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Los Angeles

SPIRITED CHOREOGRAPHIES

*Ritual, Identity, and History-Making in Ewe Performance*

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Culture and Performance

by

Elyan Jeanine Hill

2018

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2018

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

SPIRITED CHOREOGRAPHIES

*Ritual, Identity, and History-Making in Ewe Performance*

by

Elyan Jeanine Hill

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Chair

*Spirited Choreographies: Ritual, Identity, and History-Making in Ewe Performance* traces ritual performances and festival events presented by communities of Ewe people residing in coastal regions of Ghana and Togo. While ethnomusicologists have extensively theorized Ewe music, danced ways of knowing remain comparatively neglected. By using dance idioms that performers adapt even in the moment of production, communities seek a degree of cultural, conceptual, and national fluidity. I explore Ewe choreographies thematically: through stylized rituals in the first chapter of the dissertation, narratives of domestic enslavement in the second, pedagogical practices meant to discipline female sexuality in the third, and festival performances idealizing and representing transnational ethnic identities in the final chapter.

To theorize indigenous Ewe processes of historical production occurring on both sides of the Ghana-Togo border, I examine *Mami Wata*, a group of pan-African water spirits who mediate between West African devotees and cultural “others.” During performances for water spirits, devotees comment about trade histories, critique threats to social accord, and translate

foreign cultural practices. Additionally, women's narratives of domestic slavery presented during devotional practices honoring another fierce pantheon of slave spirits, called *Mama Tchamba*, suggest that Ewe women mirror the non-discursive sharing of memories of enslavement novelized in Paule Marshall's 1983 "neo-slave narrative" *Praisesong for the Widow*. Yet, Ewe dances inscribing histories of enslavement move beyond text to serve as coping mechanisms for collective memories founded on obligations to the spirits of enslaved ancestors who return through spirit possession to control the descendants of slave-holding African families.

Bridging the gaps between private ritual contexts and public festivals while mired in social tensions between Pentecostal morality and Vodun pedagogies, the elders of the Association Deconu—a Togo-based traditional dance association—train and evaluate Ewe girls as cultural representatives. In both small-scale rituals and larger, state-funded festivals, information flows across borders and ethnic divisions to converge in performances that integrate younger generations and foreigners into histories of Ewe migration and dispersal through culturally specific epistemologies.

The dissertation of Elyan Jeanine Hill is approved.

Mary Nooter Roberts

Janet M. O'Shea

Yogita Goyal

Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2018

Once more...

To my father,  
for his passion for Africa

To my mother,  
for being my first teacher and reminding me to laugh through adversity

To my sisters,  
since sisterhood is the most precious thing I know

And to all of the family members that I had to leave home to find.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Abstract of the Dissertation.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Vita.....</b>	<b>xiii</b>
<b>Introduction: Identity, Ritual, and History-Making in Ewe Performance.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Identity.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Constructing Cultural Identities of Ewe People.....	6
Ewe Migration.....	6
The Domestic and Transatlantic Slave Trades in Eweland.....	8
Colonial Vicissitudes.....	9
Reunification Efforts and Independence.....	10
Neo-Colonial National Contexts.....	12
Choreographic Analysis as Methodological Framework.....	12
<b>Ritual.....</b>	<b>17</b>
Ritual and Dynamic Traditions in Vodun Practices.....	19
Tradition as Innovation.....	20
Spirit Possession.....	22
Mami Wata’s Many Roads.....	23
Mama Tchamba: Dancing Narratives of Enslavement.....	31
<b>History-Making.....</b>	<b>36</b>
Cultural Memory and Choreographing Histories.....	37
Fieldwork.....	44
Ghana-Togo Crossings.....	45
Selection of Research Sites.....	47
Choreographies of Writing.....	48
<b>Chapter One: Choreographies of Healing, Wealth, and Identity in Ewe</b>	
<b>Mami Wata Devotions.....</b>	<b>53</b>
Introduction.....	53
Dancing Chromolithographs and Foreign Benefactors.....	58
“Wives” of Mami Wata.....	62
Ritual Choreographies.....	64
Vodun Practices as Intersubjective Relationships.....	72
Gestures of Health and Wealth.....	81
Mami Sika, “Golden Mami”.....	88
Sofivi’s Mami Wata Altar.....	91
The Yeke Yeke Festival and Dancing Altars.....	94
Beads, Biography, and Regalia.....	102
Conclusion.....	106



