patterns*] begins from the other side of Otto, who attempted first to give us an account of consciousness and then to show how it expresses itself through religious forms. Eliade's work shows how the forms of matter, (nature) evoke modes of consciousness and experience (hierophanies)."[147] In the work of Eliade, Long identifies, therefore, a central paradigm for exploring the relationship between materiality and religion.

Then, building on Chidester's materialist recommendations, but with theoretical insights from both Mircea Eliade and Charles Long, in his 2003 essay, Tatsuo Murakami locates the origin of the modern concept of religion in the colonial and imperialist contexts in which the primitive Others' materialities were denied and denigrated. Murakami thus asserts, "the 'primitives' are, in this sense, the *material* origin of

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[146] Houtman and Meyer, "Introduction," in *Things*, 6.
[147] Charles Long, "Mircea Eliade and the Imagination of Matter," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 1, no. 2 (2000): 1.

religion."[148] Yet, since the materiality of empirical others is obscured and negated, the

origin of religion as an imperialist construct is first and foremost a *problematic* that must be

questioned and reevaluated. Both Chidester and Murakami's essays, therefore, suggest

that this new materialist analysis of religion mandates problematizing the Euro-Western

imperialist genealogy and ideology of the concept and, moreover, recovering the

indigenous traditions dematerialized in the process. Accordingly, as Murakami advocates,

this dissertation situates "religion" as an initial question and problem at the beginning of

the inquiry rather than as an established fact. Therefore, through exploring the contours

of material expressions and experiences in African (Vodoun) communities, I seek not only

to problematize the concept of religion but also to redefine and reimagine the concept of

religion beyond the confines of its imperialist heritage.

The materialist turn in religious studies has also spawned the creation of such

works as the journal *Material Religion* launched in 2005; Manuel Vasquez's *More Than*

Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion published in 2011; and the edited volume *Things:*

Religion and the Question of Materiality published in 2012. Yet still, many of these materialist

perspectives in religious studies continue to depend upon Western ontological categories

of materiality such as *objects* and *things*. The editors of the journal *Material Religion*, for

instance, have stated, "A materialized study of religion begins with the *assumption* that

things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion,

but rather inextricable from it."[149] Similarly, Brigit Meyer and Dick Houtman, the editors

of *Thing*, declare,

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[148] Murakami, "Asking the Question of the Origin of Religion in the Age of Globalization," in *Religion and Global Culture*, 21.

[149] Meyer, Morgan, Paine, and Plate, "The Origin and Mission of *Material Religion*," 209 (emphasis added).

> We invoke the term *things*, and take it as the title for our volume, because it signals indeterminacy… More than the term object, which is usually invoked in the framework of a subject-object relation, in which the former supposedly wields control over the latter, *thing* suggests an extra dimension that expands the realm of rationality and utility. Here we follow Bill Brown's suggestion that we imagine things "as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects in their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems."[150] Calling attention to "things" (rather than simply "objects") in the field of religion… opens up a broad field of inquiry.[151]

While various materialist re-evaluations of religion have attempted to move beyond the problematic of the subject-object relationship, the *thing* is oft revealed as merely a politically correct reworking of the fetish that remains beholden to Western ontological assumptions. In Bill Brown's theorizing, the thing, accordingly, reveals itself as revolutionized reification of the triad of bad objecthood. For instance, in his essay "Dangerous Things," Matthew Engelke notes, "one function of the concept of 'thing' is *to account for* what does not fit into a coherent ordering of objects," and thus becomes dangerous.[152] Even Jane Bennet, who I find theoretically robust in her articulation of a vibrant materiality, espouses a theory of the *thing* as an "out-side," a wildness, that is, "an

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[150] See Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 5.

[151] Houtman and Meyer, "Introduction," in *Things*, 16.

[152] Matthew Engelke, "Dangerous Things," In *Things*, 60 (emphasis added). It should be noted that Engelke's essay explores the logic of materiality in the Masowe we Chishanhu Church, an apostolic fellowship in Zimbabwe. It argues that even though this apostolic community is committed to a project of immateriality that the objects that members utilize become, therefore, even more significant. Engelke ultimately argues, "keeping the commitment of immateriality depends on the ability to define the significance and authority of objects. It depends on the ability to assert…that 'some things are more material than others'" (41). Consequently, their espousal of a project of immateriality is not a complete renunciation of the world and its materialities. Though this dissertation is particularly interested in indigenous African religious contexts that embrace a project of materiality, Engelke's essay demonstrates that materiality is still central to the practices and ontological orientations of those Africans who espouse Christian and anti-materialist religious perspectives. I suggest, therefore, that a materialist exploration of even anti-materialist religious traditions may reveal significant material practices, ideas, and experiences.

irreducibly strange dimension of matter."[153] While expanding beyond the subject-object

dichotomy, the concept of the *thing* often still presupposes, therefore, this Euro-Western

ontological structure as the norm and thus the *thing*, like the *fetish*, as a dangerous

derivative.

As the present discussion reveals, contemporary materialist theories often limit

their conceptions of materiality to Euro-Western philosophies and insights. Jane Bennet's

Vibrant Matter is a work that explicitly seeks to build on the Western philosophical history

of the idea of vibrant matter based on the work of Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche,

Henry David Thoreau, Charles Darwin, Theodor Adorno, Gilles Deleuze, Henri

Bergson, and Hans Driesch. Similarly, Manuel A. Vasquez's *More Than Belief* is beholden

to a Western phenomenological framework. Vasquez importantly expands beyond the

shortcoming of Cartesian dualism, Edmund Husserl's transcendental subject, Martin

Heidegger's emphasis on historicity over and against corporeality, Gerardus van der

Leeuw's religious transcendentalism, and Mircea Eliade's positioning of *homo religiosus* as

the transcendental subject. However, in fully espousing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology,

Vasquez's non-reductionist material phenomenology still remains beholden primarily to a

set of limitations imposed by Euro-Western theorists and thought-patterns. These

reflections do not make the work of either Vasquez or Bennett irrelevant, however, their

philosophical theorizations are at least potentially inadequate for the task of

understanding African indigenous materialities on their own terms. Therefore, given the

ideological dominion of bad objecthood in the study of religion and the historical reality

of frontier and comparative religious methodologies, the question still remains: Can the

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[153] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2-3.

study of religion overcome its history of imperialism and negative objecthood to facilitate

an actual reawakening of materiality? Moreover, what would this reawakening of

materiality in the study of religion require?

Section IV: Towards a New Materialist Approach to Religious Studies: A Re-Evaluation of Charles Long's "Imagination of Matter" & Religion as "Orientation"

To conclude this analysis of key concepts and categories in the formation of

religion, matter, and its religious Others, I would like to return to our discussion of

Charles Long's notion of religion as orientation and his conception of a religious

"imagination of matter." Long's notion of religion as orientation is particularly instructive

for an evaluation of the history and ideological function of the concept of religion and for

a valuation of the Other in the formation of the study of religion. Yet, nonetheless, his

construction of religion as essentially *sui generis* presents particular challenges to my larger

concern for exploring an African materialist approach to religious studies. While I concur

with his notion of the sacred or of religion, that is, the metaphysical, as a modality of

being and thus an ontology, based on the philosophical work of Kwasi Wiredu (which I

will elaborate upon further in chapter four), I firmly maintain that with respect to African

religious traditions, in particular, to speak of the "sacred" as something essentially

transcendent and outside of empirical experience is to mistranslate and distort indigenous

metaphysical principles. Nevertheless, I find that a reevaluation of Charles Long's

conceptions and theories may suggest a new materialist approach to the study of religion.

This approach seeks to actually build upon both *sui generis* perspectives that allow room

for the *meaning* and the *presence* of the *religious* and naturalist approaches that take seriously

materiality as socially, culturally, and historically situated. As Jonathan Z. Smith has

noted, the fundamental issue in religious studies has been an understanding of "religion" as *presence*/experience versus as *representation*/expression. Smith argues that religion has been framed according to two major opposing stratagems: the *exceptionalists*, who insist on the unique nature of religion, and the *assimilationists*, who argue for the equivalence of methods in the study of religion with other human and social sciences.[154] However, I maintain alternatively that when *materiality* is made the central imaginative category for conceptualizing the *religious* and *religion,* that religious materiality is revealed through a both/and approach that further promotes methodological diversity.

In this analysis of Charles Long's theory of religious materialism, I will, therefore, first explore Long's notion of an "imagination of matter" and its conceptual relationship to his theory of religion as orientation. While providing a productive conceptual space for theorizing the relationship between religious consciousness and human orientation as materially lived, I argue ultimately that Long's attention to human consciousness and epistemology partially obscures the significance of the ontological and the material. Nonetheless, I insist that Long proposes possibilities for avoiding methodological imperialism, ultimately allowing conceptual space for the *religious* and the *material* to co-exist and even converge. Lastly, suggesting a way forward towards a new materialism in religious studies, exploring and nuancing Long's demand for a new humanism, I suggest instead the need for a new materialism that reveals the human as primordially a material being co-emergent and co-existent with the raw matter of our lifeworld.

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[154] Smith, *Relating Religion*, 362-363.

Charles Long and Mircea Eliade's "Imagination of Matter"

In his theoretical articulation of the "imagination of matter," Charles Long

demonstrates that Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religions* (1958) reveals materiality

as the *a priori* basis for religious consciousness and thus that Eliade is essentially concerned

with questions regarding religious epistemology—in other words, by what means do

archaic and polytheistic peoples *know* the sacred? In Eliade's *Patterns*, the sacred reveals

itself through the transcendence of the sky, the rhythmic repetitions of the moon, the

primary and purifying nature of water, the earth as the foundation of existence, and so

on. Therefore, even transcendence, that which in the Euro-Western world has often been

metaphysically imagined as beyond and out of time, is revealed through the material and

the natural. Eliade's *Patterns* specifically attempts to demonstrate how archaic and

polytheistic peoples *imagined* the sacred through their concrete experiences *in* and *with*

matter, that is, the natural world. Charles Long's reading of Eliade's *Patterns*, thus, posits

that religious epistemology—how one knows the sacred or the divine—cannot be

separated from one's being-in-the-world and thus from one's ontological relationship to

the sacred. Therefore, according to Long's reading, materiality evokes both religious

consciousness and religious experience.[155] Building on his theorization of Mircea Eliade's

"imagination of matter" and his understanding that the fundamental discoveries about

the material world (such as the domestication of animals and agricultural production)

were made by archaic societies, Long furthermore argues that there is an essential

congruence between *homo religiosus* and *homo faber*, between human beings as religious

beings and human beings as creator-workers. Long specifically suggests that both *homo

religiosus* and *homo faber* utilize the same materiality and material context to *imagine* and

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[155] Long, "Mircea Eliade and the Imagination of Matter," 1-3.

create their cosmos-world. Based on this concrete *imagining* and *creating* of the sacred, according to Long, Eliade insists that human beings (alongside their gods) are co-creators of the sacred.[156] Accordingly, in Eliade's *Patterns*, Charles Long uncovers an existential basis for a religious hermeneutic, a hermeneutic that emphasizes our "imagination of matter" as the foundation for creating various religious materialities and orientations in the world.

Contextualizing Long's Notion of Religion as Orientation

In his commonly overlooked publication *Alpha* (1963), Long specifically identifies G. van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (1933) and Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958) as providing an overview of the varied modes of *cosmic* "orientation" in religious life. He then states that his intent in *Alpha* is to provide a further delineation of these various cosmic orientations through an attention to specific cosmogonic myths.[157] Moreover, in his development of the notion of religion and the sacred in terms of orientation, Long seemingly expands on the concept of orientation as delineated in Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of Eternal Return* (1949), which suggests the existence of two distinct orientations to time and history and two corresponding modes of humanity: 1) the traditional, cyclical and 2) the modern, linear. According to Eliade, these orientations represent two separate religious ontologies, meaning binary ways of being vis-à-vis the sacred.[158] Finally, in his acclaimed *Significations* (1986), Long clearly defines religion as orientation, as, precisely, the ultimate meaning of one's locus and positioning

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[156] Ibid., 5-6, 8.

[157] Charles Long, *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 19.

[158] See chapters 3-4 in Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2005), 93-162.

in the cosmos world.[159] In his conceptualization of religion as orientation, Long brings

together two notions of religious experience: 1) religious experience as an experience of

the ultimate (as articulated in Rudolf Otto's notion of the wholly other, that is, the

mysterious, tremendous, and awe-inspiring numinous, and Joachim Wach's ultimate

reality), and 2) religious experience as the significance that humans give to their particular

positionality in the world, and their imaginings of their material existence. Moreover,

according to Long, the notion of religious experience as ultimate reality is implied in the

latter conception of religious experience as human orientation.[160]

Accordingly, Long's notion of religion as *orientation* further positions religious

meaning-making and religious imagining and creating as historical, cultural, temporal,

and material. It provides a means for exploring how the sacred is materialized and

localized through the embodied orientations of particular peoples and communities and

how it participates in the creation of new materialities (new places and new human

beings). Specifically, Long demonstrates that this notion offers a way to explore how

particular *orientations* form unique material *loci*, such as: how the sixteenth- and

seventeenth-century European contact and encounter with an *other* world (i.e., the New

World) produced new religious meanings and how the contact and encounter of the New

Guineans with Westerners and their commodities produced "cargo cults." Both

examples, as Long contends, are new imaginings of both religion and humanity.[161]

Building on Eliade's *religious epistemology* in which persons come to know the sacred

through their material existence, as Charles Winquist notes, Long articulates and

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[159] Long, *Significations*, 7.
[160] Ibid., 107.
[161] See Long, "Conquest and Cultural Contact in the New World" and "Cargo Cults as Cultural Historical Phenomena" in *Significations*, 107-138.

theorizes a *contact epistemology* in which persons come to know the sacred and religion specifically through their material experiences of cultural contact—precisely, the unequal cultural interaction between the Euro-Western world and indigenous cultures.[162]

The Problematic in Long's "Imagination of Matter" and Religion as Orientation

While Long's clarification of Eliade's "imagination of matter" and his articulation of religion as *orientation* provide important theoretical grounds for "imagining religion"[163] in materialized, localized, embodied, and historical ways, ultimately, both Long and Eliade subordinate immanent reality and experience to transcendence as ultimate reality. In his *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Eliade acknowledges the importance of the material world as a basis for the production of religious consciousness and thus the significant role of hierophanies as modalities of the sacred, yet he ultimately presents materiality as limited and limiting. Imagining the sacred as ultimate transcendence, Eliade contends that it is not surprising that the sacred manifests in materiality but rather that it manifests period and, thus, that the sacred shifts from being universal and cosmological to being anthropological and particularized. In Jonathan Z. Smith's analysis of Eliade's morphology of the sacred (in comparison to Goethe's morphology of the leaf), Smith names and identifies two morphological rules: 1) the law of retrogressive metamorphosis by which the sacred inescapably falls into the concrete, and 2) the law of the archetype by which all hierophanies (deities, religious objects, symbols, myths, etc.) are always inclined towards a transcendent model.[164] While the first morphological law allows Eliade to

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[162] Charles Winquist, "Forward" in Long, *Significations*, v.
[163] Smith, *Imagining* Religion, xi.
[164] Smith, *Relating Religion*, 84-90.

account for the limitless diversity of religious phenomena and for the human tendency to seek more intimate and concrete forms of the sacred, the second allows Eliade to construct and imagine a coherent system. In this unified system, matter and, specifically, nature are never natural but rather are always magico-religiously *transformed* and *hierophanized*.

Through his notion of the dialectic of hierophanies, Eliade sets up a binary between the sacred and the profane whereby a profane thing can only become sacred through a particular choice and transformation. Thus, according to Eliade, every hierophany embodies a paradox wherein the sacred and the profane, being and non-being, come together. Moreover, for Eliade, the hierophany presents the central problematic in religion: the *manifestation* of the sacred in the material.[165] Ultimately, for Eliade, the sacred and the profane and the spiritual and the material are essentially separate ontological domains wherein the former has priority over the latter. Therefore, Eliade is clear that every hierophany is a re-presentation and in-carnation of the sacred and that a sacred thing is, thus, never merely a natural object but rather is worshipped and adored because it *reveals* ultimate reality.

At this juncture, let us return to Jonathan Z. Smith's critical analysis of Eliade's *Patterns* with specific attention to what he refers to as Eliade's onto-theology. In his analysis of *Patterns*, Smith separates Eliade's morphology of the sacred (as noted earlier) from his onto-theology. Smith understands this onto-theology as Eliade's subordination of his morphology of the sacred to his ontology, namely his transcendental conception of the sacred as ultimate reality, as the *real*, as the supramundane. Thus, through this onto-

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[165] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 29.

theology, Eliade's historical and material hierophanies are transcendently transformed into suprahistorical entities. Smith contends that it is this onto-theological move that results in criticisms of Eliade's *Patterns* as ahistorical, even though Eliade himself acknowledges the historical context of hierophanies. Moreover, given his naturalist orientation to religion, Smith wishes to jettison Eliade's onto-theology and yet leave room for reclaiming the morphological project.[166] However, in consideration of my earlier discussion of the problematic of Eliade's dialectic of hierophanies, I propose a slightly nuanced perspective.

Rather than jettisoning the understanding of the sacred as an ontological mode entirely (as I discussed earlier in my critique of African religious studies), I instead suggest discarding Eliade's Euro-Christian theological presumptions. While Eliade did not in general privilege Christianity, presenting essentially a Christian apologetic, Eliade interprets *all* hierophanies as essentially "prefigurations of the miracle of the Incarnation"; thus, his understanding of the sacred-profane dialectic and of the sacred as *reality* and *being* is influenced by an explicit Euro-Christian theology of incarnation.[167] However, I contend that it is the imposition of a Euro-Christian transcendental reality and the phenomenological transcendental subject (as adopted from Husserl's transcendental phenomenology) that results in both a subordination of the material to the spiritual and, by extension, a theological ontology that ultimately dismisses the materiality and historicity of sacred matters. I assert, therefore, that the *sacred* can be ontological without being transcendental and that, if the sacred is understood in material terms, it can be

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[166] Smith, *Relating Religion*, 94, 96.
[167] Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 29-30.

experienced and lived, as Kwasi Wiredu suggests, as an immanent metaphysics.[168] Wiredu insists explicitly that not all metaphysics transcends the corporeal, material, geographical, and experiential. Therefore, the sacred's connection with ultimate reality and with transcendence is not what separates it from the profane; rather, an immanent and material metaphysics indicates that the *sacred* is transformative *within*, *with*, and *as* nature. Thus, the distinction between the sacred and the profane is obsolete.

Similarly, while Long's articulation of an "imagination of matter" through which religion and the sacred are produced is theoretically robust, in its privileging of *imagination*, it diminishes the dynamic quality of materiality and presents materiality as a malleable object awaiting the creative capacities and imaginings of *homo religiosus* and *homo faber* rather than as a vibrant agent participating in co-creation. By extension, despite his creative ways of imagining ultimate reality—as, for example, the *mysterious tremendum* experience of the European-West through which indigenous peoples are signified, re-created, and re-materialized—by subordinating his notion of religious orientation to ultimate reality, Long's epistemological orientation is more cognitive and symbolic than material and lived. His epistemology does not yield theoretical substance that can be existentially productive in exploring the non-transcendental metaphysics of, for example, materialized African deities, ancestors, and other quasi-material forms. Due to Long's and Eliade's concern for epistemology, for knowing, for comprehending religious consciousness and the religious *believer*, and in Long's case, for the problematic signifying discourses of the Western thinking subject, they overlook the importance of ontology as materially and corporally lived. This weakens the prominence of Long's very own concept of the religious *practitioner* as doer and creator. Long's attention to the overlapping

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[168] Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 87.

domains of *homo religiosus* and *homo faber*, in fact, names a locale for constructing a new materialism in the study of religion. However, given his espousal of the cognitive, mental trappings of "religion" as essentially concerned with consciousness, beliefs, and ideas, religious materialism remains under-theorized. Nevertheless, an African non-transcendental metaphysics potentially offers a way out of this labyrinth because it compels a reckoning with religious subjects as *creators*, as practitioner-believers,[169] thereby erasing boundaries between *homo religiosus* and *homo faber*.

Materiality and Co-Existence: Converging Sui-Generis and Naturalist Perspectives

While Long's and Eliade's "imagination of matter" is limited by its essential focus on the transcendent, an *a priori* ultimate reality, and its emphasis on human consciousness, I would suggest that it nonetheless presents a productive intellectual space between *sui generis* and naturalist approaches to religion. The very convergence of, or at least congruency between, *homo religiosus* and *homo faber*—their similar practices of making and creating through the modality of matter—suggests that the two perspectives may be two sides of the same coin in some respects.

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[169] See David Morgan, ed. *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2009), xiv, 8-9. In Morgan's edited volume *Religion and Material Culture*, he redefines and rematerializes belief as "what people do" and as a fully semiotic and embodied material experience of "what I know with my body." There is, therefore, little distinction between the practitioner and the believer in his theorization. Thus, he provides a new theoretical basis for moving beyond belief as merely an inner process or an extension of transcendent experiences of the sacred, and thus this approach also, like Long's, forecloses the boundaries between *homo religiosus* and *homo faber*. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore that historically the framing of religion through the category of belief and its Protestant legacy has prevented a deeper attention to material and embodied religious experiences.

In *Manufacturing Religion* (2003), Russell McCutcheon, a preeminent representative and advocate of the naturalist perspective, essentially argues that the study of religion, especially its *sui generis* school, is more than a practice in intellectual imagining.[170] He argues, as discussed previously, that it is an act of manufacturing based on relationships of power and control in which religious scholars participate in the manufacturing and controlling of disembodied *believing* subjects. Specifically, he notes that the *sui generis* perspective in religion becomes a means of minimizing the historical and devaluing the profane in relationship to the sacred, of defending the domain of religion against naturalists, such as anthropologists and sociologists, and of redefining humans as *believers* and thus transforming them into disembodied subjects that can be manipulated, controlled, and dominated. Consequently, McCutcheon ultimately understands the *sui generis* perspective as essentially a political ideology for defending religion as an autonomous domain and discipline and as a social instrument of imperialism.[171]

In the field of anthropology, Talal Asad is also concerned with the *sui generis* construction of "religion" as a transhistorical and transcultural essence, which he sees as a secularist strategy to confine religion to a specific domain and a Christian strategy in defense of religion. Ultimately, Asad understands this separation of religion from power as a modern Western norm that: 1) obscures the authorizing processes and power dynamics that create "religion" by separating the cultural (and symbolic) from the social and psychological and 2) imposes a post-Reformation historical re-theorization of

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[170] McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, xi-xii. Russell McCutcheon is critiquing Jonathan Z. Smith's intellectual notion of religious imagination whereby Smith argues that "religion" has no actual data and that it is the prerogative of the scholar to *imagine* religion for the purposes of comparison and to produce general theories of "religion."

[171] Ibid., 13, 22-26.

"religion."[172] However, while McCutcheon wants to jettison entirely the project of *interpretation* for the project of *explanation*, Asad contends that although religious symbols cannot be understood as distinct from their social context, this does not mean that they can only be interpreted based on their social and cultural contextualization.[173]

In my appraisal of the naturalist perspective, I would first like to revisit Jonathan Z. Smith's point that the *sui generis* claim is not particular to religious studies.[174] "Society" and "culture" have similarly been the *sui generis* objects of sociology and anthropology and have at least equally participated in manufacturing the Other. Thus, secondly, while providing various important critiques such as the emphasis on interpretation to the neglect of explanation and the focus on the sacred and the spiritual rather than the material and the profane, I would contend that McCutcheon largely dismisses and ignores the fact that the naturalist strategy for defining and delineating the proper boundaries of methods and theories in religious studies can be equally problematic, political, and imperialist. It cannot be forgotten that anthropologists alongside missionaries were the handmaidens of colonialism and imperialist projects and that various scholars in the *sui generis* school (particularly the Chicago school: Mircea Eliade, Charles Long, and Joseph Kitagawa) have attempted to provide a counter-narrative to ethno-evolutionary and "primitive" depictions of the archaic Other. Charles Long, particularly, maintains that theorizing the sacred as wholly other and as a *mysterious tremendum* provided a means for these Chicago-school scholars to make sense of their experiences as *Others* both existentially and academically and, furthermore, to address the

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[172] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 28, 32-37.

[173] Ibid., 54.

[174] See discussion of the *sui generis* and unique claim, in Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 6.

experiences of the marginalized communities they studied as *Others*.[175] These

marginalized communities, that is, these religious Others, Long explains, experienced a

wholly oppressive otherness in their encounter with the European-West that rendered

them *creatures* before a manipulative *creator* god.[176]

Thus, while in the interest of producing a new materialist approach to religion, I

am de-privileging transcendence as the primary religious modality. I am not suggesting

that there is no room for a transcendent understanding of the divine or the sacred.

Similarly, I am not suggesting that naturalist perspectives, even if historically grounded in

imperialist histories, cannot be intellectually productive. Rather as Long maintains in his

theorization of the "imagination of matter," given that both the *sui generis* and the

naturalist perspectives can provide meaningful *understandings* and *explanations* of religion,

even when and where these perspectives collide and contrast, there is no need for

methodological imperialism.[177] In demonstrating the relationship between and even the

convergence of *homo religiosus* and *homo faber*, Long's "imagination of matter" indicates that

both perspectives have something to teach us about how materialization produces the

religious and *religion*. Likewise, in his call for a rediscovery of matter as a religious

phenomenon,[178] Long is at least partly suggesting that a materialist and therefore

naturalist orientation to religion is both necessary and imperative.

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[175] Long, *Significations*, 27-28.
[176] Ibid., 175-176.
[177] Long, "Mircea Eliade and the Imagination of Matter," 1.
[178] Ibid., 10.

De-Centering Humanity: Towards a New Materialism

To conclude, I would like to consider Charles Long's reflection on the notion of *human centers* and his central solution to the methodological problems in the history of religions. In this regard, Long argues that, in order for the science of religion to move beyond the problem of its Enlightenment heritage—in which the Western epistemology of rationalism was placed at the center, and the *Other* and its data were placed at the periphery, outside of space and time—it will be necessary for historians of religions to decenter the Western ideology of rationalism and to allow a new humanism to take precedence, one that recognizes all human beings and their respective religious consciousness as both ontological and ontologically real. This new humanism, according to Long, must be concerned with working towards an ultimate definition of the human.[179] While I find his notion of the new humanism both intellectually and ethically meaningful, I still wonder: To what extent does a focus on human consciousness and the *homo sapiens* obscure the ontological reality of existence, specifically those aspects of material existence that do not attain the privileged status of being defined as either a "human" or a "person" within a Western epistemological centering scheme? While Long's suggested methodology decenters the Western human subject, it continues to center the human as the privileged ontological position and reality.

Given this ontological limitation, contrary to Long's recommendation, I would alternatively ask: Can there be a religious studies that conceptualizes the ontological reality as it unfolds in both human and non-human, material and quasi-material ways rather than privileging the human? I am, therefore, suggesting, alongside such scholars as Bill Brown and Daniel Miller, that a new humanism is not what is required; what is

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[179] Long, *Significations*, 81-87.

needed is a new materialism, a new means of honoring the ontological value and reality of all of existence.[180] This new materialism enquires: what do the raw materials of existence—including human persons, "objects," bodies, geographies, etc.—have to teach us about what it means not merely to be human but to exist, to be ontologically and materially real? Eliade and Long suggest that the human is made possible in the ultimate sense as *homo symbolicus* ("symbolic man").[181] I argue that the ultimate evaluation of humanity must contend with the human as a material being, as precisely *homo materia*, as part and parcel of the raw matter of existence.

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[180] See Brown, "Thing Theory," 1-22; and Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

[181] See Long, *Significations*, 86.

CHAPTER 3
Translating Vodoun:
History, Scholarship, and the "Violence of Translation"

Troubling the positionality of African religious Others, in particular, and of

materiality in the study of religion, more generally, in the previous chapter, I provided an

overview of key concepts in the formation of the polemical relationship between religion,

matter, and politics of othering. Through highlighting the construction of Bosman's

"Guinea" and Max Müller's "science of religion," I exposed the imperial stratagem of

"classify and conquer" through which the Euro-Western concept of religion has signified,

imagined, and manufactured its religious Others as "primitives," "savages," and

"disembodied believing minds." Turning to the manufacturing of African religious

Others, in particular, I examined the Christian and Western legacies in the study of

religion in Africa that continue to participate in its positionality as the undesirable step-

child of proper religion (i.e., Euro-Christianity) and offered a way beyond this

problematic through an attention to religion as ontology. Finally, giving consideration to

present-day fetish and materialist discourses, I critiqued the overriding influence of Euro-

Western epistemological and philosophical norms in the formation and re-imagination of

the fetish and the thing, in particular, and materiality, more generally. I suggested instead

an attention to the very indigenous African materialities and materialist philosophies that

were originally mis-translated and converted through the Euro-Western fetishizing gaze.

Lastly, I concluded by offering a way forward towards a new materialist approach to

religious studies that brings together the insights of *sui generis* and naturalist approaches

and by proposing a new materialism that understands the human as essentially *homo*

materia, that is, as part and parcel of the material cosmos.

In the present chapter, I provide a contextual, historical, and intellectual overview of the translations (or, often mis-translations) of Vodoun religious cultures. I begin this present analysis by first exploring the challenges with constructing African histories and then providing a general historical and cultural overview of Vodoun religious cultures with particular attention to the Porto-Novo region of the Republic of Benin. Secondly, I interrogate the discursive processes by which Vodoun Others, in particular, have been violently translated into "fetishes" and "primitives." With attention to this "violence of translation," finally, I suggest stratagems for moving beyond this negative politics of interpretation by privileging emic concepts, theories, philosophies, and norms. Offering a methodological basis for subsequent chapters, this current chapter provides an outline of the conceptual suppositions that inform my ethnographic and theoretical analyses.

Section I: The Problematic of Constructing "History" and "African History": Telling the Lion's Narrative

Constructing history is never an impartial or merely evidence-based task. History is more than a narrative of events and occurrences; it is the product of a modern Euro-Western attempt to make sense of the world: to create losers and victors, to invent "civilizations" and "primitive" societies, and to fashion "new worlds" to be discovered and colonialized. The modern conception of history, as Talal Asad asserts, is not a static thing, rather it is an active endeavor, precisely, a "making of history." As Asad argues, the problematic with this modern notion of making-history is that it is part and parcel of the project of modernization and Westernization by which the European West came to define itself based on an explicit historicity—that is, their partition of time into Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Modernity—and in opposition to non-Western cultures based on

this precise ideology of history. It is, moreover, this ideology of history that Mircea Eliade

denounces in his theorization of the "terror of history," a notion of time that annihilates

the past rather than regenerating antiquity into the present.[182] History is, therefore, not

merely a noun naming an explicit thing to be uncovered, attained, and accomplished.

Rather, history is a deed that participates in the construction of an "us" and "them" and

the destruction and replacement of the old—that is, the ancient and the so-called

primitive—with the new and the modern. As a remnant of the Enlightenment, the

modern "making of history" is a problem precisely because, as Talal Asad explains, in the

act of making-history "the agent must create the future, remake himself, and help others

to do so…. Old universes must be subverted and a new universe created."[183] Essentially,

the new—modernity and the categories, concepts, and institutions it engenders, that is,

Christianity, "religion," "science," the fetish, and the commodity to name a few— must

surmount, subvert, and even redefine the relics of antiquity—that is, indigenous and non-

Western cultures, social institutions, cosmologies, and lived philosophies.

In a 1994 interview with the *Paris View*, reflecting on pitfalls of this modern

making of history, Chinua Achebe, the late prominent Nigerian novelist-historian, stated

the following:

> When I began going to school and learned to read, I encountered stories of other
> people and other lands…. Then I grew older and began to read about adventures
> in which I didn't know that I was supposed to be on the side of those savages who
> were encountered by the good white man. I instinctively took sides with the white
> people. They were fine! They were excellent. They were intelligent. The others
> were not… they were stupid and ugly. That was the way I was introduced to the
> danger of not having your own stories. There is that great proverb—that until the
> lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the
> hunter. That did not come to me until much later. Once I realized that, I had to
> be a writer. I had to be that historian. It's not one man's job. It's not one person's

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[182] See Eliade, "The Terror of History," in *The Myth of Eternal Return* (2005).

[183] Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 19.

job. But it is something we have to do, so that the story of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the travail—the bravery, even, of the lions.[184]

Yet, it is no surprise that Chinua Achebe was considered a novelist rather than a historian in the strict sense of the word. Nevertheless, Achebe was committed to the task of recovering and narrating his peoples' stories because he understood that in order for a people to have a present and a future they must first possess and know their past.

Offering a conceptual basis for understanding the purpose of the past in many African socities, the religious studies theorist and African theologian John Mbiti proposes that traditionally many Africans have had a two-dimensional conception of time, which consists of an extended past and an actualized present but a virtually nonexistent future. Time was—and, to some extent, still is—conceived in concrete, material, and geographical terms. According to this perspective, time is not, as Mbiti asserts, an abstract or mathematical quantity but rather actualized events, occurrences, and experiences— such as, the setting and rising of the moon, the birth of a child, the period of harvest, the rainy and the dry seasons, the time of puberty initiations, and the death of an elder. To the extent that the future is merely potential time and, therefore, not actualized, Mbiti further argues that traditionally many Africans did not focus their attention on an abstract future, but instead on an actualized past (including the mythical past), a concrete present, and the contemporaneous future.[185] In this respect, history is not the narrative of advancement beyond the past but rather the story of how antiquity lives on in the present. Thus, I explore the history—or more precisely, the ancestral narrative—of Vodoun cultures and societies to understand how the past informs and transforms the present.

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[184] Jerome Brooks, "Chinua Achebe, The Art of Fiction No. 139," *The Paris Review* no. 133 (Winter 1994), accessed October 6, 2015, http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1720/the-art-of-fiction-no-139-chinua-achebe.

[185] See Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 16-28.

Crafting a history of the hunted, of the lions, that is not implicated in the invention of "civilizations" and "savages" remains a challenging task. With this problematic in mind, Asad situates his text *Genealogies of Religion* as "a contribution to a historical anthropology that takes the cultural hegemony of the West as its object of inquiry… [to] explore ways in which Western concepts and practices of religion define forms of history making."[186] While equally concerned with how the Western concept of religion defines and confines the historical and mythical narratives we construct about the world, particularly non-Western worlds, I seek to tell the lion's story. Yet, in telling the lion's narrative, I do not further notions of time and history connected to modern notions of progress, but rather seek to explore the past as a repertoire of knowledge for the present-day functioning and vitality of Vodoun communities. Thus, my contribution lies not only in unearthing how the Western concept of religion continues to colonize and re-define non-Western persons, cultures, sacred institutions, philosophies, and practices but also in allowing the lions (that is, indigenous communities) to speak back to, to re-define, and to challenge the parameters of *religion*, *religions*, and the *religious*.

Yet, in telling the narrative of the hunted, reconstructing the past, and narrating the present, I am fully aware that fundamentally history is a subjective enterprise. Even if we move beyond a notion of making-history that presupposes Western notions of progress, history is still a human attempt to insert oneself into the pattern of time, a process that tends to write out certain details, moments, and peoples, and naturally creates a particular image of the self. History, like all narrative forms, is, as Michael Jackson asserts, "counterfactual" for it is our human attempt to establish and structure

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[186] Asad, *Geneologies of Religion*, 19, 24.

our place in society and in the world.[187] Likewise the historian Edward Carr remarks,
"The historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing
objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous
fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate." Nonetheless, regardless of the desire to
imagine history as merely a gathering together of truths, as Carr asserts, "interpretation
enters into every fact of history."[188] Thus, in providing a historical outline of several
Vodoun societies in West Africa, my goal is not to create a "factual" narrative but rather
to explore and interrogate the socio-cultural, material, and metaphysical landscape that
produced the Porto-Novian society and Vodoun community that my study examines.

However, given that modern African historical narratives are often based
substantially on the written testimonies of European "observers" (even if and when local
oral narratives are consulted), constructing or, in other words, re-creating African history
involves unique challenges. Euro-Western imperialist agendas, which facilitated cultural
contact between European missionaries, slave traders, and administrators and coastal
African merchants, community leaders, and populaces, are implicitly implicated in the
modern project of "making" African history. To this end, a primary difficulty with
reconstructing African history in the "Slave Coast" and the "Gold Coast" regions of West
Africa, as my earlier analysis of William Bosman exposes, is that these agents of European
imperialism have distorted and amended the past according to their capitalist interests
and religio-cultural predispositions. Robert Norris' 1789 publication, *Memoirs of the Reign of
Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomey, an Inland Country of Guiney*, which provides an account of the
reign of the *àxɔ́sú* (monarch) Tegbesu, was written and publicized explicitly to contest the

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[187] Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and
Intersubjectivity* (Portland, OR: International Specialized Book Services, 2002), 16.
[188] Edward Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 10-11.

abolition of the slave trade. Likewise, producing largely a work of propaganda rather than

of objective history, in 1793 Archibald Dalzel published his *The History of Dahomey, an*

inland kingdom of Africa. Problematizing this professed "history" of eighteenth-century

Dahomey, the Yorùbá historian I.A. Akinjogbin states the following:

> Even Dalzel… did not write for the edification of Dahomey. He, or his editor, was
> mainly interested in showing, despite the many incidents in his work which proved
> the contrary, that Dahomey was one of those 'savage nations' which were 'under
> little control [sic] than that of their own will' and by that to extol the British
> civilization. The commonest epithets which he used for Dahomey were
> 'barbarous' and 'savage.'[189]

Similarly, in *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome* (1864), Richard Burton depicted African

peoples as essentially inferior and even explicitly stated, "no white man who has lived

long in the outer tropics can prevent feeling that he is *pro tempore* the lord, the master, and

the proprietor of the black humanity placed under him."[190] In this respect, African history

has been a modern project of reclamation dedicated to the promotion and support of

European imperialism rather than the actual ancestral legacies of African peoples. Thus,

we must concur that Akinjogbin is correct in concluding: "Our knowledge of eighteenth-

century Dahomey [and, for that matter, Africa in general] up to date therefore is a

mixture of facts, fables, and prejudices, sanctioned by usage and rendered acceptable by a

general lack of interest in genuine African history except as an aspect of European

imperial activities."[191] To tell the lion's narrative, scholars must then take care to avoid

framing the African historical past simply based upon European imperialist events,

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[189] I.A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 4-5.

[190] Richard F. Burton, *Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome*, Vol. 1 (London: Tinsley Brothers, 18, Catherine Street, Strand, 1864), 18.

[191] Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours*, 4-5.

interests, and perceptions and instead explore indigenous and local narratives as windows (though perhaps opaque) into the past.

Section II: A General History of Vodoun: From Tado to the Present-day Kingdom of Hogbonu (Porto-Novo)

The concept of *vodoun* (*vodun*, *vodou*, *vodu*, *voudou*, *voodoo*, *voju*)[192] is primary to this present study, and yet *vodoun* can neither be easily defined nor delineated. The term first appears in written sources as *vodu* in 1658 in the *Doctrina Christiana*, a catechism written in Spanish and Ayizo[193] (with the latter described as "lengua Arda") by an ambassador of Toshonu (Toxonu), the *àxɔ́sú* (monarch) of Allada, to encourage Philip IV of Spain to concentrate trade and missionary activities in Allada rather than Hueda.[194] In this seventeenth-century diplomatic and religious document, *vodu* was translated as "god," "sacred," or "priestly"; thus, presumably Toshonu sought to establish his tradition as equivalent to the Roman Catholic faith.[195] Presently, the word *vodoun* is employed

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[192] The concept of *vodoun* can be written in various ways given that its spelling has not by and large been standardized. In the community in Porto-Novo where I conducted my research, they utilize *vodoun* as the standardized spelling. However, other scholars have employed, for instance, *vodu* and *vodun*. Thus, when addressing other scholarship, I will maintain the scholar's proposed spelling of the concept. However, elsewhere and otherwise I will utilize *vodoun*.

[193] A. Le Hérissé, *L'Ancien Royaume du Dahmey: Moeurs, Religion, Histoire* (Paris: Emile Larose, 1911), 275. It seems probable that Ayizo might have been adopted as the name of the language of Allada given that, according to Le Hérissé, the autochthonous designation for the country (prior to Adja conquest) was Aïzonou-tômè (meaning, the country of the Aïzonou).

[194] See Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving 'Port,' 1727-1892* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 17-19. Following the convention set by Robin Law in *Ouidah*, I refer to the peoples and the kingdom, which from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century were referred to as "Whydah," "Fida," "Juda," and "Ajuda" in European sources, as "Hueda" in order to cohere more closely with the Fon language.

[195] Suzanne Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 37; Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours*, 27-28. The political purpose of this document is quite clear; as Akinjogbin notes, "The mission,

generally to designate both a distinct African religious tradition with a variety of

communities and adherents predominantly located in the Volta region of present-day

Ghana, Togo, and southern Benin, and the "gods" or "deities" of said tradition. Yet,

vodoun[196] names more than a sacred orientation or an ontological metaphysics, it

designates peoples, communities, institutions, and ways of being which claim ancestral

descent from the Adja (Aja) and the powerful ancient Kingdom of Tado—namely, the

Ayizo, the Fon, the Ewe (Evhe), the Gun, and other linguistically and culturally affiliated

communities and peoples.

Often referred to as the "Slave Coast," this region is the cradle of *vodoun* and the

various Adja- and Yorùbá-affiliated communities, institutions, and cultures that epitomize

its diverse expression. Yet, given the legacy of European colonialism, imperialists and

historians alike have often either distorted native names for geographical localities, local

kingdoms, and indigenous institutions or have outright dispensed with and replaced local

place names for European appellations. As the title of his central historical text suggests,

Robin Law's *The Slave Coast of West Africa 1550-1750* (1991), largely examines the

geographical expanse—encompassing present-day south-eastern Ghana, Togo, Benin,

and south-western Nigeria—from the vantage point of the European West, for whom the

region was the principal site of their lucrative but controversial trade in African bodies.

While the "Slave Coast" has become an acceptable misnomer in historical writings,

naming and concretizing a primary locality of the Atlantic Slave Trade, it nevertheless

redefines the communities, peoples, cultures, and institutions of this region as merely

however, failed. Toshonu did not show the expected enthusiasm to change his religion. In fact he declared, after many prevarications, that he had no intention of doing so. Nor did he really allow his subjects to change theirs" (28).

[196] When talking about *vodoun* as an indigenous concept that refers to either their "deities" or the tradition itself, I will use *vodoun* in the lowercase.

either accomplices or victims in this illicit commerce in bodies. Yet, in exploring the

"history" of this *vodoun* region as an ancestral narrative rather than merely a project of

progress (that is, modernization), I maintain that these peoples, communities, and cultures

have an historical legacy and identity that supersedes their cultural contact with the Euro-

Western world. Accordingly, emphasizing the two major ethno-linguistic consortiums of

this geographical area, Akinjogbin terms this region "Yoruba-Aja country," stating the

following:

> The Yoruba kingdoms, numbering about fourteen major and many minor ones at
> the beginning of the eighteenth century, occupied mainly the eastern portion of
> this area. The major kingdoms were Benin (or Ibini), Ekiti (or Efon), Egba,
> Egbado (or Awori), Ife Igbomina, Ijamo, Ijebu including Idoko, Ijesha, Ketu,
> Ondo, Owu, Oyo, and Shabe. The smaller ones were scattered all over modern
> Dahomey and Togo republics…. The Aja occupied the western portion of the
> Yoruba-Aja country. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the most
> important of their kingdoms were Allada, Whydah [Hueda], Popo, Jakin and
> Dahomey.[197]

Hence, before this region was designated as the "Slave Coast," it was the political, social,

cultural, and sacred terrain of Adja- and Yorùbá-derived peoples.[198] According to

Akinjogbin, oral narratives, collected in Togo and among the Ewe in Ghana, indicate

that as a result of Yorùbá expansion the Adja gradually migrated westward to establish

their kingdom at Tado (also known as Adja-Tado), a village in present-day southern

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[197] Ibid., 9, 11. There are disputes as to whether all of the latter aforementioned
kingdoms are descendants of the Adja, which I will discuss in more detail shortly.
Nevertheless, the Adja are central mythical ancestors for various peoples and ancient
kingdoms within the region.

[198] Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750: The Impact of The Atlantic
Slave Trade on an African Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 21-24. Robin
Law confirms this noting that the Adja-Ewe (also referred to as Gbe, the local word for
"language") formed "an indigenous African cultural and linguistic entity" (21-22) in the
region, but that Yorùbá-speaking peoples were the second dominant linguistic and
cultural unit in the region.

Togo, and from there later dispersed to found succeeding kingdoms.[199] He elaborates

accordingly, "Some went to Nuatja or Watchi, which later became the centre of Ewe

dispersal, and others returned eastward as a result of dynastic quarrels and settled at

Allada, from where they founded the kingdoms whose names are quoted above [that is,

Hueda, Popo, Jakin, and Dahomey]."[200] Likewise, Robin Law confirms,

> In recent times, most of the Gbe-speaking [that is, Adja-Ewe speaking] peoples of
> the Slave Coast have claimed a common traditional origin, the ruling dynasties of
> the major states tracing their ancestry through a series of migrations ultimately to
> a common cradle, in the Aja kingdom of Tado. The royal families of Notse, Great
> Popo, Whydah [Hueda], and Allada are all claimed to derive directly from Tado,
> while secondary migrations from these centres in turn are said to have created the
> other states, the Ewe for example claiming a common origin from Notse, the Hula
> from the Great Popo, and Dahomey and Porto-Novo [Hogbonu] from Allada. In
> some versions of the traditions, an ancestral link is more remotely claimed also
> with the Yoruba to the east, the legendary founder of Tado, Togbe Ani, being
> presented as an immigrant either from Oyo or from Ketu, another of the Yoruba
> kingdoms.[201]

Adja-Tado is, therefore, the ancestral cradle of *vodoun* and of the various peoples and

dynasties that became politically and socially central as Adja descendants confronted new

challenges to their kingdoms, communities, and sacred traditions from Portuguese,

Spanish, Dutch, English, and French traders, missionaries, and colonial administrators.[202]

Accordingly, historians have estimated that in the late sixteenth century, perhaps

around 1575 and during the expansion of the Atlantic Slave Trade, a dynastic lineage of

Adja-Tado emigrants, the Agasuvi, migrated further east to the country Aïzo and there

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[199] Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours*, 11.

[200] Ibid.

[201] Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 26. Furthermore, it should be noted that, according to Law, the Mahi and Weme kingdoms are among the only Gbe-speaking groups that do not claim an origin from Tado, but rather from the Abomey region (ibid., 26-27).