<b>Chapter Two: Danced Narratives of the Slave Trade in Mama Tchamba Worship.....</b>	<b>108</b>
Introduction.....	108
Embodied Memories of Enslaved Others.....	112
Reversals of Power and Unspeakable Fears in Tchamba Devotions.....	120
Navigating Local Memories of Transatlantic Enslavement.....	128
Spectral Geographies.....	138
Intersubjective Ritual Choreographies in Paule Marshall’s <i>Praisesong for the Widow</i> .....	143
Narrative and Place Beyond Text in Tchamba Dances.....	150
Intergenerational Transmission.....	153
Conclusion.....	157
<b>Chapter Three: Traditional Education, Community Building, and Body Politics in Eweland.....</b>	<b>161</b>
Introduction.....	161
Dancing in the Stands 2015, Tsévié, Togo.....	166
Constructing Traditional Womanhood.....	169
<i>Mami Wata Ritual 2013, Tsévié, Togo</i> .....	171
Clothing and Nudity.....	173
Participant Observation as Observant Participation.....	176
Training Acceptable Bodies.....	181
<i>La Reine Ayiza Beauty Pageant 2015, Tsévié, Togo</i> .....	183
<i>Adjifo Dancers 2015, Anloga and Ho, Ghana and Tsévié, Togo</i> .....	187
Female Sexuality and Ritual Servitude.....	190
Body Politics and Anxieties about Cultural Decline.....	194
Mami Wata as a Rampant Seductress.....	195
<i>Mini Hogbe School Festival 2014, Anloga, Ghana</i> .....	200
<i>Learning Husago 2008, Ho, Ghana</i> .....	203
Occupying the Margins.....	205
“Doing Cooking”.....	207
Stylistics and Sensory Engagement.....	210
Conclusion.....	213
<b>Chapter Four: Staging Festival Narratives of Migration and Development.....</b>	<b>215</b>
Introduction.....	215
Experiencing Ewe Festival.....	220
Walking in the Festival: Ayiza (Tsévié, Togo).....	222
Imagining Ethnic Identities.....	224
The Establishment of Ewe Exodus Festivals.....	226
Underlying Conflict and Marginalized Rituals.....	230
Hunter Associations.....	231
Walking in the Festival: Hogbetsotsoza (Anloga, Ghana).....	233
War Dances as Animal Ontologies.....	237
Claiming, Cultivating, and Cleansing Eweland.....	239
Walking in the Festival: Reconciliation Ceremony (Anloga, Ghana).....	242

Healing Vodunwo in Festival Performances.....	245
Walking in the Festival: Agbogboza (Notsié, Togo) .....	246
Incorporating Ethnic “Others” .....	248
Walking in the Festival: Border Crossing (Aflao-Lomé, Ghana-Togo).....	248
Framing Minor Transnationalism.....	252
Counterbalancing Narratives of Economic Decline.....	254
Walking in the Festival: Agbogboza (Notsié, Togo) .....	257
Chief at Large.....	261
Anticipating Ewe Futures.....	263
Conclusion.....	265
<b>Conclusion: Borderlands, Performances, and Religious Frameworks in Eweland.....</b>	<b>267</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>274</b>

LIST OF FIGURES:

Figure 1. Mural of Mami Wata. Aflao, Ghana, 2015.....24

Figure 2. Mama Tchamba mural. Aného, Togo, 2015.....33

Figure 3. Genevieve possessed by Mami Ablo (“Mami Who Loves Colors”).  
Tsévié, Togo, 2015.....69

Figure 4. Vodou Da dancer holding an apia at Yeke Yeke festival.  
Aneho, Togo, 2015.....98

Figure 5. Mama Tchamba ritual. Tsévié, Togo, 2015.....117

Figure 6. Attendants appease possessed practitioners at Mama Tchamba  
ritual. Tsévié, Togo, 2015.....124

Figure 7. Inscribing the dance space in a Tchamba ritual. Tsévié, Togo 2015.....140

Figure 8. Mama Tchamba priestesses dancing toward a line of flaming  
gunpowder. Tsévié, Togo, 2015.....156

Figure 9. Dancing Tchamba with Mamissi Sofivi. Tsévié, Togo, 2015.....159

Figure 10. Girls of the Association Deconu add their own flair to agbadza  
movements. Tsévié, Togo, 2015.....167

Figure 11. Adjifo dancer performing at Ayiza festival. Tsévié, Togo, 2015.....188

Figure 12. Mini Hogbe Festival Anloga, Ghana, 2014.....201

Figure 13. Reenacting Ewe migration in the Hogbetsotso festival.  
Anloga, Ghana 2015.....235

Figure 14. Kokusi dancers resting on the sidelines after performing.  
Notsié, Togo, 2015.....247

Figure 15. Zagbeto at the Asogli Yam Festival. Ho, Ghana, 2015.....251

Figure 16. Togbe Ngoryifia Céphas Bansah, his wife, and his mother-in-law.  
Notsié, Togo, 2015.....259

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- “Spirited Choreographies: Danced Neo-Slave Narratives Among Ewe People in Togo.” Presented at “Performing Africana Art and Culture: Repression, Resistance, and Renewal,” the 15th Annual Africana Studies Symposium, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, NC. 7 April 2017.
- “Altars in Motion: Afro-Asian Exchanges, Critical Consumerism, and Ritual Choreographies in Ewe and Mina Performances.” Presented at “Imagining Africa at the Center: Bridging Scholarship, Policy, and Representation in African Studies,” the 59th annual meeting of the African Studies Association Conference, Washington DC. 2 December 2016.
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## **Introduction:**

### ***Identity, Ritual, and History-Making in Ewe Performance***

“Why would you want to study traditional dances in the village?” he asked me. “One day they will tell you one thing and the next day you will ask them again and they will give you a completely different meaning for the dance. Why not write about one of the traditional dances choreographed for the National Dance Company of Ghana?”<sup>1</sup> I had many such conversations with different professors in the dance department of the University of Ghana, Legon, including a professor who I will call Professor Believe, during my first research trip to Accra, Ghana. How could they have known, as I questioned them with the gulp-deep trepidation of a young ethnographer new to fieldwork, that the ambiguity, complexity, revisions, liminality, communal processes, and conflicts inherent to traditional dances were the very elements that attracted me most? The choreographers of the National Dance Company re-contextualize dances from different regions of the nation and restage them for concert stages as emblems of the state. Unlike the dances performed by the National Dance Company of Ghana, performances at festivals and in ritual events occurring in the heart of communities in Ghana’s Volta Region and the small French-speaking nation of Togo just to the East reveal how communities detach themselves from nationalist frameworks to claim ethnic identities that encompass multiple nations. Within the dissertation, I call these practices “traditional” not because they are rigid or unchanging but, rather, to re-invest the term with its own dynamics of transmission, adaptation, and regeneration, as new generations adapt practices passed from older generations to the needs of contemporary performers and communities. Though performers often call upon the “putative seamlessness of origins” (Roach 1996: 30) when identifying certain practices as traditional, this

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Believe, Personal Communication July 19, 2012

study questions such narratives while acknowledging and examining the modes of transmission through which individuals perpetuate practices that they view as traditional. The strategic adaptation and shifting loci of indigenous historiographic practices, political and ritual authority, and ethnic identities in Ewe-populated regions of Ghana and Togo demonstrate the efficacious dynamism of indigenous educational practices, rituals, and public cultural events. Ghanaian and Togolese performers and religious practitioners use events foregrounding music and dance performances as tactics through which to present alternatives to current national frameworks of identity.

Ethnomusicologists and musicians have popularized Ewe musical styles through festivals, scholarship, and the performances of groups like the National Dance Company of Ghana and the Ghana Dance Ensemble.<sup>2</sup> Scholars of Ewe music explore festival, ritual, popular, and church music for its polyrhythms and for its close association with Ewe religious practices.<sup>3</sup> Such studies tend to privilege the perspectives of male performers since, until recently, drumming was the sole province of men amongst most Ewe communities (Burns 2009: 11). Conversely, I shall privilege the dancing and music-making bodies of women over the drumming bodies of men. Though male drumming ensembles and women dancing, singing, clapping, and playing percussion sticks and rattles known as *axatse*, are essential to ritual and festival performances, scholars too often exclude or obfuscate the voices and perspectives of women within such studies, with the notable exception of James Burns's monograph (2009) on female musicians in a dance-drumming group in Dzodze, Ghana. Yet, as he notes, "through the entire

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<sup>2</sup> The Ghana Dance Ensemble (founded in 1962) is a collaboration between the government-led Institute of Arts and Culture and the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon.