[202] Ibid., 17. Law notes that that neither Adja nor Tado were explicitly mentioned by name in European sources of the seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries, which according to Law suggests that the Adja of Tado were not extensively involved in the slave trade during this period.

established the Kingdom of Allada under the authority of the legendary Adjahuto, who

instituted the Allada dynasty.[203] Given the estimation that Tado had been a principal

sovereignty in the Adja-Yorùbá region up until about the sixteenth century, Law reasons

that Allada understood itself as the royal inheritor of the previous position of

paramountcy that Tado had once maintained. Although the political sovereignty of

Allada was already in decline by the mid-seventeenth century, Europeans present during

the period affirm that Allada's protectorate had included Dahomey to the north and

Hueda and Great Popo to the east, with only the Krepi (namely, the Ewe peoples) to the

far west, beyond Allada's grasp.[204]

The decline of Allada's authority in the mid-seventeenth century directly

coincided with the emergence of the Kingdom of Dahomey, which arose at the beginning

of the seventeenth century. According to oral traditions collected in Abomey and in

Hogbonou (Porto-Novo), after the death of the Allada king, Ko-Kpon, around 1610,[205] a

succession dispute erupted between his elder son Tè Agbanlin and his younger son

Dogbagri-Ghènou (Dako).[206] Dogbagri-Ghènou was initially elected but, after the quarrel

with his older brother, the elders decided to dethrone him, and Allada was entrusted to

his great uncle, Hounogoungoun. Thereafter, Dogbagri-Ghènou, with his sons Dako and

Ganhèhèsou and his allies, fled north to the country of the Ghèdèvi, and conquering their

king, established Abomey, the capitol of the Dahomey Kingdom. Concurrently, the elder

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[203] Le Hérissé, *L'Ancien Royaume*, 274-275; see also Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours*, 10; Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 28; Yves Person, "Chronologie du royaume gun de Hogbonu (Porto-Novo)," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 15, n. 58 (1975): 217-218.

[204] Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 30.

[205] Le Hérissé, *L'Ancien Royaume*, 277.

[206] Ibid., 276. There is some disagreement and confusion as to whether Dakodonu (also known as Dakodonu) was the father of Dogbagri-Ghènou or the son of Dogbagri-Ghènou, but Le Hérissé's account suggests that Dako was his son.

brother, Tè Agbanlin, also left Allada but traveled first to the south to Godomey (Jakin) and then to Epe (Ekpé). Lastly, according to oral tradition, Tè Agbanlin finally migrated east to Ajase (Porto-Novo) and there founded the Kingdom of Hogbonu.[207] Yet, there was still a third brother, Hukunkundu-Radugo, who remained at Allada.[208]

In accordance with the Dahomean tradition, Dakodonu (Dako), the son of Dogbagri-Ghènou and the grandfather of Agaja, was the actual founder of Dahomey. His reign has been dated to the mid-seventeenth century, approximately 1625-1650.[209] Yet, in more recent times, Dakodonu has been designated as a "captain" rather than a monarch, an *àxɔ́sú*, proper.[210] According to Norris, Dakodonu was succeeded by Adahunzo (c. 1650-1680) and then Wegbaja (c. 1680-1708). However, Law claims that recent accounts, which regard Wegbaja as the "true founder" of Dahomey, switch the order and contend that Wegbaja reigned before Adahunzo.[211] Nevertheless, whether during the reign of Adahunzo or Wegbaja, in 1671, the rebellion of Offra, the main trading outlet of the kingdom, clearly demonstrated the weakening power of Allada. Though an unintended consequence, as a result of Offra losing its economic position

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[207] See Le Hérissé, *L'Ancien Royaume*, 276-278; A. Akindele and C. Aguessy, *Contribution à l'etude de l'ancient Royaume de Porto Novo* (Dakar: IFAN, 1953), 20-28; Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours*, 21-22.

[208] See Person, "Chronologie du royaume gun de Hogbonu (Porto-Novo)," 218.

[209] Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 261; see also Robert Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomey* (London, 1789; repr. 1968), xvi.

[210] Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 264. However, Law importantly notes that the indigenous term *àxɔ́sú* (*ahosu*), which Europeans translated as "king" or, better yet, "monarch," was according to Dahomean tradition also applied to the heads of "tribes" or clans that existed in the region before the establishment of Dahomey (Ibid., 70).

[211] Ibid., 263-264. Since the succession from Dakodonu to Adahunzo to Wegbaja would have made Adahunzo Agaja's father and Wegbaja Agaja's brother, Law notes, "It may have been Wegbaja's status as the first *àxɔ́sú* (monarch) of Dahomey which led to his displacement from his true position in the traditional king-list, since it was probably felt necessary to represent Agaja (and consequently all subsequent kings of Dahomey) as his direct rather than collateral descendants in order to guarantee their legitimacy" (ibid., 264).

within the kingdom, European traders began to concentrate their trade instead at

Glehue,[212] in the end challenging the sovereignty of Allada. While Allada then made

numerous efforts to divert European trade to their port at Jakin, these endeavors were

ultimately unsuccessful.[213]

Between the 1710s and 1730s, the new Adja kingdom of Dahomey, under the

reign of Agaja, conquered the kingdoms of Weme, Allada, Hueda, destroyed the port at

Jakin, and obtained control of Glehue—thereby, becoming the dominant power in the

Adja region.[214] Just as Allada had perceived itself as the inheritor of the ancient

sovereignty of Tado, as a result of Dahomey conquering Allada in 1724, the Dahomean

kingdom came eventually to construct itself as the successor to the previous dominion of

Allada, and, by relation, also of the ancient Kingdom of Tado.[215] However, the new

Dahomean order, which greatly profited from the illicit trade in enslaved African persons,

would fundamentally greatly transform the political and social arrangement of the Adja-

Yorùbá region. As Robin Law explicitly contends,

> By the end of the seventeenth century, the European demand for slaves had
> brought about a profound transformation of the African societies of the Slave

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[212] See Law, *Ouidah,*17-19. *Glehue* is the indigenous name of the town referred to currently as "Ouidah" and whom the English commonly called "Whydah," the Dutch "Fida," the French "Juda," and the Portuguese "Ajuda." In this regard, Law notes, "A special problem is posed by the case of Ouidah itself, whose name is commonly given in Anglophone literature (including earlier work of my own) in the form 'Whydah', which was the usual English spelling in the pre-colonial period. But here consideration of familiarity have to yield to the usage of the community itself, in which 'Ouidah' is the spelling in current and official use" (ibid., 17). Furthermore, he explains, "Strictly and originally, Hueda was not the name of the town nowadays called Ouidah, but rather the kingdom to which it belonged in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, whose capital was Savi, 11 km further north" (ibid., 18-19). While Law retains the name "Ouidah" for the town to cohere with common present-day usage, I retain the indigenous name, which Law acknowledges is still used in their local languages.

[213] Law, *Ouidah,* 46.

[214] Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 17.

[215] Ibid., 30.

Coast. Although this was primarily an economic transformation, it had dramatic effects in the political sphere also, in a collapse of political order leading to the rise of the new state of Dahomey…. The disintegration of the existing political order on the Slave Coast which was evident by the end of the seventeenth century, involving both wars among states and private banditry, was in the final analysis due to the commercialization of violence by the rise of export trade in slaves. The effect was seen not only in the increasing level of disorder, but also in the increasing prominence of groups for whom violence was a profession. The emergence of banditry and mercenary soldiering was paralleled by the militarization of existing ruling élites. In Dahomey (and also in Little Popo) it is not easy to determine whether the bandit gang had turned itself into a state, or the state turned to banditry.[216]

In this climate of violence, new political orders and ethnic communities emerged that were, even so, still primarily built on ancient Adja-Tado dynasties and inheritances.

In the aftermath of the destruction of the kingdoms of Weme, Allada, Hueda, and the Houla state of Jakin, the refugees of Dahomean conquest forged both new kingdoms and a new national identity in the southeastern region of Adja-Yorùbá country. Even though by 1732 the Dahomeans had successfully overthrown much of the former territory of Allada, the authority of Dahomey still did not extend any further east than Jakin. Although a Yorùbá-speaking province, the region east of the River Weme had been part of the kingdom of Allada before the Dahomean conquest of 1724.[217] Accordingly, to escape Dahomean subjugation, a lineage of Allada expatriates migrated eastward between Jakin and Apa to the town of Aklon on the northern bank of the lagoon east of Lake Nokue and established the new kingdom of Hogbonu. Likewise, refugees from Weme reestablished their kingdom northwest of Hogbonou, and Hueda and other Adja peoples displaced by Dahomean conquest established a third kingdom at Badagry,

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[216] Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 345-346.
[217] Ibid., 309.

previously a subsidiary village of Apa.[218] Bonded by their common experience of

Dahomean subjugation and forming a new linguistic and culture populace preserved by

the lagoons, marshes, lakes, and rivers that surround them, the peoples of these new

kingdoms in the southeast of Adja-Yorùbá country became known as Gun ("Egun"

among the Yorùbá and "Goun" in French). While Gun designates a socio-cultural

populace that consists of several independent and yet often hostile dynasties,[219] based on

their proposed post-1724 history, according to Law,

> The existence of the Gun nationality, however, is evidently a product of recent
> history rather than a background to it, being essentially the result of the
> demographic and political transformations of the early eighteenth century,
> involving the fusion not only of Gbe-speaking immigrants with Yoruba-speaking
> indigenes, but also of disparate Gbe-speaking groups originating from different
> ancestral communities with each other. The name Gun, in fact, is not attested in
> contemporary sources before the 1840s, and may well have been then a recent
> coinage, making its application to earlier periods strictly anachronistic.[220]

Among historians, the Gun peoples are widely considered, then, merely a recent national

populace.[221] Yet still, among local communities, Gun remains a distinct language and

identity that names a particular history and a specific socio-cultural locale.

Before the Adja-Gun peoples of Hogbonu (a dynasty of the Allada kingdom)

established their sovereignty in the town of Aklon (Okoro), Yorùbá-speaking peoples

occupied the region. The town of Aklon was originally founded by the Holli (Ahori), a

sub-branch of Yorùbá peoples; and two states of Holli origin occupied the area. There

was the older state of Okoro (but known as Akron in the Gun language) in the east, from

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[218] Ibid., 17, 24; Person, "Chronologie du royaume gun de Hogbonu (Porto-Novo)," 230.

[219] See Robin Law, "A Lagoonside Port on the Eighteenth-Century Slave Coast: The Early History of Badagri," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 28, no. 1 (1994): 34; Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 17, 19.

[220] Law, "A Lagoonside Port," 34.

[221] Ibid; see also Person, "Chronologie du royaume gun de Hogbonu (Porto-Novo)," 217.

which the town seemingly takes its name, and the more recent state of Ijasè in the west,

which, the historian Yves Person submits, "appears to be the origin of the Yoruba name

of the new city, Ajace [Ajase], which one interprets actually as 'conquest of Aja.'"[222]

While Yorùbá-speaking communities referred to this newly established Adja-Gun

kingdom as Ajase Ipo and its capital as Ajase,[223] resident successors of the Allada dynasty

designated this new kingdom as Allada or Hogbonou (meaning "the big house" in Gun),

and Europeans initially referred to it as Ardres or Grand Ardres.[224] While from the

sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries, European sources utilized the designations

Arada, Arda, Ardra, and Grand Ardres to refer exclusively to Allada and Petit Ardres to

denote Allada's port at Offra, in the post-1724 period, Hogbonu inherited the designation

of Ardres or Grand Ardres, and Little Ardres came to designate the trading port at Semé,

which the Portuguese termed Porto-Novo (meaning "new port").[225] Accordingly, since

Dahomey conquered Allada and retained its previous sovereignty by force rather than by

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[222] Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 17, 24, n. 48; Person, "Chronologie du royaume gun de Hogbonu (Porto-Novo)," 230-231 (my translation).

[223] See Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours*, 214-215; see also Person, "Chronologie du royaume gun de Hogbonu (Porto-Novo)," 232, n. 49. Reflecting on Akinjogbin's apparent substitution of European colonialist naming practices for Yorùbá imperialist nomenclature, Person importantly remarks, "It seems that a certain Yoruba imperialism has incited Akinjogbin to systematically call Porto-Novo [that is, Hogbonu] Ajace-Ipo, so too he calls Ouidah, Igelefe. I am partisan to reestablishing the African names in the spirit of authenticity, but in the cases considered, it is necessary to retain the Aja names, that is to say, Hogbonu and Gléhué, and not the Yoruba forms (Akinjogbin, pp. 21-22, 91-92)" (my translation).

[224] Marie-Josée Pineau-Jamous, "Porto-Novo: royauté, localité, et parenté (Proto-Novo: Kingship, Kinship and Locality)," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 26, no. 104 (1986): 549; see also G. Parrinder, "Yoruba-speaking peoples in Dahomey," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 17, no. 2 (April 1947): 124.

[225] Person, "Chronologie du royaume gun de Hogbonu (Porto-Novo)," 228; Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours*, 214-215; Law, "A Lagoonside Port on the Eighteenth-Century Slave Coast," 33, n. 2.

progeny,[226] local Allada refugees and Europeans alike initially understood Hogbonu,

rather than Dahomey, as the true successor to the kingdom of Allada and its Adja-Tado

lineage.

Yet, in the mid-eighteenth century, the center of the slave trade shifted from

Glehue further south-east to Semé, the port of Hogbonu, which the Portuguese had

termed the "new port" in comparison to the preexisting trading ports at Glehue, Epe,

Badagry, and Little Popo. Hence, Semé (Porto-Novo) became a popular and central

trading post for the illicit commerce in African bodies and remained so until nearly the

end of the slave trade.[227] In this regard, Person highlights that while in 1743 the Charter

from Bahia spoke only of the eastern trading posts, Epe and Apa, and seemingly had no

knowledge of Semé, in 1758, when a Brazilian trader negotiated in the port at Semé, the

name Porto-Novo appears for the first time in writing.[228] Moreover, as Akinjogbin

explains at length,

> In 1754 more ships went to Badagry, Epe, and Little Popo than went to Whydah
> [Glehue]. In 1755 very few ships indeed went to Whydah and the drift was not
> stopped by all the protests which Tegbesu [the king of Dahomey] delivered to the
> directors of the fort. By 1763 Porto Novo, the new port of the kingdom of Ajase
> Ipo [Hogbonu] was being used both by the English and the French… [and] In
> 1765 the total export of the slaves from Whydah port was about five thousand.
> This compared very unfavorably with the nine thousand in 1750. The combined
> total of the slaves exported from Little Popo, Great Popo, Epe, Porto Novo,
> Badagry, and Lagos was also about five thousand. No doubt Whydah trade was
> predominant but as it depended largely on Oyo suppliers, its continued lead
> depended on Oyo preferences. The phenomenal growth of Porto Novo which in
> 1765 was exporting one thousand two hundred slaves, more than the combined

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[226] See Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 332, 348-349. While Dahomey initially represented itself as primarily a military state, as Law remarks, Dahomey came to eventually adopt a policy of incorporation, and, therefore, to present itself as the inheritor of the supremacy of Allada. Thus, both Dahomey and Hogbonu were competing for the position of authority and prestige that Allada had previously attained.

[227] Person, "Chronologie du royaume gun de Hogbonu (Porto-Novo)," 232.

[228] Ibid.

total of the long-established ports of Epe and Badagry, suggests that the days of Whydah as the leading port in the Yoruba-Aja country were numbered.[229]

Semé (that is, Porto-Novo), which in 1774 became the main port of the Oyo kingdom, therefore, came in direct competition with Glehue (Whydah), the central trading post of Dahomey, which had previously greatly depended upon Oyo for its supply of enslaved Africans.[230] Moreover, because of the new position of importance that this port attained, Hogbonu, the new kingdom of Allada, was rechristened as the Kingdom of Porto-Novo. Thus, the trade in African bodies not only redefined and re-designated the Adja-Yorùbá region as the "Slave Coast," as argued earlier, but also the Hogbonu Kingdom was reconstituted as the "new port" for the corrupt trade in captive Africans.

Despite this contemporary retitling of the kingdom, a colonial translational product of the cultural encounter with European traders, the ancestral legacy of Hogbonu remains, and Hogbonu endures as the originary designation of the kingdom among local communities. The accepted oral tradition, as recounted by A. Le Hérissé (1911) and A. Akindélé and C. Aguessy (1953), furthermore, locates the founding of this kingdom during the seventeenth century. Yet, as this recounting of the post-Dahomean conquest period implies, historians (e.g., Akinjogbin, Law, and Person) have largely concluded that the founding of Hogbonu must have been the direct result of the Dahomean conquest of Weme, Allada, Jakin, Hueda, and Glehue and thus necessarily an eighteenth-century phenomenon, often dated to 1730.[231] Nevertheless, Person admits that, during the seventeenth century in the southeastern region of Adja-Yorùbá country, a group of Adja-Tado peoples, presumably the Agasuvi of Allada but known locally as the Tofinnu,

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[229]Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours*, 139-140.

[230] Ibid., 145-146.

[231] See Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours*, 21-22; Law, *The West Coast of West Africa*, 33; Person, "Chronologie du royaume gun de Hogbonu (Porto-Novo)," 227.

founded the villages of Tori and Semé prior to the migration and arrival of Tè Agbanlin.

Person further elaborates, "It is probable that these Adja would have vaguely recognized

the sovereignty of Allada because they go along without difficulty with Tè Agbanlin, who

they give an outlet on the sea between Ekpé [Epe] and Appa (Badagry)."[232] Moreover,

according to Person, the alliance between the Toffinu and the Agasuvi of Hogbonu,

which provided foundational support to the kingdom until the end of the nineteenth

century, was initially forged at Jakin (Godomey) "during the period when the [Toffinu]

fishers had not yet occupied their inaccessible sites at the lagoons." Furthermore, Person

explains, the Toffinu later "acquired these sites by evacuating the land closed from

Godomey, at the precise moment when the Agasuvi were installed at Hogbonu."[233]

Similarly, according to the oral tradition that Le Hérrisé recorded and that I recounted

earlier, before establishing the Hogbonu kingdom, Tè Agbanlin was said to have traveled

south from Allada to Godomey (Jakin), then to Epe, and finally to Ajase, "le pays de sa

mère," ("the country of his mother") but perhaps more accurately Semé.[234] Nevertheless,

Le Hérissé's account coheres with the history of the Tofinnu that Person admittedly

acknowledges. Therefore, Person concedes, "The history of the quarrel resulting in the

separation of the three lines can therefore be the scheme of a real event that would have

occurred in 1600. Not out of the kingdom like the family of Dogbagri, this line would

have lived more than a century at Godomey." Yet, he concludes ultimately,

> …the symmetry of the three branches of the Agasuvi cannot be the effect of a
> realization *a posteriori* from traditions.…I, therefore, tend to admit that the
> separation of the three brothers is mythical and that, around 1600-1610, the
> winners of the conflict which provoked the exile of the Agasuvi from Agbomè all

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[232] Person, "Chronologie du royaume gun de Hogbonu (Porto-Novo)," 230 (my translation).

[233] Ibid., 234 (my translation).

[234] See Le Hérissé, *L'Ancien Royaume*, 277.

> remained at Allada. It is subsequently, in the current of the eighteenth-century,
> that a party of the royal line was transferred towards lake Nokué and established
> with the Tofinnu fishers the solid alliance that would permit them to escape the
> fall of Allada in constructing the kingdom of Porto-Novo.[235]

Yet, despite his conclusions, the separation of the three branches (that is, Allada, Dahomey, and Hogbonu) in the early seventeenth century remains a viable hypothesis. Local oral traditions continue to confirm that Tè Agbanlin or a close relative left Allada around 1600 during the time of the great quarrel with his brother, Dogbagri-Ghènou. The prince traveled to Godomey, then to Epe, and finally settled in the Ajase-Semé region to found the kingdom of Hogbonu. Moreover, given the establishment of Semé and Tori prior to the Dahomean conquest of Allada, it is possible that the Agasuvi of Hogbonu could have existed in the region in the post-1724 period and then been further populated by refugee communities from Allada in the 1720s and 1730s. Therefore, perhaps the kingdom of Hogbonu simply remained largely unknown to so-called European observers until its involvement in the slave trade and its re-christening as Porto-Novo. Nonetheless, it is at least clear that the kingdom of Hogbonu was founded sometime between the end of the seventeenth century, as documented in Hogbonu oral tradition, and the beginning of the eighteenth century, as Person estimates.

Historians (e.g., Robin Law and Yves Person) have also questioned whether oral accounts of ancestral descent from the Adja-Tado are merely mythical fabrications to reinforce the political and religious authority of contemporary royal dynasties (like Dahomey, Hueda, and Hogbonu). Yet, my concern is not whether or not these ancestral legacies are "factual," but rather what these oral traditions, that recount and affirm these legacies, communicate about present-day persons, communities, and traditions within the

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[235] Ibid., 234-235 (my translation).

Adja-Yorùbá region. Hence, I am less occupied with Euro-Western estimations of historicity and instead focused on unearthing the ancestral legacies that connect Hogbonu and present-day Porto-Novo to the interrelated familial narratives of Allada, Dahomey, Glehue, Jakin (Godomey), and Apa (Badagry). To this end, Robin Law affirms that "these traditions of common origin from Tado… do suggest the existence of a sense of common identity and shared historical experience."[236] But, he contends in the end, "The basis of this shared identity, it may be suggested, lay in the common experience of subjection to the power of successive dominant states [that is, Tado, Allada, and then Dahomey]" rather than in any actual familial experience and narrative. [237] However, these oral traditions of common Adja-Tado origin do not merely reflect a shared history of subjugation. Given the continued legacy of *vodoun*-based divinities, practices, and institutions, which were both reinforced and sustained by the aforementioned hegemonies, oral traditions establish *vodoun* as a common metaphysical, political, social, and cultural thread among these varied local polities and far beyond. Hence, *vodoun* is revealed then as a foundational basis for the varied and yet mutual ancestral histories, religious sensibilities, and governmental inclinations of the many independent nations and peoples (such as, Allada, Dahomey, Hueda, and Hogbonou) that claim Adja dynastic descent.

Given the involuntary "passage" of these Adja-Tado peoples to the Euro-American "New World," iterations of this *vodoun* fabric can also be found in the traditions of Candomblé in Brazil, Haitian Vodou in Haiti, New York, Boston, and other urban localities, Voodoo in New Orleans, and various other Africana religious cultures.

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[236] Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 30.
[237] Ibid.

Accordingly, this ancestral sketch suggests that by reasserting or at least privileging

indigenous idioms, designations, and narratives, we begin truly to explore what a history

from the perspective of the hunted might reveal about the lions—that is, the indigenous

communities in the Adja-Yorùbá region that, beginning in the fifteenth century with the

Portuguese imposition, confronted new economic interests and new ideological challenges

to their existing ways of knowing and ways of being-in-the-world.

Section III: Scholarly Translations of Vodoun Religious and Artistic Cultures

While history has been a central product of the Western project of progress, the

scholarly enterprise, too, has sought to *define* and *categorize* in order to reinforce the myth

of Western civilization. In giving attention to the lions' ancestral narratives, it is also,

therefore, necessary to explore how scholars of Vodoun religion, art, and material culture

have, despite noble intentions, often participated in its continued colonialization. I am

not, however, suggesting that I am immune to such scholastic fallacies, especially given

my own extensive indoctrination in the Euro-Western world, but rather I highlight some

of these shortcomings in support of a scholarly praxis that privileges emic theories,

categories, philosophies, and concepts. While a comprehensive survey of academic

literature on Vodoun religious, artistic, and material cultures is beyond the scope of this

present project, through an analysis of three Anglophone texts, I emphasize how Euro-

Western discourses of the *object*, the *fetish*, and the *thing* continue to mis-translate Vodoun

religious and material cultures.

In the 1996 publication of *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*, Suzanne Preston

Blier explores Fon art and religion through an attention to *bo* and *bocio*, indigenous

statuette artistic forms. Blier literally "reads" the bodies of the *bo-bocio* ritual-aesthetic

corpus through the lens of psychology with a particular emphasis upon both

psychoanalytic and semiotic frameworks and assumptions. Presuming an essential

compatibility between African Vodun aesthetic-religious forms and Western psychology,

she employs a psyche-based and therefore subject-based analysis. For instance, while Blier

concedes that Vodun therapeutic practices "display a multifocality rarely evidenced in the

West, often involving not only words (talk), medicines (various plants, salves, and

solutions), and in some cases hypnosis (here trance) but also a full range of sensate

experiences," she ultimately re-conceptualizes these practices as merely

"psychotherapeutic" healing methods.[238] Therefore, a critical and close reading of *African

Vodun* reveals that Blier is most interested in exploring "the ways in which figural

representations convey ideas of the *psyche* through *signifying* body features."[239] She is

seemingly less interested in allowing Vodun materialities to speak for themselves. Rather,

by reading Western psychology into Vodoun materialities and indigenous theories, Blier

positions the psyche and its aligning fields of psychology and psychoanalysis as cross-

culturally and cross-historically viable. Moreover, even though she includes indigenous

voices to elaborate, for instance, upon the embedded ethical and spiritual meanings

within the term *vodun* and other central concepts, the Western scholastic philosophies

from psychoanalysis, Western philosophy, and semiotics take precedence. As such, the

Western self is literally read onto Vodun aesthetic, religious, and material forms.

Blier's psychoanalytic analysis furthermore suggests the following key question: Do

Vodun practitioners see themselves as "subjects" in relation to their *bo-bocio* "objects"?

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[238] Blier, *African Vodun*, 14.
[239] Ibid., 133 (emphasis added).

Blier's own informant provides an instructive response to this question. Discussing the process by which *bocio* are activated, her informant Ayido explicitly states that when applying the sacred *ye* powder to a *bocio*, one is literally "calling [their] *du* [divination sign] into the statue… [and] transforming it into a *person*."[240] Yet, given her focus on the psyche, what this quote suggests is that even as Blier elaborates upon various indigenous terminologies, categories, and even philosophies, her theorizations ultimately privilege the meanings and taxonomies of her Western ancestors over those of her informants. Seeking to explore theories embedded within indigenous concepts and idioms, this dissertation builds on Blier's attention to language-derived philosophies, but, unlike Blier's *African Vodun*, this present project does not rely upon Western theories to explain or validate Vodoun metaphysical and material forms.

In her 1998 publication, *Possession, Ecstasy & Law in Ewe Voodoo*, Judy Rosenthal is less concerned with forcing Ewe Vodun cultures to fit the confines of Western norms. Rather, she describes her engagement with the Western psychoanalytical, semiotic, and philosophical traditions as merely wanting "some genial figure, some handsome character of Western discourse, some lovely body of theoretical play, to dance with West African Vodun, and to be a very worthy dancing partner."[241] Rosenthal, therefore, is careful to note the ways in which "persons" become "objects" and even "objects" become "persons."

Yet, Rosenthal's analysis is ultimately diminished by her reliance on the Western notion of the object and the concept of the fetish as supposedly sufficient explanatory categories. Arguing that indigenous devotees have adopted the term to talk about their *tro*

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[240] Blier, *African Vodun*, 227 (emphasis added).
[241] Judy Rosenthal, *Possession, Ecstasy & Law in Ewe Voodoo* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1998), 11.

and *vodun*, Rosenthal attempts to justify her use of the fetish concept. While her claim is not untrue, through a translational slippage, she ignores the social context of the term's contemporary use, displaces the indigenous terminologies, and reifies the seemingly normative Western divide between objects, subjects, and divinities.

Through her analysis of the fetish as a "god-object," she demonstrates that there are varied and diverse intersubjective relations possible within Vodun cultures—relationships that even involve interchanges between human "persons" and "objects." While her analysis of Vodun intersubjective relationships is central, the notion of the "object" in her theorization of these relations is ultimately untenable. She herself admits, "with respect to... inanimate wealth, objects as such are almost never merely objects (god-objects are worshipped). To say that a person is treated like an object would hardly have the same meaning in Ewe that it has in English."[242] Then, speaking about the deity Nana Wango (that is, Grandma Crocodile in her materialized form), Rosenthal explains, "She must be treated with respect; one must never point and call her 'wood.'"[243] Though Rosenthal calls these materialized *tro* and *vodun* "god-objects," her ethnographic narrative reveals that they are actually not objects; they are not "wood"—that is, dead matter, or more precisely, anything literally cut off from its life force and its community existence.

Even so, since these materialized *vodun* and *tro* are created, Rosenthal maintains that they are objects. In the words of Fo Idi, a Gorovodu priest: "We Ewe are not like Christians, who are created by their gods. We Ewe create our gods, and we create only the gods that we want to possess us, not any others."[244] Yet, Rosenthal makes the assumption that since these deities are created, they, then, must necessarily be objects.

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[242] Ibid., 134.
[243] Ibid., 67.
[244] Ibid., 45.

However, Fo Idi's statement when carefully assessed suggests a different ontology and theology than subscribed to within Euro-Western traditions, wherein whatever a human creates becomes its *object*. Furthermore, it is precisely the createdness of materialized *tro* and *vodun* that establishes them as powerful mediums of metaphysical communication. This is similar to the way in which human beings' createdness also makes them potential communal mediums or repositories of sacred possession. The elements that compose a *vodun* or *tro* and the manner in which they are created are essential to determining their potential efficacy as well as their ability to be agents of spiritual incarnation. The same is true for human beings. Molded and created in *dzogbe*, the human being is like the materialized *vodun* and *tro*.[245] Their creation through the continuity of the social-cosmological community—which for humans happens through a sponsoring ancestor and for materialized *vodun* and *tro* occurs through the sponsoring devotee—allows for the maintenance and sustenance of and overlap between the world of the *vodun-tro* and the human-social environment.

A similar problematic appears in Steven Friedson's *Remains of Rituals* (2009), which presents an ethno-musicological ethnography of the Brekete/Gorovodou religion among the Ewe peoples of present-day Ghana. While partially privileging the ontological and epistemological orientation of these Ewe devotees and thus insisting on the centrality of indigenous knowledge, Friedson ultimately defines the *gorovoduwo* as "fetishes" and "god-things," providing the following explanation:

> …the term [fetish] itself is not pejorative. Whether taken as something good or bad, fetish merely speaks of those things that receive sacrifice and libation. All the northern shrines that came to the coast brought with them these god-things, which were collectively known as *gorovoduwo*, a name that points both to their northern origin and their southern embrace. The first part of the name, *goro*, is the

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[245] Ibid., 176.

> Hausa word for kola nut, the medicine cum sacrament of these shrines, and a commodity with a long history of trade between the Sahel and the forest region of central Ghana…. It is the kola sacrament perhaps more than anything else that, in Ewe eyes, separates these gods from the second part of the name, *vodu*, the word for spirit-god in many Kwa/Gbe languages of the Guinea Coast. *Voduwo*… are both fetishes and dancing gods who possess their deities.[246]

While Friedson is careful to note that the term *fetish* is not inherently pejorative among indigenous Ewe communities, he does not thoroughly account for it as a translational term—as a Euro-Western colonial concept imposed for the purposes of negating the values and realities of African metaphysical ontologies. Utilizing the concept of the fetish as a "neutral" translational term for "powerful things,"[247] he attempts to rescue the fetish and its thingness but dispense with the fetish concept. In this respect, he expounds,

> Fetish as a term became a fetish, the avatar for a moral discourse of other minds, mystification, and pathology. Whether the fetish was a talisman or Christian amulet, or more mundane things such as shoes or money, fetishism was cast as an archaic and unhealthy fixation with things not real…. What is lost in this attribution of motive, this causative privation, is the things themselves. Fetishes lose their opacity, their thingness, becoming transparent supports for other more intangible effects. In this transparency, things collapse; everything becomes equally close equally far.[248]

Friedson then exclaims, "But *gorovodu* <u>fetishes</u> are not objects once removed, thus twice thought…. You can see them, smell them, touch them, and be touched by them."[249] Yet, Friedson forgets an important fact; namely, the fetish is not a concrete thing or object. It is always a concept—a term that names a cultural encounter defined by a Euro-Western fear of unrestrained matter and materiality—and the history of the mistranslation of African materialities and metaphysics in the process of that encounter. As examined in the previous chapter, William Pietz reminds us that, "Unlike, say, the *suman* in Ashanti

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[246] Steven Friedson, *Remains of Ritual: Northern Gods in a Southern Land* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 23.

[247] Ibid., 86.

[248] Ibid., 86-87.

[249] Ibid., 87 (emphasis added).

society… the fetish has never enjoyed the social actuality of being an institutionally defined object within a particular culture or social order," and, therefore, "must be viewed as proper to no historical field other than the history of the word itself."[250] Yes, the *gorovodu* are "not objects once removed," meaning that they are not, as Friedson importantly argues, merely the materialization of beliefs that can be rationalized and explained away, but the *gorovodu* are also not fetishes. The fetish is not an actual thing but rather a concept constructed to explain and categorize certain things and relationships to things. The *gorovoduwo*, therefore, fundamentally challenge Euro-Western categorical concepts. Friedson's notion of the *gorovoduwo* as "god-things," like Rosenthal's concept of materialized *tro* and *vodun* as "god-objects," is, in the end, an attempt to make sense of a supposed contradiction between the metaphysical and the material, between the divine and the concrete. Yet, neither scholar considers the extent to which such a conundrum is specifically a Euro-Western problematic that has no equivalent in indigenous philosophies and metaphysics. Thus, in theorizing the *gorovoduwo* through the concepts of the *fetish* and the *thing*, Friedson's philosophical phenomenological analysis imposes Western existential norms onto an Ewe Vodoun material and metaphysical soundscape.[251] By privileging Western translational concepts as explanatory theories, he remains ultimately beholden to a Euro-Western ontological framework rather than an indigenous metaphysics, and continues to imagine the Other through a Western epistemological lens.

Despite being aware of the ideological history of Western and, particularly, fetish discourses, contemporary scholars of Vodoun religious cultures and artistic forms (e.g.,

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[250] Pietz, "The Idea of the Fetish, I" 10.
[251] Friedson, *Remains of Ritual*, 8. Friedson utilizes the notion of a "soundscape" to describe an environment and a world that is sustained and created through music and is marked by "the sheer intensity of being-with the gods in a musical way."

Suzanne Preston Blier; Judy Rosenthal; Steven Friedson) continue to deploy Western

concepts as primary frameworks to describe, make sense of, and theorize contemporary

practices and experiences. While providing various justifications, these scholars fail to

consider the translational violence that these Western concepts (e.g., fetish, object, thing,

etc.) continue to produce by privileging Euro-Western perspectives and categorizations of

the Other. Alternatively, this present study appraises and privileges the indigenous

concepts, categories, and lived philosophies through which Vodoun beings and worlds are

constructed and materialized. While Western concepts of course cannot be avoided, this

project problematizes the notions of religion, matter, materiality, personhood, and

divinity through an analysis of Vodoun indigenous terminologies and cosmological

principles. This study thus examines Vodoun materialities through indigenous theories

and vocabularies in order to explore linguistically and culturally embedded philosophies

and theories of materiality that challenge our present understanding of the religious.

Section IV: Beyond Residue and Loss: Overcoming the "Violence of Translation" in the Study of Vodoun Religious Cultures

In a recent article, "The Violence of Translation: An Indigenous World-Sense

and the Western 'Prostitution' of Dahomean Bodies," I argue that translation is more

than a neutral process of transference whereby the ideas of one culture are merely

conveyed through the concepts of another. Translation is an act of conversion—the

transfiguration of indigenous philosophies, metaphysics, and materialities resulting in

their rebirth as neophytes of the Euro-Western episteme and its epistemological

concerns.[252] Rather than being an impartial exercise in cross-cultural communication, at

its worst, translation precipitates violence.

> Translation has always been an important means of cross-cultural communication. Yet, historically, inaccurate translations or, better yet, interpretations rendered by foreign explorers, anthropologists, religious [studies] scholars, historians, and even scientists have participated in the construction of a one-way communiqué in which the "experts" defined, analyzed, and categorized the "other." Rather than facilitating communication in which both parties participate, the *translators* signified the *translated*, situating themselves as the "civilized" vis-à-vis the "primitive." These translational acts are more than simply conceptual mistakes. These theoretical blunders are acts of discursive violence— violence produced through written and oral discourse that "anthropologically impoverish" and abuse by engendering social, psychological, and cultural destruction and by legitimizing acts of material violence and enduring discrimination. In sum, interpretational inadequacies have frequently participated in the mistranslation of the Other and have provided a legitimate basis for the practice of discursive violence.[253]

My concept of "the violence of translation" names and identifies, therefore, the

destruction, even if unintended, that can ensue from the "residue or loss"[254] that is the

inevitable result of any exercise in translation and interpretation. While some may still

maintain that mere translation cannot produce violence, the history of the concept of the

fetish, which I discussed in previous chapters, clearly was and is a form of discursive

assault against the African peoples, communities, and institutions that the Portuguese and

later the Dutch encountered on the western coast of Africa. This mere translational

concept incited devastating material consequences—the rendering of African bodies into

commodities of exchange, the defining of African peoples, cultures, and institutions as

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[252] See for example p'Bitek, *African Religions in European Scholarship*, 80-88, and my analysis of Okot p'Bitek's work in section II of chapter 2, "'African Religion,' 'African Religions': The Politics of Religion in the Study of Africa." Okot p'Bitek is specifically critical of the imperial conversion of African deities and other metaphysical forms into Hellenized and Christianized gods.

[253] Jefferson-Tatum, "The Violence of Translation," 280.

[254] Thomas Kuhn, "Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability," *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* 2 (1982): 670.

inherently primitive and pathological, and the subjugation of African communities and

political institutions to European economic and political interests. Moreover, this history

of translation is precisely what relegates the study of religion in Africa primarily to

anthropology and sustains "world religions" as an imperialist category of analysis in

religious studies.[255]

Moving beyond "the violence of translation," meaning, in this case, the

categorization of African materialities as improperly religious, this present work asserts

that the making and materializing of the social and the metaphysical—precisely, the

creation of both "persons" and "gods"—contributes to an alternative and material

existence-embracing notion of *religion*, *religions*, and the *religious*. Accordingly, I argue, as

addressed earlier in the previous chapters, that in earlier articulations of this material

philosophical theology—namely, fetishism, totemism, and animism—Euro-Western

intellectuals were misguided by their search for the primitive origins of the European

other in the foreign other. As such, this dissertation is not concerned with the origins of

religion in Euro-Western history, but rather with how the imagined, scholarly categories

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[255] See Jacob K. Olupona and Terry Rey, eds., *Òrìsá Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005). Olupona and Rey importantly argue for a reframing of the concept of "world religion" to include not simply those traditions that have been historically privileged according to Euro-Western notions of cultural evolution but instead religious cultures, like the Yorùbá-based devotional communities that are globalized phenomena. Thus, Olupona and Ray conclude, "rehabilitating the term 'world religion' and freeing it from the obvious evolutionist bias of such typologies would likely expel certain demographically minor religions such as Jainism and Zorastrianism (whose globalization largely has been limited to a handful of relatively insular immigrant communities) from the ranks of world religions and add other normally excluded traditions whose practitioners number into the tens of millions across several continents" (8). Nevertheless, Masuzawa compels us to consider to what extent the concept of "world religion" might, even so, still reinforce the Euro-Western episteme and Christianity, in particular, as the quintessence of proper religion and religion proper.

of the *religious* and *religion* highlight meaningful materializations of Vodoun and other African-embodied theologies and philosophies. In this analysis, the defining and essential factor of religion is, therefore, *matter*—that is, the materialization of specific African ontologies, namely, *gbὲ* (nature-existence), *sέ* (personhood), and *nɔ̀* (mother-ownership). In this sense, religion is understood as the way in which concrete invisible and visible entities materialize and localize their presence to facilitate a this-worldly renewal and reintegration of the social and the metaphysical. Yet, this dissertation is also concerned with how "religion"—as a Western and modern concept—has participated in a manufacturing of Vodoun as an "empirical other."[256] Accordingly, this project explores how Vodoun materialized realities can become resources for reevaluating, rearticulating, and reimagining what constitutes the *religious* and *religion*.

Translation is always occurring, and yet, as scholars, we can be sensitive to the outcomes of these exercises in communication and comprehension. In the case of Vodoun religious cultures, I propose that such translational care necessitates privileging indigenous theories, philosophies, and concepts rather than Western ontological categories and suppositions (e.g., "object," "thing," and "fetish") that impose norms of being, existing, and thinking that are incompatible with embodied and materially integrated ways of being-in-the-world. Yet, given the parameters of the academic enterprise and my own limitations as a scholar born and inculcated in the Euro-Western world, it is not yet possible to avoid Western concepts entirely. Even those scholars born in seemingly indigenous contexts often face similar methodological limitations. As the Ghanaian scholar Emmanuel Lartey notes,

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[256] See Long, "Primitive/Civilized: The Locus of a Problem" in *Significations*, 90.

> Many African scholars and religionists seem unable to think creatively or at least independently, concerning the religions and cultures of Africa, without constantly looking over their shoulders to see what their colonialist tutors and their successors might think of what they do. Much that passes as African religious studies operates with the categories and terms that were shaped and crafted by Europeans to characterize what they thought the locals were doing.[257]

Alternatively, in pursuit of postcolonializing[258] African religious studies, I recommend that, through careful attention to originary concepts and philosophies, we might re-think ontological and epistemological categories—in this case, *gbὲ* (nature), *sέ* (personhood), and *nɔ̀* (mother-owner)—that have cross-cultural purchase and import, such that, when these concepts are re-theorized, they may reveal indigenous and local metaphysical norms. My earlier historical analysis of the Adja-Yorùbá region sought, therefore, to provide an analytical context for situating *vodoun* indigenous philosophies and conceptual terms within a wider ancestral narrative and metaphysical landscape. Given the imperialist legacy that initially rechristened this region as the "Slave Coast" and equally signified African materialities as "fetishes," in this chapter, I have explored issues of history making and translation because a re-righting of the mis-interpretation of *vodoun* is inseparable from a retrieval of its ancestral account.

Pursuant to this translational revision, in the subsequent chapters, I will analyze the Gun and Fon concepts of *gbὲ* (nature-existence), *sέ* (personhood), and *nɔ̀* (mother-

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[257] Lartey, *Postcolonializing* God, x.

[258] Ibid., xiii. Defining the postcolonial project as more than a noun and thus as a verb, Lartey explains, "As a verb 'postcolonializing' articulates the nature, acts, and activities of communities, leaders or people who seek to establish communities of faith or else who produce or provide regularly or occasionally rituals or ceremonies that, reflecting the decolonializing nature of the divine, are plural in form, diverse in character and which subvert and overturn the hegemonic conditions established through colonialism creating forms of spiritual engagement that more truly reflect categories of thought and life that emanate from an African, rather than a European, way of being and thinking." By privileging Vodoun ontological and epistemological norms, this project is similarly an intellectual exercise in postcolonializing the study of African religious cultures, in particular, and the study of religion, more generally.

owner), to re-theorize and investigate the relationship between religion and materiality in Vodoun religious culture. The ethnographic data presented in this work was collected among Vodoun communities in the Porto Novo-Adjarra region of the Republic of Benin over the course of eight months between December 2013 and August 2014. During this field research, I was hosted by Bernard Adjibodoun, the Spiritual Chief of the Town of Adjarra and an official advisor to His Majesty Kpoto-Zounme Hakpon III, the King of Porto Novo, and his son Olawolé Adjibodoun, the *hounon* (head priest-physician) of the Atô Ogoun shrine. Reflecting the heterogeneity of the region that my historical narrative highlighted, the Adjibodoun family is ancestrally Yorùbá (Nago) and Mahi, but in the seventeenth-century their paternal ancestor Chief Atô Ogun Masi, who is believe to be reincarnated in Hounon Olawolé Adjibodoun, was an Oyo official who became the minister of religion and warfare to the Hogbonu court. Hence, in the current period, the Adjibodoun family is fully integrated within the Gun Vodoun religio-cultural landscape and do not proclaim explicit allegiances to the Oyo dynasty, but rather are official representatives of the present-day Kingdom of Porto-Novo. I also received official sponsorship and support from His Excellence Mitô Akpologan Guin Agboto-Zounmè Houétchénou, the Supreme Minister of Vodoun for the Kingdom of Porto Novo.

In the following chapters, I employ my qualitative data to re-theorize "religion" and "African religious cultures" through transdisciplinary methods and tools. In an inaugural essay of the *Journal of Africana Religions*, Dianne Stewart and Tracy Hucks offer parameters for a transdisciplinary agenda in the emerging field of Africana religious studies. To this end, they distinguish transdisciplinary from unidisciplinary scholarship, stating the following,

> The transdisciplinary scholar transgresses all relevant disciplinary boundaries to interlace varied tools, methods, frameworks, and datasets in pursuit of a research problem. She responds to the problem-based questions driving her research as opposed to unidisciplinary questions and predispositions that impose limits upon her conceptual options based upon her principal discipline's preferred methods, theories, and tools. Inter/multidisciplinary scholarship leans toward transdisciplinarity but does not necessarily proceed from problem-driven inquiries that demand consolidated research methods in the pursuit of comprehensive proposals.[259]

Concerned with the problematic relationship between *religion* and *matter* and correspondingly between *religion* and *Africa*, this present work takes up the task of transdisciplinary scholarship. This dissertation is then guided by a two-fold question: What is *religious* about *Africa*, and what is *African* about *religion*?[260] Yet, in responding to this question, I am not merely concerned with how to translate African idioms into Western forms but rather in seeking to overcome the violence of translation, as Stewart and Hucks propose, I am concerned with "how to apprehend indigenous concepts and their purchase as religious studies categories."[261] Hence, in examining indigenous terms that have analytical and empirical purchase that transcend the cultural dissimilarities between Fon, Gun, Adja, and other Adja-Yorùbá related peoples, through the trans-ethnic concept of *vodoun*, I propose generic African theories and concepts for the study of religion. Through exploring local materializations of nature, motherhood, and personhood, I offer, therefore, new theoretical avenues for defining *religion*, *religions*, and

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[259] Dianne Stewart Diakité and Tracey E. Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies: Towards a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (2013): 39.

[260] See Newell S. Booth, "An Approach to African Religions" in *African Religions: A Symposium*, edited by Newell S. Booth (New York: Nok Publishers, Ltd., 1977). Booth introduces this problematic noting that while anthropologists, on the one hand, in their attempt to capture the whole of African culture often loss sight of the *religious*, historians of religion, on the other hand, in their pursuit of the phenomenon of religion often obscure what is specifically *African*.

[261] Ibid., 64.

the *religious*, as well as new methodological pathways for studying religion in Africa and

the Africana world.

CHAPTER 4
"The Leaves that the Ancestors Put Together Cannot be Undone":
The Nature of *Vodoun* and a Re-Imagining of Natural Religion

As highlighted in previous chapters, historical and contemporary Euro-Western representations of Vodoun religious cultures have largely depicted these communal worlds as landscapes of fetishes and fetish-worshipers—that is, as the epitome of improper and often devious material, religious, and economic relationships with things. Given this discursively violent translational legacy, materiality has been a central problematic in comprehending, articulating, and translating this African world-sense—a fully sensuous world-perspective in which the *material*, the *mundane*, and the *natural* are fundamental to the *religious*. Yet, an exclusive attention to "matter" among some materialist-oriented scholars has failed to provide adequate solutions, since their discourse continues to frame the conversation according to Western norms and often effaces the primary dilemma of the relation of "nature" to "religion."

In the proceeding discussion, privileging the world-senses and material experiences of Vodoun indigenous communities in the Proto Novo-Adjarra region in the Republic of Benin, I explore and interrogate the relationship between "nature" and "religion." While not ethnography in the strict sense, this theoretical and philosophical investigation utilizes qualitative data and secondary source materials to re-theorize *vodoun*, in particular, and African religious cultures and the category of "religion" more generally. Hence, since there are many *vodoun* worlds and there is no one truth or reality, I theorize and philosophize from a *particular* context, community, and material experience to contemplate and engage the *universal* and the *generic*.

With a keen attention to this theoretical shift from the particular to the universal and vice versa, this study interrogates: what is *natural* about religion and, what is *religious* about nature? While analyses of this ontological schism between "religion" and "nature" often emphasize and theorize the category of "nature religion," from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, it was instead initially the concept of "natural religion" and its attention to questions of origin that became a framework for exploring the nature of religion. By examining the genealogy of the Western concept of "natural religion" in comparison to an African indigenous episteme, I aim to show that in the study of religion the conceptual formation of "natural religion" ultimately solidified the fissure between *nature*, as the domain of the concrete and the material, and *religion*, as the realm of the supernatural and the immaterial. I seek also to demonstrate that this schism is inconsistent with nature-based African ontological norms. Through an analysis of *vodoun* lived philosophies and practices, I explicitly argue that nature is religion and religion is nature. They are one and the same. Instead of delineating religion as necessarily transcendent, supernatural, and/or otherworldly, in this chapter, I propose and offer an alternative framing of religion as natural, material, and immanent.

Section I: *Adjamanklo* and the Ancestral Origins of *Vodoun*

The naturalness of the metaphysical is actualized in the life experiences of those devotees, priests, and community members (regardless of public faith commitments) who converse and comingle with the *vodoun* and the ancestors on a daily basis. In May 2014, having experienced, over the course of several months, the day-to-day activities at the Atô Ogoun shrine—the consultations, offerings, sacrifices, and herbal baths to address sickness, infertility, and financial misfortune, the Friday prayer rituals of thanksgiving,

and the dancing of the *vodoun* in the bodies of their devotees—I was relaxing in the outdoor living space of the compound when Bernard Adjibodoun, a spiritual administrator of the Adjarra area and a leading ritual expert within the shrine, recounted the following proverb: "*Adjamanklo dé mèho lé bla mèdé man non tounkpon*" (literally meaning, "The leaves (*adjamanklo*) that the ancestors attach, nobody can open and see"). During our discussion, Bernard further explained that without the *adjamanklo* "there is no *vodoun*."[262] Therefore, when a person receives an herbal bath either to address a metaphysical, social, or physical dis-ease or to undergo initiation, these *adjamanklo* are an essential and potent ingredient utilized in the cleansing and rebirthing process. These *adjamanklo* invoke the *vodoun* and are the binding element—uniting the human person with their particular *vodoun*. These leaves, therefore, create and facilitate the sacred bond between *vodoun* and *vodounsì* (that is, the initiated devotee or, in other words, the spouse of the *vodoun*) that nobody and nothing should "open and see." Thus, the herbal bath, particularly the bath of initiation, is a matrimonial binding process that initiates the *vodounsì* into the sacred *vodoun* episteme—an indigenous knowledge system that, through the bathing ritual, is literally embodied and materialized. Moreover, through this herbal immersion, the *vodounsì* facilitates their continuity with the ancestors that long ago established this ritual process for binding and maintaining the nature community.

Accordingly, the term *adjamanklo*, literally meaning "Adja leaves," denotes the ancestral origins of *vodoun* for the varied devotee communities throughout West Africa (e.g., the Adja, the Ewe, the Fon, and the Gun). As previously related in chapter three, the official oral history specifies the originary home of *vodoun* as Adja-Tado, a town in present-day southern Togo and a region politically and socially pivotal to the ancestral

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[262] Bernard Adjibodoun, May 17, 2014; July 16, 2014.

legacies of the varied peoples who venerate the *vodoun* and depend upon them to maintain

harmony within the nature community.[263] Further indicating the ancestral roots of these

leaves, the word a*djamanklo* is interchangeable with the term *hùnmà*, which means literally

"leaves of *hùn*." Though commonly employed as a synonym of *vodoun*, the indigenous

concept of *hùn* is not merely a signifier of a "God," "god," or the "sacred" more generally,

rather as the linguist B. Segurola elucidates, *hùn* means literally "heart" and "blood."[264]

Elaborating upon *hùn* as a signifier of the heart, Suzanne Blier explains:

> The term *hun* additionally is used to signify "drum" (an instrument whose beat
> recalls that of the heart), "bellows" (which similarly are associated with a pumping
> action), "cotton tree" (bombax—an enormous tree from which drums are carved),
> and "vehicle" (the earliest example of which—the pirogue—were made from the
> hollowed-out trunks of cotton trees).[265]

With regard to *hùn* as a signifier of blood, citing the explanations of two indigenous

theorists, Blier then notes the following:

> As Agbidinukun explains (4.3.86), "All the things that have created people are
> called *hun*." To Agbanon similarly (2.25.86), "All the *vodun* are called *hun*… *vodun
> hun*, it is they that gave birth to one, providing the blood that flows in one's
> body."[266]

Thus, perhaps *hùn* would best be defined as that vital creative capacity within *vodoun* that

gives birth and imparts life. Similarly, expounding upon the related concept of *hùnsì*,

which is often considered synonymous with *vodounsì* (i.e., devotee; "spouse of the *vodoun*"),

as Segurola documents, *hùnsì* also means "blood" or "kinship," or more precisely, "eau du

sang" ("water of the blood"). Hence, according to Segurola, the related saying *Hunsì ce we*

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[263] See Mathurin C. Houngnikpo and Samuel Decalo, *Historical Dictionary of Benin*, 4th Edition (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), 25, 201.

[264] B. Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français* (Cotonou: Procure de L'Archidiocèse, 1963), 233 (my translation).

[265] Blier, *African Vodun*, 46-47.

[266] Ibid., 47.

signifies, "this is my blood, this is my kin."[267] Thus the indigenous notion of *hùn* elaborates

a philosophical theology that underscores the metaphysical as literally the beating heart

and energetic blood force that gives life to the ancestrally consecrated community.

According to this lived philosophy, this *hùn* sustains the energetic force of nature,

humanity, and the *vodoun*. Hence, as the indigenous etymology of *hùn* elucidates, *hùnmà*

(or, in other words, *adjamanklo*) is the materialized vitality (i.e., "blood") that empowers

and sustains the kinship of the nature community—that is, a natural kinship that

embraces the *vodoun*, the ancestors, humans, and all beings of nature. Given these

etymologies and their proverbial context, one may infer that the *adja* leaves in particular,

and perhaps nature in general, are the very ancestral essence and blood force of *vodoun*.

Yet, *adja* leaves are not merely special things. They are utilized, like other leaves

and herbs, for purification purposes in herbal baths and ritual offerings and for medicinal

reasons, such as, lowering blood pressure and healing wounds. They point, therefore, to a

generic lived philosophical ecology and nature-oriented metaphysics—meaning a theory

of existence and a way of being that is fundamentally grounded in existential and social

engagement with nature and the natural elements. My philosophical exchanges with

Bernard about the relationship between leaves and *vodoun* have been, therefore, formative

to my theorization about the nature of *vodoun* more generally. This indigenous theoretical

framework has provided me with a conceptual scheme to think through and theorize the

rituals, experiences, and philosophical conceptions I encountered both within the Âto

Ogoun shrine and the larger community of Porto-Novo. Further contextualizing this

embedded metaphysics, deeply disturbed one day by an exchange with a person in

passing who claimed that leaves and herbal prescriptions were distinct from *vodoun*,

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[267] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 249 (my translation).

Bernard adamantly exclaimed, "This is wrong. *Vodoun* is leaves, water…" and all the elements.[268] One cannot exist without the other. As he further explained, when people announce the birth of their child, they say, "This child is the leaf of their ancestors." He then continued, "We are born with leaves…. You cannot make anything in *vodoun* without leaves. This is the replication of who we are."[269]

An alternative iteration of our central proverb, "the leaves that our ancestors put together cannot be undone" conveys that, like nature, the depth and the breadth of *vodoun* cannot be fully known or destroyed, for it is an extension of *gbè*, existence and life itself. *Vodoun* is as dynamic and mysterious, as haunting and glorious, as creative and potent as nature. The *adjamanklo* proverb that opens our reflections, thus, suggests that perhaps the religion-nature schism to which we have become accustomed is actually incompatible with metaphysical and sacred realities that are rooted in the natural, the material, and the immanent. As the Latina theologian Ivone Gebara illumines, "We have been afraid to adore the sun, as the Egyptians did, or the earth, as indigenous peoples did. We have been afraid to adore nature or to speak of jungles, seas, rivers, and stars as divine. In our hierarchal worldview, we had to keep all these things carefully pigeonholed. They had to remain submissive to the Supreme Lord of the universe and to obey the order established by God."[270]

Perhaps by overcoming the dominating shadow of "God" and its transcendence and otherworldly sacredness in the study of religion,[271] we might take seriously alternative

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[268] Bernard Adjibodoun, March 16, 2014.

[269] Bernard Adjibodoun, July 19, 2014.

[270] Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 122.

[271] See Jason Josephson, "God's Shadow: Occulted Possibilities in the Genealogy of Religion," *History of Religions* 52, no. 4 (May 2013): 309-339.

narratives in investigating the genealogy of this theoretical and theological empire. In this light, in the discussion that follows, I investigate the history of the concept of "natural religion" as a means of exploring the following questions: What is the nature of religion? And, are "religion" and "nature" necessarily separate and distinct domains? Through problematizing the religion-nature schism in the study of religion, I demonstrate that this ontological fissure: 1) facilitates the religious othering of African metaphysical experiences, and 2) contradicts and violates African (Vodoun) indigenous epistemological and ontological norms. Thus, imagining an alternative conception of the nature of religion, I ponder: How might an attention to African, and in this case, Vodoun religious philosophies, elucidate an integrated and co-existent conception of the natural and the religious? To what degree is the religious even necessarily dependent upon and founded on the natural and nature for its very existence and ingenuity?

Section II: **A Genealogy of "Natural Religion"**

In their respective analyses of "natural religion," Peter Byrne and David Pailin conclude that natural religion is not a unitary concept but rather a notion with multiple and varied meanings and connotations. In *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion* (1989), Byrne outlines four primary conceptions of "natural religion": 1) as not revealed, 2) as not civic or mythic, 3) as non-supernatural, and 4) as "a natural human religiousness."[272] Then without reference to Byrne's earlier publication, in his 1994 essay, "The Confused and Confusing Story of Natural Religion," Pailin offers a more extensive list identifying eleven different constructions of "natural religion" ranging from "natural religion as what

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[272] Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1-9.

is universally acknowledged by reason" to "natural religion as focused on the powers manifested in the natural order."[273] Given my particular attention to the shifting conceptual relationship between "nature" and "religion" and how this fluctuating affiliation has informed our understanding of the category of religion, in the proceeding discussion, I interrogate three principal conceptions of "natural religion" that both scholars identify and examine: 1) natural religion as religious beliefs and practices originating in reason rather than revealed through divine revelation; 2) natural religion "as the product of human imagination;"[274] and 3) natural religion as the opposite of supernatural religion.

In the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation and the European wars of religion, the first conception of natural religion—meaning, in this case, religious beliefs and practices originating in human reason rather than divine revelation—dominated seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical and theological debates. This construction of natural religion as the opposite of revealed religion developed in response to problems specific to Christianity, regarding the place and role of religion in a newly "enlightened" European world. In addition, this formulation informed the universal definition of *religion* as Christians confronted *religions* in the plural.[275] This seventeenth- and eighteenth-century definition of natural religion was essentially concerned with the question of religious epistemology, namely, how one comes to *know* God. By situating knowledge of God and religion in human reason, this conception of "natural religion": 1) legitimized the role of Christianity in the larger European "enlightened" society, and 2)

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[273] David A. Pailin, "The Confused and Confusing Story of Natural Religion," *Religion* 24 (1994): 199, 208.

[274] Ibid., 204.

[275] See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 40-42; Smith, *Relating Religion*, 182.

established Christianity as the "true religion" vis-à-vis "false religions." Matthew Tindal,

in his *Christianity as Old as the Creation: Or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature*

(1630), provides a poignant illustration of how the notions of *religion* and *religions* took

shape around the conceptual construction of "natural religion" during this time:

> If God, then, from the Beginning gave Men a Religion[,]… he must have giv'n
> them likewise sufficient Means of knowing it…. If God never intended Mankind
> shou'd at any Time be without Religion, or have false Religions; and there be but
> One True Religion, which ALL have been ever bound to believe, and profess[,]…
> All Men, at all Times, must have had sufficient Means to discover whatever God
> design'd they shou'd know and practice…. [He] has giv'n them no other Means
> for this, but the use of Reason…. By *Natural Religion*, I understand the Belief of the
> Existence of God, and the Sense and Practice of those Duties, which result from
> the knowledge, we, by our Reason, have of Him and his Perfections; and of
> ourselves, and our own Imperfections; and of the Relations we stand in to him,
> and to our Fellow-Creatures…[276]

This notion of "natural religion," which framed the relationship between the *natural* as

rational and *religion* as Christianity, provided the impetus for the construction of a generic

and universal conception of *religion* under which other *religions* could be subsumed and

subordinated. By constructing natural religion as *rational* and thus *true*, Other religions

were imagined as necessarily irrational and *false*.

The second primary conception of "natural religion," which defines it as "the

product of human imagination," was articulated prominently by David Hume in his *The*

Natural History of Religion (1757). His affective and anthropological definition of natural

religion denied the validity of the innateness claim inherent within the epistemological

definition of natural religion and instead located the origins of religion in human

emotions, in their irrational hopes and fears, to be precise. This anthropological notion of

natural religion, which situates the study of religion in human history rather than in

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[276] Qtd. in Smith, *Relating Religion*, 183; Matthew Tindal, *Christianity As Old as the Creation; or, The Gospel, a Reduplication of the Religion of Nature* (London, 1730), facsimile edition, ed. Gawlick (Stuttgart and Bad Cannstatt, 1967), 3, 7, 13.

human reason, became the very basis for the development of the social scientific study of religion.

Yet, while the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were concerned with the generic category of *religion* and its origins, in the nineteenth century, as Jonathan Z. Smith argues, "a different set of taxonomic questions [was] raised" regarding the plural category of *religions*. Such questions included: "Are the diverse 'religions' species of a generic 'religion'?" and "How might the several 'religions' be classified?"[277] This attention to taxonomy epitomized the nineteenth-century desire to transform a "natural history" of religion into a "science"[278] and became the basis for our third primary conception of natural religion as the opposite of supernatural religion. Smith underscores that, at this time, "One of the most persistent stratagems ["for a classification of the religions" during the nineteenth-century] was the conversion of the epistemological duality natural/supernatural into a characterization of the object of belief (as in "nature worship") and the placement of these two terms in a chronological relationship."[279] Namely, in this third formulation, natural religion shifts from an epistemology (i.e., a mode of knowing) that defined religious knowledge as inherently innate, natural, and universal to a taxon concerned with the natural (rather than the supernatural) as the object of religion.

Accordingly, nineteenth-century anthropological approaches segmented this taxonomic notion of natural religion into fetishism, totemism, anthropomorphism, animism, preanimism, etc. The underlying assumption was that nature-oriented and

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[277] See Smith, *Relating Religion*, 186.
[278] Ibid., 187.
[279] Ibid., 188.

materialist religious cultures were necessarily flawed, primitive, and pre-historical.[280] It is

no coincidence then that just when "natural religion" became a problematic regarding

the proper object of religion, fetishism, in particular, became the epitome of superstition

and the paradigmatic Other of the Enlightenment.[281] A conceptual product of the

asymmetrical exchanges between Protestant merchants and African societies on the coast

of West Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the fetish concept initiated a

new conceptual genealogy in the field of religion. The fetish discourse explicitly "raised

the problem of the material object in a new way" and thus established materialities as

proper to the domain of commodity exchange rather than religious devotion.[282] The

fetish emerged, therefore, as a novel problem-idea that eighteenth-century Enlightenment

thinkers then adopted in their constructions of the relationship between "nature" (as the

newly constructed sphere of commodities) and "religion" (as the presumed domain of the

supernatural). Thus, ultimately, because of its "untranscended materiality"[283] and its

affront to abstraction, fetishism proved to be an inappropriate archetype of religion and,

hence, was rejected as the origin of religion by E.B. Tylor,[284] Émile Durkheim,[285] and

Friedrich Max Müller.[286] Yet, although these thinkers jettisoned fetishism as an

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[280] Ibid., 188-189.

[281] See Pietz, "Bosman's Guinea," 13, 16.

[282] Ibid., 3; Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, II," 40-41.

[283] See Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," 7.

[284] Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. Vol. 1 (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1871), 384. Tylor defined religion vis-à-vis animism as fundamentally "a belief in spiritual beings."

[285] Émile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 44. Durkheim understood the totem as essentially "a symbol, a tangible expression of something else," precisely, the collective.

[286] Friedrich Max Müller, *Natural Religion, The Gifford Lectures Delivered Before the University of Glasgow in 1888*. 2nd Ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1892), 158. Müller defined fetishism as "the very last state in the downward course of religion."

explanation for religion, their understandings of natural religion were nonetheless influenced by the notion of the fetish given that it represented the polar opposite of proper religion (i.e., the supernatural). In other words, just as the notion of "nature" was changing to accommodate new concepts of matter (e.g., the fetish and the commodity), natural religion was reconceived as the opposite of the supernatural.

Alternatively, the categories of "high religions," "instituted religions," "universalistic religions," and "world religions" (categories elaborated in taxonomies of religion in the nineteenth century)[287] were understood as spiritual (rather than material) and it was presumed that the correct or at least superior object of religion was necessarily abstract and transcendent. This focus on religion as the domain of the supernatural and transcendent led to a further emphasis upon *belief* and *meaning*, an inheritance of religion's Protestant legacy. Thus, as explored in chapter one, in reimagining the domain of "nature" and the purpose of material objects, Protestant merchants on the "Guinea Coast" of West Africa not only redefined material objects as commodities rather than sacramental objects or even beings but also constructed the domain of religion as concerned essentially with beliefs. Ultimately defined as the superior opposite of "natural religion," "supernatural religions," through the guise of *belief* (rather than superstition), were constructed as credible and true.

The taxonomy of "natural religions" and "supernatural religions" was and continues to be based on the assumption that the worship of nature and matter is the lowest form of religion (or is even irreligious) and that the veneration of an abstract, supernatural entity is the highest form of religion. The underlying presumption is, therefore, that *religion* should supersede *nature*. Hence, it is precisely the development of

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[287] See Smith, *Relating Religion*, 189.

this third notion of natural religion and its taxon of so-called "primitive" religious Others that solidifies the current schism between the natural and the religious.

Yet, the question remains, if we do not presume that an attention to nature and material religious forms is an inferior form of religious expression, how might we reimagine the relationship between the natural and the religious? How might an attention to the particularities of, in this instance, Vodoun religious-natural cultures of West Africa highlight a means of re-framing and re-defining both "natural religion" and religion *as* natural?

Section III: An African Non-Transcendental Metaphysics

In his 1997 publication *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, the Akan philosopher Kwasi Wiredu makes a primary intervention in the study of African philosophy and religion in questioning the universal intelligibility and validity of the transcendental notion of creation. He contests the reigning assumption that creation *ex nihilo* ("out of nothing") is central to metaphysics. Rebutting the automatic legitimacy and cogency of this anti-empirical notion of creation within originary African thought systems, Wiredu maintains, "a people can be highly metaphysical without employing transcendental concepts in their thinking, for not all metaphysics is transcendental metaphysics."[288] Namely, he argues that Akan and perhaps other African cultural systems embody a non-transcendental metaphysics wherein there are no "supernatural beings," "spirits," or "mystical experiences" (in the strict Euro-Western philosophical understanding of these terms). There is no conception of a God, gods, or experiences in general outside of an empirical, spatial, and material context. Thus, Wiredu argues that Western categories of

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[288] Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 87.

thought—that is, concepts that provide a conceptualization of a people's world-sense and

identity—have been superimposed onto African thought systems. Challenging this Euro-

Western intellectual imperialism, Wiredu explicates at length:

> Consider the term "physical." We note that tables are physical. So too are our
> hands and legs and trees and cars. And one can obviously think of many different
> kinds of entities among whom the idea of the physical does not discriminate.
>
> But in ordinary English discourse the term "physical" will generally be held not to
> be applicable to certain entities. Thus our souls, if we have any, will be said to be
> spiritual rather than physical. The mind, whether or not it is different from the
> soul, will also be considered spiritual rather than physical. God himself, if he or
> she exists, would also be said to be a spiritual being….
>
> Imagine, then, a foreign observer of African culture whose mind is fully furnished
> with such categories of thought. If he finds out that Africans do not seem to view
> certain things, for example, the causes of some diseases, in the same light as he
> views what are called physical phenomena in his culture, he will suppose that
> Africans regard them as spiritual. The controlling dichotomy here, note, is "If not
> physical, then spiritual." Since the disparity in question is widespread, African
> ontology, according to our present source, would be brim-full of spiritual
> phenomena. Exactly this is what has happened, and the result is that Africans are
> credited, or more frankly, debited with a worldview in which almost everything is
> spiritual.[289]

Given the tendency to view the world according to these categorical distinctions of the

physical and the *spiritual*, African experiences and philosophies have been forced to

conform to Western epistemological norms and ontological assumptions. Yet, the spiritual

as the inverse of the material has no equivalent in classical African thought.

Instead, the metaphysical is embedded in the material nature of existence. Wiredu

puts forward, moreover, that there is no ontological schism between the domains of

existence corresponding to "nature," on the one hand, and "supernature," on the

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[289] Kwasi Wiredu, "An Oral Philosophy of Personhood: Comments on Philosophy
and Orality," *Research in African Literatures* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 8-9.

other.[290] Essentially, all is nature; there is no notion of a part of existence that is *before*, *prior to*, *above* or *apart from* nature and its materialities. By extension, there is no break between the spiritual and the material; metaphysical beings are *not* outside of existence, rather these ontological forms are integral components of an interconnected world in which so-called "persons," "objects," and "gods" share in the same material reality. There is no existence beyond the empirical and the material. To the extent that something exists, it is material. As Wiredu explains,

> No entities are spoken of or even dreamt of in Akan philosophy that are not material to some degree. If we take the maximal limit of materiality to be exemplified by things like chairs and tables, which are subject to all the constraints of space and time and have all the familiar causal susceptibilities, then the difference between such objects, on the one hand, and entities such as *okra* and *sunsum* [i.e., the two central components of the Akan soul complex], on the other, is not that the former are material and the latter are immaterial, extentionless, but rather that the former are fully material, and the latter are thought of as only partially so, being only loosely constrained by space and time and commonplace causality.[291]

Within this immanent metaphysics, materiality, therefore, has no correlating antithetical ontological mode. There is nothing—not even "souls," "spirits," "ancestors," "gods" or even the creator "God"—that is not material, that is not existentially realized. While there are beings (whether internal or external) that operate beyond the visible realm, their existence is neither discontinuous nor incongruous with that of human existence or the wider nature cosmos; thus, their presence cannot be adequately defined as non-material. Hence, by separating metaphysics from transcendence and fully immersing the metaphysical in the immanent, I propose that we, as scholars, re-theorize the whole range of materiality as metaphysically-relevant and by extension rematerialize our "gods," "deities," "spirits," and "ancestors" and even re-naturalize "human persons."

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[291] Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 99-100.

***Section IV*: Gbὲ as the Cord that Binds Us Together**

As the source and substance of all-that-is, *gbὲ* (life, existence, nature) is

foundational to any theorization of the metaphysical as material, natural, and immanent

in classical Vodoun philosophical thought. Accordingly, Segurola defines *gbὲ* as "life,"

"existence," or "world." Yet, providing an example, he translates the phrase *gbὲ mɛ fi* as

"on this earth," "in this life," or "here below."[292] Hence, to the extent that *gbὲ* denotes a

notion of life and existence as earthly or as founded on life "on this earth," *gbὲ* also

signifies "nature" in a general sense. Accordingly, in *Proverbs de la Sagesse Fon*, Pamphile

Boco interchangeably defines *gbὲ* as "life," "nature," and "existence."[293] For instance,

note the following proverbs:

> *Kanlin ma dó sí ɔ́, gbɛ wɛ nɔ nyà sukpɔ.*
> For the animal that has no tail, it is nature that chases the flies.

> Ayĭhúnh*ɔ́n-gbɛ wɛ nɔ* mlí gb*ɔ́ mĭ.*
> It is existence that gives a round form to the excrements of a goat.[294]

These proverbs exemplify *gbὲ* as the all-that-is that guards and shapes life and existence

for all living beings. No detail is too large or too small—not even the shape of a goat's

excrement.

Associated with a rich semantic field of concepts and meanings, the verb form of

gbὲ, as Segurola notes, notably signifies to "knot," "braid," "tie," or "to gather." Thus, he

elaborates that, for example, *gbὲ kã* means "to weave a cord" and *gbὲ nùkú* connotes "to

harvest."[295] Reflecting on this active form of *gbὲ*, Suzanne Blier elaborates, "Human life

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[292] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Francais*, 207 (my translation).
[293] Pamphile Boco, "Certains mots-repère en ordre alphabétique," *Proverbs de la Sagesse Fon*, CREC des pères jésuites (Godomey, November 2013), iv (my translation).
[294] Boco, *Proverbs de la Sagesse Fon*, #373, 843 (my translation).
[295] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Francais*, 207 (my translation).

in turn is perceived as sharing qualities of a cord…. Descent and relational ties also are compared to cords, with each new generation being understood as offering a twist or braid to the overall family line."[296] Yet, it is not merely human life that *gbè* represents and "gathers" but rather the entire nature community—that is, humans, animals, plants, *vodoun*, and the list goes on. *Gbè* then represents life, existence, and nature as a braided cord woven and bound by the various and varied generations of the entire cosmos, that is, the nature life-world. In connotational continuity, *gbě*, which has a raising tone (rather than a low tone like *gbè*), likewise means, "society" or "association" but also "friend" or "companion."[297] Thus, given its etymological spectrum, the indigenous concept and philosophy of *gbè* implies that: 1) life and existence are indivisible from nature and the natural world, and 2) that nature as the society of all living beings "gathers" and "weaves" together the different threads of existence. G*bè* as nature, existence, and life is, therefore, the foundation of community; it is the cord that binds us together.

The affirmation of the centrality of nature's materiality—namely, the earthliness of *gbè*—as the foundation of community, therefore, implies that this world cosmos consists not in objects and subjects but rather in a full spectrum of beings-in-community. Just as the material and the spiritual—and likewise, the natural and the supernatural—are inadequate categories of thought for conceptualizing African epistemological and ontological norms, I contend that neither the object nor the thing make conceptual sense within classical Vodoun thought systems and perhaps within indigenous African philosophy more generally. Likewise, as Gerhardus Cornelis Oosthuzien confirms:

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[296] Blier, *African Vodun*, 173-174.
[297] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Francais*, 206 (my translation).

> In the context of Africa, people are surrounded not by things but by beings—the metaphysical world is loaded with beings. Thinking in this context is synthetic rather than analytically oriented, which implies that everything is interdependent and in the end has religious value. The traditional approach does not have place for something religiously neutral. Furthermore, the whole reality is of primary concern. Nature is not objectified as in science; orientation toward totality is reflected in the intense feeling of community. In modernist thinking, the principal of identity prevails—there is no sharing of being. For the traditional person in Africa, a communal unity of essence is possible—an individual is never a mere individual, but is also the other (who is also another).[298]

As the tapestry of collective life and existence, *gbὲ* elaborates a life-world full of communal beings woven together by a common thread. Within this immanent metaphysical cosmos, the materiality of *gbὲ* is ontologically elaborated into a spectrum of communally constituted beings. Since there is no explicit divide between the sacred and the profane, everything has religious, or better yet, metaphysical value—meaning precisely, that every being, every materialization of *gbὲ*, reflects a *vodoun* world-sense regarding the ultimate nature of being and existing more generally. *Gbὲ* suggests, therefore, that there is nothing that can exist outside of being-in-community; *existing* necessitates *being* a fully communal *gbὲ*-creature. *Gbὲ* implies, moreover, an ontological philosophy that intimates that to exist (regardless of functional form) is ultimately to exist as a communal entity—namely, a person, or in other words, a morally efficacious being. I will provide a fuller analysis of this argument regarding the personhood of *gbὲ* beings in the following chapter. Yet, at this point, what is imperative is to appreciate *gbὲ* as a wholly communal cosmos. *Gbὲ* (namely, nature existence) then is not an objectified world of things but rather a fully intersubjective nature cosmos.

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[298] Gerhardus Cornelis Oosthuizen, "The Place of Traditional Religion in Contemporary South Africa," in *African Traditional Religion in Contemporary Society*, edited by Jacob Olupona (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 40-41.

Section V: *Vodoun* and *Gbɛ̀*—The Sacred Community

If we understand *gbɛ̀* as the communal cosmos that binds together the living, the

question remains: how might we perceive the relationship between *gbɛ̀* and *vodoun*? Yet, in

order to explore the correlation between these two indigenous concepts and ontological

genres, it is necessary to carefully consider the meaning of *vodoun* itself. Though the

precise etymology and meaning of the word *vodoun* (or *vodŭn* with tonal marks) remains

obscure, Bruno Gilli and Bernard Maupoil offer two meaningful etymological

theorizations of the concept.[299] Gilli explains that generally the radical *vo* signifies "hole"

and "opening." However, in the Afa (Fa) divination system, as Gilli contends, "*Vo* here…

is a symbol of the hidden, the secret, of what we cannot explain but which troubles us and

makes us uneasy."[300] Then clarifying the relationship between *Afa* (*Fa*) and *vodoun*, Gilli

states, "*Afa* is not considered to be *Vodu*, but rather the voice of *Vodu*. *Du*… has therefore

the same significance as *Afa*: it is the 'messenger' or 'sign.'"[301] Therefore, according to

Gilli's etymology, *vodoun* (*vodŭn*) specifically signifies "the messenger of the hidden." Given

the coherence of this etymology with the *adjamanklo* proverb that I examined earlier,

which emphasizes the importance of binding what is secret and hidden, I concur that

vodoun, like *adjamanklo*, is that which "cannot be undone" and which "nobody can open

and see." Moreover, since *gbɛ̀* is the active and activating life substance that "weaves,"

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[299] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Francais*, 552; see also Blier, *African Vodun*, 39-40. Segurola states explicitly, "The word *vodŭ*, for which the etymology is lost, evokes therefore the idea of mystery." Therefore, he translates and defines *vodŭ* as "idol, deity of the animist religion, improperly called fetish." Providing an etymology of *vodoun* that is distinct from the interpretations of Bruno Gilli and Bernard Maupoil, Suzanne Blier defines *vodoun* as "to rest to draw water." However, this particular etymology was unfamiliar to the Porto-Novoian community where I conducted my field research.

[300] Bruno Gilli, *Naissances humaines ou divines? Analyse de certains types de naissances attribués au Vodu* (Editions HAHO, 1997), 9 (my translation).

[301] Ibid., 12 (my translation and emphasis added).

"binds," and "gathers," I infer, moreover, that *vodoun* is the hidden, the secret, and the invisible that *gbὲ* has woven together to establish the continuity of the nature community.

Offering a similar etymological theorization, Maupoil explains, "*vodū* designates, in our language, the unknowable or the unknowables (*nu e mi ma tū wū a e*); it is composed of the word *vo* and of the exclamation *dū*, synonym of *hū*."[302] Then, he elucidates, "*Vo-dū* signifies therefore: we have thought a long time, at the most profound level of ourselves; we have meditated on the causes, on our origin, on the mystery of creation and on life; but unable to understand, we have cried: *hū*! This goes beyond us."[303] *Vodoun* then, as the unknowable and the unseizeable, is that which in *gbὲ* (life, existence, nature) remains beyond our common intellectual grasp; *vodoun* is that which words alone cannot express. Actualized and materialized through *gbὲ* (the nature-cosmos), *vodoun* is the mystery of creation unfolding in the natural world.

As the collective substance of the cosmos world, *gbὲ* is, therefore, the material canvas and the abode of the *vodoun*. The *vodoun* exist as the plants, the leaves, the trees, the ocean, the rains, and the rivers exist. They are fire, water, earth, and air—the four fundamental elements without which life-nature (that is, *gbὲ*) would not exist. Thus, to be *vodounsì*, a spouse of the *vodoun*, is to be in partnership with nature. I propose, therefore, that to be *vodounsì* is to be a person connected to oneself as a *nature being*, that is, *homo natura*, and not merely as a *human being*, a *homo sapiens*. Hence, *vodounsì* materialize, localize, and create their deities out of clay, leaves, water, iron, talcum powder, sweet drink, blood, and other natural *matters*. They embody a philosophy in which *vodoun* is nature. A sacred

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[302] Bernard Maupoil, *La Géomancie l'ancienne Côte des Esclave* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1981), 53 (my translation).

[303] Ibid., 54 (my translation).

metaphysics in which the *ache* (i.e., metaphysical power) of *Xùmè Dàn* (that is, *Mami Wata*) cannot be separated from the material, physical power of the ocean. They, that is, *gbè* and *vodoun*, are one and the same.

The ontological continuity that *gbè* and *vodoun* exemplify is best captured by a communitarian conception of the cosmos world. Providing such a theoretical basis, in *On Communitarian Divinity* (1994), A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya contests the presumption that a Eurocentric and monotheistic conception of the Divine as "God" is central to classical African religious thought or even African theology. While E. Bolaji Idowu, for instance, argues that without the concept of "God" it would not be possible to speak of "African religion," Ogbonnaya retorts, "It is true that the idea of the nature of God may be a common thread running through African consciousness, but the problem that faces African scholars is to determine the most adequate way of articulating the traditional African concept of the Divine."[304] While understanding the Divine as dynamically operative within African religious cultures, Ogbonnaya is critical of any assertion that implies that "God"—that is, a monotheistic conception of the Divine—is essential to a religious conception of Africa and African peoples. Citing Edmund Hogu, Ogbonnaya instead insists "communality is the essence of the gods."[305] Yet, this communalism is neither limited to the divine nor the human realm. Reflecting on his own personal upbringing in a classical Igbo environ, he relates,

> My belief in African community was formed—long before I heard the word theology—by a communal experience of belonging among my people and various African peoples. This sense of community, as my *Chi* (spiritual guide) would have

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[304] A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), xii; see also E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 103.

[305] Qtd. in Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, 13; Edmund Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo Culture* (New York: Nok Press, 1974), 201.

it, included the ancestors, spirits, and other beings within both my immediate cosmos and beyond. I was taught that I was connected with all and the All was connected to me.[306]

Moreover, for Ogbonnaya, this community does not merely include so-called rational beings. Since all creatures are "beings" (rather than "things") and therefore also beings-in-community, as our discussion of the indigenous conception of *gbὲ* has implied, Ogbonnaya affirms, "this relatedness is inclusive of the whole cosmos."[307] While Ogbonnaya is particularly concerned with the Divine—that is, with gods and deities—his notion of communitarian divinity provides a critical means of understanding the metaphysical in its entirety as a communitarian natural cosmos. Thus, *gbὲ* and *vodoun* are one-in-the-same because *vodoun-gbὲ* is a communitarian cosmos in which all beings partake of the ontological material substance of *gbὲ*—that is, existence, the nature lifeworld.[308]

Exemplifying this communitarian continuity, upon entering the temple of Hounoun Atô Ogoun in Porto-Novo, one will read, "Believe in Maman Tchamba and you will be saved." Yet, this is not an affirmation of a creed or an otherworldly soteriology. Rather, this is an existential statement about Maman Tchamba as nature, as the architect, as *gbὲnɔ̀n*, the mother of life. Bernard Adjibodoun has, for example, said, "I

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[306] Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, vii.

[307] Ibid., 14.

[308] While comparisons can be made to Edmund Husserl's concept of "lifeworld," by utilizing this concept, I am not invoking his ontological suppositions. Instead, I am specifically denoting this *gbὲ* nature existence and *vodoun*-based metaphysics in which all entities are *beings*, specifically beings-in-relationship, and are neither objects nor things. Hence, while subjective and objective aspects characterize Husserl's lifeworld, my concept of a lifeworld is defined by a relationality that does not presuppose the creation of subjects and objects, but rather a spectrum of beings and persons (see chapter 5 for my theorization of personhood).

believe in leaves, animals… beings and forces of nature."[309] Then, when I asked him

about the foundational philosophy of Vodoun, he explained, "the philosophy is that

African people never saw god when they looked up into the sky and looked around and

so… they took soil, leaves, and other substances of nature to make their *vodoun*."[310] This

indigenous theorist suggests, then, that *vodoun* cannot be separated from the matters and

materialities of nature—of the *gbè* substance that sustains life and existence itself. Instead,

the *vodoun* are made perceptible and perceivable through their materialization into

shrines, figures, devotees, and other organic or even industrial bodies. Similarly, in the

course of providing instruction in the Fa divination and indigenous science system,

Bokono Sètondji Adanklounon, explained the following:

> Many many years ago, there were people who lived for more than four hundred
> years. When they passed, others who had known them came and took the dirt
> from where they had lived and combined this with water, sand, and leaves, and
> then spoke the names of those who had passed to form their divinities.[311]

The major *vodoun* (e.g., Shango-Hevisso, the deity of justice and the guardian of thunder

and lightening; Ogoun, the deity of iron and warfare; Dangbé, the great sacred python;

and Sakpata, the deity of the earth), therefore, are not metaphysical beings or deities

created *ex nihlio*. They are created out of and with the substances and *matters* of *gbè*—our

nature existence. In this sense, they cannot then be distinguished from nature; they are

part and parcel of the *gbè* communitarian substance. The *vodoun* are expressions of the

continuity and connectivity of natural existence—of life to death, of humans to non-

humans, of nature to the immanently and yet metaphysically sacred. It is widely held,

however, that not all *vodoun* were created; thus, many are understood as co-existent and

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[309] Bernard Adjibodoun, Wednesday, January 1, 2014.
[310] Bernard Adjibodoun, Tuesday, January 7, 2014.
[311] Bokono Sètondji Adanklounon, Wednesday, June 4, 2014.

co-creational with nature. Hence, while the language of "belief" that adorns the Atô

Ogoun shrine seemingly suggests a transcendental element, what the indigenous theorists

Bernard Adjibodoun and Sètondji Adanklounon are pointing to is a deep *vodoun*

immanent metaphysics wherein *gbè* is cherished as the nature community that guides and

sustains all who seek balance in this life-world. *Vodoun*, often conceptualized as a

"vibration,"[312] a material energy force that one senses in the breeze of the wind, in the

waxing and waning of the ocean, and in the rumble of thunder and lightning, originates

in and *with* nature. The *vodoun*, therefore, are not super-natural beings; they are rather the

materializations of the energetic potency of nature. Hence, all of nature is *vodoun-xwé*—

that is, the house, the shrine, of the *vodoun*. The *vodoun* were and are, therefore, created

from the natural, material *gbè* world in which humans and non-humans alike seek and

find their essence.

Yet, neither the continent of Africa nor the region of Porto-Novo are idyllic

natural oases. Modern-day Porto-Novo, for example, is a mixture of ancestral norms and

modern, urban realities: worn-down colonial structures; cellphones, bootleg movies, and

zemijons (motorcycle taxis); backyard farms; *les buvettes* serving Star Nigerian beer and

Coca-Cola; roaming chickens, goats, and cows; hip-hop music and sacred African drum

beats; market vendors and market shrines. On an average day, one may hear the Quran

uttered over loudspeakers, wake up to the songs of Celestial Christians at 5am, or meet on

one's street corner an *Egúngún* (a Yoruba masquerade of the ancestors) or *Zangbeto* (a

prominent deity and secret society in charge of policing the local community).

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[312] Bernard Adjibodoun often utilized this concept in English to describe the Vodoun tradition, in general, and the *vodoun* "deities," in particular.

Thus, in alignment with the non-transcendental metaphysics that Wiredu elaborates, *vodoun* embraces a notion of nature that includes a spectrum of materialities, from modern commodities to ancient metaphysical, quasi-material entities. For *vodounsì*, nature is not reduced to its elementary forms. Rather, nature is understood as being inclusive of the domains of experience we have demarcated as "culture" and even as "science." For instance, at the conclusion of one of my Fa divination lessons, Bokono Adanklounon proclaimed, "Ce n'est pas magique. C'est d'apprendre" ("This is not magic. This is knowledge").[313] He was conveying that Fa is a science—an indigenous knowledge system of interpretations, prescriptions, and prohibitions based on the principles and laws of *gbè*, of nature existence itself. Moreover, the general abiding understanding among *vodounsì* is that one cannot speak about "culture" irrespective of the *vodoun*; all aspects of the nature-cosmos work in concert. Accordingly, in *vodoun-gbè*, nature is not simply or even primarily appreciated and venerated in some mystical sense but rather is a material and physical corpse of knowledge and wisdom. *Gbè*-nature encodes a deep episteme that *vodounsì* then decipher to predict, protect, heal, preserve, defend, defeat, govern, educate, reflect, grow, and create.

Section VI: Horton's Intellectualist Approach and a Re-Imagining of Religion

Given the philosophical reflections and empirical examples provided, the question still remains: How might we imagine a "religion" in which nature is both the landscape and canvas of the sacred? Anthropologist Robin Horton introduces two dimensions as essential to the study and apprehension of African religious cultures: 1) the

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[313] Bokono Sètondji Adanklounon, Monday, April 28, 2014.

"explanation/prediction/control" dimension, in which religion provides a system of concrete theories and practices for regulating everyday life events and circumstances, whether sickness, drought, financial hardship, pregnancy, marriage, and the list goes on, and 2) the "communion" dimension in which religion provides a system for a set of relationships (meaning, for example, relations between humans as well as between humans and non-humans).[314] Horton, moreover, notes that prior to the eighteenth century, "the Western quest for explanation, prediction, and control of the world was pursued *through* religion and was indeed the most vital shaper of religious ideas.... Before this time, the idea of religion and science as distinct and contrasting fields of thought and action simply did not exist."[315] However, in the context of the emergence and development of the concept of natural religion and in a political situation in which Christians were confronting new challenges to their power and authority, there was a "division of labor" in which religion became the domain of communion and the supernatural and science became the domain of nature and of explanation, prediction, and control.[316] Yet importantly, as Horton reminds us, the development of a separation between the domains of the natural and the supernatural has "no parallel in African religious thought."[317] "In so far as [African thought] provides a framework for explanatory concepts that embrace all worldly phenomena," Horton explains, "[there] is no place for a dichotomy corresponding to that between the 'natural' and the 'supernatural', and no place for spiritual attitudes… which def[y] the 'natural' order of

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[314] Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion, and Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.

[315] Ibid., 353.

[316] Ibid., 188-189.

[317] Ibid.

things."[318] Similarly, as noted earlier, Wiredu argues that "no line is drawn in the Akan worldview demarcating one area of being corresponding to nature from another corresponding to supernature… there is no sense of crossing an ontological chasm, for the idea is that there is only one universe of many strata wherein God, the ancestors, humans, animals, plants, and all the rest of the furniture of the world have their being."[319] Wiredu contends then that the claim that Akan and other African peoples demonstrate a proclivity towards supernatural explanation is actually the superimposition of Euro-Western ontological and religious categories onto African thought systems and structures.[320]

Although there are some conceptual parallels between Horton's and Wiredu's interpretations of classical African thought systems, contrary to Horton, Wiredu fundamentally argues that Akan (and other similar metaphysical systems) cannot "constitute a religion in any reliable sense."[321] While I agree with Wiredu that the concept of "religion" cannot be applied unproblematically to all cultures across time and space, in light of Ogbonnaya's recommendations, I disagree with Wiredu's presumption that religion must continue to be defined according to the Judeo-Christian standard of belief in a Supreme Being (i.e., "God"). For instance, in Horton's examination of approaches to the study of African religious cultures, he analyzes what he calls the "Devout translational recipe." He thus critiques African apologetic theologies, which assumed that the focal object of all African religions must without exception be a Supreme Being or God. From this Devout perspective, religion is fundamentally about

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[318] Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, 188-189.
[319] Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 50.
[320] Ibid., 51
[321] Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 59.

communion with God. Yet, Horton essentially argues that Devout scholars (e.g., John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu) have too heavily relied upon Rudolf Otto's notion of a unique religious attitude when the data indicate instead that the attitudes expressed towards metaphysical beings are in continuity with attitudes towards human beings. In this respect, metaphysical being—whether ancestors, deities, or even counter-productive beings, such as "witches"—are related to as familiar social beings—as aunts and uncles, as fathers and mothers, as grandmothers and grandfathers, and as wives and husbands. Horton argues then that explanation, prediction, and control, rather than communion with God, are the central aims of African religious life.[322] Horton's argument thus suggests that various African religious scholars have, in the words of Russell McCutcheon, *manufactured* African gods to suit their Christian apologetics and their *sui generis* notions of religion.

Given, therefore, the seeming irrelevance of a supernatural/natural dichotomy to African indigenous religious communities, African religious cultures might, as Robin Horton suggests, be best understood through a "scientific" and intellectualist framework, meaning a way of seeing "religion" not essentially as a system of "beliefs" or even "rituals" related to the supernatural but as a system for addressing and honoring the forces and elements of nature in its various manifestations. In this sense, African religious cultures are systems concerned with natural creation as the primary and fundamental revelation, a metaphysical immanence that requires no books, no creeds, no orthodoxies but rather is nourished and sustained through everyday life practices and modes of discerning and being in the nature world. Providing an instructive theoretical basis for re-

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[322] Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, 177.

defining religion as concerned first and foremost with nature and natural creation, John Mbiti posits,

> Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the nonreligious, between the spiritual and material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the field where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony….[323]

Within African indigenous worlds, religion is not constructed according to a binary opposition between supposed opposites. Rather, religion is an ontology (a way of being) and an epistemology (a manner of knowing vis-à-vis existence).[324] Moreover, religion includes all the facets of existence—the economic, the social, the political, the spiritual, the biological, etc. Given this theoretical framing of religion more generally and African religion in particular, I understand Vodoun religion as metaphysics, specifically how *vodoun* communities and peoples conceptualize and embody ultimate being—that is, the fundamental significance of being and existing itself[325]—and their precise knowledge concerning existence. As the philosopher Munyaradzi Mawere poignantly articulates: "Unlike natural sciences such as mathematics, physics and chemistry, metaphysics raises ontological and critical questions that have to do with the 'whatness' and 'whyness' of all

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[323] John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 2.