<sup>3</sup> Agawu 1995; Freidson 2009; Younge 2011; Locke 1982; Gblonyo 2009; Burns 2009; Pantaleoni 1972; Locke: 1982; Nyamuame 2013

corpus of Ewe scholarship we find no interviews with women musicians, no mention of the sexual division of musical roles and no collaboration with female composers, choreographers or elders. In fact, female musicians have been completely written out of the collective representation of Ewe music to date” (Burns 2009: 11). To contest this tendency to “privilege male perspective and methodically [interpret] the world through male-privileging lenses” (Nzegwu 2006: 24), I foreground the voices and experiences of women and girls as they collaborate with drumming ensembles. By highlighting the choreographies of Ewe women performers, this study illustrates ways that women teach and characterize music and dance performances within the context of their lives and religious practice.

Scholarship has yielded few studies of Ewe dances and many of them have centered around festival performances of popular dances like *agbadza* and *borborbor*.<sup>4</sup> Both of these are dance and music styles performed at festivals, funerals, and in churches (Younge 2011: 46-51, 112-119). Despite a dearth of scholarship in comparison to the vast array of studies on Ewe music, Ewe dance forms persist as important elements of cultural representation. Of the few studies of dance in West Africa, those that specifically address dance choreographies, including dance studies scholar Francesca Castaldi's *Choreographies of African Identities: Negritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal* (2006) and ethnomusicologist Paul Schauert's *Staging Ghana: Artistry and Nationalism in State Dance Ensembles* (2015), often examine West African choreographies as representations of the nation-state and focus on state-funded institutions. Castaldi examines how dance becomes allied with dominant narratives in nations trying to reestablish themselves in the wake of postcolonial independence movements, while Schauert

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<sup>4</sup> A popular dance and music style performed at festivals, funerals and in churches

argues that performers use nationalism as a tool for personal advancement and self-expression. Instead, this study explores the points at which Ewe people prioritize ethnic and local regional identities over national ones. Even when scholars investigate Ewe performance in village settings, they often emphasize either ritual (Friedson 2009; Nyamuame 2013; Rosenthal 1998) or festival (Younge 2011; Kuwor 2013; Gblonyo 2009) performances despite the fact that the two are difficult to disentangle. Since the same performers and leaders often hold key roles in both types of events in Eweland, I investigate interconnections between these different dance contexts.

By examining dance performances, this project maps an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) across a number of borders: ethnic, national, and temporal. Since Ewe identities include multiple subgroups that blur and blend into each other and that communities determine situationally—identities that permit individuals to emphasize certain affiliations to their advantage—festival planning committees often include dance styles from these and other neighboring groups, namely Fon, Ga, and Yoruba ethnic groups. During festivals, communities reenact Ewe migration and convene rituals through which participants seek balance and reconciliation among different subgroups following different political and religious leaders. These festivals culminate in “grand durbars,” processions of chiefs and elected public officials accompanied by dance and musical performances paying homage to leaders, local heroes, and host communities. Ewe communities transmit specific forms of alternate literacy through indigenous pedagogical practices using dance and musical vocabularies to form communities based on access to specialized knowledge. Community elders use narratives constructed during these performances to formalize and perpetuate cultural norms, vacillating between dynamic extensions of current practices and restrictive conservatism. Ewe people also continue to use

performance events to welcome and integrate members of the wider, international community of Ewe-speakers living outside of Eweland—in countries including the United States, Germany, France, and England—into local Ewe cultural practices.<sup>5</sup>

## **Identity:**

*[M]ost of the recent studies of nineteenth-century pre-colonial Africa have emphasized that far from there being a single 'tribal' identity, most Africans moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves at one moment as subject to this chief, at another moment as a member of that cult at another moment as part of this clan*

~ Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa"<sup>6</sup>

The groups of people who identify themselves as Ewe orient themselves towards other groups and amongst themselves through rhetorical strategies and bodily disciplines including language, clothing choices, and gestures that constitute markers of identity. Ewe communities and subgroups speak a mutually comprehensible collection of dialects called *Evegbe*. These communities justify their participation within histories of Christian pietist missionization, the transatlantic slave trade, and the neo-colonial nation through performances that leave room for unresolved tensions and ongoing negotiation. In this section of the introduction, I present a brief geographical, historical, and political background of Ewe peoples to contextualize the past and overview the political and social upheavals with which Ewe performances and religious practices contend.

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<sup>5</sup> See Djifa Kothor (2012) and Sylvanus Kwashie Kuwor's (2013) unpublished dissertations for more on Ewe diasporic communities in England and the United States and Chapter Four of this dissertation for more on ways the Ewe diaspora has taken shape in Germany.

<sup>6</sup> Ranger 1983: 248.