[324] Often metaphysics is viewed as essentially about ontology, theories of being, and existence, but I argue that in African indigenous religious cultures *knowing* (i.e., their episteme, their science and knowledge) cannot be separated from *being* (i.e., their cosmos, their world system and structure), the same way that the "mind" and "spirit" cannot be separated from "matter" and the "body." In this re-materialization of the conception of African religious cultures, materiality (i.e., nature, matter, and the body) is the very basis for all knowledge (see chapter 5).

[325] As I understand it, ultimate being is not necessarily about a high god or a supreme being but rather about the ultimate meaning of existing itself. Therefore, this begs the question: How do Vodoun communities embody ultimate being? What (or who) provides the ideal of ultimate being? I do not presuppose then that ultimate being must be defined through a high god or supreme being. For an elaboration of this concept and theory, see my discussion of motherhood in chapter 6.

things in the realm of existence."[326] Often alternatively defined as a science of being *qua*

being, metaphysics is not simply about the relationship between humanity and the divine,

rather it is about the whole of existence—the complete ontological spectrum that our life-

world sustains. Providing insights from religious naturalism, in his articulation of a

"nature of religion," Donald Crosby likewise insists that nature cannot be limited to those

aspects often accounted for by the natural sciences but must include an understanding of

human beings as nature beings and thus capture "all of the resources of human thought

and creativity, including philosophy, history, the arts, morality, and religion."[327] Thus, an

attention to religion as metaphysics, as an emic science of being, brings to the fore the

whatness and the whyness of African ontological categories, structures, and thought

systems and expands the terrain of the religious to include the full spectrum of our life-

world. Hence, in specific regard to the *vodoun* world-sense, *gbè* then is not merely a nature

cosmos, *gbè* is the very basis of this indigenous metaphysics that provides the whatness

and whyness of existence itself.

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[326] Mawere, *African Belief and Knowledge* Systems, 1.

[327] Donald A. Crosby, "Naturism as a Form of Religious Naturalism," *Zygon* 38, no. 1 (March 2003), 119-120; see also Donald A. Crosby, *A Religion of Nature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002); Donald A. Crosby, "A Case for Religion of Nature," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 1, no. 4 (2007): 489-502; Donald A. Crosby, "Further Contributions to the Dialogue," *JSRNC* 1, no. 4 (2007): 508-509; Robert S. Corrington, *Nature's Religion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997); Robert S. Corrington, "Deep Pantheism," *JSRNC* 1, no. 4 (2007): 503-507; Charley D. Hardwick, "Religious Naturalism Today," *Zygon* 38, no. 1 (March 2003): 111-116; Jerome Stone, "Varieties of Religious Naturalism," Zygon 38, no. 1 (March 2003): 89-93. Given the rejection of any recourse to the transcendent or the supernatural and, moreover, the fundamental primacy of nature, the religious naturalism intellectual tradition is in many ways compatible with Vodoun religious culture, as I have theorized it, as well as other nature-originated sacred traditions. Hence, since, as Jerome Stone (2003: 92) acknowledges, "religious naturalism has grown up on the monotheistic soil nurtured by both Jewish and Christian traditions," a comparative and dialogical analysis engaging religious naturalism and African religious cultures could in the future be a productive and fruitful philosophical exercise that might create new theorizations for rethinking the categories of "nature," "religion," and even "matter."

In insisting upon African religions as indigenous theories that are neither merely

symbolic[328] nor fundamentally God-centered, Horton's contribution to African religious

studies is significant. However, I am not willing to agree that the communion dimension

is merely "an optional extra"[329] in African religious life or that the primary and necessary

aim of African religion is prediction, explanation, and control.[330] Though deeply

intellectual and even scientific, as Horton maintains, African religions are not simply

"bodies of theory regarding the underlying character of the world."[331] African

metaphysics, namely its conceptualizations of existence, is concrete and lived. Moreover,

to make such an argument continues to reify religion as essentially an abstraction—a

product purely of human intellect and imagining. Just as the Euro-Western separation

between the natural and the super-natural is inconsistent with African religious thought,

the notion of a binary between the communal and the explanatory, too, has no parallel in

African religious cultures. As Ogbonnaya's notion of communitarian divinity implies, if

we understand *gbὲ* as the communitarian substance that connects all-that-is, then it is

impossible for explanation, prediction, and control to exist outside the context of

community. Understanding the communion aspect and the explanation/prediction/

control dimension as working in concert, I propose, therefore, that African religious

cultures like Vodoun are equally as concerned with creating and sustaining relationships

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[328] For his critique of the Symbolist approach see Horton, "Back to Frazer?" *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, 105-137. His two major objections to the Symbolist approach are that they: 1) interpret African religious thought as "figurative representations of purely earthly realities" rather than as literal theories and do so without any evidence for making such an interpretative leap, and 2) contend that the real intention of this religious discourse is solely "the production of symbolic imagery" while insisting that the explanation/prediction/control and the communion aspects of religion are merely "matters of superficial and deceptive appearance" (Ibid., 7).

[329] Horton, *Patters of Thought in Africa and the West*, 373.

[330] Ibid., 177, 372-373.

[331] Ibid., 119.

(whether between humans and other organic forms or between humans and this-worldly deities) as they are with providing nature-based answers and solutions to life's problems, challenges, and pitfalls. From this vantage point, the very need to explain, predict, and control is predicated upon personal and social relationships—dis-ease in family structures, the inability to conceive, and even natural disasters are all understood as the result of imbalanced and disharmonious relationships, whether with family members, ancestors, *vodoun*, or with nature itself. African religious cultures are thus not merely theories from which practices arise. Rather, in their dynamic intercourse with the community of nature, theories and practices (or, in other words, beliefs and rituals) are co-emergent.

CONCLUSION

Returning to our initial discussion of natural religion, each of the three primary conceptions had one common underlying assumption: each presumed that the epistemological foundation for *religion* and *religions* was ultimately human nature. Yet, the foundation of human nature *is* nature itself. What if we presume nature—in its broadest sense—to be the *summum genus*, the foundation of religion? What if we, moreover, understand "natural religion" as simultaneously a metaphysical, natural, and material experience, knowledge, and practice that both originates and ends in nature? I suggest that for many *vodounsì*, religion is "natural religion," meaning in this case a nature-originated and nature-centered, immanently physical and metaphysical experience and life system. Religion cannot be separated from *nature* and the *natural*. Without nature, without *gbὲ*, there is no *vodoun*.

By interrogating the concept of "natural religion" rather than remaining beholden to "nature religion," I challenge what is presumed as *natural* to religion. Thus, beyond

merely questioning what constitutes the rightful object of religion (e.g., the supernatural or the natural, the immanent or the transcendent, etc.), I contest what is often assumed about the nature of *religion* and the *religious*. Yet, unlike nineteenth-century scholars who defined natural religion in a hierarchal opposition, this conception of natural religion is not conceived within a taxonomy wherein the supernatural is its superior other. My conception of natural religion leaves no room for a transcendent and abstracted super-nature. Rather, it takes seriously our genus *in* nature and realigns human beings as nature beings, as *homo natura*, as co-existent within a communitarian cosmos of other nature beings.

Returning to my consideration of Long's "imagination of matter" as discussed in chapter two, I submit, therefore, that, as Mircea Eliade and Charles Long propose, we imagine religion as the "stuff" of nature but not merely as the product of human reason or of human irrational imagination or even a superstructure above nature. I argue alternatively that we imagine religion as an organic creation of a dynamic engagement with our natural and material existence. Hence, while Eliade and Long have argued that being religious is essential to being human (*homo religiosus*), I have instead attempted to demonstrate that religion does not simply establish the importance of *homo religiosus* but rather the significance of *homo natura*. If we understand religion as a metaphysical orientation, as a way of knowing that establishes ways of being, as Long himself argues, then as my theorization of *gbɛ̀* implies, religion is fundamental to existing as part and parcel of nature. Being *religious* is essential to being *natura*. Being *natura* is primary to being *religiosus*.

CHAPTER 5
"Every Person has a *Sɛ́*":
Persons, Community, and the Consumption of Life

Through an analysis of the indigenous concept of *gbɛ̀* (nature, existence, life), in the previous chapter, I offered a reframing of religion as wholly natural, metaphysical, and material. Yet, challenging the tendency to merely define nature-originated religious cultures like Vodoun as simply "nature religions," I proposed a reframing not only of the assumed object of religion (e.g., a supreme god, deity, or abstract transcendent entity), but moreover insisted upon a reconsideration of the very nature of religion itself. In my reimagining of religion as not only nature-centered but also as natural, I argue that religion is not merely about the ultimate meaning of being human (i.e., *homo sapiens*) but rather the fundamental significance of being part and parcel of *natura*, of the nature community. In a Vodoun religious cosmos, wherein *vodoun* is *gbɛ̀* and *gbɛ̀* is *vodoun*, religion is then an expression of our ultimate communitarian existence with nature—that is, with all the beings (e.g., humans, ancestors, *vodoun*, and even plants and animals) that collaboratively sustain the functioning of our lifeworld.

Yet, an analysis of *gbɛ̀* as the nature community and, therefore, as the basis for philosophizing the whatness and whyness of existence, specifically existence-in-community, necessitates an understanding of the beings, both human and non-human, that are part of this communitarian cosmos. Given that *gbɛ̀*-existence presupposes an ontological philosophy that implies that being is always being-in-community, in this present chapter, I contend that to the extent that these varied beings-in-community are morally efficacious entities that facilitate and sustain the functioning and overall balance

of the wider nature community, these beings—whether human, mineral, organic, divine, or other—are also "persons."

Restricted by the prescribed boundaries of the Western concept of personhood, scholars of African philosophies, religions, and cultures have presumed that conceptions of personhood essentially and exclusively concern human individuals and their communities. This dissertation, however, takes the position that, in African indigenous religious cultures, "personhood" and "humanness" are neither synonymous nor inevitably overlapping ontological domains. Rather, I theorize personhood as a spectrum of ontological potentiality that is in fact achievable by humans and non-humans alike. In this chapter, highlighting the materialization of varied persons within the *gbὲ* nature community, I will: 1) examine conceptions of personhood in contemporary African philosophy, 2) scrutinize the concept of *sέ* as an indigenous philosophy for re-theorizing personhood and offering an expanded notion of persons, and 3) recommend a re-framing of who (or even what) constitutes a "person" based on practices of offering and consumption. My extended conception of personhood acknowledges natural elements and organic (as well as seemingly inorganic) entities as part and parcel of a varied sacred nature-human collective—a nature-based kinship that creates and sustains these varied "persons" as co-responsible and co-participatory beings. Hence, in consort with my theorization of *gbὲ* as a communitarian nature cosmos and of humans as nature beings, I argue for a flexible and expanded conception of the person that rather than dividing so-called *homo sapiens* from nature proposes personhood as an ontological standing based on social and moral functionality.

Yet, if personhood as an ontological concept is to be assessed within the field of African philosophy, then African philosophy, it must be noted, is more than a descriptive

narrative. It is, as Kwasi Wiredu explains, "an evaluative enterprise," a theoretical task in which philosophers are fundamentally concerned with "figuring out, for their own enlightenment and, perhaps, that of others, what in [their metaphysical suppositions] is true, if any, and what is false, if any."[332] Hence, in this evaluative enterprise, contemporary African philosophers have been tasked with pursing the universal via the particular. Accordingly, while the African philosophers I engage in this chapter represent diverse world-senses, these perspectives are, nonetheless, also philosophical speculations about the general and universal nature of African personhood. While any general conclusions must of course be tested within particular contexts and local conceptual landscapes, it is, nonetheless, through proposing and examining generic indigenous-based categories that scholars can undo the conceptual colonialization that affects any intellectual engagement of Africa and Africana peoples. Hence, in comparatively evaluating these perspectives and putting them in conversation with my own particularist study, I am likewise pursing the universal and the generic via the particular but with an attention to the Western episteme that has predetermined the conceptual limitations of this philosophical dialogue.

As our discussion in previous chapters has highlighted, Euro-Western epistemologies have over-determined the theoretical landscape in which African religious cultures and philosophies have been established and sustained as intellectual fields. This imperialist legacy has imposed in particular Euro-Western proclivities towards delineating and concretizing difference—whether via the concept of religion, race, species, or

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[332] Kwasi Wiredu, "Introduction: African Philosophy in Our Time," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, edited by Kwasi Wiredu (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 3.

gender[333]—onto African philosophical, religious, and cultural worlds. Thus, rather than

offering an impartial translation of African concepts into European terms, European

notions, fully enclosed in Western theoretical suppositions, have been imposed on African

conceptual word-scapes.[334] European concepts and conceptual perspectives, such as

"religion," "natural religion," "commodity," and "fetish,"—concepts that previous

chapters have highlighted—have, therefore, largely predetermined the theoretical

boundaries of African thought and regrettably without being reinterpreted or reimagined

according to indigenous epistemological norms. The concept of the person is no

exception.

Section I: African Philosophy & Theories of (Human) Personhood

"Person" and "personhood" as categories of thought— namely, as concepts that

convey a community's perspective on the world via their norms of classification[335]—

presuppose Euro-Western notions of humanness and human personality. Hence, as a

product of the Euro-Western system of knowledge, African philosophy has maintained

that personhood is necessarily concerned with human individuals and human

communities. As a result, there have been two primary approaches to personhood: 1) the

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[333] For analysis of the politics of difference in the study of religion, please see Jonathan Z. Smith, "Differential Equations: On Constructing the Other" and "What a Difference a Difference Makes," in *Relating Religion*, 230-302; for analysis of gender as a Western construct, see Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*; Oyeronke Oyewumi, ed. *African Women & Feminism: Reflecting On The Politics of Sisterhood* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003); Oyeronke Oyewumi, ed. *Gender Epistemologies in Africa: Gendering Traditions, Spaces, Social Institutions, and Identities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[334] I introduce this neologism, *word-scapes*, to capture the manner in which indigenous concepts establish a world perspective and thus a particular socio-cultural and religious landscape. In this dissertation, I argue that *gbè* (nature), *sé* (personhood), and *nɔ̀* (motherhood) propose an alternative *vodoun* word-scape that challenges how we understand the concept of religion.

[335] Wiredu, "An Oral Philosophy of Personhood," 8.

communitarian approach, that explores the formation and function of the human person within the macrocosm of human society, and 2) the body complex approach, which explores the microcosm of the body-soul (or, in other words, body-shadow) complex as the essence of human persons.[336]

As the formative proponent of the communitarian approach, the Kenyan theologian and religionist John Mbiti attests that the individual finds his or her ontological significance within the context of community and thus that the individuality of the human person is always contingent upon the collective. He asserts, "Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.' This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man."[337] For Mbiti, then, it is the community, or more precisely, the human collective that defines the human individual. The human individual exists as an "I" (that is, a first person singular) only to the extent that there is an *a priori* "we" (namely, a first person plural).

Developing Mbiti's theorem into a communitarian theory of normative personhood, the Nigerian philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti affirms, "man is defined by

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[336] See Didier Njirayamanda Kaphagawani, "African Conceptions of a Person: A Critical Survey," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, edited by Kwasi Wiredu (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 332-342. Kaphagawani identifies three seemingly distinct conceptions of personhood: 1) Placide Tempel's force thesis, 2) John Mbiti's (qua Tempel's) communalism thesis, and 3) Alexis Kagame's shadow thesis. However, since the force thesis concurs that *being* as force is a *process*, and the communalism thesis contends that *being* is a process defined by *community*, I argue that these two theories of personhood actually operate in concert.

[337] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 106.

reference to the environing community."[338] In defining the person, the community defines "reality;" it is, thus, through the community that the person knows who she or he is *and* that she or he is "real," that is to say, that she or he is an existential being, a being-in-community. In theorizing this environing community, Menkiti elaborates then, "It is in rootedness in an ongoing human community that the individual comes to see himself as man, and it is by first knowing this community as a stubborn perduring fact of the psychological world that the individual also comes to know himself as a durable, more or less permanent, fact of this world."[339] Differentiating among three forms of human assemblage, the *collective*, the *constituted*, and the *random*, and elaborating on his theory of community, Menkiti explains, "When Mbiti says that the African says to himself, 'I am because we are,' the *we* referred to here is not an additive 'we' but a thoroughly fused collective 'we.'"[340] Whereas a *random* human grouping is, as its signifier implies, an arbitrary conglomeration of individuals, and the *constituted* community is, as Menkiti asserts, "a non-organic bringing together of atomic individuals into a unit more akin to an association than to a community," the *collective* is, as his analysis of the pronoun *we* in Mbiti's theory implies, an organic assemblage of individuals wherein the community is the *a priori* existential reality that both produces and defines the individual. While in a *constituted* grouping the individuals constitute the community, in the *collective* community, the community establishes individual persons.

Exemplifying the body complex approach to defining the person (namely, in this context, the human person) and thereby denying the assertion that the African

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[338] Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought" in *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, edited by R. A. Wright (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979), 171.

[339] Ibid., 171-172.

[340] Ibid., 179.

community is wholly the definer of the individual, the Akan philosopher Kwame Gyekye

insists alternatively that the individual is more than a social being. To this end, he argues,

> The individual is by nature a social (communal) being, yes; but she is, also by
> nature, *other* things as well; that is, she possesses other attributes that may also be
> said to constitute her nature. The exercise or application or consideration of these
> other attributes will whittle down or delimit the "authoritative" role or function
> that may be ascribed to, or invested in, the community. Failure to recognize this
> may result in pushing the significance and implications of the individual's social
> nature beyond their limits, an act that would in turn result in vesting the
> community with an all-engulfing moral authority to determine all things about the
> life of the individual. In short, one could easily succumb to the temptation of
> exaggerating the normative status and power of the cultural community in
> relation to those of the person and, thus, obfuscating our understanding of the real
> status of this cultural structure as well as the complex nature of the human person
> who is to function in that structure. Those who express extreme or radical views
> on the status of the community, such as Mbiti, Menkiti, and most of the advocates
> of African socialism, are victims of the temptation.[341]

For Gyekye, the individual is of course a communal being but the individual is also

defined by attributes that are independent of the community. Therefore, according to

Gyekye, the individual cannot be said to be wholly social. Rather, for him, the African

social order is amphibious—namely, an amalgamation of communality and

individuality.[342] In his estimation, to claim then that the community defines the individual

is to fall prey to the temptation of a radical communitarianism that over-determines the

role of the community and distorts the nature and function of the individual.

What appears at first to be a mere difference of opinion, between Mbiti and

Menkiti's communitarian perspective and Gyekye's amphibious standpoint, is in fact

rooted in a fundamental methodological dissonance based on their respective primary

points of analysis. While Mbiti and Menkiti philosophize the person from the macrocosm

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[341] Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 47-48.

[342] Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1995), 154.

of the community, Gyekye begins alternatively from the microcosm of the body

complex—more precisely, the essential *attributes* (i.e., "souls" and mental capacities) that

determine the functioning of the individual person within the individual body.

Accordingly, when Gyekye claims that the human person is more than a social being and,

therefore, is constituted by other attributes, he is referring to the defining components or

essences that constitute the body complex. Elaborating on these other constitutive

components of the self, he elucidates,

> I have made the observation that, besides being a social being by nature, the
> human individual is, also by nature, other things as well. By "other things," I have
> in mind such essential attributes of the person as rationality, having a moral sense
> and capacity for virtue and, hence, for evaluating and making moral judgments:
> all this means that the individual is capable of choice. If we do not choose to be
> social—because we are social by nature—neither do we choose to be intelligent or
> rational beings or beings with a moral sense (or, capacity for virtue). Let us use the
> expression "mental features" as a short hand for all of these "other things." It is
> not the community that creates this mental feature: this feature would not be
> natural if it were created by the community. The community only discovers and
> nurtures it. So that, if the mental feature plays any seminal role in the formation
> and execution of the individual's goals and plans, as indeed it does, then it cannot
> be persuasively argued that personhood is fully defined and constituted by the
> communal structure or social relations.[343]

Understanding these other attributes as wholly separate from the community, these

mental features are the individuating elements of the body complex. These attributes and

mental features, according to Gyekye, enable both rational thought and moral sensibility,

and, therefore, contribute to the individual's agentive capacity—that is, his or her ability

to fulfill goals and aspirations and, thereby, the potentiality to partially constitute his or

her own reality.

Offering the Akan metaphysical context as a formative illustration of the

constitutive capacities of the individual, in his theorization of the Akan conception of the

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[343] Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity,* 53.

person, he identifies three primary components within the body complex: 1) *okra*, the life

force, 2) *honhom*, the breath, and 3) *sunsum*, the "personality-soul."[344] While the *okra* is, as

he explains, the "soul" and the destiny, or, more precisely, the "innermost self, the

essence, of the individual person,"[345] the *honhom* is the "tangible manifestation or evidence

of the presence of *okra*."[346] Yet, it is the s*unsum* that is the individualizing essence. The

sunsum is that which determines the personality and, therefore, the behavior of the

individual person.[347] Providing several examples, he expounds,

> Thus, for "He has a strong personality" the Akan would say, "His *sunsum* is
> 'heavy' or 'weighty'" (*ne sunsum yē duru*). When a man is generous they would say
> that he has a good *sunsum* (*ōwō sunsum pa*). When a man has an impressive and
> imposing personality they would say that he has an overshadowing *sunsum* (*ne
> sunsum hyē me so*). In fact sometimes in describing a dignified person they would
> simply say, "He has spirit" (*ōwō sunsum*), that is, he has a commanding presence.
> And a man may be said to have a "gentle" *sunsum*, a "forceful" *sunsum*, a
> "submissive" or "weak" *sunsum*.[348]

The *sunsum* is then that fundamental essence of the self that determines and shapes the

individual person's conduct and comportment. While the *sunsum* and the *okra* have distinct

functions, as Gyekye further explains, "The *sunsum* may, more accurately, be

characterized as a *part*— the active part —of the *okra* (soul)…. [Thus,] the *okra* and *sunsum*

are constitutive of a spiritual unity, which survives after death." [349] The *sunsum* is,

therefore, that which after death permits the *okra* to retain its individuality. Hence, in

consideration of its personalizing function, Gyekye concludes, "The *sunsum* appears to be

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[344] See Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 90; G. Parrinder, *West African Psychology: A Comparative Study of Psychological and Religious Thought* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1951), 29-44. Parrinder introduces the conceptual notion of the personality-soul.

[345] Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 85.

[346] Ibid., 88.

[347] Ibid., 90.

[348] Ibid.

[349] Ibid., 98.

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."[350]

As the actualizing force of the individual person and specifically the "force of the human psychological system," the *sunsum* is responsible for the mental features and attributes of rationality and mental sensibility that Gyekye identifies as constitutive elements of the individual person.[351] Hence, it is the *sunsum* that enables the human person to *adwen*, to think and to rationalize. The *sunsum* is then connected to an individual's capacity for *nyansa*—namely, wisdom or mental dexterity. As Gyekye clarifies, there are two senses of the Akan conception of *nyansa*. *Nyansa* signifies: 1) the inherent capacity for philosophical thinking and, more precisely, wisdom, and 2) the ability to acquire mental skill and practical knowledge.[352] Accordingly, the *sunsum* is the component of the body complex that is responsible for the individual's inherent *and* acquired mental features and therefore for the individualization of the person.

Based on Gyekye's philosophical exploration of the Akan notion of the person, one can concur that it is the *sunsum* of the individual person that becomes the basis for his theory that the person is unavoidably more than a social being and, thereby, via his or her mental attributes, has individual autonomy. Elaborating on his theory of personal autonomy, Gyekye rationalizes,

> The capacity for self-assertion that the individual can exercise presupposes, and in fact derives from, the autonomous nature of the person. By autonomy, I do not mean self-completeness but the having of a will, a rational will of one's own, that enables one to determine at least some of one's own goals and to pursue them, and to control one's destiny. From its Greek etymology, 'autonomy' means, self-governing or self-directing. It is thus essentially, the freedom of the person to choose his own goals and life plans in order to achieve some kind of self-

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[350] Ibid., 97.
[351] Ibid., 63.
[352] Ibid., 61-62.

realization. The actions and choices of goals of the individual emanate from his
rational and moral will.[353]

For Gyekye, autonomy is then the capacity for the individual to direct and control his or

her life destiny. To the extent, that the individual person, via the metaphysical unit of the

sunsum and *okra*, has this capacity, then according to Gyekye's logic, the person is more

than a communal being and, therefore, the community does not fully constitute persons.

Rather, the human person, through his or her mental capacity, always has the capacity to

determine and define his or her own life course. Referencing an Akan proverb, Gyekye

then concludes: "The clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appear

huddled together, but which would be seen to stand *individually* when closely

approached."[354]

Hence, while Mbiti and Menkiti's communitarian notion of personhood insists on

the *a priori* and definitive authority of the community, Gyekye's body complex perspective

attempts to balance the supposed sovereignty of the community with the autonomy of the

individual person. Weighing both approaches, the Akan philosopher Kwasi Wiredu

ponders:

> First, then, what is a person? In much of Western philosophy this is a call to
> ontological inquiry. The task is to explain the relationship of mind and matter or,
> usually equivalently, body and soul… The African mind is not oblivious to the
> ontological aspects of the concept of a person, and has ideas thereto. But ethical
> issues are more dominant.[355]

Thus, ethical matters—meaning precisely, the functional responsibility of the person

within the community— are of the utmost concern. Moreover, the moral capacity of the

person has relevance only within the context of community. It is the community that

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[353] Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 54.
[354] Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 158.
[355] Wiredu, "An Oral Philosophy of Personhood,"13.

necessitates privileging the ethical over the ontological—meaning here, the ontology of the body complex. Yet, this seemingly strict dichotomy between the ethical and the ontological is ultimately misleading. Instead, as Menkiti maintains, even the ethical is ontological. [356] In other words, ethics are actualized through modes of *being*, *belonging* and *becoming*. Since persons exist and become in the context of social relations, the ontology of the individual body is inseparable from the community. Morality is then lived and embodied. To the extent that the community shapes and even transforms the individual, including his or her body complex,—welcoming, naming, and initiating his or her particular body microcosm within the larger macrocosm of the community—the community-at-large ultimately defines personhood and in doing so establishes the norms and responsibilities of persons.

While Gyekye's contentions about the individual person being more than a communal being seem at first viable, especially given that few would deny that an African notion of personhood must take into account personal capability and destiny, ultimately, his separation of the person's attributes—namely, in his words, the individual's mental features—from the community is in the end untenable. Hence, understanding the body complex—and its attributes—as integrated within the community rather than as a distinct and autonomous micro-cosmos, Menkiti reasons as follows:

> Whereas most Western views of man abstract this or that feature of the lone individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristic which entities aspiring to the description "man" must have, the African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual…. A crucial difference thus exists between the African view of man and the view of man found in Western

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[356] See Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," 171-182; Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of a Person," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, edited by Kwasi Wiredu (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 324-331.

thought: in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory.[357]

Personhood is, therefore, not a state of being, a psychological attribute, or a mere fact of biology. Personhood is a process. Describing this processual nature of personhood, Menkiti explains,

> This brings us to the second point of contrast between the two views of man, namely, the *processual* nature of being in African thought—the fact that persons become persons only after a process of incorporation. Without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere danglers to whom the description of 'person' does not fully apply. For personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed…. Thus, it is not enough to have before us the biological organism, with whatever rudimentary psychological characteristics are seen as attaching to it. We must also conceive of this organism as going through a long process of social and ritual transformation until it attains the full complement of excellencies [sic] seen as truly definitive of man.[358]

During this process, the individual and his or her body complex are incorporated into the community. It is through this incorporation process, moreover, that the body complex and its attributes are transformed and shaped according to the moral norms of the community. Hence, Menkiti theorizes personhood is an "ontological progression"— meaning, an ontological transformation of the self into a morally efficacious being. This ontological progression is enacted through community rites of passage, such as, naming ceremonies and initiations, but also such transformative life events as marriage, procreation, eldership, and ancestorhood.[359]

Yet, to the contrary, Gyekye would have us believe that these practices and process of community incorporation are "mere rituals." In effect, he states,

> It is true that at the time of initiation into adulthood young people are reminded and seriously instructed in the moral values or virtues of the society (as they are

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[357] Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," 171-172.
[358] Ibid., 172.
[359] Ibid., 173-174.

instructed in other social customs). But, if leading a satisfactory moral life is an important determinant of personhood, it is difficult to perceive how this can be manifested at the stage of social incorporation through mere rituals.[360]

Gyekye attempts to detach moral development from the ontological transformation that so-called "mere rituals" materialize, but this is simply not plausible. The very purpose of ritual is to bring about ontological transformation—that is, the conversion of the very *being*, namely, the metaphysics, of the individual person, which is inclusive of (but not exclusive to) moral and social transformation. Based on Menkiti's communitarian philosophy, ritual is then an ontological process by which the metaphysics of the individual body complex are molded and incorporated into the community.[361] Moreover, if the moral presupposes the ontological, as we argued earlier in our discussion of ethics as embodied and lived, then rituals are fundamental to ethical-ontological transformation.

In his theorization of personhood as an ontological progression, Menkiti fundamentally argues that personhood is an ontological status that an individual can achieve, but then potentially also fail to attain. If one can achieve or fail at personhood, personhood is not a stable ontological standing but rather an ontological spectrum. Some individuals are more persons then than others. Elaborating on his theory of personhood as an ontological progression, Menkiti explains,

> Time's movement was generally from the present to the past, so that the more of a past one has, the more standing as a person one also has. In this regard, a remark to the effect "I am looking forward to my own past" would be a remark well placed within the thought system.
>
> Ontological progression, then, in taking place in time, demands that time be considered relevant to the in-gathering of the excellences of the person as one ages. Hence the Igbo proverb: "What an old man sees sitting down, a young man cannot see standing up." A statement of this nature signifies that passage through

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[360] Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 48.
[361] For instance, see my discussion of rituals and practices of consumption (i.e., herbal baths and water truth rituals) in this chapter and chapter 6.

> time helps create not only a qualitative difference between young and old, but also an ontologically significant one. The issue here is not gradation pure and simple, but graduation based on the emergence of special qualities seen as constitutive of a level of being not only qualitatively superior to, but also ontologically different from, the entity with which one first began.[362]

Hence, if we reconsider Mbiti's concrete notion of time, which I discussed in chapter three, time, and therefore history, is not a progression into an abstract future but rather the accrual of materialized experiences and events and, therefore, as Menkiti likewise argues, the accumulation of the past into the present. In this respect, while a child has very little materialized experience in this world (and therefore generally a brief past), those who are elders have extended actualized experiences. Yet, in their accumulation of a concrete past, those of old age are not merely older, if one means to suggest a merely qualitative progression towards the future, rather, if they have lived ethically, they are elders—meaning that, these persons have accrued life occurrences and undergone ritual processes of incorporation (i.e., initiations, marriage, parenthood, etc.) that have gradually rendered them ontologically distinct.

Confusing Menkiti's ideals of personhood with the realities of actual human persons, Gyekye counters that elders cannot be automatically considered full persons. In this vein, Gyekye states, "The difficulty is in considering elderly people as necessarily moral, or as necessarily having the ability or disposition to practice moral virtues satisfactorily. For, surely there are many elderly people who are known to be wicked, ungenerous, unsympathetic; whose lives, in short, generally do not reflect any moral maturity or excellence. In terms of a moral conception of personhood, such elderly people may not qualify as persons."[363] And, yes, Gyekye would be correct. Menkiti is not arguing

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[362] Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of the Person," 325.
[363] Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 49.

that all elders are moral and thus full persons. Instead, he is claiming that normatively the

elder is the human ideal of personhood. Hence, aged persons who do not exhibit and

embody norms of moral excellence would not qualify as full persons or even perhaps

persons at all, and likewise would often not be seen as elders within the community, since

eldership is a title of honor rather than merely an indicator of old age. Thus, as Menkiti

elucidates, even if one has accrued an extended past and thus reached old age, full

personhood is not an inevitable ontological status or destination: "For married to the

notion of person is the notion of moral arrival, a notion involving yardsticks and

gradations, or, more simply, involving an expectation that certain ways of being and

behaving in the world may be so off the mark as to raise important questions regarding

the person-status of their doers."[364]

Misunderstanding the normative ontological function of ritual and time and, thus,

attempting to problematize Menkiti's notion of moral arrival, Bernard Matolino, a

proponent of Kwame Gyekye's "moderate communitarianism," insists that rather than

being an ontological progression, personhood merely reflects epistemological

development. In analyzing Menkiti's notion of personhood, he deduces,

> Firstly, it appears as if there is no justification for this gradation to be seen as
> ontological progression that bears on the status of personhood. Menkiti's claim
> that gradation, which connotes moral arrival, is symbiotic with the ontological
> status of personhood is overstated. The moral difference between the young and
> old is nothing more than a difference in epistemological status in certain matters,
> in this case moral matters. The epistemological arrival at the moral codes of
> conduct that are socially sanctioned is indicative of the success of the
> internalization of such codes. The difference between the elderly members of
> society who have undertaken such a journey and the young who are yet to embark
> on such a journey is not as radical as Menkiti depicts. It is not an ontological
> difference but a difference in time which accounts for the different epistemological
> stations that the young and the old find themselves respectively in.
> Epistemological difference, no matter how vast, cannot be taken to represent

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[364] Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of a Person," 326.

ontological differences…. What the elders have is simply superior knowledge compared to the young.[365]

The problem with Matolino's argument, however, is his assumption that there is a necessary separation between the epistemological and the ontological and that the acquisition of knowledge is merely an epistemological process. Rather, when we understand moral acquisition in terms of "moral function,"[366] as Menkiti argues, and comprehend it within the context of various initiatory practices (that is, ontologically transformative rituals), then knowledge attainment is both an epistemological and ontological process. Moreover, if we understand time, as we have argued, as the accumulation of past experiences (including rituals of incorporation), then within a normative framework, elders are not merely epistemologically superior to the young; elders are also ontologically advanced. Thus, moral arrival is not merely an epistemological status; rather, it is, as Menkiti maintains, an ontological prestige—the actualization and achievement of a moral ideal of being.

Yet, if personhood is an ontological ethic and if humans can achieve or even fail at personhood, as Menkiti argues, why then should we presuppose that other organic entities—or, in other words, nature beings—could not *do* and *be* the same? Bringing attention to an ancient court case brought before the monarch of the Hogbonu kingdom (that is, the present-day Kingdom of Porto-Novo in the Republic of Benin) concerning a *vodounsi* (a newly consecrated *vodoun* devotee) and a kola tree, I argue instead for an inclusive notion of personhood. While building on the work of African philosophers such

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[365] Bernard Matolino, "The (Mal) Function of 'it' in Ifeanyi Menkiti's Normative Account of Person," *African Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 34.

[366] See Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," 175-176; Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of A Person," 328-330. For instance, he defines children and the nameless dead as non-persons noting "the absence of moral function," whereas the ancestors as persons are defined as fully morally functional.

as Mbiti and Menkiti, through privileging *vodoun* indigenous experiences and social norms and avoiding idealizing humans as persons, I develop a theory and philosophy of normative personhood that explores the nature community as wholly "peopled" with varied ethical, communal beings—that is, persons who are both human and non-human, and even organic and divine.

Section II: **The Kola Tree & the *Vodounsi*—Towards an Inclusive Notion of Personhood**

In the seventeenth-century, during the reign of Dè Gbènyon, a noteworthy court case, with significance to any theorization of personhood within *vodoun* religious worlds, was brought before Chief Atô Ogun Masi, an Oyo official and a minister of religion and warfare for the Hogbonu court. However, before we consider this particular judicial matter, it is essential to at least briefly explore how issues of law and justice are understood and addressed both metaphysically and historically.

In the previous chapter, I explored *gbè* as nature, life, and existence itself and, moreover, as the communal all-that-is that guards and molds this lifeworld for all beings. Yet, the guardianship of *gbè* obliges a debt to be paid in this world. Let us consider, for instance, the following proverb:

> *Nyadé xò nɔ ɔ, bo dò hunhɔn nú hɛnnumɔ lɛ wɛ̀, lobo yi jɛ̀ obtɔ mɛ̀. Gbɛ nɔ gɔ̀n gbɛ 'xɔ́ byɔ́ ǎ.* A man struck his mother, then fleeing his family, he fell into a pit. Nature never ceases to demand a debt of nature.[367]

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[367] Boco, *Proverbs de la Sagesse Fon*, #1862. Please note that the phrasing does not specify whether the person was a man or a woman (especially since Fongbe does not generally grammatically note sex differentiation), but to accord with Pamphile Boco's translation and to facilitate easy of comprehension, I have offered his suggested translation.

Firstly, this proverb implies that issues of law and justice are dealt with in this world rather than merely in the invisible world after a person's death. Hence, if any person within the *gbè* community violates the laws of respect and reciprocity that sustain harmony and balance within the nature community immediate retribution is required. A person cannot strike his or her mother—that is, the birthing creator within their family—, or any person, for that matter, and not be obliged to answer to the *gbè* nature community. Secondly, while any miscarriage of justice would of course require a debt to be paid, there is also the sense that all beings come into the world with a debt (*àxɔ́, xɔ́*) [368] and, thus, as the second part of the proverb states: "Nature never ceases to demand a debt of nature." For instance, according to the Cameroonian philosopher Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, in the African classical world-sense, human beings come into the world with a debt, and, therefore, the purpose of life is to pay this debt through the "transmission of humanity," namely, via ritual, marriage, procreation, eldership, and ancestorhood.[369] Therefore, in consideration of our philosophical discussion of personhood, Boulaga's theory implies that one transmits humanity and pays one's debt in life through essentially undergoing the rites of incorporation into full personhood. Yet, it must be noted that the proverb I have cited does not say that "nature demands a debt of human beings" rather it says that "nature demands a debt of nature." Hence, in my theorization of personhood beyond the imposed limitations of humanity, I would suggest that all beings—that is, all *gbè* creatures—come into the world with a debt (*àxɔ́*) to be paid, and thus, if we take

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[368] See Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 76.

[369] See Fabien Ebossi Boulaga, "Christianity and African Religion: A Dialogue," (Lecture, College of the Holy Cross, Worchester, Mass., November 30, 1998); Jefferson-Tatum, "The Violence of Translation," 293, 302-303, for my argument regarding the function of this debt (*àxɔ́*) in royal marital and social relations in the pre-colonial Dahomean Kingdom.

Boulaga's theory of African life seriously, then perhaps the purpose of existence (*gbὲ*) is not simply the "transmission of humanity," but rather the "transmission of life," more generally, namely, the creation and re-creation of the *gbὲ* community. Thus, in considering the Hogbonu court case detailed below, I would suggest that we ponder: Is the debt of a *vodounsi* necessarily greater or lesser than the debt of a kola tree? Or, do these potential persons share an equal debt in this lifeworld?

While the preceding passage offers a metaphysical understanding of justice through the indigenous notion of a life debt (*gbὲ-àxɔ́*), given that the Hogbonu court case has been dated to the seventeenth century, it is also imperative to consider the judiciary process in the Adja-Yorùbá region historically. In this regard, Robin Law explains that since providential governors exercised a great deal of authority in their localities, the monarch's court was primarily consulted in judicial matters concerning different villages within the kingdom or capital offenses (namely, either murder or adultery committed with the wife of a king or senior official). Law, therefore, stresses, "The administration of capital punishment was, indeed, the centrally important judicial function of the monarchy."[370] Accordingly, the preceding court case, which did not involve different villages, but rather two neighbors, a kola tree, and a recently initiated *vodounsi*, was in fact a capital offense punishable by death, and, thereby, concerned with issues of law and justice that were literally a matter of life or death.

Relating the official account of this court case, Bernard Adjibodoun, the present-day successor of Chief Atô Ogun, and Mitô Akplogan Agboto-Zounmè, the Minister of Culture and Supreme Chief of Vodoun for the present-day Kingdom of Porto-Novo, narrated the following:

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[370] Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 90.

There were two neighbors who were good friends, and one decided to plant a kola tree. So, he asked his friend and neighbor to borrow the neck of a pot to protect the foundation of the kola tree as it grew. At the time, the man who planted the kola tree was poor and was often covered in rags, but as the kola tree grew and began to produce, the man became quite rich. Meanwhile, his friend, who had lent him the neck of his pot, grew very jealous. And so, he demanded that his neighbor return his pot unbroken. The man of course protested saying, "How can I possibly do so without cutting down my kola tree?" Yet, the jealous friend persisted and so, they took the case before the king and the royal council. The owner of the kola tree pleaded with his jealous friend before the court, but the jealous man still insisted that the neck of his pot be returned unbroken and so the friend was forced to cut down his kola tree.

Many years later the jealous man forgot this spiteful deed against his neighbor and friend, and so he asked him if he could borrow a sacred Vodoun necklace for his daughter who was already in the darkroom to undergo initiation. The friend agreed and the two friends prepared a ceremony so that the necklace could be given to the man's daughter. The daughter wore the necklace for three years while in the darkroom and during this time, she of course grew, and so by the time she emerged from the darkroom as a new *vodounsi*, the necklace had become tight around her neck. Seeing this, the friend who had lent his neighbor the sacred necklace demanded it back but without cutting it. The man pleaded, "How can I possibly cut off the head of my daughter to return your necklace?" Yet, the man persisted and so the case was brought before the king and the royal court. The spiteful man reminded the royal court that this same friend had many years earlier brought him to court to retain the neck of his pot thereby forcing him to cut down his kola tree. The king asked him how much he had lost from cutting down his kola tree, and the man explained that he had lost a great deal of riches. The royal court, therefore, declared, "The kola tree is important in our society because you cannot pray, have marriage, install a king, or anything else without the kola nut, so just as he had to cut the neck of his kola tree, you, too, have to cut the neck of your daughter."[371]

This judicial narrative is told as a cautionary tale. It is a firm reminder that neighbors, as

co-affiliates of their local community and the kingdom, are expected to act according to

the communal tenets of mutual respect and reciprocity.[372] Yet, this narrative also raises

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[371] Based on the accounts told to me by the Mitô Akplogan at the Vodoun Roundtable on Saturday, June 28, 2014 and by Bernard Adjibodoun on Monday, January 24, 2014.

[372] See Wiredu, "An Oral Philosophy of Personhood," 15-16. Wiredu argues that, according to an Akan proverb, the maxim of this communal ethic of mutuality is that "Life is an enterprise of mutual aid" (16).

questions about indigenous notions of ontological equivalency[373] and value. One might, therefore, question: how is it that the cutting down of a kola tree could possibly be perceived as equally detrimental as the beheading of a *vodounsi*? In response, one might conclude that because the *vodounsi* was female she was disposable and therefore the ontological equivalent of the kola tree, but making such a conclusion would presuppose that females are essentially less valued than males. However, in general, that is not the case. As our discussion in the subsequent chapter will demonstrate, given that women are perceived as ontological embodiments of motherhood—a metaphysical and social status that is generally emblematic of *vodoun* notions of ownership and authority—women are generally respected as vital members of society. Moreover, according to local ethics and laws, no initiated person—irrespective of their sex or gender—should ever be physically violated or harmed. Should a person ever assault a *vodounsi*, the offender would be heavily fined. And, in the event the person refused to pay, he or she would be subjected to the retribution of the *vodoun* and would die in seven days' time. For this reason, to assault a *vodounsi* is tantamount to striking the *vodoun* themselves, for the *vodounsi* are the beloved and cherished spouses of the *vodoun*.

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[373] See for instance Maupoil, *La Géomancie l'ancienne Côte des Esclave*, 381-381. Given, as noted earlier, the Euro-Western proclivity towards demarcating difference and otherness, ontology is often theorized as about establishing different categories of being (e.g., humans, gods, angels, animals, plants, etc.). Yet, in this present work, rather than being concerned with ontological differences, I am instead concerned with exploring ontological equivalence—namely, exploring how beings share in the same substance. Hence, different species are theorized not as fixed and distinct ontological categories but rather as ontological genres. Ontology is then explored as a spectrum of being in which varied beings share in the same nature but to different degrees. Hence, I argue that apparent differences are functional and/or developmental (or, in other words, qualitative) rather than substantive. Hence, for instance, in *vodoun* metaphysics, all entities have four essential attributes, or "souls," and, consequently, share in the same substance, the difference then, as Maupoil explains it, "is purely qualitative: they are more powerful among humans."

Likewise, the kola tree, as this narrative argues, provides an imperative function that is vital to the operation of society and everyday life. Offering an important explanation for the status of the kola tree and kola nuts, Sètondji Adanklounon, a prominent *bokono* (that is, priest of *Fa*) posed the following rhetorical question, "If you kill the tree of the kola, what will provide the kola? Even Shango never kills the kola tree because if he kills the kola tree what is he going to eat."[374] Bokono Adanklounon then explained that *vodoun* from its beginnings has had three central "spokespersons": the kola tree, the sweet kola nut, and the bitter kola nut. As crucial mediators between the visible and the invisible world, the kola tree, the sweet kola, and the bitter kola sustain the relational balance between humans, the ancestors, and the *vodoun*. Without any one of these, the ancestors cannot be fed, marriages cannot be finalized, and even a new monarch can be neither chosen nor coronated. Yet, the kola tree and the kola nut are not merely sacred *things*. These natural entities, as the indigenous theorist Adanklounon explains, are "spokespersons," who are part and parcel of the larger ecological society, or, in other words, the *gbè* nature community, that must be kept in harmony and balance. Hence, this traditional court case demonstrates that an offense against a *vodounsi*, a spouse of the *vodoun*, is equally as injurious and disharmonious to society and the community-at-large as an infraction against a kola tree, the very "spokesperson" of the *vodoun*, the ancestors, and *gbè* (nature, existence, life) more generally. This royal judiciary account concerns, hence, the consequences of the breakdown of community in two respects: 1) the collapse of human social relationships, when human beings do not act according to the principles of mutual respect, and 2) the deterioration of the human-nature community,

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[374] Bokono Sètondji Adanklounon, Saturday, June 28, 2014.

when non-human *gbὲ* beings are not valued as operational moral agents, and therefore

persons, within society-at-large.

Still, even if we acknowledge the centrality and importance of nature and various

organic (and seemingly inorganic) entities to the functionality of society, why still should

we consider these non-human entities and beings potential persons? My response is that

such a consideration is imperative because to conflate humanness with personhood is to

distort the complexity and multiplicity of African ontological systems. Though insistent

that humans alone can be persons, in elaborating his communitarian theory of

personhood, Ifeanyi Menkiti actually provides a philosophical basis for an inclusive

notion of personhood.

> In looking at the African conceptualization of the person, one acknowledges, of
> course, that it is a given fact that every individual has a body apart from the body
> of every other individual within his or her community. That sort of given fact is a
> brute biological fact. But it need not be read as conveying a message that each
> stands alone…. I have in mind here the lucid example of the human navel and the
> way it points us to umbilical linkage to biological generations going before. And I
> have in mind, also, the fact that human language, which is a biologically anchored
> fact, points us, one and all, everywhere in the world, to a mental commonwealth
> with others – others whose life histories encompass past, present, and future. In
> both of these examples, biology intimates a message, not of beingness alone, but of
> beingness together. And to the extent that morality demands a point of view best
> described as one of beingness-with-others, to that extent does deep biology link up
> nicely with the direction of movement of the moral order.[375]

Menkiti's notion of "deep biology" not only implies that the body complex is ultimately

integrated within the community, as our previous discussion highlighted, and thus is not

an expression of a solitary existence but rather of a communal form of being, but also

that, on a biological and ecological level, all beings are beings-in-community, all bodies

are part of an "umbilical linkage" to prior ecological generations. From a *vodoun*

perspective, this then implies that all beings are organically linked to the past and the

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[375] Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of a Person," 324.

present of the *gbè* nature community. Yet still, personhood is not a biological given, as

Menkiti explains,

> In the stated journey of the individual toward personhood, let it therefore be
> noted that the community plays a vital role both as catalyst and as prescriber of
> norms. The idea is that in order to transform what was initially biologically given
> into full personhood, the community, of necessity has to step in, since the
> individual… cannot carry through the transformation unassisted…. and it is to
> the effect that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be achieved, the sort of
> thing at which individuals could fail. I suppose that another way of putting the
> matter is to say that the approach to persons in traditional thought is generally
> speaking a maximal, or more exacting, approach, insofar as it reaches for
> something beyond such minimal requirements as the presence of consciousness,
> memory, will, soul, rationality, or mental function. The project of being and
> becoming persons, it is believed, is a truly serious project that stretches beyond the
> raw capacities of the isolated individual, and it is a project which is laden with the
> possibility of triumph, but also failure.[376]

Echoing Menkiti's sentiments, the Yorùbá sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi similarly

argues that, among at least some classical African world-senses, biological fact does not

automatically translate into social positionality. Countering this often Euro-Western

imposed biological determinism, Oyewumi notes, "The idea that biology is destiny—or,

better still, destiny is biology—has been a staple of Western thought for centuries."[377]

However, such a notion, as Menkiti himself argues, is inconsistent with the communally

constitutive and processual nature of being in African classical worlds. While biology does

presuppose a beingness together, as Menkiti confirms, and, thus, the *gbè* nature

community, as I argued previously, presupposes that beings are always beings-in-

community, personhood is the socialization of these beings into full persons—into

efficacious moral beings in this lifeworld. Therefore, rather than defining personhood

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[376] Ibid., 326.

[377] Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*, 1.

based on a biological given or a particular individual attribute, Menkiti defines a person

as simply, "a moral being or bearer of norms."[378]

Even so, Menkiti cautions against considering animals, for instance, as potential

persons. But, rather than supporting such an assertion with evidence from an African

thought system (i.e., indigenous proverbs, idioms, narratives, and/or concepts), instead

quoting from John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, he acquiesces to a Western notion of human

justice as the foundation for such claims. Citing the following passage from Rawls,

Menkiti ultimately accepts a Euro-Western conception of personhood:

> Equal justice is owed to those who have the capacity to take part in and to act in accordance with the public understanding of the initial situation. One should observe that moral personality is here defined as a potentiality that is ordinarily realized in due course. It is this potentiality which brings the claims of justice into play… The sufficient condition for equal justice [is] capacity for moral personality.[379]

Shifting his language away from a focus on "moral function"—namely the efficacy and

vocational function of a being in community— Menkiti contends instead that justice and,

therefore, rights are based on the capacity for "moral sense." Then, on this basis, he

concludes,

> The foregoing interpretation would incidentally rule out, I believe, some dangerous tendencies currently fashionable in some philosophical circles of ascribing rights to animals. The danger as I see it is that such an extension of moral language to the domain of animals is bound to undermine, sooner or later, the clearness of our conception of what it means to be a person. The practical consequences are also something for us to worry about. For if there is legitimacy in ascribing rights to animals then human beings could come to be compelled to share resources with them.[380]

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[378] Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of a Person," 326.

[379] Qtd. in Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," 177; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 505-506.

[380] Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," 177.

Yet, if personhood, as Menkiti himself insists, is an ontological position that, irrespective of biology, one can achieve or fail at and if it is based on maximal rather than minimal standards, then other beings and so-called "things" can also be and become persons. Moreover, we cannot evade this philosophical discussion merely because doing so possess potential risks to our current sovereignty as the human species. Therefore, is it not the case then that the kola tree, in the *vodoun* world-sense, functions as "a moral being"[381] and "bearer of norms"? Or, that animals—as portrayed, for example, in the Fa sacred corpus—are moral compasses and guides for human persons and communities within Vodoun religious cultures? If the answer to these questions is in the affirmative, then to deny personhood to non-human beings (whether organic or seemingly inorganic) is a gross misunderstanding of African conceptions of existence that obfuscates the incongruity between the human species as a biological given and the communal and ethical imperatives of personhood.

Section III: **Ontological Persons and the Divine Community**

Ifeanyi Menkiti's Ontological Progression and His Theory of "It": From a Processual Notion of Personhood to a Processual Conception of Community

An inclusive conception of normative personhood that is not simply a biological given, but rather requires ethical, communal co-existence, likewise demands an all-

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[381] As my proceeding argument will clarify, by "moral being," I do not mean to imply the existence of a moral consciousness or "moral sense" but rather of a functional vocation. Hence, by shifting to the language of "moral sense" at the end of his analysis, Menkiti attempts to foreclose the possibility of considering other entities, irrespective of their biology, as persons, as ethical co-participants in community. Yet, his central argument makes it clear that personhood is not based on such minimal standards as consciousness or will, but rather the maximal requirement of actual moral functionality within community. Hence, to the extent that other entities and beings are functionally moral beings, they, too, can become and be normative persons.

embracing perception of community. Despite his privileging of the human species, Menkiti's theory of ontological progression offers theoretical pathways for exploring more inclusive notions of both personhood and community. Hence, while for Menkiti, the "we" of community, in the aphorism, "*I* am because *we* are," concerns only the human community and its ancestral antecedents, in ascribing to a theory of personhood that is ethically and communally constituted rather than biologically given, he provides theoretical room for a reframing of community that embraces the whole nature cosmos. Thus, I return to his theorizations regarding personhood as an ontological progression in order to theorize the processual nature of not only persons but also of community itself.

As noted earlier, Menkiti theorizes that, through communal rites of incorporation, there is an ontological progression by which human beings advance from existing as non-persons to achieving full-personhood. Yet, what is interesting is that, according to Menkiti, this is not strictly an "ontological progression" in that persons eventually regress into non-personhood when they become what he calls the "nameless dead." Clarifying his theory of "ontological progression," Menkiti explains as follows,

> The so-called "ontological progression" begins at birth with the child basically considered an "it" – essentially an individual without individuality, without personality, and without a name. Then the born child is brought through the various naming ceremonies, and, in the process, begins the first phase of that special journey toward incorporated personhood via the community. Later, there will be puberty and the ceremonies, which mark it as an entry into young adulthood. And through the years of adulthood, there will be other acknowledgements, through ceremony, of other important transitions such as marriage, the producing of children, the taking of titles, etc. Finally, there will arrive old age and elderhood, and after elderhood, ancestorhood.
>
> Now, a most important point has to be made regarding ancestorhood. That point is that ancestors are themselves still continuing persons, still very much a part of the living community. Here, the person that the child became, at some stage in the described journey, does not abruptly go out of existence at the stage of physical death…. Only when the stage of the nameless dead is joined does the person once again become an "it," going out of the world the same way the

> journey first began. Thus the movement is a movement from an *it* to an *it*....
> There is no heaven or hell, no final judgment warranting an ascension into the
> ranks, above, of the saved; nor descent into the ranks, below, of the damned.[382]

In effect, through rites of incorporation and an accumulation of the past, there is an

ontological progression from the non-personhood (or, *it*-hood) of childhood to the full

personhood of eldership and ancestorhood. Personhood is then not automatically lost at

death. Rather, to the extent that the ancestors remain a part of the living community, as

active social beings and pillars of ethical wellbeing, ancestors are themselves, as Menkiti

states, "continuing persons." Yet, when the departed lose their personal identities and

names, and are no longer remembered by the living, they, in effect, retreat into non-

personhood, or in other words, according to Menkiti, *it*-hood. For Menkiti, *it* is then a

signifier of the de-personalized and un-incorporated existence that is equally attributable

to children and the nameless dead.

Justifying his use of *it* in reference to children, Menkiti notes that it is actually not

uncommon grammatically to use this depersonalized identifier for infants and young

children. Providing an example, he notes the following expression: "We rushed the child

to the hospital, but before we got there *it* died."[383] While, according to Menkiti, this

expression would never be utilized to reference an adult, he contends that the social and

grammatical flexibility that allows for children to be referenced as *it* has ontological

significance. Hence, he concurs, "This is not to say that all of language always carries

ontological weight, but I think that, in this case, language does."[384] For Menkiti, *it*

signifies then the de-personalized state of the child, who has not yet accumulated a past

and has not yet undergone rites of incorporation.

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[382] Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of a Person," 326-327.
[383] Ibid., 327.
[384] Ibid.

Equally, when referring to those dead who are no longer actively engaged in the social community and its affairs, Menkiti contends that the *it* designation also properly captures their loss of personhood. Disagreeing with Mbiti on this point, Menkiti explains,

> The nameless dead remain *its*, and cannot be designated as something else. For this reason, Mbiti's description of the nameless dead stage as a time of "collective immortality" (in contrast to what he calls the "personal immortality" of the living dead stage of ancestor existence) is, I believe, problematic and misleading. For at the stage of total dis-incorporation marked by the *it* expression, the mere fragments that the dead have now become cannot form a collectivity in any true sense of the word. And since, by definition, no one remembers them now, it also does not make much sense to say of them that they are immortal either. They no longer have any meaningful sense of self, and, having lost their names, lose also the means by which they could be immortalized. Hence it is better, I believe, to refer to them by the name of the nameless dead…. But this emendation apart, Mbiti is quite right when he observes that for African men and women no ontological progression is possible beyond the spirit world: "Beyond the state of the spirits men cannot go or develop. This is the destiny of man as far as African philosophy is concerned" (1970: 34).[385]

Menkiti agrees with Mbiti that the ancestors are rightly called the "living dead" and that this ancestral existence is properly referred to as "personal immortality," given that death has not ended the ancestors' social interaction with the living and that they have retained both their personal names and individual identities. However, with regard to those departed who are so removed from community that they are no longer remembered by name, Menkiti argues that these dead have transitioned into "personal non-existence" and, thus, that this "terminal stage of life" cannot rightly be referred to as "collective immortality."[386] Rather, according to Menkiti, these dead have become dis-incorporated and thus have lost their personhood. In this regard, he asserts that these dead cannot rightly be considered a *collective*—that is, as Menkiti defines it, an organic assemblage of individual persons. Moreover, since they are no longer remembered and, therefore, have

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[385] Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of a Person," 328.
[386] Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," 174-175.

lost their personal names, for Menkiti, these dead also cannot be considered immortal, and thus should more accurately be termed the "nameless dead." In sum, according to Menkiti, in the so-called "ontological progression" from childhood to the nameless dead, essentially from *it*-hood to *it*-hood, human beings eventually end their journey in life the same way that they started their journey, that is, as *its*, as "unincorporated non-persons."[387]

Yet, there are a number of conceptual problems with Menkiti's use of *it* as a depersonalized reference for both children and the nameless dead. With attention to this designation, Matolino rightly notes that the first problem with Menkiti's designation "is his attempt to ground the normative difference between babies and adults, in African thinking, through his alleged evidence of the usage of the English word "it" as an indicator of the ontological difference between babies and adults."[388] Essentially, he problematically utilizes English (and, therefore, Euro-Western grammatical norms) to make claims about African notions of normative personhood. Hence, Matolino remains unconvinced that there is an ontological progression from childhood to adulthood, and as noted earlier, insists that there is merely an epistemological progression. However, as argued previously, I submit, alternatively, that there is philosophical precedence for an African notion of ontological progression since rituals are indeed rites of incorporation that not only produce epistemological transformation but moreover facilitate ontological rebirth. Moreover, if the African notion of time, as Menkiti and Mbiti both contend, is a gathering of the past, then beings are ontologically transformed through the accumulation of a past—that is, the accrual of concrete life-transforming experiences (e.g., naming

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387 Ibid., 174.
388 Matolino, "The (Mal) Function of 'it' in Ifeanyi Menkiti's Normative Account of Person," 28.

ceremonies, initiations, marriage, procreation, etc.). Yet, nonetheless, Matolino is right to

conclude,

> The normative function of "it" would have carried more weight had Menkiti
> shown that there is such a word in his language which does the normative work
> for showing the ontological difference between the young and the old. His attempt
> at using the word "it" from the English language in the way he does as evidence
> for his conclusion betrays either a selective use of the word or a serious
> misunderstanding of how the word operates in the English language.[389]

Matolino contends, therefore, that in the English language *it* does not have either a moral

or qualitative significance but rather is a pronoun comparable to "he," "she," or "they"

that does not denote a depersonalized existence. Moreover, he argues that while *it* can be

utilized to refer to children, its use is not evidence of a depersonalized state of being, and

that *it*, for that matter, can actually be used in reference to any noun.[390] For example, he

notes, if one asks in English, "who is *it*?" it is customary to respond, for example, that "*It*

is Menkiti."[391] As a result, at least in certain grammatical instances, *it* can in fact be

utilized to reference adults.

Even if we admit, as I would, that Menkiti utilizes the English pronoun *it* as

merely a signifier of depersonalized existence, given that *it* is at least a depersonalized

reference devoid of personal identifiers, this reference ultimately does not adequately

capture the ontological existence of children (as embryonic non-persons) in comparison to

the nameless dead (as ancestral non-persons), in that the *it*-hood of childhood is regarded

as equivalent to the *it*-hood of the departed. Matolino, thus, concludes,

> Even if we were to accept that Menkiti's use of "it" carries moral or ontological
> significance, still he would run into serious difficulties. The greatest problem
> facing Menkiti's account is that he does not distinguish between these two kinds of
> "its"—that is one at the beginning of the individual's life and one at the end of

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[389] Ibid.
[390] Ibid., 28-29.
[391] Ibid., 29 (emphasis added).

that individual's life. He just lumps them together as periods of depersonalized existence. However, on closer examination there is a huge difference between these "its" which have very unfavorable implications for his use of "it" as a normative indicator. The baby whom Menkiti refers to as an "it" that lacks any moral standing, hence ontological status, has yet to live through all the requirement of attaining personhood. In other words we may refer to her as a potential person. However, a member of the spiritual world of collective immortality has gone through all the stages of personhood and has now attained a different status. Although both categories may be referred to as "its" they are in a radically different relationship to that word in as far as it is meant to carry any ontological weight. One who has moved away form an "it" into a full person and back into another "it" does not quite make a return to the "it" of babies. Babies and ancestors who belong to the world of collective immortality do not stand in the same relationship to the ontological weight of "it." There is a qualitative difference between these two senses of "it," and Menkiti's account ought to acknowledge and clarify that difference and its significance to both instances of the depersonalized existence…. If my point is valid then it cannot be the case that babies and ancestors can both be referred to as "its."[392]

On this point, I must agree with Matolino. Having accumulated a long past, gone through all of the rites of incorporation, and entered into full personhood, the non-personalized standing of the nameless dead cannot rightly be considered developmentally equivalent to that of children. This conceptual error is "a gross violation of the African understanding of the status of the departed," but not because, as Matolino argues, he is purporting that these departed are non-persons, but because he fails to distinguish their ancestral non-personalized existence from that of the embryonic non-personalized existence of a child and he implies that their loss of personhood signifies that they have reached the final stage of their ontological progression.[393] Thus, while I agree that Menkiti's theory of African personhood as an ontological process is valid, I argue that these oversights in his theory of normative personhood are the result of his failure to: 1) theorize personhood without, as he himself implies, resorting to a biological given (that

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[392] Ibid., 29-30
[393] Ibid., 31.

favors the human and human communities over and against other biological species), and

2) develop an equally processual theory of community.

A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya's Communotheism: A Processual Theory of Community

In chapter three, referencing the philosophical suppositions of A. Okechukwu

Ogbonnaya, I claimed that the ontological symmetry between *gbè* and *vodoun* reveals a

communitarian cosmos world[394] in which all beings are part and parcel of the ontological

substance of *gbè*—namely, of the nature community, of existence, and of the lifeworld.

Ogbonnaya argues then that this communitarian ethos is not limited to the human

community, but rather is "inclusive of the whole cosmos"—whether rational or seemingly

irrational beings, human or divine, or even organic or purportedly inorganic.[395]

Moreover, if, as Ogbonnaya states, the "Community in African contexts include[s] the

precarnate, the incarnate, and the discarnate," then, as he concurs, "Community is not

just a state but a process of being in the world—a process that includes the past, the

present, and the future."[396] Accordingly, I propose that integrating Menkiti's and

Ogbonnaya's processual theories of personhood and community respectively might offer

a conceptual basis for theorizing all nature beings as potential persons.

Yet, if I am to salvage Menkiti's theory of ontological progression in support of an

inclusive construction of normative personhood and of community, I must address the

fact that his ontological progression fails to the extent that: 1) he insists that the nameless

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[394] I employ the concept "cosmos world" to convey an immanent metaphysical reality in which the divine cosmos is part and parcel of the natural world rather than an otherworldly domain.

[395] Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, 14.

[396] Ibid., 8-9.

dead as *its* are in an ontological state of de-personalized existence that is equivalent in

status to the *it*-ness of a child and, 2) he claims that this stage is terminal—namely, that

there is no ontological progression beyond this point of depersonalized existence. To

address my points of contention with Menkiti, let us then carefully consider Mbiti's

theoretical suppositions, which are the basis for Menkiti's own claims. Offering his

theoretical reflections on the subject, Mbiti explains,

> The personal immortality of the living-dead is for all practical purposes dependent
> on his progenies…. Human beings keep the relationship going between them and
> their living-dead, chiefly through libation, offerings of food and other items,
> prayers and the observation of proper rites towards the departed or instructions
> from them.

> The process continues on a personal level as long as someone who knew the
> living-dead is still alive…. When the last person that knew him dies, the living-
> dead is entirely removed from the state of personal immortality…. He is now
> dead, as far as human beings are concerned, and the process of dying is now
> completed. The living-dead is now a spirit, which enters the state of collective
> immortality. It has "lost" its personal name, as far as human beings are
> concerned, and with it goes also the human personality. It is now an "it" and no
> longer a "he" or "she": it is now one of the myriads of spirits who have lost their
> humanness. This, for all practical purposes, is the final destiny of the human soul.
> Man is ontologically destined to lose his humanness but gain his full spiritness; and
> there is no general evolution or devolution beyond this point.[397]

In the state of collective immortality, the living-dead become, according to Mbiti, *its*, and,

by this he means specifically that they lose their humanness, that is, their human

characteristics. It is on this basis that Menkiti argues that it is not their humanness

(namely, their biologically given selves) that they lose but rather their personhood, that is,

their ethical purpose and social positionality within community. Hence, as Mbiti explains,

when there is no kin person or community member alive who remembers them

personally, that is, by name, and in whom they can be reincarnated "[t]hen the process of

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[397] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 158.

dying is complete."[398] Thus, it is on the bases of Mbiti's notion of *it* as a signifier of the

living-dead's transformation from humanness to spiritness, that Menkiti founds his own *it*

theory and, thus, his conception of depersonalized and disincorporated existence.

However, in no way does Mbiti imply that this state is either developmentally

equivalent to that of the embryonic state of childhood or an ultimate death. Addressing

my first point of contention, it should be noted that, to my knowledge, Mbiti does not

actually refer to children as *its*. However, he does state the following:

> In African societies, the birth of a child is a process which begins long before the
> child's arrival in this world and continues long thereafter. It is not just a single
> event which can be recorded on a particular date. Nature brings the child into the
> world, but society creates the child into a societal being, a corporate person. For it
> is the community which must protect the child, feed it, bring it up, educate it, and
> in many other ways incorporate it into the wider community…. The birth of a
> child is, therefore, the concern not only of the parents but of many relatives
> including the living and the departed. Kinship plays an important role here, so
> that a child cannot be exclusively "my child" but only "our child."[399]

A child is then, by definition, a being still in the process of being born; it is, as Mbiti

himself implies, a being that is transitioning from the nature community to the corporate

community. While a child has undergone his or her initial birthing and transition from

being precarnate to incarnate, he or she must still undergo their second birthing, or in

other words, his or her incorporation into the community. Hence, it can be said then

that, through various rites of incorporation, children are literally birthed into "persons."

Yet, in no way is this state of being and transition equivalent to that of the nameless dead,

who are, as I will argue, alternatively beings in the process of reintegration into the nature

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[398] Ibid., 25, 159-160. Mbiti states explicitly that while not all ancestors are
reincarnated that only the living-dead can be reincarnated. Moreover, he notes that this is
understood as a partial reincarnation in that only some of the ancestor's features are
"reborn" in the new child. Thus, when the departed have passed into the state of
"collective immortality" and thus no longer have any living family members, they by
definition cannot be reincarnated.

[399] Ibid., 107.

community. Thus, while children are undergoing incorporation into the corporate community, the nameless departed are rather experiencing disincorporation and reintegration into nature.

While the loss of personhood is a kind of death, if we understand death fundamentally as a transition, then this is not an ultimate denouement, but rather an ontological shift, as Mbiti argues, to a different state of existence. While Mbiti does refer to the removal of the living-dead from the state of personal immortality as a death, note that he specifically states, "He is now dead, as far as human beings are concerned, and the process of dying is now completed."[400] Hence, Mbiti is arguing that in respect to human social relationships, the departed is now completely dead, and thus, as Menkiti argues, has through this process of death lost its personhood, its personal identity within community. However, unlike Menkiti, he does not claim that this is an ultimate death. Instead, he states,

> Collective immortality is man's cul-de-sac in the hereafter. Whether this immortality is relative or absolute I have no clear means of judging, and on this matter African concepts seem to be vague. Some of the spirits become attached to natural objects, some possess people, but the majority seem to "vanish" out of human contact and thinking.[401]

Essentially, in becoming *its*, the living-dead transition from the state of full personhood and personal existence to a state, of what Mbiti refers to, as "full spiritness."[402] Yet, rather than discussing this transition in seemingly transcendent metaphysical terms (that impose a divide between the spiritual and the natural), noting Mbiti's earlier comment that "Nature brings the child into the world," I would speculate that nature, or in other words, the nature community re-embraces this nameless dead. On this basis, Mbiti is right to

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[400] Ibid., 158.
[401] Ibid., 159.
[402] Ibid., 158.

consider this state of existence the stage of "collective immortality." To the extent that the nameless dead continue to have an existence, they retain their immortality. While this form of immortality may not be preferred in comparison to immorality born out of personal relationships, these nameless dead, nonetheless, continue to exist. Moreover, given that, they are apparently reintegrated into nature, they are part and parcel of the nature cooperative.

Whereas Menkiti neglects to theorize a processual theory of community that can account for an ontological progression beyond personal immortality and thus the reintegration of the departed into the nature community, Ogbonnaya offers important theoretical insights that provide a framework for examining community itself as a process and for re-theorizing the function of persons within this processual community. As noted previously, Ogbonnaya understands the whole cosmos as a community. Yet, in his *On Communitarian Divinity*, Ogbonnaya is principally concerned with theorizing divine communality. Hence, rather than supposing that the divine cosmos must be either monotheistic or polytheistic, he argues that in African religious contexts the High God (or purportedly Supreme God) cannot be understood as ontologically distinct from the other gods, but rather that these divine beings form a cohesive community. In this regard, he purports, "That there may be a great God among the gods is unquestionably African, but that this god is the only true God is not African."[403] Ogbonnaya critiques, therefore, the supposition that a monotheistic conception of "God" is either central or, for that matter, even relevant to classical African religious though and practice. Yet, he also challenges the perception that African deities are wholly autonomous divine beings. Proposing instead the notion of "communotheism," he asserts,

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[403] Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, 26.

> The concept of the Divine as community actually does more justice to African conceptions of God. For this we need another term, a word like *communotheism*, a community of gods. Community, in the African sense, will reflect better the affirmation of both the One and the Many than the categories of monotheism and polytheism. The noun *communotheism* communicates the idea that the Divinity is communal.[404]

Confirming Robin Horton's theory, as noted in the previous chapter, that in African religious contexts there is no unique religious attitude towards the gods, Ogbonnaya's theory of communotheism expresses the philosophy that the divine realm, like the human social community, is merely another social domain. Yet, if we recall Menkiti's categories of social grouping,[405] for Ogbonnaya, this community is neither random or merely a collection of otherwise autonomous gods. To the contrary, according to Ogbonnaya, the divine is a collective, or better yet, a community of interrelated persons:

> So a god is a Divine person and, as a Divine person, is not the whole Divinity. This personification is not one but many. Manyness is not in opposition to the concept of oneness, but it is inclusive of all of the gods. To claim that only one can be Divine is similar to the claim that because a village has a chief who is a man, there must be only one real man in the village instead of seeing the chief as one man among many men. It is also similar to claiming that the chief is the only human being, because he or she represents society at a particular point in history. So capital letter or not, in the African traditional religion, a god is a god, is a god, is a God. A god does not cease to be the same nature with other gods even if that god has been chosen to represent the rest. It is precisely because a god shares in the same nature as all of the other beings that warrants it being called god. One god is inextricably related to the other gods by virtue of the Divine nature.[406]

In sharing in the same divine substance, African gods as divine persons constitute then a cohesive community. As divine persons, African deities operate, thus, as efficacious ethical beings with distinct purposes and responsibilities within the divine collective. The distinction between the High God and the other gods is then, from this perspective, not a

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[404] Ibid., 28.

[405] See Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," 179-180. As noted earlier, Menkiti identifies three types of social groupings: random, constituted, and collective.

[406] Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, 24-25.

difference of substance, but rather a difference of function. Hence, reiterating

Ogbonnaya's aphorism, "a god is a god, is a god, is a God."[407]

However, before we explore this latter point regarding ontological function, it is

important to note that while Ogbonnaya is principally concerned with theorizing the

divine community, his communitarian theory of persons can be extended to other social

domains. Therefore, in my concern for the wider nature community, I reason that, to the

extent that the community includes all beings, as Ogbonnaya himself affirms, then

through the process of personification, or incorporation (Menkiti), there can be: divine

persons (e.g., *vodoun*), ancestral persons (i.e., the living dead), human persons, and even

animal and plant persons. Ogbonnaya's theory of personification does not, however,

simplistically mean representing non-human beings, such as gods, "as if" they are human.

Rather, in continuity with my preceding arguments, by decentering humanity as

emblematic of personhood, I propose that personification describes the process by which

all beings can become persons— that is, moral participants within community.

Yet, while the concept of communotheism, or simply a community of persons,

presupposes that all persons share in the same communal substance, this does not mean

that there is no hierarchy of authority and responsibilities. To the contrary, Ogbonnaya

theorizes that while divine persons as a collective share in the same nature, each divine

person has a different function. Each person then has different responsibilities. Hence,

while there is no ontological hierarchy in regard to substance, according to Ogbonnaya,

there is a hierarchy of responsibilities. Noting a conversation with a prominent South

African poet, he clarifies,

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[407] Ibid.

> In a telephone conversation with Mazisi Kunene, he insisted that the distribution of responsibility is not hierarchical, but must be seen as historical—something that changes with time and with age. In fact, he went so far as to state emphatically that the human being is not necessarily superior to an insect; rather, there is a distribution of responsibility. The key then is mutuality. We live in a mutually interdependent world. In this world, everything possesses some level of intrinsic value. This is necessitated by communality and relationality.[408]

Since the hierarchy of responsibilities is then not static but rather contingent upon history and time, Ogbonnaya also refers to this distribution of responsibilities as "temporal functional subordination."[409] This concept proposes that while certain persons are seemingly functionally subordinate, such as the insect in relationship to the human being or perhaps the kola tree in relation to a *vodounsi*, this subordination is merely a temporal function of the distribution of responsibilities within the community, and, thus, does not imply that, the insect, in this case, or the kola tree, in the court case I cited earlier, are ontologically subordinate, since the insect, the kola tree, and human beings share in the same nature substance. Likewise, while a god may be temporally and functionally subordinate to another in certain respects, all the gods (including "God") still share in the same divine ontological substance. Therefore, Ogbonnaya makes an important distinction between ontological subordination and temporal functional subordination, and proposes that irrespective of functional responsibilities, all divine persons are ontologically equal. In support of this theory of ontological equality, he reasons,

> What determines the particular form which the act of a member may take is not ontological but historical, and the connection to history, though real, is temporal. Because they are ontologically equal there is no second and no third, no degrees of Godhood. They share the same substance, power, and nature…. The concept of equality in community is tied to substance, nature, and power. There are no degrees (*gradus*) of Godhood. There is one order of being God…. And indeed there is no community, whether human or Divine, which is not ordered with

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[408] Ibid., 29-30.
[409] Ibid., 29-30, 64.

varieties of responsibilities, but when these varieties of responsibilities are used to determine Ontological Inferiority and superiority it becomes a problem.[410]

Irrespective of the specific type of community, Ogbonnaya argues that in African religious thought temporal functional subordination does not translate into ontological subordination. Hence, while Ogbonnaya is concerned primarily with the divine community, based on his theorizations, I submit that all persons, irrespective of physical or quasi-physical form, by fact of being persons (that is, co-participants in community), must be ontologically equal. All persons share in the same communal substance.

Yet, to understand this distribution of responsibilities within the context of community, the notion of communal substance presupposes, for Ogbonnaya, a processual theory of community. Hence, in his reinterpretation of Tertullian's ontological conception of the Trinity, he identifies three stages of the divine community. In the first stage, Ogbonnaya observes that for Tertullian "before the creation of the world, god was not alone since he had within himself both reason and inherent in reason the Word." In this stage, "God then was a community before creation."[411] However, in the second stage, according to Ogbonnaya, the Divine community manifests itself "as community in the distribution of responsibilities in the creation of the universe."[412] Then, finally, in the third stage, the persons of the Divine community are reintegrated and "return to the substantial level of equality of existence at the end of their temporal function within history."[413] Ogbonnaya, thus, concludes, "One finds, then, in Tertullian, a movement from undifferentiated (in terms of responsibility) communality to connected individuation in which the distributive, temporal responsibility is undertaken, and back to communality

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[410] Ibid., 83-85.
[411] Ibid., 69.
[412] Ibid., 70.
[413] Ibid.

in which the fundamental nature is again recognized and reaffirmed and preparation is made to undertake other temporal responsibilities in new epochs."[414] Essentially, through his African communotheistic reinterpretation of Tertullian's Trinity, Ogbonnaya identifies and articulates a theory of processual community that transitions from undifferentiated communality to connected individuation (or, perhaps individuated community) back to undifferentiated communality. Moreover, according to Ogbonnaya, this Trinitarian communal process is, as he states, "a symbol of the historical process of *being*, *belonging*, and *becoming*."[415]

While Ogbonnaya neglects to develop a processual theory of persons, given that he is primarily concerned with divine persons, his processual theory of community, when considered alongside Menkiti's theory of normative personhood, indicates that both persons and community go through the ontological process of being, belonging, and becoming. Together Menkiti and Ogbonnaya's theories offer renewed pathways for conceptualizing then not only the ontological progression of all potential persons— whether human, divine, plant, animal, or other— from infancy to collective immortality but also the process by which the whole nature community transitions from undifferentiated communality (namely, the nature community prior to its personalization) to individuated community (in the incorporation of persons and the distribution of functional responsibilities) and then finally the transition back to undifferentiated community (when persons lose their personal identities and functions to be reintegrated into the nature community). I will discuss this schema in more detail below. However, at this point, I merely want to note that while, on the one hand, Menkiti offers a processual

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[414] Ibid.

[415] Ibid., 70-71 (emphasis added).

notion of personhood that provides a theoretical framework for an inclusive theory of persons, on the other hand, Ogbonnaya furnishes a processual and inclusive theory of community that supplies a conceptual basis for theorizing the communal substance of persons. Yet, because both scholars ultimately remain constrained by their unidisciplinary theoretical suppositions—namely, an emphasis on human persons for the philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti, and, a focus on divine persons and the divine community for the theologian A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya— they both miss the opportunity to theorize an inclusive African conception of personhood and community that accounts for the communal nature of not only the human or even the divine collective, but of the African cosmos more generally. Therefore, by beginning this theoretical investigation with a "problem-based question"—namely, what ontologies (precisely, types and categories of being) mediate daily material interactions and social relationships?— I have here attempted to consolidate theoretical sources and perspectives from various disciplines and fields to fashion a transdisciplinary rather than simply unidisciplinary response.[416] Accordingly, in the subsequent sections, I hope to offer a more comprehensive conception of the *vodoun-gbè* cosmos world that brings these varied disciplinary theoretical suppositions and philosophical perspectives to bear on a renewed understanding of the ethical function of varied persons within the nature community.

Section IV: Gbὲtínmὲ—Beings in the Tree of Life

In preceding discussions, I argued that *gbὲ* (nature, existence, life) implies that "to exist" ontologically necessitates enduring as a communal being, and that,

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[416] See Stewart Diakité and Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies," 39, and my discussion of this transdisciplinary approach in chapter 3.

correspondingly, the ontological presumes the ethical—namely, that morals are materialized and embodied through communal processes of becoming and being. Exploring then the ontological meaning of existing itself, I observe that in Fon and Gun the verb form of "to exist" (*tín*) signifies "tree" (*atín*) in its noun form. I would submit then that this etymological connotation proposes that, in the *vodoun* world-sense, to exist (*tín*) is to be materially rooted like a tree (*atín*). In consideration of my foregoing argument, I would, moreover, contend that to exist within the *gbè* nature cosmos is precisely to be part and parcel of the same rooted substance, and, therefore, to become and be a morally efficacious member of community. Accordingly, within this world-sense, even life (*gbè*) itself can be understood as a tree, as a rooted and interconnected form of existence. Hence, based on his analysis of the Gun anthroponym *gbètínmè*, which means literally "in the tree of life," Pierre Saulnier elucidates that life (*gbè*) is a tree (*atín*), a rooted and yet branched form of being.[417] Within this tree, Saulnier proposes that it is the supreme[418] creator god, *Gbèɖǒtɔ́*, that is at the base of *gbètín*, the tree of life, and that human beings (*gbètɔ́*) are correspondingly *gbètamè*, precisely, "at the head of life."[419] While Saulnier does not specify the place and function of other beings, his theory of *gbètín* offers, nevertheless, an indigenous conception for understanding the ontological organization of the *vodoun*

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[417] Pierre Saulnier, *Noms de Naissance: Conception du monde et système de valeurs, chez les Gun au Sud-Bénin* (Paris, Société des Missions Africaines, 1976-2001), 68 (my translation).

[418] I utilize the term "supreme" in lowercase in order to identify the creator deity that is considered functionally superior to other metaphysical beings to the extent that this deity is primarily considered responsible for creating other beings. However, in line with Ogbonnaya's argumentation, I contest the Euro-Western conception of the Divine as necessarily "God" and, thus, avoid imposing the upper case "Supreme God" or similar iterations so as not to imply that Vodoun is either monotheistic or, according to Bolaji Idowu's conception of Yorùbá, a diffused monotheism. However, it should be noted that most scholars, including Saulnier, utilize the uppercase.

[419] Saulnier, *Noms de Naissance*, 68 (my translation).

cosmos-world and, therefore, for theorizing the functional purpose and positionality of varied beings and potential persons within the *gbɛ̀* nature community.

I agree with Saulnier that the supreme creator deity is properly positioned at the base of the tree of life (*gbɛ̀tín*) and, therefore, is literally the foundational root of all *gbɛ̀* beings. However, I question his contention that this supreme creator is namely *Gbɛ̀ɖɔ̆tɔ́* rather than *Mǎwǔ*. Given that there are innumerable and varied peoples within the *vodoun* community (e.g., Fon, Gun, Adja, Ewe, etc.), there are various creator gods and, therefore, the creator is known by many names. Cognizant of this cultural and theological diversity, Saulnier contends that while *Mǎwǔ* is often allocated as "God," he proclaims, "*Mǎwǔ* does not seem to be this Supreme Being."[420] Hence, Saulnier notes that when *Mǎwǔ* and her male counterpart *Lisa* were introduced into the Kingdom of Abomey at the time of King Tegbesu, there already existed a hermaphrodite creator *Nana-Buluku* and "a superior divinity and creator that one calls *Gbɛ̀ɖɔ̆tɔ́* (the one who created life) or *Sɛ́gbó* (the Great *Sɛ́*) of which the role is to give life to all humans and all living beings."[421] Saulnier proposes, therefore, that overtime *Mawu* was conjoined with *Gbɛ̀ɖɔ̆tɔ́-Sɛ́gbó*, and therefore, *Gbɛ̀ɖɔ̆tɔ́* is rightly the creator father (*ɖɔ̆tɔ́*) of life (*gbɛ̀*). Oral traditions do confirm that Kpojito Hwanjile (1740-1774), as the reigning counterpart of Tegbesu, imported *Mǎwǔ* and *Lisa* from Adja and established these creative divine counterparts as supreme among the Fon *vodoun*.[422] Yet, despite these cosmological variations, based on my own field research among the Gun peoples of Porto-Novo, it is *Mǎwǔ*, who is in

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[420] Ibid., 46 (my translation and emphasis added).

[421] Ibid (my translation and emphasis added).

[422] See Edna Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics, and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 91-93. *Kpojito* is the title of the female reign-mate to the monarch.

common parlance considered the supreme creator. Even Saulnier's own analysis of Gun

anthroponyms, which explicitly identifies three primary life principles, respectively, *Măwŭ*

("God"), *gbè* ("life"), and *sέ* ("destiny"), suggests that *Măwŭ* rather than *Gbèɖŏtɔ́-Sέgbó* is

commonly considered the supreme creator deity. Yet, perhaps *Gbèɖŏtɔ́* and *Sέgbó* are

different iterations or even, as Ogbonnaya's communotheism infers, "persons" of *Măwŭ*.

We will return to this later point shortly; however, confirming my suspicions, in an

unpublished essay, Bernard Adjibodoun writes, "Among the Fon, for example, this god

Mawu is also named *Lisa Sêgbo*, *Dada Sêgbo*, *Semedo*, or *Gbêdoto*, depending on whether we

insist on the creation (*Mawu*, *Dada Sêgbo*), the principle of being (*Semedo*) or life (*Gbêdoto*)."[423]

Yet, while known by various names and in various forms, *Măwŭ* is, nonetheless,

commonly identified as the supreme creator—precisely, as the powerful creative deity

who reigns supreme among all *gbè* beings.

As the foundational root from which life (*gbè*) sprouts and blossoms, *Măwŭ* is the

supreme architect who, as Hounon Olawolé Adjibodoun explained, created both the

world and the *vodoun*.[424] Accordingly, as the following anthroponyms imply, *Măwŭ* is the

great maker:

> ***Măwŭná***: Mawu has given
> ***Măwŭɖŏ***: Mawu created
> ***Măwŭkló***: Mawu is great[425]

Yet, as the anthroponym *Măwŭtín* (literally, "Mawu exists") implies, even *Măwŭ* shares in

life (*gbè*) and thus exists (*tín*) within the tree of life (*gbètín*). Hence, as argued in chapter

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[423] Bernard Adjibodoun, "Religion dans Vodoun Pratiques de Guérison et Sante dans le République du Benin," (Unpublished Essay, Porto-Novo, 2011), 1 (my translation).

[424] Hounon Olawolé Adjibodoun, Thursday, July 24, 2014.

[425] For these examples and others, see Saulnier, *Noms de Naissance*, 48-50 (my translation).

three, the creator is not exterior to natural existence, but is rather part and parcel of it.

Offering an etymological theory for the ontological function and significance of *Mǎwǔ*, in

his *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, Segurola proposes that *Mǎwǔ* signifies "to share the body"

given that *mǎ* means "to share" and "to divide" and *wǔ* (*ǔ, ǔtu*) signifies "the body."[426]

While Saulnier interprets this etymology as implying that "*Mǎwǔ* and *Lisa* share the first

place,"[427] I interpret this etymological theory as expressing that, as the rooted foundation

of the tree of life, *Mǎwǔ* is literally the shared-body.

If we, furthermore, understand this etymological-based theory of *vodoun*

metaphysics within the wider *gbè* reality, then *Mǎwǔ* is precisely the shared-body of the

gbè nature community. In an analysis of Fon language and culture, Georges A. G.

Guédou defines the body (*wǔ*) as "the seat and altar of being."[428] Similarly, Guérin

Montilus describes the body (*wǔ, ǔ, ǔtu*), particularly the human body, as "the point of

reference" that establishes a relationship to the universe (*wɛkɛ́*) (i.e., the entire cosmos) and

the world (*gbèmè*, meaning literally, "in the world").[429] Hence, in exploring the body and

its relation to the world, Basile Toussaint Kossou theorizes, "the body, that is to say, life

in its bio-organic expression,… is the first reality that gives itself, and thus, which serves

or must serve as the foundation and the measure of that which follows."[430] As the

foundation of being, the point of reference, and thus the first reality, the body (*wǔ*) is the

ultimate measure of existence (*gbè*). By measure, I mean that the body as the foundation

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[426] See Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 369, 374, 531-533 (my translation).

[427] Saulnier, *Noms de Naissance*, 47 (my translation).

[428] Georges A. G. Guédou, *Xó et Gbè: Langage et Culture Chez les Fon* (Bènin) (Paris: SELAF, 1984), 231 (my translation).

[429] Guérin Montilus, *L'homme dans la Pensée Traditionnelle Fon* (Cotonou, 1977), 14 (my translation).

[430] Basile Toussaint Kossou, *Se et Gbe: Dynamique de l'existence chez les Fon* (Paris: Pensée Universelle, 1983), 43 (my translation).

of being is also the concrete basis for assessing life. For instance, if an individual wants to ask "why," he or she would say *àní ŭtu* meaning literally, "what body?" or, in other words, "what reality?" Then, if this person wished to provide a cause and thus wanted to say "because of," she or he could simply say *ŭtu* (body).[431] Therefore, the body (*wŭ, ŭ, ŭtu*) is not only the first and foundational reality, but is, moreover, the concrete basis upon which one measures this life reality. Accordingly, as the shared-body of *gbè*, *Măwŭ* is the first reality and the foundation of existence for all *gbè* beings, and, therefore, as the creator, is literally the cause of (*ŭtu*) all that exists.

In accordance with Ogbonnaya's communotheism theory, as the shared-body (*wŭ, ŭ, ŭtu*) and the first reality for all *gbè* beings, *Măwŭ* is the primary personification of *gbè* nature existence. Yet, as noted earlier, personification does not signify the representation of, in this case, a divine being "as if" it were a human person, but rather the establishment of an incorporated communal being. As the supreme creator, *Măwŭ* is then the divine person through whom *gbè* beings experience the reality of creation. Thus, to return to a point I made earlier, within this communotheistic framework, *Gbèḑŏtɔ́* and *Ségbó* are then perhaps other persons of *Măwŭ*. Hence, while *Măwŭ* personifies the principle of creation, *Gbèḑŏtɔ́* is then the personification of the principle of life and of *Măwŭ* as the "shared-body," the divine person who embodies, as argued in the previous chapter, the interconnectedness of all *gbè* beings. Yet, as noted previously, *mă* denotes both "to share" and "to divide," and, thus, *Măwŭ* is also the "divided-body," for to share

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[431] See Kossou, *Se et Gbe*, 41-42; Claire Lefebvre and Anne-Marie Brousseau, *A Grammer of Fongbe* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), 72-73, 326 (my translation). Note that while Lefebvre and Brousseau state that "because" is *útú*, Kossou states that it is *dó ùtu*, literally, "on the body," so there are slight nuances, but the basic principle that the body serves as the foundational measure of existence is, nonetheless, consistent.

of something requires that one must also divide and distribute it. Hence, *Ségbó*, the great

Sé is the personification of personal destiny and moral function; *Ségbó* is *Măwŭ* as the

"divided-body." *Ségbó* then is the divine person that is distributed within all *gbè* beings for

all beings have a *sé*, a purpose and function within community.

Sé: Towards a Vodoun Theory of Personhood

As the divided-body, *Ségbó* is then the distribution of the creative capacities and

intelligence of *Măwŭ*. While *Gbèḍŏtɔ́* is the actualization of the interconnectedness of all

gbè beings, I would argue that *Ségbó* is alternatively the materialization of individual

persons through their *sé*, their unique parcel of the divided body of *Măwŭ.* Saulnier

similarly confirms,

> If each living being and each man in particular receives the life of "Gbèḍŏtɔ́," the creator, he receives a special and original good sense. Man perceives the diversity and the particularity of each individual, and he concludes that it came from that which each was created in a unique manner and from that which each received a destiny to realize themselves in a particular manner. In the languages of "gùn" and "fòn," this is translated by a term, that of "sé."[432]

The sé is then the materialization of the diversity of divine creation in the lifeworld (*gbè*).

Moreover, having observed Hounon Olawolé Adjibodoun concretize a *sé* using white

chalk and water, I have specifically come to understand the *sé* as the materialization of

the inner self and, thus, of one's potential for personhood. As we sat in the foyer of my

apartment, while he molded a *sé,* Hounon Olawolé explained, your *sé* is "your guardian

angel," or more precisely, "it is you;"[433] it is the inner "person" that provides not only an

internal moral compass but also that which directs and orients the individual's lifeworld.

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[432] Saulnier, *Noms de Naissance*, 71 (my translation).
[433] Hounon Olawolé Adjibodoun, Thursday, July 24, 2014.

Accordingly, as Hounon Olawolé elucidated, though not all *sé* go through this process of concretization, the molded *sé* is kept in the bedroom with offerings of food and every morning its proprietor, before doing all else (e.g., brushing one's teeth, bathing, or even speaking to one's partner), must pray to their *sé*.

As the materialization of the relationship between the *gbὲ* nature cosmos and individual *gbὲ* beings, or more precisely, between *Ségbó* and each personal *sé*, it is, therefore, via the *sé* that each *gbὲ* being not only lives out their unique embodiment of *Măwŭ* but also remains morally connected to the *gbὲ* community. Accordingly, citing reflections on the *vodoun* soul-complex collected in Porto-Novo, Bernard Maupoil concurs, "The *sε* constitutes the moral sense, the moral consciousness of each being. It gives to the living good counsel and opposes that he or she does evil. No misfortune happens to the human through the fault of his or her *sε*. One correctly translates *sε* by: tutelary spirit."[434] This conception of the *sé* as the all-encompassing moral sense and conductor of an individual's life course is also reflected in the following Gun and Fon proverbial names:

> **Sέnắkpó**: *Sέ ná kpó* – "*Sέ* has given all."
>
> **Sέwàkpó**: *Sέ wà kpó, é nyĭ xuhlɔ́n nŭ lέ kpó tɔ́n* – "*Sέ* makes all, it is the force of all."
>
> **Sέmayĭ**: *Sέ ma yĭ, yĕ ma sɔ̀gán bàsí* – "What *Sέ* has not accepted, one cannot do."
>
> **Sέnắlìdĕ̌**: *Sέ ná lì dĕ̌, mĭ ná xodó* – "*Sέ* has given a path, we will follow it."
>
> **Azándòsέsí**: *Azán dò sέ sí* – "The day is in the hand of *sé*."
>
> **Sέsí**: *É to sέ sí* – "It is in the hand of *sé*."
>
> **Sέblŏdĕ̌**: *Sέ blŏ dĕ̌, mὲ dĕ̌ ma gbὲ̌* – "That which *sé* has made, one cannot refuse it."[435]

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[434] Maupoil, *La Géomancie à l'anciennce Côte des Esclaves*, 381 (my translation).