## **Constructing Cultural Identities of Ewe People:**

The area along the Bight of Benin on the Western Atlantic coast of Africa includes a region often designated as Eweland. The term “Eweland” designates the territories populated by Ewe people which stretch along the Atlantic coast between the Volta region of Ghana and the Mono River on the Western side of Bénin. Ewe people currently consider themselves as an ethnic group based on language, cultural, and religious practices. Though I designate the communities whose perspectives form the basis of this study as Ewe people, and Ewe-related neighboring groups like Fon and Mina people in Togo and Bénin, anthropologist Paul Nugent warns against viewing Ewe people as a clearly defined and cohesive or homogeneous group of people, since the term “Ewe” has been used to designate many subgroups that call themselves by names besides Ewe. Nugent recommends the adoption of the French meaning for the word *ethnie* as a close approximation to how scholars should define the term ethnicity in the case of Ewe people. The French word “ethnie” indicates identities “embedded in a deeply-rooted cultural matrix and a profound sense of shared history” (Nugent 2005: 29). Though Ewe people continue to have a sense of themselves as one people due to the use of mutually intelligible dialects and traditions of a common origin in Notsié, some of these traditions—including the notion of the city of Notsié, in Togo, as the cradle of Ewe civilization—were invented or at least underscored by German missionaries (Greene 2002). Yet, Ewe people continue to construct their ethnic identities based on language and historical consciousness through performances of identity that assert and solidify kinship among these diverse subgroups.

### *Ewe Migration*

According to oral histories of groups who most readily identify themselves as “Ewe,”

Adja, Fon, Mina, and Ewe peoples—collectively identified as “Gbe”—all originated in Ketu, a walled city in the southeastern region of the Republic of Bénin famous for Yoruba cultural idioms including Gelede masquerades, in the 15th century.<sup>7</sup> The ancestors of those who now call themselves Ewe people migrated from Ketu to Notsié, in present-day Togo, where they built a walled city chronicled in archaeological records and maintained to an extent as an archaeological ruin in Notsié, Togo to this day (Posnansky 1982; Posnansky and de Barros 1980). These migrations were most likely prompted by the expansion of Yoruba people. These people groups, who would later identify themselves as Ewe, founded the city of Notsié surrounded by a protective wall (*agbogbo*) in the late 16th century. The rigid political policies of King Agorkoli I of Notsié precipitated continued migration in the late 16th or early 17th centuries as the ancestors of the Anlo-Ewe fled the King’s wrath. Some of those who fled Agorkoli I were joined by migrants from west of the Volta River who spoke Ga, Akan, and Guan who mixed with Ewe communities fleeing from Notsié to form Guin Ewe subgroups, also known as Mina people.<sup>8</sup> Ewe people were never unified under a single state and, due to the distances among Ewe states, distinctions arose, as evidenced by the diversity of Ewe dialects and religious practices (Laumann 2005: 15-17, 20). The migrants moved southward towards the coast of the Atlantic and westward as far as the Volta River in Ghana, settling in towns located on both sides of the postcolonial borders of Ghana and Togo where they continue to celebrate their exodus and ethnic identity through cultural festivals.

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<sup>7</sup> Not to be confused with the walled city of Notsié, located in present-day Togo, which forms an important part of contemporary Ewe migration histories and identities. For more on histories of Gelede masquerade in Ketu see Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal’s *Gelede: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba* (1983: 194).

<sup>8</sup> The present-day Guin-Mina ethnic group originally included Fante, Ga, Anlo and Adangbe people of Southern Ghana (Wendl 1999: 111-112).

*The Domestic and Transatlantic Trades in Enslaved Africans in Eweland*

Guin-Mina people, an Ewe sub-group, established their communities within present-day Togo at the end of the 17th century during the transatlantic slave trade, after fleeing Elmina, a major slave port along the coast of present-day Ghana (Wendl 1999: 111; Lovell 2005: 94-95).<sup>9</sup> The city of Aného was the political epicenter of their group and profited from economic upturn during expanding ivory and slave trades. Ewe and Guin-Mina society included free citizens (*ablodeto*) and enslaved persons (*adonko*). Though the children of Ewe men and enslaved women were freemen, they were viewed as too weak to hold political positions due to their lack of maternal lineage (Wendl 1999: 112). Enslaved women were preferred over men because they contributed more labor to society and were seen as more obedient and coercible (Claude Meillassoux 1986: 110; Manning 1990: 29,132). Some wealthy Ewe and Guin-Mina people profited from the domestic trade in enslaved Africans, selling captives from wars and raids in distant communities in the northern regions of present-day Ghana and Togo (Akyeampong 2001b). “Person-purchasers” from Ewe and Mina communities sold captives from neighboring groups to avoid losing their investment from captured neighbors seeking asylum in their nearby communities. Consequently, these neighbors were sold to European merchants or local intermediaries for resale into the transatlantic slave trade. Though a domestically enslaved person amongst Ewe and Mina people could buy his freedom, his emancipation was incomplete until his origins as an enslaved northerner had been erased from collective memory. Though Northern areas were ethnically heterogeneous, Mina and Ewe people referred to the entire region as *adonko*, or “the slave country” since they viewed people from those regions as potential captives (Wendl 1999: 113-114). Some Ewe people participated in the transatlantic trade in