[435] See Saulnier, *Noms de Naissance*, 75, 79, 84, 94, 97 (my translation).

As the personal destiny, tutelary spirit, or divine guardian, the *sé* is then the means through which *gbè* beings actualize themselves within the world as individuals, and yet it is also the moral compass by which these *gbè* beings are kept accountable to the larger *gbè* nature community. Therefore, *sé* is more than simply the inner self, *sé* is also the inherent capacity to actualize full personhood—that is, ethical beingness-in-community. As the Gun proverbial appellation *Séhŭmɛ* literally asserts, *sé* is greater than any person.[436] Therefore, *sé* is that which enables one's full incorporation into community. Through actualizing this full personification, or, rather this full materialization of *sé*, beings become persons—efficacious ethical individuals-in-community.

  Sé is then more than personal destiny; it is the actualization of the relationship between the collective vocation and principles of the *gbè* nature cosmos and the individual destiny of each *gbè* being. Thus, in an essay on the Ewe peoples of present-day Togo, Claude Rivière, describes *sé* as both ultimate law and personal destiny. In this regard, he explains,

> The translation of *se* by the word "destiny" is approximate. The study of its polysemy reflects however this principal idea. *Se* designates a law. *Edo se* "it has established a law." But it applies also to God: *Mawu-Se*, understood as the destiny or supreme law of beings. *Segbo*: the great Destiny, is the great honorary title of God. Applied to mankind, the word *se* indicates the concrete destiny of the human being in this world, which one also conceives as participation in the universal destiny.[437]

Hence, Rivière submits that *sé* is both the concrete destiny of human beings in the world and simultaneously the ultimate law that governs all beings. Correspondingly, Segurola notes that *Mǎwŭsé* signifies precisely, "law of God" and "Decalogue"— namely, a

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[436] Ibid., 77.

[437] Claude Rivière, "Les representations de l'homme chez les Evé du Togo," *Anthropos* Bd. 75, H. 1/2 (1980): 14 (my translation).

commandment or binding principle.[438] As the divine person of this ultimate destiny,

Ségbó is, therefore, the personification of *Măwŭ*'s governance of all *gbè* beings, but also

the individual materialization of the concrete destiny and moral compass by which all *gbè*

beings realize their full potential within community.

Through *sé* all *gbè* creatures not only actualize their personal potential but also

their ethical capacities within community, and, hence, each *sé*, as a share of the body of

Măwŭ, is in fact *Măwŭ*. Theorizing this interrelationship between *sé* and *Măwŭ*, Maupoil

elucidates,

> There exists a grand *Sɛ*, who is *Mawu*. The individual *sɛ* is only a tiny portion of
> the grand *Sɛ*… *Sɛ* and *Mawu* are one and the same principle. One hears
> sometimes said: my *Mawu*, in the sense of: my *sɛ*. One hears said that each possess
> an individual *Mawu*, which derives from the grand *Mawu*, common to all beings,
> to all animals, to all things.[439]

Likewise, the proverbial appellation *Mĕ̌nyĭsɛ́* emphatically declares, "Who is *sɛ́*? No

person is *sɛ́*, it is *Măwŭ* that is *sɛ́*" (*Mɛ̌nyĭ sɛ́? Mɛ ɖĕ ma nyĭ sɛ́, Măwŭ wɛ̀ nyĭ sɛ́*).[440] Given

that no individual person is the benchmark of *sɛ́* but rather it is *Măwŭ* (the collective

person, or, in other words, the shared-body) that is *sɛ́*, then, as Menkiti's communitarian

notion of normative personhood maintains, there is no individuality, no personal destiny,

outside of the context of the community of *Măwŭ-gbè*—the divided and shared body

(*măwŭ*) that is the *gbè* nature community. The community always constitutes the person.

There is no individual *sɛ́* without the grand *sɛ́* (*Ségbó*) of *Măwŭ*.

Yet, before we further explore this inherent interrelationship between

individuality and communality that the indigenous concept of *sɛ́* implies, it is imperative

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[438] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 376 (my translation).
[439] Maupoil, *La Géomancie à l'anciennce Côte des Esclaves*, 388 (my translation).
[440] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 77 (my translation).

that we first note, as Maupoil confirms, that all beings and so-called "things" have a *sé*.

Just as all creatures are *gbὲ* beings and therefore beings-in-community, as argued in

chapter four, all *gbὲ* beings likewise possess a *sé*—a parcel of the communal body of

Măwŭ. Therefore, as Maupoil confirms,

> All the creatures have an immortal *sε*, all that lives and breathes, and has blood,
> and even the insects like the ant, which do not have blood. All that which walks on
> legs, all that which has wings to fly, rings to crawl, and fins to move in water,
> possesses a *sε*.[441]

All *gbὲ* creatures then have a personal destiny and vocation that is their ethical

responsibility and purpose within the lifeworld. All nature beings are then interconnected

with the *Măwŭ-gbὲ* cosmos world. As the following song, composed by the Dahomean

diviner Gedegbe pronounces:

> This life where we have awakened
> Is a thing of mystery.
> The human has a *sε*.
> The animal has a *sε*.
> The bird has a *sε*.
> The tree has a *sε*.
> All these *sε*, who knows them?
> It is *Mawu-Gbε* who is their *Sε*.[442]

Sé does not discriminate; it is present in all-that-is. Moreover, as the life energy and

ethical sense of all beings, sé comprises an elaborate etymological terrain. In *Dictionnaire*

Fon-Français, Segurola defines *sé* as the "essential and powerful part of a being," "spirit,"

"vital principle," "guardian angel," and "God, providence, and destiny." Yet, as he

documents, *sé* also signifies, "the flower bud" and "the sting of insects."[443] Also, exploring

this rich semantic field, Guédou elaborates that it includes such expressions as: *àtín sé*,

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[441] Maupoil, *La Géomancie à l'anciennce Côte des Esclaves*, 388 (my translation).
[442] Ibid., 399 (my translation).
[443] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 460 (my translation).

"flower of a tree;" *flô sέ*, "bud of a flower;" *gbón vè sέ*, "a wasp sting;" *wíín sέ*, "a bee sting;" and *àtín wílí sέ* (literally, "tree catches *sέ*") "the tree flowers."[444] *Sέ* as the stinger and the blossom is then also the materialization of the destiny and functional vocation of the insect and plant respectively.[445] Hence, while some scholars have theorized *sέ* as the fundamental principle of being as if the human were the normative standard of personhood,[446] neither *sέ* nor the soul-complex more generally is exclusive to the human species.[447] Rather *sέ* as ethical function and personal destiny is, therefore, the capacity inherent in all *gbè* creatures to be and become persons—morally efficacious individuals-in-community. Moreover, this etymological analysis proposes that a primary paradigm of *sέ* is actually the blossom of a flower and the stinger of an insect and, therefore, perhaps, as my earlier discussion of the kola tree argued, animals, plants, and even insects are central archetypes of normative personhood. However, at a minimum, I will conclude that *sέ* proposes that all *gbè* creatures have the inherent capacity and even vocation of becoming persons—of being and becoming fully incorporated individuals.

Returning now to our earlier comparative analysis of Menkiti and Gyekye's conceptions of personhood, we must examine, hence, what it means to be an individual-in-community, and, thus, investigate this inherent interrelationship between the

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[444] Guédou, *Xó et Gbè*, 243 (my translation).

[445] See Rivière, "Les representations de l'homme chez les Evé du Togo," 14.

[446] See for example Montilus, *L'homme dans la Pensée Traditionnelle Fon* (1977).

[447] See Maupoil, *La Géomancie à l'anciennce Côte des Esclaves*, 378; for a discussion of *sέ* as the fundamental life principle see Guédou, *Xó et Gbè*, 245; Kossou, *Se et Gbe*, 55-57. Identifying the four "souls" or "shadows" of each being, Maupoil notes, "Each living being, each animal, each plant, each thing created by Mawu possess four souls: *ye* [the peripheral shadow], *wesagu* [the messenger], *lido* ["the invisible soul"], and *sɛ* [the moral sense and personal destiny]." However, as Guédou and Kossou have argued, it is *sέ* that is considered the primary life principle, which was also confirmed by my own field research.

particularized person (*sέ*) and the wider community (*Mǎwǔ-gbὲ*). Defining Menkiti's

normative theory of personhood as problematically radical, unrestricted, and extreme,

Gyekye claims that this communitarian conception ultimately demolishes the individual.

Hence, with specific attention to the Akan concept of the body-complex, he proposes, as

explained earlier, a "moderate communitarianism" that conceives of the individual

person as constituted only partly by the community and, thus, also partially and

independently by its *sunsum* (that is, its mental features; its capacity for moral thought and

reasoning). Yet, my analysis of the indigenous concept of *sέ* and my own reading of

Menkiti presuppose that rather than being demolished, the person comes to materialize

and actualize their individuality through communal incorporation. While *sέ*, like *sunsum*,

is associated with the individual's personal destiny and potential for self-actualization, the

sέ is not a wholly independent ontological component of the self, but rather is always part

and parcel of the communitarian nature cosmos of *Mǎwǔ-gbὲ*. *Sέ* is then, by definition,

part of the body (*wǔ*) of *Mǎwǔ*. Hence, from this perspective, community incorporation

actually facilitates individuality rather than erasing it meaning precisely that the

individual exists because the community is the environs for its birthing and belonging.

The community then is not an authoritarian structure that renders differentiations among

beings and selves either invisible or obsolete. Instead, in this conception of community, its

constitutive capacity—that is, its environing responsibility—is merely dedicated to

maintaining the ethical balance among the various beings-in-community.

     Yet, while the African person, or at least *vodoun* persons, is conceivably wholly

constituted by community, this does not mean, as some might suggest, that these persons

are *dividuals*—namely, persons held in common that are *divisible* and, therefore, without

their own singularity and distinctiveness. Defining the concept of dividuality in her study

of the Melanesian conception of the person, Marilyn Strathern clarifies,

> Far from being regarded as unique entities, Melanesian persons are as dividually
> as they are individually conceived. They contain a generalized sociality within.
> Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the
> relationships that produced them. The singular person can be imagined as a social
> microcosm…. [Thus,] While collective events do, indeed, bring together disparate
> persons, it is not to 'make' them into social beings…. The relations at issue involve
> homologies and analogies rather than hierarchy.
>
> In one sense, the plural and the singular are 'the same'. They are homologous to
> one another. That is, the bringing together of many is just like the bringing
> together of one…. The causes of internal differentiation are suppressed or
> discarded.[448]

What Strathern describes is truly a strict communitarian cosmos wherein the community

not only defines persons but also erases their indivisibility (that is, their individuality).

Because of this erasure, this type of community is not, as Strathern states, concerned with

"making social beings" (or, in other words, actually constructing "persons") but rather

with establishing a homologous unity. However, I would alternatively propose that in

African classical religious cultures wherein the community is often explicitly invested not

only in its own accord but also the destiny and functional purpose of its members, there is

an explicit concern for "making persons," for ontologically transforming generic "beings"

into ethical "persons." In the *vodoun* cosmos, I propose that this transfiguration of generic

beings into moral persons is precisely the process of incorporation and personification

that reproduces *gbὲ* beings into *sέ* persons. While *gbὲ* beings are wholly beings-in-

community and, thus, are actualizations of *Măwŭ* as the "shared-body," *sέ* persons

(meaning precisely, those individuals-in-community who have fully lived into the vocation

of their *sέ*) are, I would argue, the diverse and distributive embodiments of *Măwŭ* in the

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[448] Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with
Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 13-14.

world (*gbèmè)*, and, therefore, are rather materializations of *Mǎwǔ* as the "divided-body."

Yet, whether as *gbè* beings (and, therefore, potential persons) or as fully *sé* persons, the

environing community establishes the foundational context for incorporation and the

materialization of one's personal vocation and purpose.

However, in discussing this communitarian conception of the normative person as

wholly constituted by community, the notion of the individual still might seem inadequate

in certain respects. It may then alternatively seem more reasonable to contend that

African persons are *in-dividuals*. Yet, by *in-dividual*, I do not mean a *wholly* separate or

distinct entity or person but rather an *indivisible* and yet *inseparable* being that is not

ontologically distinct. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, often in reference to

the Trinity beginning in the fifteenth-century, the English term *individual* meant originally,

"One in substance or essence; forming an indivisible entity; indivisible."[449] Hence, the

hyphen in *in-dividual* signifies this originary meaning and denotes any being that is "one in

substance" and thus that is *in* common with the *gbè* nature community, and yet in and of

itself is unique and indivisible in its vocation and purpose. From this perspective, *sé* is that

which is *indivisible* in everything and in every living being, but simultaneously *sé* is also that

which renders every being *inseparable* from another. Thus, in line with Ogbonnaya's

commontheism thesis, each *gbè* being—whether divine, human, mineral, plant, animal, or

other—shares in the same substance, namely, as argued in chapter three, the *gbè* nature

cosmos, which in the act of divine creation is personified through *Mǎwǔ*, the "shared-

body." Yet, as Ogbonnaya argues, this shared ontological substance does not presuppose

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[449] "Individual, adj. and n.," OED Online, December 2015, Oxford University
Press, http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/Entry/94633?redirected
From=individual (accessed February 09, 2016).

that all beings are same in function; therefore, he introduces the notion of a temporal

hierarchy of responsibilities. While each *gbè* being is same in ontological substance, each

has a distinct temporal function, and therefore a different *sɛ́*—a personal destiny and

purpose in community. Hence, as reflected in the title of this present chapter, the

anthroponym *Mɛsɛ́* clearly affirms that each person has a unique destiny (*Mɛ sɛ́ mɛ sɛ́ wɛ̀*

ɖò mɛ), and, thus, that every person has a *sɛ́*.[450] Similarly, Basile Kossou argues, "the *sɛ́* is

individual, consequently, the work of each is individual," but he mistakenly concludes

that "the morality of the act must elevate first the individual."[451] Thus, he concurs, "In

effect, the question, 'what should I do?' only the individual poses it to himself and

personally, 'in his soul and consciousness,' there brings a response."[452] Yet, as I argued,

the in-dividuality of *sɛ́* does not negate its fundamental foundation within the community

of *Mǎwǔ-gbè*. Rather, as Ogbonnaya maintains, in the classical African cosmos,

"Manyness is not in opposition to the concept of oneness."[453] To the contrary, the ethical

question, "what must I do?" is not simply a personal query but rather requires and

presupposes a consideration of the needs of the community for one is always an

individual-in-community. One's individuality, hence, has no ontological meaning outside

of the environing community.

If individuality has no ontological significance *a priori* of the collective, then

Gyekye's proverbial conclusion—namely, that "The clan is like a cluster of trees which,

when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which would be seen to stand

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[450] Saulnier, *Noms de Naissance*, 87.

[451] Kossou, *Se et Gbe*, 178-179 (my translation).

[452] Ibid., 179 (my translation).

[453] Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, 24-25.

individually when closely approached," [454]—is then perhaps not in actuality an

endorsement of the individual as personally constituted, as Gyekye would insist, but

rather affirms the primary ontological coexistence between the community and the

individual. Hence, while Gyekye would have us believe that this "proverb expresses the

idea that the individual has a separate identity and that, like the tree,… the individual is

separately rooted,"[455] perhaps this proverb is merely an expression of the

interconnectedness between the individual and the community, and that whether

someone perceives the community or the individual as primary is merely a matter of

perspective that, nonetheless, does not negate their interconnectedness. Hence, even if

persons can be conceived as individually rooted, as Gyekye contends, their foundation,

their essential ontological substance, is one and the same. Moreover, as I have argued, the

conception of in-dividuals as wholly communally constituted does not in actuality

"obliterate individuality,"[456] as Gyekye asserts, but rather is an affirmation of the

ontological sameness of all beings and yet simultaneously their distinctive purpose and

vocation.

The proverbial appellation *gbètínmè* expresses this fundamental individual-

community interrelatedness, and, thus, I would argue proposes that different beings are

not existentially separately rooted trees but rather are the varied branches (i.e., in-

dividuals) of the same tree of life—that is, of the same *gbè* communal substance. Yet, as

generic beings actualize their in-dividuality through becoming persons, through fulfilling

their vocational life purpose, these beings are, as I have argued, then materializing the

potential of their *sé* within the environing community of *Ségbó*, or, in other words, as the

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[454] Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 158.
[455] Ibid., 159
[456] Ibid.

anthroponym *sétínmè* implies, within the tree of destiny. Consequently, the ontological progression from *gbè* beings to *sé* persons corresponds to the communal progression from *gbètínmè*, *Măwŭ* as the "shared-body," to *sétínmè*, *Măwŭ* as the "divided-body." Thus, in line with Ogbonnaya's processual theory of community, there is a social and ontological progression from undifferentiated community (precisely, the *gbè* nature community) to connected individuation (namely, the in-dividuality of the *sé* collective), wherein in-dividual persons' materialize their functional ordination, and yet retain the same ontological substance.[457]

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[457] Based on Euro-Christian theology, the common ontological claim is that human beings are made in the same image as God, but are not of the same substance. However, for the *vodoun* metaphysical world, I propose alternatively that all beings are ontologically equivalent and, therefore, share in the same substance. Furthermore, while there are presumably multiple reasons for the differences between ontological genres, the central emphasis tends to be based on functional vocational distinctions.
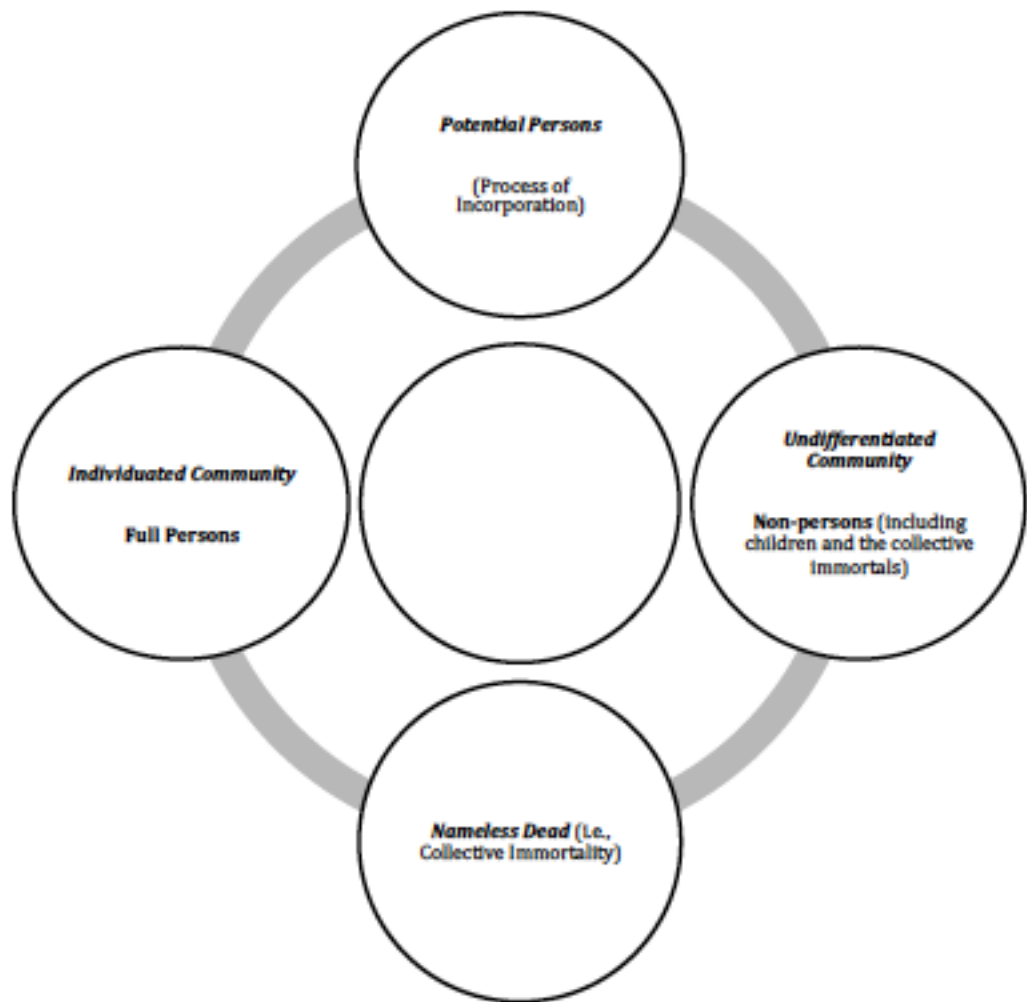
Diagram 1. Ontological Progression of Persons and Community within a Communitarian Cosmos (based on A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya's communotheism and Ifeanyi A. Menkiti's normative conception of personhood)

As the above diagram illustrates, within this communitarian cosmos, there are then, as my earlier analysis of Menkiti outlines, four primary stages or transition points: 1) non-personhood 2) potential personhood, 3) full personhood, and 4) collective immortality. Moreover, in the process of undergoing this ontological transition, there is a corresponding communal transformation, as Ogbonnaya highlights, from undifferentiated community to individuated community and then eventually back to undifferentiated community. Bringing these two communitarian perspectives together

and recalling my argument in chapter four, I conclude that this metaphysical progression

maps (see the diagram below) the process by which beings emerge from the *pure natura* of

gbè to be personified and incorporated in the world (*gbèmè*) and then are eventually, at

some undetermined time, reintegrated back into *pure natura*, an affirmation of the

fundamental nature of all beings. Likewise, I propose that this ontological progression

maps the course by which *gbè* beings become *sé* persons, and, simultaneously, the *gbè*

nature community as *gbètínmè*, the tree of life, becomes the *sétínmè*, the tree of destiny.
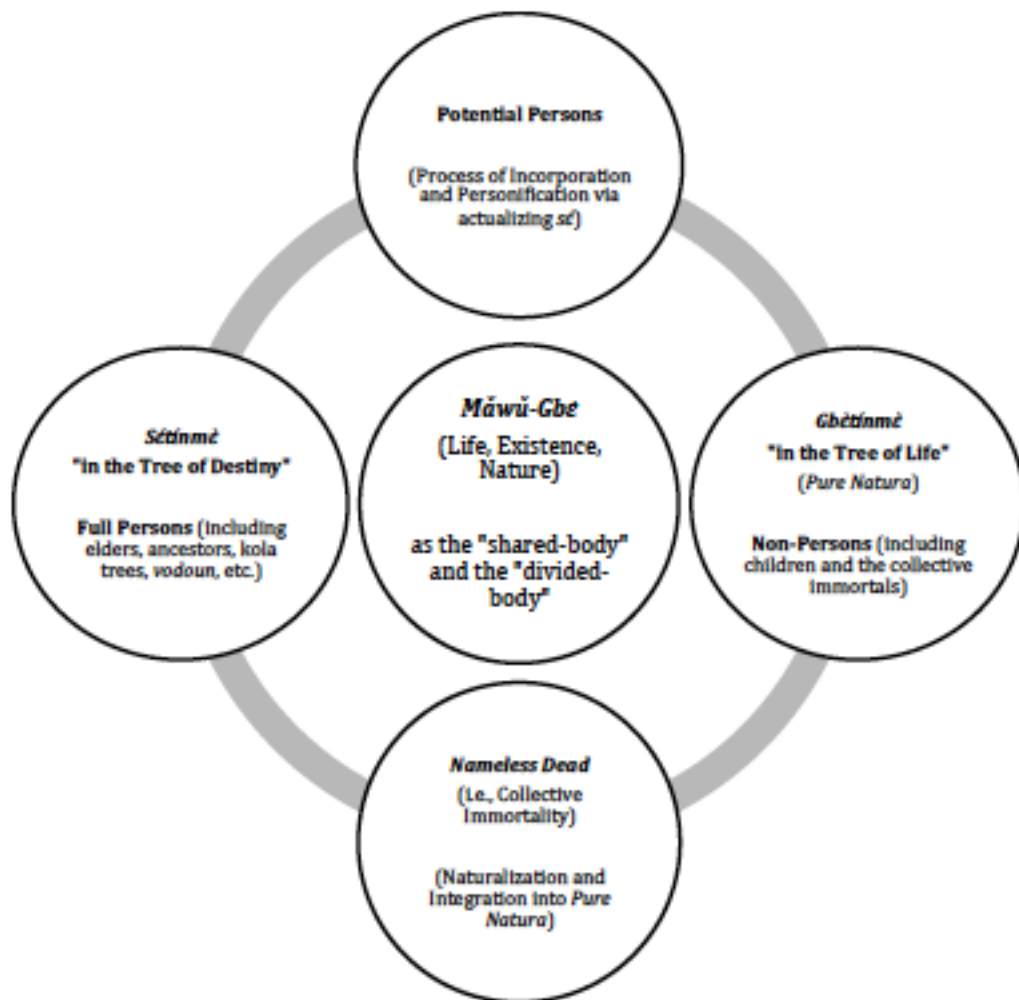
Diagram 2. The Ontological Progression of Persons and Community in the *Măwŭ-Gbε* Communitarian Cosmos

While *gbètínmè* highlights the interconnected existence and therefore the common substance of all *gbè* beings, I would argue that *sétínmè* alternatively highlights personal destiny, and, therefore, the in-dividual vocation of each being. Hence, although I proposed in the previous chapter that all beings are *gbè* beings and, therefore, all beings are *gbètínmè*, "in the tree of life," not all *gbè* beings are *sétínmè*, "in the tree of destiny."

Section V: *Sɛ́tínmɛ̀*—Persons *In* the Tree of Destiny

Even though all *gbè* beings have a *sɛ́*, not all beings actualize and materialize the full potential and ethical function of their *sɛ́* within and for the benefit of the *Mǎwŭ-gbè* community and fully become in-dividuals. Therefore, not all *gbè* beings are *sétínmè*, "in the tree of destiny." Then, what does it existentially mean to be *sétínmè*? And, who is in the tree of destiny and, hence, fully in life? In his analysis of humans as *gbètɔ́*, as literally the "fathers of life," Georges Guédou identifies three primary classifications of beings, namely, humans (*gbètɔ́*), animals (*kànlín*), and plants (*atìn*). While all these species are, as he says, "living beings," he claims that "only the human being and the animal are called *nú dò gbè*, that is, 'things being in life.'"[458] Furthermore, based on the etymological meaning of *gbètɔ́*, he states, "For the Fon the human being is the first one who manages the world and supervises it. He is then the one who transmits life and who is responsible for the protection of the human, the animal, and the plant species."[459] Yet, in my earlier analysis of the proverb that states, "nature never ceases to demand a debt from nature," I proposed that is it not only humans that are potential transmitters of life, but rather given that all of nature shares an equal debt in this lifeworld, as the proverb implies, all *gbè*

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[458] Guédou, *Xó et Gbè*, 228 (my translation).
[459] Ibid., 227 (my translation).

beings have the capacity to pay their debt by transmitting life—that is, by facilitating the

creation and re-creation of the *gbè* nature community. Thus, as our discussion of the court

case involving the kola tree and the *vodounsi* highlighted, it is not merely humans, or, even

just humans and animals, for that matter, who can fully be *gbèmè*, namely, "in the world."

While it is true that humans as *gbètɔ́*, precisely, the "father-guardians of life," have a

unique function and responsibility in this lifeworld as guardians and administrators, as

Ogbonnaya reminds us, we should not obfuscate temporal functional ordination with

ontological superiority or inferiority. Hence, even if, as Saulnier claims, human beings

(*gbètɔ́*) are at the head of life (*gbètamè*), this is a temporal functional super-ordination that,

nevertheless, does not repudiate humans' ultimate ontological equality with all other *gbè*

beings.[460] For as argued in the preceding chapter and as the indigenous concept of *gbètɔ́*

validates, in the *vodoun* world-sense, human beings are fundamentally *homo natura*—that is,

gbè beings, or, in other words, nature beings—rather than *homo sapiens*. Moreover, as the

indigenous notion of *sɛ́* substantiates, animals, plants, and all *gbè* beings have their

respective functional vocational responsibilities and equally share in the ontological

substance of the *gbè* nature cosmos. Thus, for that matter, only *Măwŭ* and the *vodoun*, as

divine persons, are *gbènɔ̀n*, the "mother-owners of life," and, yet, even they are of the

same ontological nature as all other *gbè* beings.

Then, what determines who is and who is *not* a person? For Menkiti and Mbiti,

the central indicators of personhood are precisely the maintenance of familiar

connections and a personal name. Hence, once an ancestor has lost both his or her

personal kinship ties and personal designation, they are by definition no longer a part of

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[460] Saulnier, *Noms de Naissance*, 68.

the life of the living and therefore are, according to Menkiti, the nameless dead, and, according to Mbiti, collective immortals. Yet, as the designation the nameless dead implies, it is the loss or lack of a personal name that is, for Menkiti, the definitive definer of non-persons. Accordingly, in comparing children and the nameless dead as non-persons, he contends:

> The point can be made then, that a significant symmetry exists between the opening phase of an individual's quest for personhood and the terminal phase of that quest. Both are marked by an absence of incorporation and this absence is made abundantly evident by the related absence of collectively conferred names. Just as the child has no name when it tumbles out into the world to begin the journey towards selfhood, so likewise, at the very end, it will have no name again. At both points it is considered quite appropriate to use an 'it' designation precisely because what we are dealing with are entities in regard to which there is a total absence of incorporation.[461]

Non-persons are then precisely defined as beings "without individuality, without personality, and without a name."[462] Yet, I contend that even if potential persons (e.g., children) have undergone certain naming ceremonies and, therefore, some rites of incorporation, they can still potentially have personal names and not fully meet the normative standards of personhood if they have not yet actualized their ethical and vocational purpose within community as transmitters of life. Moreover, as Bernard Adjibodoun explained to me on numerous occasions, within *vodoun* sacred knowledge, every plant, every animal, and, everything for that matter has a secret name, and it is through knowledge of these secret names that the various natural elements and beings can be employed and manipulated.[463] Hence, while, as Menkiti proposes, names confer a special significance in this lifeworld, providing an important means of incorporating children into their kin community, and immortalizing honored elders, ancestors, and

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[461] Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," 175.
[462] Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of a Person," 326.
[463] Bernard Adjibodoun, Friday, March 14, 2014, and Tuesday, June 24, 2014.

other special persons, I conclude that if personhood is indeed something that one can achieve or fail at, as Menkiti claims, then personal names are not, in and of themselves, adequate indicators of ethical beingness in the world.

Since personal names are inadequate to this task of determining and qualifying persons, namely, ethically efficacious individuals-in-community, I would like to propose an alternative. While names are a significant concretization of the incorporating and personalizing process, I propose that, if in fact rites of incorporation are central to the formation of persons, as Menkiti submits, it is then specifically through practices of libation, sacrifice, and offering that communal relationships are established and maintained, and, moreover, that in-dividuals can regularly transmit life within the *Mǎwǔ-gbè* community and fulfill their ethical purpose. For instance, explaining the ontological status of the ancestral dead, Menkiti notes that sacrifice plays a major role in their continued life among the living. He notes, "For the ancestral dead are not dead in the world of spirits, nor are they dead in the memory of living men and women who continue to remember them, and who incessantly ask their help through various acts of libation and sacrificial offering."[464] Acts of offering and consumption—namely, communal practices of eating and drinking, or, in other words, communion—then are rites of incorporation that regularly establish and affirm in-dividual persons and simultaneously sustain the livelihood of the community.

Consuming Life, Making Persons: Herbal Baths as Rites of Incorporation

If practices of consumption are central to the incorporation of persons and the sustenance of community, then it cannot be insignificant that "to be happy" and "to

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[464] Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," 174.

enjoy" *ɖù gbɛ̀* means literally to "to eat and consume life."[465] According to Segurola, *ɖù* means precisely "to eat," "to chew," "to bite," and "to absorb."[466] It also figuratively often signifies "to enjoy." Hence, this indigenous etymological conception implies that practices of eating and drinking are the embodiment of notions of happiness and enjoyment. However, in the *vodoun* world of Porto-Novo, eating and drinking are nearly always also acts of communion—practices of offering and sacrifice that connect the human community with the wider *gbɛ̀* cosmos, particularly the *vodoun* and the ancestors. Through consuming *gbɛ̀* (life, nature, existence), the lifeworld is literally and continuously embodied, or, in other words, incorporated. Hence, to enjoy and to be happy (*ɖù gbɛ̀*) means to be an ethical, incorporated persons; it means to succeed, as Saulnier implies, in transmitting life, or better said, in being pro-creative,[467] and, therefore, to be placed firmly within the world (*gbɛ̀mɛ̀*) and within the tree of destiny (*sétínmɛ̀*). It can be argued then that those who *ɖù gbɛ̀* ("consume life") actualize their *sɛ́*, their personal moral function, and, therefore, fully materialize their personhood.

If *ɖù gbɛ̀*, "consuming life," is in fact a central praxis for community incorporation, then I would likewise argue that herbal baths are fundamental rites of consumption during which the natural elements and various *gbɛ̀* beings are brought together to reinforce the *Mǎwǔ-gbɛ̀* community through the enactment and restoration of regenerative transformation—either the transfiguration of disease (e.g., infertility, family dysfunction, unemployment, physical aliment, etc.) into wellness (precisely, harmonious and abundant living), or the rebirth of human persons through conjugal unioning with

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[465] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 150 (my translation).
[466] Ibid (my translation).
[467] Saulnier, *Noms de Naissance*, 52-53, 68.

their guiding *vodoun*. Hence, while it is the human person that is reborn into the *Mǎwǔ-gbὲ* community, it is nevertheless through the bringing together of multiple ontological genres for this communion that the community is reconstituted and other persons are also incorporated.

During the herbal bathing process, whether a formal initiation or a healing cleanse, the body (*wǔ*) is fed and, thus, sacrifices and offerings of food and drink are literally fed to the self, namely, to his or her *sέ*. As the concrete and personal reality of a being, the body (*wǔ*) is, therefore, the foundational basis of the self, and, therefore, of one's personal destiny and distributive vocation in life. Further explaining the relationship between *wǔ* (*ǔ*, *ǔtu*) and *sέ*, Kossou contends,

> The dichotomy sε-body is not conceivable. Thus, the sε is co-extensive with the body (head, sweat, genitals…) which, by consequence, presents itself as a mold which is… ordered and determined, according to the criteria that define corporal existence (space-time) and the numerous potentialities of sε. There is ample reason, it seems to us, for religious care dedicated to the body, otherwise the sε would only be badly actualized.[468]

For this reason, when constructing a molded *sέ*, nail and hair clippings are used to ground the *sέ* into the molded sculpture. Hence, the body and the *sέ* are interconnected. If the *sέ* is then understood as the distributed body (*wǔ*) of *Mǎwǔ*, as I have argued in this chapter, then *sέ* and *wǔ* are perhaps best conceptualized as coextensive materializations of the self—precisely, of a being's concretized personal potential and vocational purpose. Hence, ritual baths are acts of sacrifice and offering intended to nourish and strengthen the *sέ* of an individual via his or her *wǔ* (body) and, thereby, facilitate the materialization of their full personhood—their full incorporation into the *Mǎwǔ-gbὲ* community.

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[468] Kossou, *Se et Gbe*, 177 (my translation).

As I observed on various occasions in the Atô Ogun shrine, during the course of an herbal bath, various items are poured as libations onto the body (*wŭ*): perfume and powder, to purify and to make the body cool; condensed milk, to re-present the breast milk of Maman Tchamba (a great mother *vodoun* of the ocean)[469] and the first meal an infant has upon its initial birthing into the world; eggs, to materialize the birthing of new life; and, blood, to energize and enliven. For the libations of blood, animal sacrifices are literally given to the body (*wŭ*). These offerings are no different from those regularly given to any of the *vodoun* or the ancestors. The animal is first fed some leaves and then its throat is cut and the blood is poured over the body (*wŭ*) as the shrine of one's *sɛ́*. Animals are chosen for sacrifice based on the vocational and energetic purpose and, therefore, the *sɛ́* (namely, the personhood) of the animal, and on the purpose of the herbal bath. Pigeons are for peace. Ducks, whose actions are sometimes like a snake and thus re-present the *vodoun* Dan, are for energy. Chickens and roosters are most often used for sickness and dis-eases, and as replacements for particular individuals, and goats are often for peace or used also as replacements.[470] Often several animals are actually offered in the course of an herbal bath, and then later prepared and consumed, as a communion, by the community. As Bernard Adjibodoun poignantly explained to me one day as I was offering a turkey for the *vodoun* Maman Adoko, "God [*Măwŭ*] created animals for us to give sacrifice."[471] In other words, in being sacrificed, animals actualize their temporal functional responsibility—that is, the personal destiny of their *sɛ́*—in the *vodoun* lifeworld. Yet, while

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[469] Maman Tchamba is often described as a *vodoun* of slavery and the enslaved, but this is a very narrow conception of this *vodoun*, that does not capture how she operates in the *voodun* lifeworld as a supreme mother *vodoun*.

[470] Bernard Adjibodoun, Tuesday, April 15, 2014.

[471] Bernard Adjibodoun, Friday June 21, 2014.

this might seem problematic, this functional subordination is not a denial of their

ontological equality with all other *gbὲ* beings (including humans), and, hence, indeed this

apparent subordination simply reflects the temporal vocation of certain animals in the

vodoun lifeworld. Yet, even still, in *vodoun* families, often animals are not consumed unless

sacrifices and offerings are given. In Porto-Novo, for instance, where people still purchase

live stock from the market rather than buying cuts of meat from a butcher, everyday

practices of consumption are typically also rites of communion.

Immediately after these libations, this feeding of the body (*wŭ*) and the *sέ*, the

body is then scrubbed and bathed in herbal water, often including *adja manklo* leaves, as

mentioned in the previous chapter, to invoke the *vodoun* to come onto the body (*wŭ*) of the

person for this rebirthing ritual. Then, finally, the person emerges often wrapped in new

white cloth, and then the community consumes the animal offerings. The more persons

present to consume the animal offerings and, therefore, share in the blessing of the ritual,

the better. In the process of this rite of incorporation, various persons—chickens, roosters,

adjamanklo, *hounon* (vodoun physician-priests), *vodoun*, and other community members—

participate in this ritual practice of offering and consumption, and, therefore, are also

being further incorporated and re-birthed. Hence, while often compared to a baptism, a

herbal bath is also a sacred rite of offering and consumption through which various

persons are brought together to *ɖù gbὲ* ("consume life") and are, in the process,

incorporated into the *Măwŭ-gbὲ* community.

Non-persons: Children and the Nameless Dead

If persons, or at least, potential persons are those who *ɖù gbὲ* "consume life," then

non-persons are those who, by definition, do not or at least no longer in-dividually

participate in practices of libation, offering, and sacrifice. Hence, even though infants and young children, who are still suckling at their mother's breasts, have names and thus have often gone through some rites of incorporation (such as birthing rituals and naming ceremonies), since they do not yet participate in the communal practices of consumption, they are not persons and perhaps are not yet even potential persons. Infants and toddlers simply, in general, do not have the developmental capacity to actualize their *sɛ́*, their personal destiny and ethical responsibilities in community. Accordingly, in Porto-Novo, a child is not considered a "person" until they have teeth. Before a child has teeth, they suckle mainly from their mother's breast. Hence, it is not until a child literally has teeth, and therefore, can *ɖù* "bite" and "chew" that they can fully participate in communal practices of offering and consumption. In most cases, a child cannot then literally *ɖù gbɛ̀*, that is, "consume life." Although children share in the same ontological substance with all *gbɛ̀* beings, including elders, the ancestors, and the *vodoun*, children are not of the same ontological status with those who are persons—that is, with those who have materialized their ethical function in the community.

While in Ogbonnaya's communotheism, he argues that distinctions between divine persons are merely distinctions based on the temporal and functional distribution of responsibilities within the divine community, in expanding his theorem beyond divine persons, and, therefore beyond fully established and concretized in-dividuals, it is necessary to develop and include a theory of developmental subordination. Therefore, in theorizing the whole of *gbɛ̀* as a communitarian cosmos with a multitude of persons and potential persons—human, ancestral, animal, plant, mineral, divine, etc.— I propose that not only do all beings share in the same ontological substance, distinctions among these

gbè beings are a function of temporal functional distinctions and/or developmental differences that produce provisional differences in ontological status. While temporal functional subordination points to subordination that is the function of the hierarchical distribution of responsibilities (such as, the temporal difference in distributed responsibilities between an insect and a human being), developmental subordination is, alternatively, the function of the maturation of a being (for example, the developmental differences between children and adults).[472] While these developmental disparities vary from species to species, primarily concerned with their own personal needs for food and comfort, babies and young children are generally developmentally incapable of consuming life (*ɖù gbè*), and, therefore, of being transmitters of life—of creating or recreating life through acts of pro-creation and community building.

Yet, in my estimation, even though personhood is an ontological achievement, the non-personhood status of children and the nameless dead, for that matter, is not an indictment. For neither of these counterparts has necessarily failed at achieving personhood, rather children as embryonic non-persons are merely generic beings, who are in the process of being literally born into the community (and thus undergoing their second birth), and the nameless dead as ancestral non-persons are generic beings, who have been reintegrated into *pure natura*, into the shared-body of the *gbè* nature cosmos.

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[472] While, as noted earlier, differences between ontological genres largely emphasis functional dissimilarities, developmental differences are also significant. Hence, in conceptualizing this ontology as a spectrum, some beings are than more advanced then others. In indigenous terms, this might be phrased as the difference between being *gbètínmè* "in the tree of life" versus *sétínmè*, "in the tree of destiny." While all beings can be in the tree of destiny, not all beings have advanced to this ontological position. For instance, elders are ontologically advanced in comparison to children, but it is also true that the *vodoun* are ontologically advanced when compared with humans and various other beings generally. For an elaboration of the latter claim, see my argument in chapter 6.

Non-personhood is then, in these cases, merely a neutral status with regard to functional responsibilities and, thus, does not necessarily presuppose that either children or the nameless dead are anti-persons—namely, morally counterproductive and destructive beings.

Nŭ and Mɛ as Generic and Personal Beings

As beings-in-community without in-dividuality and without personhood, through the indigenous category of *nu* (often translated as "thing"), I propose conceptualizing children and the nameless dead as generic beings. Scholars and translators of Fon and Gun have generally accepted the simplistic distinction between *nŭ* ("thing") and *mɛ* ("person"). Segurola, for instances, insists on the applicability of this strict ontological dichotomy within Fon language and culture.[473] However, while typically translated simply as "thing," Segurola translates *nŭ* as "thing, matter; cause, object, subject; animal (insect, reptile, etc….)."[474] Also, he notes, "sometimes, in a tone of contempt, the word *nŭ* can designate a person."[475] Yet still, *nŭ* is not only used to talk about an individual with contempt. For instance, to the contrary, Saulnier explains,

> When the noun "*ňu*," "thing," finds itself in expansion of a verb, and mostly of the verb "*nyĭ*," to be, it has the sense of the phrase "*nŭ-jɔ̀-nŭ*,"/thing/to value/thing/, and thus an important, serious thing, to be taken into account; thus: *Nɔ̀nyĭnŭ = Nɔ̀-nyĭ-nŭ* = /mother/is/thing = mother is a thing (= person) important.[476]

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[473] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 378.
[474] Ibid., 410 (my translation).
[475] Ibid (my translation).
[476] Saulnier, *Noms de Naissances*, 36 (my translation and emphasis added).

Hence, while the concept *nŭ* can function as a gloss for the Western notion "thing," given

its rich semantic field, there is in actuality no explicit ontological distinction between

"things" and "persons."

Yet, what then does the notion *mɛ* ("person") suggest about the relationship

between *nŭ* and *mɛ* as indigenous concepts? Segurola translates *mɛ* in its noun form as

"individual" or "person," and as an indefinite pronoun as "someone."[477] However, as

Segurola notes, "in certain cases, *mɛ* designates the monarch, the chiefs, and the [*vodoun*]

Sakpata."[478]M*ɛ* can then signify a specific individual, or perhaps, more precise, a specific

being, and also a "person" of high authority and esteem. Yet, if we explore its wider

semantic field, its etymological correlate, *mɛ̀* means "in" or "interior to," and thus

functions as a locative preposition. For example, note some of the phrasal concepts we

have highlighted throughout this chapters, such as: *Sɛ́tínmɛ̀* ("in the tree of destiny") and

gbɛ̀mɛ̀ ("in the world").[479]

Given the philosophical complexity of the etymological and semantic terrain that

the indigenous concepts *nŭ* and *mɛ̀* encompass, I propose that the ontological distinction

between *nŭ* and *mɛ̀* is then hypothetically a difference between the generic and the

personal, rather than strictly between "things" and "persons" because as the proverbial

phrase, *sɛ́ nŭ wɛ̀ nŭ lɛ́ kpó*, implies, "all things [*nŭ*] are the things [*nŭ*] of *sɛ́*."[480] Therefore,

as argued earlier in this chapter, all beings, whether depersonalized or incorporated, have

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[477] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 378 (my translation).

[478] Ibid., 379 (my translation). Throughout his dictionary, Segurola problematically defines and refers to the *vodoun* as "fetishes." Hence in the above phrase he actually said, "the fetish Sakpata," but I replaced the word "fetish" with the appropriate indigenous concept.

[479] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 380; Saulnier, *Noms de Naissances*, 31 (my translation).

[480] Saulnier, *Noms de Naissances*, 73 (my translation).

a personal destiny and an ethical vocation within the *Mǎwǔ-gbè* community. From this viewpoint, I submit that the grammatical usage of *mè* demonstrates when an in-dividuated being—a person interior to the world (*gbèmè*)—is being referenced whereas *nǔ* is generally utilized either to speak about a group more generally (such as, in the phrase noted earlier, *nǔ dò gbè*, approximately meaning, "things being in life"[481]) or to reference a specific being in depersonalized terms—precisely, then designating someone not *placed*, not yet *interior to* the visible lifeworld. Hence, while building on Menkiti's claims, rather than imposing the English pronoun *it* as a signifier of the depersonalized existence of children and the nameless dead, I instead suggest *nǔ* as an indigenous signifier of this depersonalized and unincorporated existence. For example, note the following Gun proverbial names,

> **Adǎnnǔdě**: *Ovǐ ma nyǐ adǎn nǔ dě*, "The child is not a thing [*nǔ*] obtained by force."

> **Vǐasénǔ**: *Vǐ wè sé nǔ, adǎn mɔ nɔ jì vǐ*, "The child is the thing [*nǔ*] of *sé*, force did not give the child."[482]

Children as *nǔ* are then generic beings without personal and ethical stake in the world. Often incapable of participating in community, children are then generic beings still waiting to be fully born. And, yet, children have a *sé* and, thus, as Kossou explains, "it is the *sé* that has possessed him [or her] that one respects" (*Sé é dǒ ta tɔn é si wɛ dè*).[483]

Even so, there are special cases in which young children become persons—fully ethically functioning in-dividuals and transmitters of life. For example, currently in his early twenties, Hounon Olawolé Adjibodoun became a *hounon*, a priest-physcian of *vodoun*, at the unusually young age of five, and, thus, unlike most *hounon*, he was not formally

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[481] See Guédou, *Xó et Gbè*, 228 (my translation).
[482] Saulnier, *Noms de Naissances*, 83 (my translation).
[483] Kossou, *Se et Gbe*, 171 (my translation).

trained. Instead, as he explained, he has learned from his visions and dreams. As the reincarnation of his great family ancestor Chief Atô Ogun Masi, the Oyo official who became the minister of warfare and religion for the Hogbonu court in the seventeenth-century, Olawolé was literally born into the world with an already great and extended materialized past. Thus, one can conclude that, in such special cases in which a powerful and great ancestor is reincarnated into a child, that this child—given the passing of concrete time from present to past, as theorized earlier—is able to be and become a full person. This child is then, by definition no longer a child, a *ví* (namely, in a position of subordination), but is rather a functioning moral community member. Hence, children who are considered the reincarnations of their ancestors are those who may acquire the name, *Sétínmè*, which declares, "He [or she] came from the tree of *sɛ́*" (*Sɛ́ tín mè é tɔ́n sɔ́n*).[484] Personhood and non-personhood are then complex ontological standings, within an ontological spectrum, that are neither biologically given or necessarily age specific. Rather, it is the developmental maturity, the concrete past, and the capacity of one's *sɛ́* to *ɖù gbὲ* "consume life," that determines and influences the ontological station and ethical vocation of any and all *gbὲ* beings.

CONCLUSION

Kwame Gyekye indicts Ifeanyi Menkiti, John Mbiti, and other communitarianists for allegedly constructing an "extreme communitarianism" that erases and dissolves the individual. Yet, how can we argue that the individual does not exist within African thought if the notion of personal destiny (*sɛ́*) is imperative to the African conception of life

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[484] Ibid., 92 (my translation).

(*gbὲ*)? Rather, as I have argued, the in-dividual is realized and materialized through community rather than merely dissolved within it. The in-dividual, in its unique destiny and personhood (*sέ*), therefore, can only be said to be an in-dividual person to the extent that he or she fulfills his or her purpose and vocational function in community. The in-dividual contains the community and yet in its unique functionality is not homologous with community. The individual is, therefore, not merely a microcosm of the community. Hence, while I maintain that the notion of autonomy that Gyekye imposes is potentially problematic, I argue, nonetheless, that the individual in actuality does participate in his or her own personhood. However, such participation is, of course, neither divorced nor divisible from community nor the person's beingness-in-community.

Persons are always fully constituted by community. Precisely, through the ontological transformation that rituals enact on the body and the *sέ*, generic beings are transformed into in-dividual persons—into incorporated and ethical transmitters of life. Accordingly, I define a person as any being or entity (whether *vodoun*, human, plant, mineral, or other) that achieves an ethical and functional ontological status within the social intercourse of the lifeworld and is, therefore, a responsible member of the shared community. V*odoun* life exemplifies, therefore, a flexible philosophy of personhood that, rather than privileging the human as the *sine qua non* of the person, instead defines and materializes personhood as an ontological status of moral potentiality and achievement open to the wider nature-cosmos that defines and structures our experience of the lifeworld.

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CHAPTER 6:
"The 'House of Women' is a Major Power in this World":
Motherhood, Authority, and the Matter of Vodoun Social Hierarchy

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Theorizing *vodoun* as an ontological phenomenon in which religion, as the metaphysical, materializes through a trifold process of being, belonging, and becoming, in the preceding two chapters, I proposed that while *gbè*, as nature existence, embodies a beingness together and presupposes that all beings are beings-in-community, that *sé*, as personal destiny and potential personhood, concretizes beings into in-dividual persons and, thereby, materializes the temporal functional distribution of responsibilities in the lifeworld. Likewise, whereas the *gbè* nature cosmos alludes that all beings share the same ontological nature, *sé* reveals the ethical as ontological—namely, that in-dividual persons are created, birthed, and materialized through their moral functionality in community. Hence, through the actualization of being and belonging, I proffer that all beings—humans, animals, plants, *vodoun*, ancestors, and others—are ontologically equal in nature and have the inherent capacity to materialize as persons—as ethical and functional co-participants in community.

In the present chapter, I examine the indigenous concept of *nɔ̀* (motherhood) as an ontological idiom for theorizing the metaphysical as not only being and belonging, but also as becoming—namely, as a mother-person who pro-creates and reproduces other persons. Hence while the ontological processes of being and belonging actualize the cosmos as a shared and a distributed life experience, the metaphysics of becoming highlights the fecundity of the cosmos and its fundamental creative driving forces. Yet, in theorizing motherhood as a metaphysics of becoming, rather than focusing on biological mothers and mothering, in this present chapter, I conceptualize the indigenous concept of *nɔ̀* as ontological motherhood, and, more precisely, I theorize *nɔ̀* (literally, "mother-

owner") as mother-person, as the ontological prototype of ownership, authority, and power.

Interrogating the ontological significance of mothers and mothering beyond the Euro-Western postulations of gender normativity and biological determinism that have unduly aligned motherhood with female subjugation, irrespective of cultural, historical, and social differences across geographical regions, I will alternatively analyze motherhood and mothering as ontological paradigms and material practices of social and cosmological authority. Theorizing ontological motherhood through the indigenous concept of *nɔ̀*, I will: 1) examine Oyeronke Oyewumi and Ifi Amadiume's theorizations of motherhood, mothers, and mothering to elaborate an indigenous theory of ontological motherhood, 2) offer an etymological analysis of *nɔ̀* as mother-owner, and 3) survey materializations of ontological mothers and mothering to elucidate indigenous conceptions of metaphysical authority and power. While present academic considerations of mothers and mothering, even from ontological rather than biological perspectives, have primarily concentrated on the generative aspects and embodiments of motherhood,[485] my analysis will also include an examination of the potentially destructive materializations of ontological mothers and mothering through an analysis of "our mothers" (often inappropriately referred to as "witches") as mother anti-persons—as authoritative and powerful beings who mal-create. Hence, in exploring mothers and mothering as ontological materializations of authority,

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[485] See for example Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987); Ifi Amadiume, *Re-Inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, & Culture* (New York: Zed Books, Ltd., 1997); Oyeronke Oyewumi, "Ties that (Un)Bind: Feminism, Sisterhood, and Other Foreign Relations," *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 1-18; Oyeronke Oyewumi, "Beyond Gendercentric Models: Restoring Motherhood to Yorùbá Discourses of Art and Aesthetics," in *Gender Epistemologies in Africa* (2011); Dianne M. Stewart Diakité, "'Matricentric' Foundations of Africana Women's Religious Practices of Peacebuilding, Sustainability, and Social Change," *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* 25 (2013): 61-79.

while the previous two chapters questioned and challenged the Euro-Western ontological dichotomy between "things" and "persons," this chapter contests any ontological incongruity between "persons" and "gods." Pursuant to this aim, in perceiving the *vodoun* as persons, namely, as mother-persons, this present chapter offers an immanent metaphysical interpretation of the *vodoun* cosmos world and proposes motherhood as an ontology of divine familiarity rather than divine otherness.

Section I: Ifi Amadiume's Matrifocality and Oyeronke Oyewumi's Mothernity: From Biological to Ontological Motherhood

Examining matrifocality (namely, mother-focused ideologies), and the social materialization of female orientation (that is, female-based principles and cultural practices), in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987), Ifi Amadiume separates biological sex from gender to elucidate the fluidity of gendered roles in pre-colonial, patrilineal Nnobi Igbo society. Through documenting the co-existence of a dual-sex system and a flexible gender ideology mediated by the Igbo goddess-based religion and its corresponding matrifocal ideologies, Amadiume demonstrates that women could gain power in the *obi*, the male father-focused compound, through becoming "males" either as male daughters or female husbands, and in the *mkpuke*, the female mother-centered household, as mother-wives. Facilitated by a non-gendered language and a corresponding social system in which social roles did not encode gender, male daughters and female husbands, as *di-bu-no* (i.e., the non-gendered title of the head of an *obi*), became ontological fathers,[486] acquiring wealth, power, and authority over men and women through the accumulation of wives (as sources of agricultural production) and the attainment of roles usually

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[486] See Amadiume, *Re-Inventing* Africa, 148.

monopolized by men. Hence, the *obi* depended upon the *mkpuke*, the matricentric unit of

the mother-centered household, for both labor and food. This mother-centered

household, included a mother and her children, and, as the smallest production unit (with

its own garden or farm), operated as an autonomous household within the larger *obi*

compound. Hence, while the *obi* and the *mkpuke* appear as rigidly bifurcated social

institutions, as Amadiume explains, "This opposition is mediated by the fact that females

can head an *obi*. A daughter can also go through a ceremony whereby she becomes a

male and a son and may then replace her father in the *obi*; she thus becomes a male-

daughter."[487] According to Amadiume, gender flexibility effaced, therefore, the social

dichotomy between the patriarchal unit of the *obi* compound and the matriarchal unit of

the *mkpuke* household.

For these very reasons, in Nnobi society women could not, as Amadiume argues,

be classified within a single-sex category. Yet, in an earlier analysis of Igbo society, K.

Okonjo (1976) describes the socio-political system as "dual-sex," stating,

> A number of West African traditional societies have political systems in which the
> major interest groups are defined and represented by sex. We can label such
> systems of organization 'dual-sex' systems, for within them each sex manages its
> own affairs, and women's interests are represented at all levels.[488]

However, in a social world in which women as male daughters and female husbands

represented the patriarchal interest of the *obi* compound rather than the matriarchal[489]

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[487] Amadiume, *Re-Inventing Africa*, 129.

[488] Qtd., in Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 16; K. Okonjo, "The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria," in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, edited by N. J. Hafkin and E. G. Bay (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975), 45.

[489] Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 189. Amadiume re-defines the term matriarchy to signify a society characterized by "mother right, matrifocality/mother focus, matricentrism, female orientation, etc." Similarly denying the notion that patriarchy is a society completely ruled by men, Amadiume counters, "Men never ruled

interests of the *mkpuke* household, women were not fully represented by the female-

oriented, matrifocal social system. Instead, as Amadiume makes plain,

> The mere fact of daughters' acting in collaboration with their patrilineage men in the interests of their patrilineage – whether as a police force against the wives or as ritual spiritualists dealing with confessions of infidelity or adultery by wives, and cleansing the patrilineage of pollutions and abominations – show that one cannot talk of women's common interests being 'represented at all levels.'[490]

Hence, given that, as she reiterates, "women as daughters also played male roles in ritual

matters or in positions of authority over wives,"[491] Amadiume concludes that Okonjo's

analysis is ultimately faulty because of its reliance on sex as an explanatory framework

when in fact "female solidarity was neutralized, to some extent, through the division of

women on the basis of gender."[492] Therefore, modifying Okonjo's socio-analytical

theorem, Amadiume proposes that "the traditional Igbo dual-sex social systems were

mediated by the flexibility of gender constructions in the Igbo language and culture."[493]

 Yet, even as Amadiume challenges the rigidity of the relationship between

biological sex and gender in Igbo society, what goes unrecognized is how the concepts of

"sex" and "gender" are in and of themselves defective in that they, as Euro-Western

terms, conceivably introduce social and biological norms not inherent to Igbo society.

Hence, at times her analysis and methodology seem unclear. For instance, Amadiume

does not provide a guiding definition for either gender or sex. Taking the connotations of

these concepts for granted, her analysis suggests that by "gender" Amadiume means the

social system by which biological females were socially differentiated based on their

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completely anywhere. The claim of patriarchy remains valid only if what women do in society and culture is denied and they are treated as invisible."

 [490] Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 16.
 [491] Ibid.
 [492] Ibid., 67.
 [493] Ibid., 17.

position as daughters, wives, and mothers. Therefore, she notes that while in the Nnobi

patrilineal family, lineage daughters were senior and superior to their mothers and other

co-wives and exercised this power through their control over the funeral rites of the

patrilineage, wives and mothers, on the other hand, were understood as superior in

regards to issues of fertility and sex and exercised this authority in their control over

fertility ceremonies during marriage and pregnancy. Likewise, Amadiume implies that

among the Nnobi peoples *sex* is not only a biological category, but also a genealogical

concept, which positions a person as either an insider or an outsider with respect to the

patrilineage. Thus, a female could be identified as male if she was the first born child, in

which case, she would be considered a "male daughter," with the usual privileges of the

first born male son in terms of inheritance, but the "male daughter" was still understood

as a "woman" and thus, according to Amadiume, was still subject to certain gender

ideologies and gendered constructions. Similarly, patrilineage daughters, in general, were

seen as "husbands" vis-à-vis their fathers' wives and thus were given certain powers and

privileges accorded to male sons, but were still subject to certain gender limitations.

Hence, while Amadiume contends that her data proposes the presence of a flexible

gender system in pre-colonial Nnobi society, as my analysis of her argument will

elaborate, I would argue that her evidence also documents a flexible biological system, or

at least a biological system that is distinct from a Western conception of the body and the

biological.

The "male daughter" is a prime example of this flexibility in biological sex.

Hence, as noted earlier, Amadiume is clear that in order for a first born daughter to be

recognized officially as a "male daughter," this "female" must undergo a ritual ceremony

to become a "male" and then a "son." Citing a particularly noteworthy example, in

which this ceremony was not completed, Amadiume elaborates,

> Following the Nnobi principle of unilineal succession, founding ancestors were
> usually male, including 'male daughters,' but Umu-Ochom, the most junior minor
> lineage in Amadunu, was founded by a woman, who was Oshuga's sister. This is
> an example of a daughter who was allowed to remain at home and have children
> by informal lovers. Each minor patrilineage in turn had its own original ancestral
> home and shrine, but Umu-Ochom, which was founded by a female, would not
> have an ancestral shrine, as Ochom was not officially declared male. Her
> descendants would pay ritual homage to the ancestral shrine of Umu-Oshuga, the
> brother of Ochom.[494]

Since male daughterhood demands a ceremonial change of sex, what appears as

biological sex would be perhaps better interpreted as another social construct,[495]

especially since, as Amadiume underscores, taking on male normative roles did not mean

that these women were understood as "man-like" or "manly."[496] To the contrary, as

Amadiume explains it, these women wanted to become "males" not "men."[497]

Yet, not all women wanted to become "males." As Amadiume explains, through

the matricentric unit of the *mkpuke* centered on the mother and her children, Nnobi Igbo

women had another source of autonomy and authority: motherhood. Proposing

motherhood as a basis for contemporary feminist politics, Amadiume attests,

> The very thought of women's rights being based on the logic of motherhood has
> proved offensive to many Western feminists. It is easy to see why this is so since in

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[494] Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 52.

[495] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 10. Notably this supports Judith Butler's argument that sex is as equally socially and culturally constructed as gender, and thus, as she states, "Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts."

[496] Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 16.

[497] Ibid., 15.

the European system, wifehood and motherhood was a means of enslavement of women. In the African system of matriarchy, it was women's means of empowerment.[498]

Through motherhood, wives could transcend their outsider social position and ranking in respect to patrilineal daughters and attain autonomy within their own household. Yet, while Amadiume highlights the gender-sex flexibility that enabled "male daughters" and "female husbands" to function as social (rather than merely biological) fathers, as patrilineal heads of the *obi*, she remains ultimately tied to a biological conception of motherhood. Accepting the Euro-Western constructs of "gender" and "sex" as indigenous ontological taxonomies, in Amadiume's analysis, like her gendered conception of male daughters and female husbands, motherhood is reduced to a gender category.

Echoing Amadiume's theorization of matricentricity, in *The Invention of Women* (1997), Oyeronke Oyewumi identifies *iya* ("mother") as a social category of authority not only based on biological parentage but also ethical maturity since in Yorùbá society elder anafemales are honorary *iya*.[499] Yet, as her neologism *anafemale* and its correlate *anamale* infer, Oyewumi determines that in pre-colonial Yorùbá society neither gender nor sex were ontological categories. Through a linguistic archeology of the Yorùbá world-sense, Oyewumi finds that gender is not encoded in Yorùbá language. Yet, instead of proposing, like Amadiume, that this linguistic fact implies the operation of a tripartite social system (i.e., female, male, and non-gendered),[500] Oyewumi submits that even when biological distinctions are syntactically noted these do not produce corresponding gender roles or identities. Likewise, since in Euro-Western thought and culture, bodies have predetermined social meanings, she concludes that "sex" is equally a socially constructed

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[498] Amadiume, *Re-Inventing Africa*, 114.
[499] Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*, 41.
[500] See Amadiume, *Re-Inventing Africa*, 113.

category with no precise analogue within the Yorùbá world-sense. Hence, providing

rationality for her anatomical neologisms (*anamale*, *anafemale*, and *anasex*), Oyewumi

explains,

> Given the inseparability of sex and gender in the West, which results from the use
> of biology as an ideology for mapping the social world, the terms "sex" and
> "gender"… are essentially synonyms. To put this another way: since in Western
> constructions, physical bodies are always social bodies, there is really no
> distinction between sex and gender. In Yorùbá society, in contrast, social relations
> derive their legitimacy from social facts, not from biology. The bare biological
> facts of pregnancy and parturition count only in regard to procreation, where they
> must. Biological facts do not determine who can become the monarch or who can
> trade in the market. In indigenous Yorùbá conception, these questions were
> properly social questions, not biological ones; hence, the nature of one's anatomy
> did not define one's social position.[501]

Within Euro-Western cultures, Oyewumi identifies, therefore, what she calls a Western

bio-logic by which a person's biological/anatomical embodiment determines their social

position and identity. Hence, in the Euro-Western world, biological bodies are always

also social bodies.

Through this Euro-Western biological determinism and its correlating processes

of social mapping, Oyewumi argues, therefore, that Euro-Western gender discourses have

invented "women" and "men" as normative categories and distinct social roles.

Implicating the academy in this colonialist fabrication, by analyzing a culture through

gender categories and with gender assumptions, as Oyewumi argues, scholars are

gendering—inventing and manufacturing gender as an ontological norm that presupposes

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[501] Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*, 12-13. Oyewumi constructs, therefore, her
neologisms *anamale*, *anafemale*, and *anasex* to denote differences based on anatomical and
reproductive dissimilarities rather than "biology," or, in her words, a Western bio-logic
that presupposes that biological bodies construct certain types of social (i.e., gendered)
bodies.

"women" and "men" as universal social categories applicable across varied cultures and

historical epochs.[502] To this end, as Oyewumi elaborates,

> Western ideas are imposed when non-Western social categories are assimilated
> into the gender framework that emerged from a specific sociohistorical and
> philosophical tradition. An example is the "discovery" of what has been labeled
> 'third gender' or 'alternative genders' in a number of non-Western cultures. The
> fact that the African 'woman marriage,' the Native American 'berdache,' and the
> South Asian 'hijra' are presented as gendered categories incorporates them into
> the Western bio-logic and gendered framework without explications of their own
> sociocultural histories and constructions.[503]

Hence, if Oyewumi is correct, even as Amadiume questions the Western re-invention of

Africa through the erasure of African matricentric ideologies and institutions, in

Amadiume's delineation of a flexible "gender" system, she contributes inadvertently to

the gendering of Nnobi Igbo society and, thus, the continued manufacturing of, as

Oyewumi terms it, "African versions of Western things."[504] This is perhaps why

Amadiume's indeterminate usage of the categories of "gender" and "sex" fails to

adequately encapsulate the pre-colonial Igbo social world in which anafemales sought

authority and power through becoming "males" (but not "men") or "mothers." Hence,

what Amadiume perceives as gender flexibility is perhaps merely an indigenous social

elasticity that has no precise correlate within Euro-Western cultural norms.

If gender and sex are not ontological truths, then, as Oyewumi asserts,

motherhood cannot be reduced to either gender or biology. Mothers and mothering are

not merely biological givens or gendered social practices. Rather, as Oyewumi expounds,

> Though female reproduction is a human universal, the meanings attached to
> motherhood are diverse across cultures. Western accounts of motherhood reduce
> it to a gender category: mother is represented as woman first and foremost, a
> category that is perceived to be customarily disadvantaged and oppressed because

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[502] Oyewumi, "Introduction" in *Gender Epistemologies in* Africa, 2.

[503] Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*, 11-12.

[504] See ibid., 19.

women are subordinated to males, who are the privileged group. The traditional Yorùbá elaboration of motherhood is radically different, and is anything but gendered.[505]

Hence, while theorizing motherhood as biological is valid, in African religious cultures, mothers and mothering are ontological experiences and practices of care giving that supersede hereditary relationality. For Oyewumi, motherhood is then ontological.

Theorizing motherhood as precisely an ontological ethic, Oyewumi proposes the concept of mothernity to convey how mothering function as a "communitarian ideology and ideal."[506] Referencing the Yorùbá indigenous concept of *omo-iya*, which means literally "my mother's child," and elaborating on this mothernity—or, in other words, this mother ethic—Oyewumi explains,

> The category *omo-iya* transcends gender; sometimes it is used to refer to an individual but what it encapsulates is the collectivity. It functions to locate the individual within a socially recognized grouping and underscores the significance of mother-child ties in delineating and anchoring a child's place in the family. These are relationships that are primary and privileged, and they should be protected above others. *Omo-iya* is the primary category in the sense that it is the first and fundamental source of identification for the child in the household. To put it crudely, in the traditional Yoruba household, the first thing you need to know is not whether you are a boy or a girl but who are your *omo-iya* – siblings with who you share the same mother.[507]

One's primary identity is then not based on gender or sex, but rather on one's social relation to one's *iya* (mother), and to the children of that same *iya*. O*mo-iya*, as the egalitarian relationship between individuals of the same mother, exemplifies then, as Oyewumi maintains, a communitarian ethic of "unconditional love, togetherness, unity, solidarity, and loyalty."[508] Equally, as Amadiume elaborates, the Igbo concept of *umunne*,

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[505] Oyewumi, "Beyond Gendercentric Models: Restoring Motherhood to Yorùbá Discourses of Art and Aesthetics," in *Gender Epistemologies in Africa*, 232.
[506] Oyewumi, "Ties that (Un)Bind," 7.
[507] Ibid., 8.
[508] Ibid.

meaning, "children of one mother," embodies an ethic of common motherhood. Hence,

proposing the matricentric unit in Nnobi Igbo society as the basis for a communitarian

social ethic, Amadiume portrays Nnobi matrifocality as follows,

> …the matricentric unit, the *mkpuke* structure, a distinct mother-focused social
> category… occupied a distinct space in the form of a self-contained compound of
> mother and children…. This unit… had an ideological base as it was bound in the
> spirit of common motherhood in the ideology and ritual of *umunne* – children of
> one mother with its strong moral and spiritual force, binding members in love,
> care, compassion, peace and respect, forbidding incest and bloodshed within the
> group.[509]

Accordingly, as the indigenous concepts of *omo-iya* and *umunne* imply, and as Oyewumi

argues, the womb is not a gendered domain. In facilitating the egalitarianism between

siblings of a common mother, the womb cultivates both anamales and anafemales.[510] Yet,

the womb is still not merely a biological symbol; it is an archetype of a wider

interconnectedness and solidarity. Therefore, as the concept of co-mothering implies,

motherhood cannot be defined as merely a genetic relationship between mother and

child. Rather, as Oyewumi argues, co-mothering, the sharing in the responsibilities of

mothering, is the "essence of community building."[511] Accordingly, Oyewumi asserts,

> Co-mothering as a communal ideal and social practices is not reducible to
> biological motherhood; it transcends it. The fact that the children of one's *omo-iya*
> are regarded as one's children demonstrates this ideal. Furthermore, in many
> polygynous, multiple-generational households, the reality is that children
> experience many mothers.[512]

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[509] Amadiume, *Re-Inventing Africa*, 147-148.
[510] Oyewumi, "The Ties that (Un)Bind," 8-9.
[511] Ibid., 9.
[512] Ibid.

Motherhood and mothering are the materialization of a communitarian ethic of care.

Becoming a "mother" is then more than a biological fact; it is an ontological

achievement.[513]

Section II: **From Wives to Mothers: Personhood, Motherhood, and the Indigenous Concept of *nɔ***

Championing piety as a praxis of non-liberalist agency embodied within the

Egyptian women's mosque movement, in *The Politics of Piety* (2005), Saba Mahmood

maintains that the terms through which people understand themselves must become

critical points of analysis since these guiding concepts are "not simply a gloss for

universally shared assumptions about the world and one's place in it, but are actually

constitutive of different forms of personhood, knowledge, and experience."[514] As

Mahmood's argument proposes, motherhood is then not merely a gloss for womanhood

but rather is a different mode of ontological personhood and a distinct experience and

knowledge that captures a matricentric approach to being-in-the-world. Likewise, in

consideration of Charles Long's phenomenological approach to religion as orientation,

Dianne Stewart proposes that motherhood "introduces a semantic environment for

thematizing an orientational element in African religious cultures often eclipsed by the

undue and misplaced emphasis on 'magic' and 'witchcraft' as definitive features of

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[513] See Stewart Diakité, "'Matricentric' Foundations of Africana Women's Religious Practices of Peacebuilding, Sustainability, and Social Change," 61-79. In this article, Stewart engages Amadiume and Oyeronke to theorize socio-ontological mothering as a comtemporary basis for an Africana communitarian ethic of care. I will engage her argument in more detail below.

[514] Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*, 16.

African religions."[515] Motherhood offers, therefore, an indigenous ontological and orientating framework for conceptualizing the functionality of authority and power in African religious worlds.

In accordance with the pervading assumption that power and authority are necessarily gendered, authority (whether human, ancestral, or divine) has largely been framed based on masculinizing and patricentric ideological norms. I alternatively scrutinize conceptions of authority via indigenous notions of motherhood (*nɔ̀*). While exploring fatherhood as an indigenous framework of power is also imperative, Vodoun scholars have largely theorized indigenous forms of authority and power through a patricentric and masculine ideological lens to the neglect of matricentric manifestations of sovereignty even when and where idioms of motherhood and mothering are dominant forms of expressing authority.[516] Hence, in the gendering of *vodoun* social hierarchies as male and father-centered, matricentric conceptions of authority have remained under theorized. Moreover, while gender is clearly an abiding norm in contemporary *vodoun* communities, by exploring motherhood as an ontological rather than gendered concept, I demonstrate how varied persons—both female and male, man and woman—materialize their authority through indigenous ideologies and practices of mothering. Accordingly, while in the colonial era African "women" and "men" had to carve out new social arenas

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[515] Stewart Diakité, " 'Matricentric' Foundations of Africana Women's Religious Practices of Peacebuilding, Sustainability, and Social Change," 63.

[516] See Guédou, *Xó et Gbè* (1984); Montilus, *L'homme dans la Pensée Traditionnelle Fon* (1977); Kossou, *Se et Gbe* (1983); Maupoil, *La Géomancie à l'anciennce Côte des Esclaves* (1981). In their emphasis on humans as "*gbètɔ́*," literally the "father of life," and humans correlating relationship to the supreme deity as *Gbèɖɔ̆tɔ́*, the "creator father of life," as noted in chapter five, scholars have, in accordance with Euro-Western norms that frame human and divine authority as fundamentally male and fatherly, over theorized fatherhood as authority and neglected to conceive of motherhood as an at least equally significant indigenous materialization of authority and power.

and the African high god was transmuted into the African supreme father, as Oyewumi submits, indigenous social ontologies and ideologies are, nevertheless, neither absent nor obsolete; "Indigenous forms did not disappear though they were battered, subordinated, eroded, and even modified by the colonial experience."[517] Mothers, mothering, and motherhood as ontological modes and practices of authority and power survived this colonial assault.

Motherhood (nɔ̀) Beyond Gender: A Vodoun Indigenous Notion of Motherhood and Ownership

The Fon- and Gun-based concept of motherhood, as elaborated through the indigenous term *nɔ̀* (also commonly transcribed as *non*), encompasses a rich and complex semantic field that Euro-Western gendering constructs fail to ontologically and socially capture. For example, delineating this culturally specific concept of motherhood, in *Wives of the Leopard*, Edna Bay claims,

> In Dahomey, descendants of Tegbesu claim that there were female counterparts of the *gbonugan daho* (ministers of state) during their ancestor's reign. These palace women were identified by the suffix *–non*, which like *–si* was a gendered suffix. Translated as mother and used to designate biological motherhood, *–non* was also used more broadly to signal ownership or the holding of a charge or responsibility. For example, the mother of a girl named Hwefa was called Hwefanon. The head of a congregation of *vodun* was a *vodunon*. A seller of maize or corn (*gbade*) was *gbadenon*. The head of a household (*hwe*) was *hwenon*.[518]

While Bay would have us believe that *–non* (*–nɔ̀*) is a gendered suffix and concept, she does not fully disclose that *–non* captures a social sphere in which anatomical bodies do not dictate social positionality. First, though it is probable that the anafemale counterparts of the ministers of state were refered to with the suffix *–non* and that the mother of a girl

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[517] Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*, 156.
[518] Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 114-115 (emphasis added).

named Hwefa would be referred to as Hwefanon, these are two different forms of motherhood: socio-ontological motherhood and biological motherhood. While in the first case the suffix –*non* denotes social ownership and indicates a political position and ranking, in the second, –*non* specifically designates the birth mother and signifies biological proprietorship. Explaining this distinction and yet the interrelatedness between these two conceptions of motherhood, in her Africana feminist-womanist call to action, Stewart maintains,

> The power of mothers and the value that females are accorded as a result of their biological motherly potential should not quarantine our hope for the matricentric potential in all humans. Whether childless women, fathers, childless men or children, I am suggesting that all members of the human family can become *socio-ontological mothers*! Motherhood, as an socio-ontological category, is a mode of being that takes instruction from concrete and material experiences of motherhood (actual mothers) but socio-ontologically is extended to other women, men and children in diverse circumstances involving religion and the arts, social organization and governance as well as education and initiation. Motherhood is a title, rank, and status in its own right; but it introduces a repertoire of ideals, values and expectations that all human beings can and should be educated to internalize…. The *socio-ontological mother*, then, is a quality of being that does overlap biological motherhood in some cases but in no way is reducible to biological motherhood. In continuity with James Cone's Christian formulation of ontological blackness, socio-ontological motherhood invites all humanity to *be* in accordance with the principles of mothernity.[519]

The distinction between biological and socio-ontological motherhood is, therefore, significant because it demonstrates that even when the concept *nɔ̀* is applied to anafemales it is not ultimately about gender or biology but rather the ontological import and triumph of becoming a pro-creative person in the world. Hence, while only some are biological mothers, as Stewart upholds, all persons can be and become ontological mothers—pro-creative owner-creators who birth other persons into the world.

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[519] Stewart Diakité, "'Matricentric' Foundations of Africana Women's Religious Practices of Peacebuilding, Sustainability, and Social Change," 75-77.

Second, even as Bay claims that *–non* is a fully gendered suffix, her subsequent examples—*vodunon* (priest-physician of *vodoun*), *gbadenon* (seller of maize) and *hwenon* (head of household)—are not gender specific titles or social positions. To the contrary, both anamales and anafemales can in fact attain these social roles, and become ontological mothers. Hence, while *nɔ̀* can designate biological motherhood and/or an anafemale counterpart, there is often in actuality no correlation between the designation *nɔ̀* and a particular anatomical body or anasex. Correspondingly, affirming Bay's ancillary definition of *nɔ̀* as a designation of ownership, a charge, or a responsibility, in *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, Segurola translates the suffix *nɔ̀* as, "mother," "owner," and "proprietor."[520] Given this semantic and etymological analysis, in the foregoing argument, I translate *nɔ̀* as mother-owner and theorize it as an indigenous matricentric conception of authority and power.

While I would not, of course, deny that motherhood is a biological fact, the indigenous concept of *nɔ̀* illustrates that Gun and Fon ontological conceptions of motherhood can neither be limited to biological affiliation or to a particular anatomical body. Hence, even while anatomical and reproductive differences are recognized and are considered significant given the emphasis on procreation in African life, these differences do not presuppose that either anafemales or anamales are socially superior or inferior. Yet, those who become mothers, whether biologically or socially, are valued as truly pro-creative persons-in-community. Hence, motherhood is not a gendered concept. Rather, it is an ontological goal and achievement—namely, to pro-create and to give birth.

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[520] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 408 (my translation).

Nyɔ́nùxwé: the Vagina and the Power of Mothers (*nɔ̀*)

If being a mother, whether ontological or biological, is a materialization of the matricentric capacity to pro-create and give birth to other persons, then while the womb, as Oyewumi argues, is the central archetype of solidarity and unity, the vagina is, on the other hand, the primary prototype of creative power and authority. Accordingly, in the course of a conversation about indigenous conceptions of female-originated power, as we sat in his outdoor living room space, Bernard Adjibodoun explained, "The 'house of women' (n*yɔ́nùxwê*) is a *vodoun* and a major power in this world."[521] While this at first glance may appear to be a gendered statement, by the expression the "house of women" (n*yɔ́nùxwê*), Bernard was politely referring to the vagina and, thus, the divine capacities specific to this anatomical particularity of women, or better yet, of anafemales (*nyɔ́nù, nõnù*).[522] In chapter four, I theorized that, as the mystery of natural creation, the *vodoun*, like the *adjamanklo* leaves, are divine persons of nature who "cannot be undone" and who "nobody can open and see." By declaring the vagina a *vodoun* (namely, a divine person), equally shrouded in secrecy and mystery as something which "nobody should open and see," Bernard Adjibodoun was establishing a central, indigenous correlation between the creative and pro-creative powers of the *vodoun* as divine persons and the unique birthing and pro-creative capacities of *nyɔ́nùxwé*, the vagina. Furthermore, in the course of our

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[521] Bernard Adjibodoun, Saturday, February 22, 2013.

[522] See Jefferson-Tatum, "The Violence of Translation," 291-292; see also Lefebvre and Brousseau, A Grammar of Fongbe, 534; Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 444; Justice-Amour Mawouton, *Le Fon Precis et Pratique (Français)/Practical Fon Language (English)*, (Benin, 201?), 384-385. Please see my article for my argument regarding the translation of *nyɔ́nù* as "anafemale" rather than "female" or "women," given that this indigenous descriptive concept denotes specifically anatomical difference. Also, based on Lefebvre and Brousseau, please note that I originally used *nyɔ́nû*. However, given its etymological meaning, it is more consistently transcribed as *nyɔ́nù* or *nõnù*. Hence, I correspondingly transcribe anamale here as *súnnù*.

discussion, a friend came to visit and when he inquired about our conversation, Bernard asked him, "Why is *nyɔ̀nùxwé* called a *vodoun*?" and, the man replied matter-of-factly, "Women are the mother's of humanity."

As the place from which all human beings are birthed into the world and, thus, as the materialization of the power and authority of *nɔ̀* (mother-ownership), like the *vodoun*, the vagina is a preeminent divine person that "nobody can open and see." For example, as Bernard explained, based on *vodoun* ethical norms of conduct, it is not permissible for even a husband to glance at his wife naked without her knowledge. To avoid this ethical infringement, when passing by, for instance, when she is in the shower, the husband must announce his presence by saying, "*âgo, âgo, âgo*," which, as explained on numerous occasions, is a verbal means of "knocking" (as if at a door) and asking permission. This phrase is also uttered when opening a new bottle of gin at the beginning of a ritual-prayer for the *vodoun* or the ancestors, and also when a wife removes a cap from her husband's head, often considered the seat of one's *sé* (namely, personhood). Moreover, while often misunderstood even by local devotees and community members, Bernard clarified that menstruation is not in fact either dirty or defiled. Rather, menstrual blood is the materialization of the creative and pro-creative powers of *nyɔ̀nùxwé* (that is to say, "the house of women," or more precisely, the vagina). Hence, as Bernard explained, menstruating women cannot partake in rituals or ceremonies, not because they are unclean, but rather because, as he stated, "the power can reduce another power." As a *vodoun*, the *nyɔ̀nùxwé* is then a competing power that can disrupt the ritual materialization of other divine powers. Hence, since menstruation, I would argue, is conceived as a form of temporary incarnation or divine possession—namely, the materialization of a divine person in the body of an anafemale—then, as Bernard also noted, "the woman will never

be possessed on her cycle."[523] She is, by definition, already possessed; a menstruating woman is then essentially materializing a divine personage.

As the unique materialization of matricentric authority and power, neither the vagina (*nyɔ́nùxwê*) nor motherhood (*nɔ̀*) has an equivalent. When I inquired as to whether the penis (*súnnùxwé*, literally "the house of men," or better yet, anamales) was also considered a *vodoun*, Bernard replied frankly, "there is nothing there."[524] Therefore, even though the penis is undoubtedly a primary symbol of patricentric and masculine power, as evidenced, for instance, by statues and images of Legba with an erect phallus, the penis is, however, not a *vodoun*. Oyewumi then fittingly argues that motherhood is not simply a correlating equivalent of fatherhood, but rather "as the pivot around which family is structured and family life rotates" is its own authoritative institution.[525] In this regard, Oyewumi asserts, "Motherhood in the Yorùbá worldsense is a singular category that is unparalleled by any other. Fatherhood is not its counterpart."[526] Similarly, providing a comparative semantic analysis of the Fon and Gun concepts *tɔ́* ("father") and *nɔ̀* ("mother"), Georges Guédou delineates that while, in such cases as *àjò-tɔ́* (literally, "father of theft;" thief) and *àjɔ́-tɔ́* (namely, "father of commerce;" trader), *tɔ́* denotes "mastery, experience, art, domination, and the moral and physical capacity to do something," conversely, in examples like *àkwɛ́-nɔ̀* (literally, "mother of money; a wealthy person) and *àyí-nɔ̀* (that is, "mother of land;" landowner), "*nɔ̀* connotes possession, acquisition, and the art of preserving one's achievements."[527] Hence, motherhood and fatherhood are seen not as social analogues but as ontologically different materializations of functional

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[523] Bernard Adjibodoun, Saturday, February 22, 2013.
[524] Ibid.
[525] Oyewumi, "Ties that (Un)Bind," 9.
[526] Oyewumi, "Beyond Gendercentric Models," 225
[527] Guédou, *Xó et Gbè*, 227 (my translation).

authority and power. Yet, even so, irrespective of the semantic dissimilarities between *tɔ́* ("father") and *nɔ̀* ("mother"), both anamales and anafemales can be thieves, traders, wealthy, and landowners. Likewise, in comparing the seemingly equivalent social roles denoted as *xwétɔ́* ("father of the house") and *xwénɔ̀* ("mother of the house"), Guédou comments, "the translation is improvising because one never employs one for the other;" *xwétɔ́* and *xwénɔ̀* are not interchangeable social roles.[528] Yet, he concludes that the *xwétɔ́*, as head of the compound, is ultimately superior to the *xwénɔ̀*, the head of the matricentric household.[529] However, in presupposing Euro-Western gendered norms, Guédou ignores that the *xwénɔ̀* as head of the matricentric unit is, as Amadiume argues, the matriarch of the primary family unit, which also functions as an autonomous household—that is, as its own domain of authority and power incomparable with the patricentric compound of the *xwétɔ́*. Thus, while fatherhood requires and presupposes motherhood, motherhood does not necessitate fatherhood. As the vagina (*nyɔ́nùxwé*) as a prime archetype of pro-creative power implies, motherhood (*nɔ̀*) is the primary creative institution and force without which other powers and persons would not exist.

From Wives to Mothers: Persons and Mother-Persons in the Vodoun Social Hierarchy

Based on my theorization of normative personhood in the previous chapter, in the foregoing argument, I have inferred that ontological mother-owners (*nɔ̀*) are materializations of personhood—namely, ethical and pro-creative existence in community. Yet, mother-owners (*nɔ̀*) are not merely persons; mothers are prototypes of personhood—that is, materializations of being and becoming, transmitters of life. While

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[528] Ibid (my translation).
[529] Ibid., 228.

they share in the same ontological substance with all beings and persons, as literally the creators of other persons, I theorize that mothers are, therefore, the actualization of temporal functional superordination—namely, the operational materializations of superior powers and authority. As detailed in chapter five, in his communotheistic conception of the divine cosmos, Ogbonnaya introduces the conception of a hierarchy of responsibilities to explain how, even as all persons retain their ontological equality, nevertheless, through the distribution of communal authority and power, certain persons are temporally subordinate. Similarly, in expanding his communitarian conception to include the whole nature cosmos, I conclude that certain persons—namely, mother-persons—are functionally superordinate. Hence, becoming a *nɔ̀* (that is, mother-owner) is a paramount ontological achievement. Yet, if this is the case, then becoming a mother-owner (*nɔ̀*) means *being* more than a responsible and ethical individual-in-community; it entails *becoming* a collective person.

Given that her[530] creative embodiment presupposes community, a mother (*nɔ̀*) is inherently communal; she embodies within herself both persons waiting to be born and persons fully actualized. Consequently, even though in the course of an interview in English Hounon Olawolé Adjibodoun consistently referred to *Măwŭ* utilizing the male pronoun,[531] when I inquired as to whether he viewed *Măwŭ* as a man and father, he expounded, to the contrary,

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[530] Based on the unique anatomical capacities of the anafemale, and thus the anafemale as the archetype of motherhood, I utilize the female pronoun here but this does not negate the fact that ontological mothers can be anatomically male.

[531] Given that French and English are foreign languages for even contemporary African peoples, who first learn their indigenous languages and only learn Euro-Western languages when they attend school, and that Kwa languages (e.g., Fon, Gun, etc.) do not encode gender, it is not uncommon for the male pronoun "he" to be utilized in the general sense and, thus, to not function as an indicator of either sex or gender. It was

For me, I think that *Mǎwǔ* is a woman because we cannot do anything without our women. The woman will get pregnant for nine month, and when the woman grows, she will give the breast to the baby…. If you look at it strictly, you cannot do anything without women…. This is why in Africa women have a special place, but they don't know. Everyone does not know what is really woman.[532]

Then requesting that he elaborate further, he clarified, "We call the woman our mother. Your mother will be more important for you than your father."[533] By identifying *Mǎwǔ* as a woman, Hounon Olawolé situates mothers—embodied and actualized through women's birthing and care for others—as prime re-presentations of divine authority and creative power. As primary creative persons without whom other beings and persons would not exist, in the *vodoun* world-sense, mothers, or better yet, mother-owners (*nɔ̀*) are then literally embodiments of the collective community. Similarly, in discussing *Mǎwǔ* as the supreme creator deity, Bernard Adjibodoun remarked, "For me, *Mǎwǔ* is a female." Then, providing the example of a plant that reproduces asexually, and, thus, requires no male counterpart, he affirmed, "When you look at nature, it is the female that creates."[534] Hence, in the Gun community, as Bernard attests, *Mǎwǔ* is the "mother creator divinity." Therefore, Bernard affirms, as Oyewumi and Amadiume propose, that mothers and motherhood have no socio-ontological equivalent. As functional materializations of the vagina (*nyɔ́nùxwé*, "the house of women"), mother-owners (*nɔ̀*) are unique manifestations of the creative potency of the universe. Moreover, as an embodiment of the mother and her children, motherhood is then, as argued earlier, an autonomous institution of

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actually not unusual to hear people refer to *Mǎwǔ* as "he" and "him" in English or "il" and "lui" in French and yet speak about *Mǎwǔ* as female and a mother. I think this is also a carry over of early Euro-Western gendering practices that commonly referred to human beings as "man."

[532] Hounon Olawolé Adjibodoun, Thursday, July 24, 2014.

[533] Ibid.

[534] Bernard Adjibodoun, Wednesday, June 4, 2014.

authority and power that neither requires fatherhood nor a patricentric source of sovereignty. Thus, at least in Gun Vodoun religious culture, *Mǎwǔ* is not a male-female divinity,[535] but rather simply and powerfully a supreme mother-owner (*nɔ̀*), who as a collective person and a shared-body materializes through herself all other persons and beings.

In the preceding chapter, in accordance with the proverbial name *Mɛ̌ɲyǐsɛ́*, I proposed that no in-dividual person is the archetype of *sɛ́* (namely, personhood), but rather it is *Mǎwǔ*, the shared-body that is *sɛ́*. As the shared and divided body, I submit that *Mǎwǔ* is, therefore, the collective personification of the *gbɛ̀* nature cosmos; it is, thus, through her shared body (*wǔ*) that beings are birthed and then incorporated "into the world" (*gbɛ̀mɛ̀*) as ethically functional persons (*sɛ́*). Accordingly, when Maupoil asked the diviner Gedegbe about the relationship between *sɛ́* and *Mǎwǔ*, he elaborated,

> *Mawu* and *Sɛ* are one. The terrestrial animals and the birds have a *sɛ*, as well as the plants and minerals. Because all is created by God and carries his[536] mark. That which we call God, this is the assembly of all these *sɛ* and nothing else.[537]

As supreme mother-owner (*nɔ̀*), *Mǎwǔ* is then the collective person that births and embodies all other beings; therefore, *sɛ́* is the distribution of the power and authority of *Mǎwǔ* in the world and also the actualization of the relationality among all beings and *Mǎwǔ*.

Accordingly, as Ogbonnaya proffers, the divine is necessarily familiar; the notion of divine singularity is, therefore, contrary to the principal ideals of family and

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[535] Given the focus on Fon *vodoun* in scholarly literature, as discussed in the previous chapter, *Mǎwǔ* is generally discussed and theorized as the counter part of *Lisa*, who is understood as male.

[536] See my comment in n. 531. This pronoun does not necessarily specify either gender or sex, but rather may function as a generic pronoun.

[537] Maupoil, *La Géomancie à l'anciennce Côte des Esclaves*, 399.

generativity that order the entire cosmos world. Hence, inferring that the African cosmos

presupposes matrifocality, namely, a mother-centered ideology and ideals, Ogbonnaya

declares, "A god incapable of having children or incapable of being in close familial

relationship is not truly god."[538] Hence, the divine is necessarily a mother. Moreover, as

divine persons who share in the mothering responsibilities of *Măwŭ*, the *vodoun* are co-

mothers. Then borrowing Oyewumi's phrasing, for *vodounsi* (devotees), *hounon* (priest-

physicians), and other *vodoun* affiliates within the matricentric and polygynous household

of *vodoun*, "the reality is that children experience many mothers.[539] As embodiments of the

ideals of generativity and familiarity, biological and ontological mothers—as re-

presentations of *Măwŭ*'s distributed divine ownership and authority—are themselves also

collective persons that reflect and materialize divine potency and parturition. Mothers are

then, by definition, always multiple and collective; they embody and birth a plurality of

persons and beings. A mother is never singular.

As collective persons rather than merely in-dividual persons, mother-persons not

only *belong*, they *become*—namely, mother-persons pro-create other persons and, for that

matter, also establish their own household domain. Exploring the social domain of

Yorùbá *ilé*, namely, the patrilineal household, Oyewumi proposes understanding the

social difference between *aya* ("wife") and *ọkọ* ("husband") in non-gendered terms as

rather the distinction of beings a non-owner/outsider (*aya*) versus being an owner/insider

(*ọkọ*). In this regard, Oyewumi offers the following instructive framework:

> All the members of the *ìdílé* (lineage) as a group were called *ọmọ-ilé* and were
> ranked by birth-order. The in-marrying anafemales were as a group called *aye ilé*
> and were ranked by order of marriage. Individually, *ọmọ-ilé* occupied the position
> of *ọkọ* in relation to the in-coming *aya*. As noted earlier, the translation of *aya* as

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[538] Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, 20.
[539] Oyewumi, "The Ties that (Un)Bind," 9.

"wife" and *ọkọ* as "husband" imposes gender and sexual constructions that are not part of the Yorùbá conception and therefore distort their roles. The rational for the translation of the terms lies in the distinction between *ọkọ* and *aya* as owner/insider and nonowner/outsider in relation to the *ilé* as a physical space and symbol of lineage. This insider-outsider relationship was ranked, with the insider being the privileged senior. A married anafemale is an *abilékọ*—one who lives in the house of the conjugal partner. This term shows the centrality of the family compound in defining the status of residents. The mode of recruitment into the lineage, not gender, was the crucial difference—birth for the *ọkọ* and marriage for the *aya*.[540]

Furthermore, proposing that seniority rather than gender determined the social positionality of *aya-ilé* ("in-marrying spouse") and *ọmọ-ilé* ("lineage children") within the *ilé* ("lineage compound"), Oyewumi further elaborates,

> Seniority was based on birth-order for *ọmọ-ilé* and on marriage-order for *aye-ilé*. Children born before a particular *aya* joined the lineage were ranked higher than she was. Children born after an *aya* joined the lineage were ranked lower; to this group she was not an *aya* but an *ìyá* (mother).[541]

Bolstering her claim that motherhood and other social roles were not in fact gendered in pre-colonial Yorùbá society, through theorizing the relationship of the *aya* ("in-marrying spouses") within the *ilé* (patrilineal compound), she demonstrates that *iya* (mothers), that is, *aya* who have children, become owner/insiders. While Oyewumi's observations are focused on the relationship between *ọmọ-ilé* ("lineage children") and *aya-ilé* ("in-marrying spouses"), if we conversely examine the social positionality of *aya* to *ìyá*, Oyewumi's explanations propose that while *aya* remain nonowner/outsiders, in relation to children previously born into the *ilé*,[542] *ìyá* alternatively become owner/insiders, in relation to

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[540] Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*, 44.

[541] Ibid., 45.

[542] See Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*, 46; Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands,* 16. It is worth noting that, as Oyewumi explains, children born into a lineage before an *aya* was married into a lineage were also considered *ọkọ* (insider/owners) in relation to *aya* (outsider/non-owners). Similarly, as noted earlier, Amadiume confirms that in Nnobi Igbo culture, patrilineage daughter were viewed as "husbands" in relationship to "wives."

those children who, as Oyewumi explains, are born subsequent to their in-marrying.

Oyewumi's observations are then not only instructive for reinterpreting the Yorùbá

world-sense but also other similar African ontological worlds. Extending this conceptual

social framework to the wider cosmos, I proffer then that while collective persons, that is,

nɔ̀ ("mothers") are insider owners in the nature community, in-dividual persons are

conversely *asì* ("wives"), or more accurately, outsider spouses.[543] Hence, if we take this

social framework into consideration, then as the literal meaning of the Fon-Gun concept

nɔ̀ ("mother-owner") implies, by becoming a mother, whether ontologically or

biologically, persons as "wives," or better yet, in-marrying spousal partners, gain

ownership and insider status. I would then conclude that as beings that are incorporated

individuals-in-community, persons are *asì*, "in-marrying spouses," but when and if these

persons become *nɔ̀*, that is, collective mother-persons, they become insiders and mother-

owners—namely, they acquire ownership, rather than merely citizenship, within the

Mǎwǔ-gbɛ̀ community.

Section III: Mother-Ownership—Monarchies and Shrines in the Materialization of the Vodoun Social Order

Ownership has been principally theorized and historicized as a patricentric and

patrimonial privilege. However, as our discussion has highlighted, the indigenous concept

nɔ̀ ("mother-owner") offers an important ideological and philosophical basis for

alternatively examining and elaborating indigenous matricentric conceptions of

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[543] See Jefferson-Tatum, "The Violence of Translation," 286-287, for my analysis of *asì* as a non-gendered social position often glossed as "wife," which I theorize simply as "subordinate spouse." While theorization is still valid, notice that I have slightly revised my definition here, based on Oyewumi's arguments elaborated above, to signify *asì* as simply "outsider spouse."

ownership, power, and authority. Hence, to provide such an illustration of matricentricity, let us for a moment return to our historical framing of *vodoun* religious cultures that we began in chapter three.

Mothers, Authority, and Monarchy: Materializations of Mother Sovereignty

Championing and even partially fabricating an exclusively patricentric conception of monarchal power and authority, in *Dahomey and its Neighbors* (1967), I. A. Akinjogbin proposed that the Yorùbá and Adja kingdoms functioned collectively as an *ebi* commonwealth in which the kingdom operated as a family network. According to Akinjogbin, this family complex was based on the father-child relationship wherein, as he claims, "the smallest unit within the state was not the individual, but the family."[544] Yet, as we have discussed, the smallest unit is not the family (the patricentric compound) proper, but rather the household (the matricentric unit), namely, the mother-child relationship based on, as Oyewumi and Amadiume propose, the matrifocal ideologies and ideals of solidarity and unity. Hence, as Amadiume and Oyewumi argue, while, structurally, on the one hand, the patricentric unit operated as a familiar political terrain of conflict and competition, on the other hand, the matricentric unit normatively functioned as a domain of egalitarianism. For instance, observing a kinship ethic elaborated in the Nnobi Igbo concepts of *umunne*, *imenne*, and *ibenne*, Amadiume notes the following,

> The smallest and closest kinship group are siblings in the matricentric unit, *umunne otu afo*, children of one womb. Their closeness and solidarity can best be understood in the context of polygyny, in the alliances and intrigues embodied in that system. The primary group, to whom the term *umunne* is applied, should be distinguished from the kindred group to who the same term is applied. In the case

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[544] Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours*, 15-16.

of the kindred group, the term is qualificatory and applies to the expected relationship between members of the minor patrilineage which is the kindred group said to belong to one *immenne*, inner-mother circle, and are therefore *umunne* to one another, that is, bound in the spirit of common motherhood….

Ibenne is the supernatural sanction applied to the relationship among siblings and other blood relations right up to the whole *imenne* group in the minor lineage, to ensure continued intimacy and relations of trust among members. *Ibenne* is referred to as a deity; it has no shrine but nevertheless is said to be very powerful. When brothers or close blood relatives betray, steal from, or kill one another to usurp land or commit incest, it is said to strike, to kill outright and to be deaf to pleas for mercy: *ibenne ada anu biko ghaluba – ibenne* does not listen to 'please forgive.'

Umunne, *imenne* and *ibenne* are all suffixed by the Igbo word for mother *–nne*…. In contrast to this, dealings among *umunna* – suffixed by the word for father, *nna* – are associated with distrust, suspicion, greed, jealously, envy, witch-hunting and sorcery; it is in the *umunna* group that status is reckoned.[545]

While additional historical and socio-cultural research will be necessary to confirm my suspicions, given at least these observations, I conjecture that it is perchance alternatively the matricentric bond of children born from the same mother-womb that actually provides the basis for claiming that pre-colonial Yorùbá and Adja kingdoms constituted a "commonwealth"—that is, a conglomeration of kingdoms bound by a common good. Whereas, to the contrary, it is conceivable that the patricentric bond between kingdoms actually facilitated a culture of competition and conflict that perhaps even instigated the emergence of Dahomey, as the unruly "son" of the Allada father-kingdom. Hence, since as he states, monarchs are often referred to as "fathers," namely, *baba* among the Yorùbá and *dada* for the Dahomeans, perhaps Akinjogbin is not entirely wrong in claiming that "each 'father-king' of each 'family-state' looked on his neighbor in a particular family relationship, and all the 'father-kings' of all the 'family-states' looked on one particular king as 'Father' who in turn regarded all the other kings as 'sons.'"[546] Nonetheless, while

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[545] Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 62.

[546] Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours*, 15-16.

monarchs were and still are referred to utilizing patricentric symbols, monarchs were also

addressed in ways that emphasized motherhood as an equally central paradigm of

authority and power.

For example, in *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750* (1991), Robin Law argues

that, in contrast to pre-colonial Adja-Yorùbá kingdoms, Dahomean monarchal

sovereignty was conceived as grounded in ideologies of ownership rather than kinship and

family. In this respect, he states,

> In Dahomey, in fact, royal authority was explicitly defined in terms of territory
> rather than consanguinity, and conceived in patrimonial rather than patriarchal
> terms. In Dahomean thought, sovereignty was equated with rights of ownership,
> Dahomey being the property of the king. One of the king's titles was *ainon*, or
> "owner of the land," and royal ownership of the land was held to confer
> ownership also of everything on it, including its human population: "the soil of
> Dahomey belonged to the king and everything born on it was *Dahomenu*, thing or
> people of Dahomey belonging to the king." The inhabitants of Dahomey were
> accordingly, as Robert Norris already noted in the 1770s, legally "all slaves to the
> king."[547]

Notwithstanding the description of the inhabitants of Dahomey as essentially slaves, what

is interesting is that, as our earlier discussion regarding the suffix *–non (–nɔ̀)* indicates, *ainon*

means precisely, "mother-owner of the land." Hence, what Law frames as patrimonial

authority might be better conceptualized as matrimonial sovereignty, wherein authority

and power is vested in a common mother-owner. Moreover, while it has been presumed,

as Akinjogbin's theory would suggest, that perhaps this form of sovereignty represented a

unique Dahomean political innovation, it is more likely that this political structure was

merely an elaboration of a preexisting matricentric institution. Accordingly, Law offers

the following reflections,

> Although intuitively plausible, however, this interpretation may exaggerate the
> degree to which Dahomey differed in its ideology and organization from the states

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[547] Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 70-71.

which preceded it. Dahomian tradition itself asserts that before the rise of Dahomey, the ruler of the Ghedevi, the dominant group of the area… had been considered 'owner of the land,' until he was conquered and killed by the founder of Dahomey…. While, therefore, this patrimonial ideology may well have been given greater emphasis and elaboration in Dahomey (and effective power there was certainly more concentrated in the king's hands), it was more probably a development of elements within the existing traditions of political ideology than something wholly new.[548]

Law concludes thus that monarchal ownership and, therefore, the political formation of a state were not political innovations but rather reflected "an inheritance from the earlier political culture of the region."[549] I would, however, additionally propose that, while perhaps pre-colonial Adja and Yorùbá kingdoms were political elaborations of biological motherhood and, thus, were based on ideologies of kinship, the Dahomean monarchal ideology of ownership was the explicit materialization of an ontological mother-ownership—namely, motherhood that neither presupposed nor required a biologically-based familial relationality. Hence, while my analysis does not preclude interpretations of early Adja- and Yorùbá-based kingdoms as patricentric or patrimonial political institutions, it does, however, suggest that matrifocal ideologies and ideals were at least as pivotal in shaping the political structure of Adja and Yorùbá monarchal sovereignties.

Vodounxwé: Mother-Owners in the House of Vodoun

While the monarchy is a major socio-cultural structure of authority and power, the *vodounxwé* (that is, "house of vodoun," or, more precisely, the shrine-house) also functions as another primary site of indigenous sovereignty. Within the *vodounxwé*, there

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[548] Ibid., 72.
[549] Ibid.

are two primary relational social positions: the *vodounsi* and the *hounon*.[550] *Vodounsi*,

commonly translated as simply "wife of *vodoun*," signifies the in-marrying, outsider spouse

of a *vodoun*. Hence, a *vodounsi* is a devotee, a person who has gone through the initial rites

of incorporation to attain citizenship within the *vodoun* household. However, *hounon*

literally means "mother-owner of blood," wherein *houn* (*hùn*) signifies, as noted previously,

kinship ties and vital creative force, and –*non* (*nɔ̀*) signifies precisely, mother-owner. The

hounon is then the powerful mother-owner who births, guides, shepherds, and cares for

both *vodounsi* and the community at large. Hence, the *vodounxwé* (namely, the shrine-house)

can be conceived as a matricentric household founded on the relationship between, in

this case, the *hounon* mother-owner and *vodounsi* non-owner-spouses of the *vodoun*, who are

children in relation to the *hounon*, who birth and consecrate them into the community.

The *vodounxwé* is then a household bonded in common motherhood through the *hounon*,

whose authority and power as an owner, rather than merely a citizen of *vodoun*, is

exercised via his or her functional superordination as a priest-physician within the

community.

If a *vodounsi*, an outsider, non-owner spouse of the *vodoun*, desires to become a

mother insider-owner, a *hounon*, then additional rites of incorporation beyond their

preliminary initiation, or in other words, conjugal unioning with the *vodoun* are required.

In the previous chapter, we explored herbal baths as central rituals of consumption that

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[550] Bernard Adjibodoun, Saturday, May 17, 2014; See Blier, *African Vodun*, 47.
There are two sides of *vodoun*: white vodoun (*vodoun*) and red vodoun (*hùn*). In white
vodoun, the primary social positions are *hounon* (priest-physician) and *vodounsi* (devotee).
Correspondingly, in red vodoun, the central social positions are *vodounon* (priest-physician)
and *hunsi* (devotee). While *hounon* and *vodounon* are both priest-physicians, *vodounon* are
generally more powerful, especially given that their domain of authority is often a region
rather than a particular shrine-house. Nevertheless, as Bernard Adjibodoun noted, " in
general all is *vodoun* but each side is a part, like the parts of the body, but all is in the same
body."

by facilitating *ɖù gbὲ* (that is, the consumption of life)—via the feeding of a particular

body-*sέ* complex and of the community—incorporate generic beings into *Măwŭ-gbὲ* as

ethical persons. While these baths are employed for both curative and initiatory purposes,

for initiations, there are three stages of herbal baths that actualize and materialize the

ontological process by which *vodounsi* persons become *hounon* mother-persons. Hence,

prior to the first herbal bath, as Hounon Olawolé explained, "you are not in the way,"[551]

you are precisely an unincorporated person with respect to *vodoun*. Hence, at the first

stage of initiation, a person learns about his or her specific *vodoun* and prohibitions,

specifically, what she or he can and cannot eat. This initial stage can, therefore, be

characterized as learning how to properly *ɖù gbὲ* ("to consume life" and "to enjoy") as

new residents within the *vodoun* household. At the second stage, a *vodounsi* obtains the

blessings and power of specific *vodoun*. At this stage, though still a non-owner/outsider,

having become an elder spouse, the *vodounsi* achieves a deeper knowledge and familial

intimacy within the *vodounxwé*. Finally, the last stage is an extended process of ordination

wherein a *vodounsi* receives training, blessings, and additional powers.[552] During this

pivotal phase, the *vodounsi* retains full knowledge and full initiation and, thereby, becomes

an insider-incorporated *hounon*—a mother-owner who having fully embodied and

consumed life (*ɖù gbὲ*) has literally become a collective person. As a *hounon*, this mother-

persons is now responsible for tending to the healing and curative needs of the

community and for birthing others, whose ancestors and divinities demand it, into the

vodounxwé. The *vodounxwé* signifies, therefore, both the specific shrine-household and the

larger *vodoun* cosmos, wherein the *vodoun* are the ultimate mother-owners who birth, labor,

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[551] Hounon Olawolé Adjibodoun, Thursday, April 10, 2014.

[552] Hounon Olawolé Adjibodoun, Thursday, April 10, 2014; Bernard Adjibodoun, Friday, May 9, 2014.

and feed the community. Hence, the *vodounxwé* is a domain of mother-owner sovereignty

in which persons can actualize their ontological capacity to *become* mother-owners like the

vodoun themselves.

Section IV: "We Drink Our Vodoun": Motherhood and the Consumption of Vodoun

Given that the consumption of life is central to becoming both persons and

mother-persons and to reinforcing and consecrating community, then in this present

section, I argue that as divine mother-owners, who are the epitomes of the ontological

achievement of mother-ownership, the *vodoun* are not only fed, they are consumed. While

the *vodoun* can be understood as female or male, in *Dan Mami Wata* communities in

particular, in which *mamisi* (devotees of *Mami Wata*) are considered mother leader-

servants, it is motherhood that is the embodiment of divine generativity. Yet, not only are

many *vodoun* considered mothers, given *Măwŭ* as the supreme mother creator, divine

authority is oft idealized as mother power. Hence, as argued earlier, as co-mothers (*nɔ̀*)

within the matricentric household of *Măwŭ-gbè*, the *vodoun* are ultimate materializations of

divine mother-ownership.

What is particularly significant is that the matricentric household, as a familial

unit of solidarity, is also, as Amadiume theorizes it, a consumption unit. It is a household

consolidated and consecrated through communion, through practices of eating and

drinking, and, moreover, sacrifice, offerings, and libations. Therefore, in her conception

of the Nnobi Igbo matricentric household, Amadiume elaborates,

> In Nnobi social structure, the *mkpuke*, which I regard as the matricentric structure
> of matriarchy, is the smallest kinship unit and the smallest production unit. It is a
> good example of where the structure of the production unit determines the
> consumption unit, for it is a unit which eats what it produces. It produces for self-

consumption; it is an autonomous household-based unit…. Those who eat out of one pot are bound in the spirit of common motherhood. This ideological structure is reproduced in the wider political order in which the whole of Nnobi are bound as children of a common mother – the goddess Idemili, the deity worshipped by all Nnobi.[553]

Hence, the matricentric unit is precisely defined as "those who eat out of one pot."

Literally, through the sharing of food, as Amadiume affirms, persons are "bound in the spirit of common motherhood."[554] Communal eating and drinking, as theorized in the previous chapter, are then essential practices of communion that regularly facilitate and sustain community cohesion. Accordingly, just as Nnobi peoples are bound in common motherhood through the goddess *Idemili*, *vodoun* peoples (Gun, Fon, Adja, Mahi, etc.) are, too, equally bound to the *vodoun* as co-mothers, who share in the mother-ownership of *Măwŭ*.

Consuming Vodoun: Truth Rituals and the Law of Vodoun

Since *ɖù gbὲ*, the consumption of life, incorporates persons within community, as divine co-mothers, namely, the divine personifications of *Măwŭ-gbὲ*, the *vodoun* are not only fed, they are consumed. Confirming this sentiment, as Bernard Adjibodoun matter-of-factly stated, "In *vodoun*, we drink *vodoun*, but you have to be clean." This means no killing, no sending evil, no adultery, no transmitting disease, no destructive spirits, and no stealing.[555] In the Gun community of Porto-Novo, there are, accordingly, two central rites for consuming *vodoun*, namely, *zekpon adonon* and *nù vodoun*. Each of these rites of communion are intended to determine if particular persons and community members are ethical and true—namely, recalling our discussion in the previous chapter, whether or not

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[553] Amadiume, *Re-Inventing Africa*, 18.

[554] Ibid.

[555] Bernard Adjibodoun, Monday, Friday 17, 2014.

persons are fulfilling their own *sé* (their own in-dividual personal destiny), *and* following

the supreme *sé* (the collective law and ultimate destiny) of the *Măwŭ-gbè* community.

Hence, in the context of expounding on the potency and significance of leaves, animals,

and other natural elements within the ontological philosophy of *vodoun*, Bernard explained

that in Adjarra there is a sacred lake and divinity called *Zkpon Adomon*. This *vodoun* is

invoked in prayers and its waters are used for purification. Elaborating on the latter,

Bernard clarified, "it used to be that families, wife and husband, would drink the sacred

water," and, if, for instance, either of them had cheated, their family members would fall

sick and pass away.[556]

Similarly, *nù vodoun*, which literally means, "to drink *vodoun*," is a ritual of

consumption through which the ethics of the community are solidified and ensured. In

this case, however, the *vodoun* cosmos gathers together to collectively bind the community

in common motherhood. Literally bring together the natural elements of air, fire, earth,

and water that solidify and complete life, in making *nù vodoun*, a *hounon* (i.e., priest-

physician) combines leaves, a gun or machete of *Ogou*, sand for *Sakpata*, and water for *Dan

Mami Wata*. Upon its consumption, if a person is not "clean" then, as Bernard elucidated,

they will speak all of their wrongs or die in nine days time. Then, Bernard commented,

"So some people runaway, it is these people who often join the church to avoid the laws

of *vodoun*."[557] Just as mothers give life, mothers, as the saying goes, can also take life away.

For example, implying that a *vodounon*, who had recently died at the young age of thirty-

seven, had not in fact properly *ɖù gbè* ("consumed life"), and thus had not ethically

conducted his affairs, Bokono Adanklounon commented, "If you are *vodounsi* or a *vodonon*,

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[556] Bernard Adjibodoun, Wednesday, January 1, 2014.
[557] Bernard Adjibodoun, Monday, February 17, 2014.

you have to be clean."[558] In consuming *vodoun*, the matricentric potency of life, persons

and even mother-persons are either incorporated or entirely eradicated from the life

community. Consuming *vodoun* is then a rite that one does not take lightly.

As a warning, it is often also said that one must know how to drink a woman. As

another actualization of the potency of *nɔ̀*, namely, of mother-ownership, let us recall that

the *nyɔ́nùxwé* ("the house of women;" namely, the vagina) is, too, a *vodoun*. Hence,

according to the etymological meaning of *nyɔ́nù* (anafemale), even though motherhood is

not a biological given, as embodiments of matricentric procreative potentiality, one must

"know how to drink" a woman. While *nyɔ́* signifies "to know," *nù* denotes the "mouth"

and "to drink."[559] Hence, as Bernard Adjibodoun clarified, women are materialities one

must know how to properly and ethically engage, especially before proposing marriage.[560]

Equally, as divine actualizations of mother-ownership, as our discussion has highlighted,

one must "know how to drink" the *vodoun*, for in consuming their vital procreative energy,

life is either restored or terminated.

Ontological mothers and mothering are then materializations of not only

community solidarity, but also are the embodiment and workings of ownership through

the enforcement of the laws of *vodoun* that sustain harmony and balance within the *Mǎwǔ-

gbè* nature cosmos. Hence, mothering and motherhood give life, but, if and when the laws

of *gbè* (life, existence, nature) are violated and individuals fail to live according to their *sɛ́*

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[558] Bokono Sètondji Adanklounon, Tuesday, January 3, 2014.

[559] Bernard Adjibodoun, Tuesday, February 11, 2014 and Wednesday, Jul 16, 2014; See also Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 412-413, 443; Mawouton, *Le Fon Precis et Pratique (Français)*, 382-383.

[560] Bernard Adjibodoun initially provided this etymology while explaining that Thursday is *nyɔ́nùzangbe*, literally "the day of women," a day of peace and happiness and traditionally the day for marriage proposals. Hence, this etymology implies that a person must know "how to drink" a woman before proposing marriage. Yet, this is likewise also true for the *vodoun* who are equally bond in conjugal union with their *vodounsi*.

(their personal destiny and functional purpose), then mothers as life owners can also take life away. Mother-owners (*nɔ̀*) are then potent materializations of both life (*gbɛ̀*) and law (*sɛ́*), and, as a result, persons to be "consumed" with great care.

"Our Mothers": Anti-Persons and the Politics of Consumption

Yet, not all mothers are consumed. While mothers are generally normative ideals of pro-creativity and generativity, there are also other mothers who embody and materialize counter-creative powers and non-generative constructions of sovereignty. Hence, just as the vagina and the womb are embodiments of pro-creative power, and, therefore, mother-ownership (*nɔ̀*), they are likewise also potentially onto-anatomical domains for the materialization of mal-creative capacity—namely, mother anti-persons and anti-personhood (*minɔ̀na*). Since biology is not destiny, as Oyewumi and Menkiti both affirm, beings must actualize their functional capacities to fully become persons (*sɛ́*) or mother persons (*nɔ̀*) or even to, in a sense, un-become anti-persons (*minɔ̀na*). While normative motherhood is oft idealized, not all mothers are models of ethical being-in-community. Some mothers are quite the contrary. Yet, as Stewart argues, nevertheless, motherhood provides an orientational indigenous vocabulary for conceptualizing both constructive and destructive authority and power.[561] While often misrepresented through such Western concepts as "magic" and "witchcraft," motherhood, namely, the indigenous concept *minɔ̀na*, proffers a Fon- and Gun-based framework for understanding counter-productive vital potency and sovereignty.

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[561] Stewart Diakité, "'Matricentric' Foundations of Africana Women's Religious Practices of Peacebuilding, Sustainability, and Social Change," 63.

The word m*inɔna* signifies precisely "our mother-owners of *aze*" but is often simply and respectfully translated as "our mothers."[562] Segurola translates *aze* as "devilry, witchcraft, sorcery, black magic."[563] Yet, in my opinion, these proposed translations are at best glosses and at worst completely pervert *vodoun* indigenous conceptions of destructive and mal-creative power. When I inquired as to whether the m*inɔna* have always been conceived of as negative, Bernard Adjibodoun explained that the m*inɔna* were originally consulted and owned by a society of elders who utilized this superior power to protect the village and the people. He further elaborated that during colonial times this power was a form of indigenous weaponry that enabled people to change their form to attack their enemies in secrecy or to send disease. Hence, while this power is inherently mal-creative and destructive, given that anything that disturbs life is ultimately negative, as Bernard affirmed, it was and to some extent still is, nevertheless, a necessary means of protection. However, today this indigenous technology is, as he elucidated, being "bought" by the young for only personal gain, and being utilized for self-serving purposes that violate communal ethics. Nevertheless, given that the *minɔna* can also be employed to heal, even today the m*inɔna* are not entirely negative. Hence, while the *minɔna* and *aze* are materializations of counterproductive potency—that is, ultimately the counter to the principle of transmitting life—the *minɔna* still have a temporal function; each *aze* even has a specialty, a vocation.[564] Accordingly, when I asked Hounon Olawolé why the *minona* existed, he offered the following explanation,

> They have to exist because you know in the world we have positive power; we have negative power. The two work together. If you see someone, the person will be positive and also negative. The *minɔna* normally are not for everybody to have

[562] Bernard Adjibodoun, Friday, February 14, 2014.
[563] Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 80.
[564] Bernard Adjibodoun, Friday, February 14, 2014; Tuesday, June 24, 2014.

their way. It's for our ancestors. How can I explain? "Witch" is for old person. And, they take it to protect themselves. It's some power that's not doing a bad thing. Now a days people are taking the "witch" to use it do negative…. *Minɔna* have a special place in the world because they are powerful. We cannot do anything without them. They are very powerful…. We have to accept them…. Its why more and more people have to make sacrifice to them to apologize and for them to protect them.[565]

In the *vodoun* cosmos, there is an understanding that both constructive and destructive forces, powers, and beings are merely a fact of existence. Anti-persons exist because existence presupposes both the negative and the positive poles of life; one cannot exist without the other. Accordingly, in *vodoun*, there is no theodicy, no problem of evil to be solved. The focus is not on why destructive forces exist but rather how to co-exist with these multiple forces, beings, and powers. Even the *minɔna* have a purpose and function in the lifeworld and as mother-owners must be acknowledged and addressed.

To provide an apt example, let me illustrate my own experience with the *minɔna*. During my field research in Benin, I was experiencing stomach troubles, which is not uncommon when navigating a new environment and eating new foods. However, in my case, ever since I was ten years old, I have had unexplained stomach problems. I received test after test, and the doctors settled on a diagnosis of exclusion, namely, Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), and prescribed me pills to address my flare-ups, but I was basically told nothing more could be done. Eating became a regularly painful and sickening experience, and so by the time I was in my twenties I had adopted a vegetarian diet. This helped some, but the problem still persisted. And so, while in Benin, I decided to consult Hounon Adanklounon. He divined and Fa revealed that I needed to make an offering to the *minɔna*, who control and are connected to the stomach. I was told to offer three large bowls of mixed raw meat (precisely, goat, beef, rooster, and pork), palm oil, and

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[565] Hounon Olawolé Adjibodoun, Thursday, July 24, 2014.

traditional alcohol. And, I did as prescribed. Yet, while most offerings are consumed, this offering for the *minɔ̀na* was not. Instead, after Hounon Adanklounon prepared the bowls of raw meat, he left them in the sacred forest just before the evening. He returned the next day and explained that the bowls were empty, and so the sacrifice was successful and all would be well. And ever since, my stomach problems have vanished. Yet, what is most central about this offering ritual is that even though the *minɔ̀na* were working on my behalf for healing and restorative purposes because they are still ultimately anti-social and destructive forces, they had to be fed apart and, therefore, their meal could not be shared with the community. Hence, the *minɔ̀na* as mother anti-persons are, unlike the *vodoun*, not consumed because to drink and consume them would be the opposite of *ḍù gbὲ* ("consuming life").

The *minɔ̀na* as anti-persons are, therefore, mother-owners who embody and materialize the destructive and counter-productive potencies of life. Yet, nevertheless, as "our mothers," as superior mother powers, they are owed respect and acknowledgement. However, while these mothers must be addressed and appeased, they are not consumed and are not fed in community, rather as anti-social beings, they eat alone.

CONCLUSION

As materializations of the multiplicity of the procreative cosmos and as the normative prototypes of ethical persons, ontological mothers, namely, *nɔ̀*, are not only being and belonging, they are becoming. That is to say, they are collective persons who pro-create other persons. Their ontology presupposes community. Mothers and motherhood are then, by definition, not singular. They are always plural.

Yet, as ontological beings that have the capacity to give and take life away, mothers are, too, the concretization of counter-productive and counter-generative life forces. As the *minɔna*, ontological mothers are then, by definition, *un-becoming*—that is, their matricentric potency and authority is ultimately counter-productive to the transmission of life. Yet, as argued previously, all beings are *gbè* beings irrespective of their temporal functional ordination or their ethical status. Hence, while not all beings actualize their *sé* (their personhood) through the transmission of life, destructive and procreative forces and beings alike are part and parcel of the *gbè* nature cosmos. Hence, as sources of indigenous weaponry and technology, even these anti-person, ontological mothers, are central and necessary to life. Providing an apt example, Bernard Adjibodoun once stated that cars are the work of the *aze*, but we need them to drive from place to place, and, thus, modern technologies (e.g., TVs, computers, cellphones, etc.) are necessary evils, if you will. Hence, the *minɔna* (and correspondingly the *aze*) as superior authorities and sources of power cannot be adequately interpreted through such Euro-Western translation concepts as "witchcraft," "sorcery," or "magic." Instead, examined through the lens of ontological motherhood, the *minɔna* are elaborated as anti-persons and yet still as nature beings, as being intimately interconnted with the *gbè* cosmos. Therefore, in sharing in the *gbè* nature substance, the *minɔna* are then essential sources of authority and power that support the equilibrium of the wider cosmos world.

Whether procreative or degenerative, motherhood reveals a major indigenous framework for understanding power and authority in the *vodoun* cosmos. Hence, the Fon- and Gun-based indigenous orientational category of *nɔ* proffers a means for theorizing and framing the *vodoun* and the *minona* as not merely "deities" and "witches" but rather as

person and *anti-person* "mother-owners." The divine world is then not an otherworldly

cosmos; it is the matricentric household that procreates our lifeworld.

<div align="center">

CONCLUSION:
Towards a Generic African Religious Materialist Philosophy

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***Returning to the Beginning: From Bad Objects to Nature Beings, Ethical
Persons, and Mother-Owners***

I began this present work interrogating the category of religion as more than a

concept or a theory, but also as a politics—namely, an asymmetrical ideological relation

between religion and its Others (e.g., primitives, idols, fetishes, totems, etc.). Situating this

politics as originating in the tenuous affiliation between religion and matter, wherein

primitive Others become material counter-datum for the construction of religion, I

proposed that this politics of religious materiality establishes and solidifies "persons,"

"objects," and "gods" as normative ontological categories. Given this colonialist and

modern imagining of religion, the taxonomy of "persons," "objects," and "gods" has been

conceptualized as a human universal. Euro-Western scholars have essentially confused

and conflated the human with the Western. The meta-ontological catalogue of "persons,"

"objects," and "gods" is then an intellectual fabrication specific to the Euro-Western

episteme and its modern ideological anxieties. Its central anxiety concerns precisely

maintaining *right* relationships between these purportedly distinct ontological domains. In

so doing, this Western taxonomy fortifies the negative space around the disciplinary

category of religion, through reinforcing its "bad objects"—namely, the totem, the idol,

and the fetish—that manufacture and invent the dichotomous relationship between the

religious and the *material* that is embedded within the conceptual architecture of

comparative religious studies. While each of these Euro-Western concepts names a

purported irregularity with religious matters, as a product of imperialist and

Enlightenment thinking, the fetish concept emerged as a novel problem-idea that

violently translated and converted African indigenous religious materialities into mere primitive fancy and trifles.

Disregarding Euro-Western epistemological norms and material ideations and, as follows, imagining a pathway beyond the "bad objects" of religion, I queried: How might we conceptualize and theorize a world cosmos wherein material relationships and institutions of power and authority construct different epistemological truths and ontological genres—that is, different bodies, beings, and selves? Hence, in my theoretical and ethnographic examination of Vodoun religious culture, rather than merely positing a more positive relationship with religious things, in response, I examined how matter is *lived* and how indigenous ontological types determine the social intercourse of the cosmos world. Discovering a materially agentive landscape that challenged the Euro-Western construction of immanent, inanimate "things," human "persons," and transcendent "gods," I elucidated an immanently metaphysical world wherein: 1) all entities, irrespective of their organic or seemingly inorganic form, are *gbè* beings, that is, beings that are intrinsically part and parcel of the nature cosmos world, 2) all beings, irrespective of their biological makeup, have the capacity to become normative *persons* through the actualization of their *sɛ́* (their personal destiny and temporal functional vocation), and 3) all ontological mothers are *mother-owners* that, as collective persons (*nɔ̀*), birth other persons (e.g., *Mǎwǔ*, monarchs, *hounon*, *vodounon*, *vodoun*), or as collective anti-persons (*minɔ̀na*), materialize a counter-productive potency often, though not exclusively, employed for self-serving and destructive purposes. Religious matters are then not merely about relationships with objects or even things, but rather, given this interrelational cosmos, include the material subtleties of social relationships, communal ethics, and institutional power and authority.

From the Particular to the Generic: Towards a Theory of African Religious Materiality

Although this Vodoun religious landscape of nature beings, inclusive persons, and mother-owners offers a vibrant cosmos of religious matters, how does this shape and impact, if at all, our broader conception of Africana religious worlds? In other words, how does the particular inform our theorization of the general? If, as Jonathan Z. Smith advises, we are to avoid taking the part for the whole and "thereby giving priority to the local rather than the general and typical,"[566] it is imperative to examine Africana religious cultures comparatively to begin to construct a generic theory of African religious materiality. It is true that generalizations have their limitations and have participated in the proliferation of stereotypes over and against realities. However, how are scholars of religions in Africa to establish a disciplinary horizon and trajectory for the field without cultivating theories particular to our scholarly contexts? If we continue to merely use imported methodologies, theories, and concepts, we inadvertently deny the theoretical purchase of African ontological philosophies and epistemological grammars and, furthermore, repudiate the validity of Africana indigenous literacies to wider world discourses concerning such topics as, ethics, human rights, environmental sustainability, and religious pluralism.

While developing this general theory is beyond the present scope of this project, I will provide a few precursory observations with an attention to the materially elaborated ontological themes that have been detailed in this text. However, having already extensively explored Yorùbá- and Igbo-based conceptions of motherhood in chapter six, I will focus my attention here on the ontological categories of nature and personhood as

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[566] See Smith, *Relating Religion*, 368.

elaborated in two Africana metaphysical landscapes: the Haitian Vodou *nanm* and the Kongolese *nkisi*. By this means, I hope to generate a preliminary conceptual foundation for an elaborate theorization concerning the vibrant functionality of materiality in Africana religious worlds.

Nature—The Haitian Vodou Nanm

In Haitian Vodou, like its continental counterpart, there is deep connectedness to nature. The *lwa*, like the *vodoun* deities of the continent, are "new world" indigenous beings co-existent with the natural and material world-sense of everyday Haitian realities. They include: *Legba*, the *lwa* of the crossroads; *Damballa*, the great serpent; *Gede*, the *lwa* of death; *Ogou*, the *lwa* of iron and war; *Ezili-Danto*, the *lwa* of motherhood; and *Ezili-Freda*, the *lwa* of love and beauty (to name just a few). Still, Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel describe this world of *vodouisants* (namely, the "servants" of the *lwa*) and *lwa* best when they assert: "Vodou embraces nature and the larger cosmos that validates our existence as part of the material world. We live in a biocentric universe in which we create the universe and are created by it. We exist as organic beings in line with all other energetic forces, including spirits."[567] There is, as such, no disconnect between the physical and the metaphysical;[568] the material and the natural are, here too, a canvas for the expression of various beings—whether *lwa*, ancestors, or other natural forms.

The Haitian Vodou notion of *nanm* (often defined as "spiritual essence," "power," "soul" or "life-force") proffers a pivotal indigenous concept for theorizing the nature-

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[567] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, "Danbala/Ayida as Cosmic Prism: The Lwa as Trope for Understanding Metaphysics in Haitian Vodou and Beyond," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 4 (2013): 470.

[568] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith explicitly made this claim in an interview *On Being* with Krista Tippett.

centeredness of Haitian Vodou. In *Voodoo in Haiti* (1959), Alfred Métraux makes a central

contribution in his theorization regarding this Haitian creole term. Métraux argues that

nanm is present within all ritually consecrated entities and all elements of life. Accordingly,

he elaborates the following, "A soul is attributed to the sun, to the earth and to plants

because they all influence man and nature. It is the *nanm* in foodstuffs which makes

children grow, and *nanm*, too, which gives plants their medicinal powers."[569] Yet,

Métraux's own analysis suggests that *nanm* is not a "soul" in the traditional sense of being

an immaterial substance or even necessarily a transcendent entity. Rather, he contends

that this natural life force is "*not* un-material." As he explains, "A worker in the fields,

under the midday sun, can feel its presence in the form of a breeze stroking his face, and

can see its shadow outlined behind it."[570] Hence, *nanm* is an indigenous category that

conceptually captures the Haitian Vodou landscape as an immanently metaphysical

domain. While Métraux understands this Haitian indigenous notion of *nanm* through the

category of animism, it is not necessary to introduce a Euro-Western ontological category

to make sense of or translate this Haitian Vodou metaphysics. I would argue, therefore,

that this concept of a natural force and power that is material and always embodied—

such as, in the wind, the soil of the earth, and the drops of the rain—is an apt example of

the concrete materiality of this Africana natural cosmos world.

Personhood—The Kongolese Nkisi: Spirit or Object?

    Nkisi is a Kikongo word that has etymological and cultural roots among the

Bakongo of western Angola and Democratic Republic of Congo and its neighboring

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[569] Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Schocken Books, 1959), 153.
[570] Ibid., 154.

cultural communities. Generically, the term *nkisi* (pl. *minkisi*) is etymologically linked to other Central African terms that are often translated as "spirit,"[571] which ontologically identifies the *nkisi* with various invisible beings, such as, the ancestors (*bakulu*), local spirits (*bisimbi*), ghosts (*minkuyu*), and a fourth class of unidentified entities that are harnessed through the *nkisi*.[572] Art historians and anthropologists, however, often understand the *nkisi* as a ritual "object," a religiously significant *thing*, which contains or harnesses a spirit for the purpose of producing some action, for example, curing infertility, protecting one's home against spies, or even attacking a person who has harmed or disturbed another individual. Physically, the *nkisi* may include clay, stones, or gray-dust to incorporate the energy or power of the dead who are believed to dwell within the earth. The *nkisi* often also includes *bilongo* (medicines), which can be made from animal, mineral, or vegetable elements as well as components of the human body such as hair and nails. Upon completion, a *nkisi* is infixed within a shrine, or formed into a statue, an amulet, or a packet that can be worn on the body or kept in a basket.[573]

Hence, while scholars have inversely translated *nkisi* as "spirit" and/or as "object," there is no precise English analogue for this Kikongo term. Neither "spirit" nor "object" as translational concepts fully capture its ontological ambiguity. The *nkisi* defies the typological ordering of the modern world, and, thus, represents a materiality, in which the spirit/object dualism, and the subject/object dichotomy are irrelevant. Returning our attention to the theoretical issue of the fetish, in his essay "The Personhood of Ritual

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[571] Wyatt MacGaffey, "Complexity, Astonishment and Power: The Visual Vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi" *Journal of South African Studies* Vol. 14, no. 2 (January 1988): 190-191.

[572] Wyatt MacGaffey, "The Personhood of Ritual Objects: Kongo Minkisi" *Etnofoor* Vol. 3, no. 1 (1990): 49.

[573] MacGaffey, "Complexity, Astonishment and Power: The Visual Vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi," 190-191.

Objects," Wyatt MacGaffey provides a poignant conceptual basis for the theoretical work

I am proposing, when he states,

> The problem of the fetish, for the European mind, has been that it confounds the distinction, regarded as basic and natural, between objects and persons... Instead of asking, as did the nineteenth century, why Africans fail to distinguish adequately between people and objects, we might reverse the question and ask whence comes this dubious distinction in our own thought… Neither the thingness of an object nor the personhood of people is given in nature; both are the result of a local, culturally specific labeling process requiring, in each case, that a particular concept or status be institutionally recognized, that an apt candidate for that role exists, and that the status be assigned to the candidate by an approved procedure.[574]

The cosmos world of the Kongo *nkisi* is not a universe neatly divided into persons and

things or subjects and objects, but rather is "a world in which material things were not set

apart in an objectivity alien to human subjectivity."[575] Hence, a *nkisi* proper is a person; it

has a temporal functionality and vocation in community. As MacGaffey explains,

> A *nkisi* towards which the proper behavior is not observed, that is, whose taboos have been broken, is profaned (*sumuka*). Depending on the circumstances and the *nkisi*, it may exact a penalty by inflicting some misfortune, or it may become powerless, in fact lose its personhood and be reduced to object status. Usually a *nkisi* is considered to be profaned when its owner dies; it remains useless until it is reconstituted in the process of initiating a successor *nganga* who can resume the appropriate behavior. A *nkisi* that has been sold or otherwise transferred to become a curio or *object d'art* is no longer a *nkisi*.[576]

Yet, even as *minkisi* proper operate as persons, as MacGaffey later argues, the *nkisi*

ultimately defies ontological concretization. Describing the *nkisi* as a theory of experience

in the broadest sense, MacGaffey argues that its semantic and existential field "refers

simultaneously to an object, the animate force it embodies, the ritual in which it is

addressed (with music, dance, alcohol), and the effect it has on the lives of the individuals

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[574] MacGaffey, "The Personhood of Ritual Objects: Kongo Minkisi," 45-46.
[575] Ibid., 58.
[576] Ibid., 54.

and groups."[577] The *nkisi* is then a prime example of an African religious form that challenges the Euro-Western ontological distinctions between things, spirits, and persons, and proposes a different material, ontological mapping of the Africana cosmos world, indeed, one resonant with the ontological schema I have elaborated above.

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Towards a Theory of African Religious Materiality

Postulating a generic African religious materiality as a new framework for thinking about *matter* and *religion* in the Africana world, this project has attempted to offer new theoretical agendas and interdisciplinary concepts for the study of Africana religions. This present work submits then that African religious matters—the Haitian Vodou *nanm*, the Kongolese *nkisi*, the Igbo *mkpuke* (matricentric household), and the Yorùbá *ìyá* ("mother") to name a few—are actualizations of an immanent metaphysics that is ontologically elaborated through *being* with *nature*, *belonging* as *persons*, and *becoming mothers*. While there are other ontological genres and concepts that pertain to Africana religious worlds and likewise specific metaphysical orientations, as this precursory sketch has illustrated, the conceptual categories of nature, personhood, and motherhood are at least germane start points for a theorization of a generic African religious materiality—namely a theory that examines Africana matters as the essential "stuff" of religion and proposes that African "objects" are more than things. In this vein, Africana entities (whether human, animal, mineral or divine) are reimagined and conceptualized as vibrant beings and persons co-participating in society and the wider cosmos.

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[577] Wyatt MacGaffey. *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 50.

In this theoretical exercise, I have attempted a preliminary reimagining of religion that takes as central the non-transcendental metaphysics of Vodoun communities as elaboratated and materialized through the trifold ontological process of being, belonging, and becoming. In doing so, I have attempted to challenge the assumption that "religion" must continue to be defined by a politics of materiality and respectability that dematerializes both persons and non-persons in the formation of the *religious*. Consequently, in re-imagining the materiality of religion, the following questions remain: might we as scholars reimagine religious Others as central rather than periphery to a post-colonialist religious discourse? In so doing, how does the very materiality of religious Others challenge the concept of "religion"? And, in what ways can we then contest disciplinary boundaries to embrace these epistemological and ontological challenges? I would like, therefore, to implore religious studies scholars to explore the marginalized and underrepresented in the study of religion and perhaps in this post-colonialist exercise to take up the project of religious imagination, and to imagine, theorize, and construct a religious discourse in which the periphery disrupts and dislocates the center.

A generic theory of African religious materiality, hence, moves beyond Euro-Western epistemological assumptions and norms to privilege indigenous ontological philosophies and ideals. In pursuing such scholastic aims, Africana metaphysical axioms, concepts, and principles will as a result no longer be mere datum to be translated and cataloged, or in other words, conquered and classified according to the established boundaries of "religion" and its disciplinary horizon. Instead, Africana concepts and philosophical grammars will become, as Stewart and Hucks propose, a "world language," that is, an indigenous lexicon of worldwide standing and theoretical purchase that

simultaneously reflects indigenous metaphysical standards and ideals.[578] At that juncture,

as Stewart and Hucks submit, "the question will not be how to translate African

indigenous concepts through the terms of our current world languages (meaning Western

languages), but how to apprehend indigenous concepts and their purchase as religious

studies categories."[579] Africana indigenous terms will then become normative theoretical

concepts and methodological frameworks for religious studies—changing and challenging

its very disciplinary domain and in the process re-inventing the conceptual triad of *religion*,

religions, and the *religious*.

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[578] See Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, 163; Stewart and Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies," 64. Stewart and Hucks adopt the concept of a "world language" from Horton, who proposes the need for such a language as a basis for adequate translation.

[579] Stewart and Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies," 64.

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