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<sup>9</sup> The name “Mina” for Guin-Mina people may derive from their origins in Elmina (Lovell 2005: 94).



enslaved Africans as sellers of the enslaved, but also suffered capture and enslavement at the hands of others (Rosenthal 1998: 105). Ewe communities in Ghana, Togo, and Bénin have integrated histories of involvement in the trade in enslaved persons through religious practices that connect these histories to ongoing social stigma and debates about wealth and debt.<sup>10</sup>

### *Colonial Vicissitudes*

Ewe identities encompass multiple communities and span across three nations since the national boundaries dividing Ewe-speakers are recent and arbitrary colonial creations (Laumann 2005: 14). Due to their coastal location, Ewe people were some of the first communities to encounter French, German, and British colonizers, foreign merchants, and missionaries (Meyer 1999). The British and Asante signed a peace treaty in 1874 to establish the Gold Coast colony, which included Anlo Ewe territories (Laumann 2005: 22). When the rest of Eweland became a part of German Togoland in 1884, many Ewe-speakers migrated to the Gold Coast colony to escape what they considered comparatively harsh German rule since the economic prosperity of German Togoland was based on “forced labor and excessive and arbitrary taxations” (Laumann 2005: 24, Amenumey 1989: 4). Sandra Greene also notes that the Anlo Ewe chief Togbui Sri II, ruler of Anlo Ewe people in the town of Anloga in present-day southeast Ghana from 1906-1956 offered 10,000 men to the British government to help defeat the Germans who had colonized Togo since the 1890s because he wished to eliminate the suffering of those in Togo dealing with the “particularly harsh character of German colonial rule” (2002: 23). To this day, my Ewe collaborators in Togo speak of the German colonizers as especially “hard” leaders, a description

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<sup>10</sup> Rosenthal 1998; Rush 2013; Vencatachalam 2015; Akyeampong 2001b

often punctuated by a gesture with the side of their closed fists pounding down on a table or in the air as if crushing an unlucky insect.<sup>11</sup> Between the British Gold Coast Colony that became present-day Ghana to the west and the French protectorate over Porto Novo and Cotonou that led to the French Dahomey colony, the Germans established German Togoland by supporting and installing sympathetic chiefs (Laumann 2005: 23). The thirty-year occupation of the Germans ended when the British and the French invaded on 26 August 1914. In summary, Eweland was divided among German administration as German Togoland (1884-1914), British administration as the Gold Coast Colony (1874-1957) and redivided among British and French administrations as British (1919-1956) and French (1919-1960) Togoland.<sup>12</sup> The division of British Togoland from French Togoland inspired later reunification movements (Greene 2002: 22).

### *Reunification Efforts and Independence*

This period was followed by a brief effort by and Ewe educated and Christianized elite to “reunify” Ewe peoples under British administration. Ewe elites encouraged others to embrace the concept that Ewe were unified by language, culture, and history and should unite under British administration.<sup>13</sup> This short-lived plea for self-rule resulted from the division of Ewe peoples by British and French colonial borders. In *The Ewe Unification Movement: A Political History*, D. E. K. Amenumey suggests that the “reunification” movement was inspired by a desire to unite

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<sup>11</sup> In a preview of the brutality and force that would characterize German colonial rule in Togo, the Germans kidnapped chiefs from the city of Aného and forced them into negotiations onboard a warship called “Sophie” (Laumann 2005: 25-26).

<sup>12</sup> Wicker and Opoku 2007: 7; Akyeampong 2001a; Nugent 2003; McGowan 2013: 1

<sup>13</sup> Sylvanus Olympio and Daniel Chapman, of French Togoland and British Gold Coast respectively, also wrote letters detailing versions of Ewe migration epics and some oral histories about the town of Notsié to demonstrate that Ewe peoples living in the Gold Coast and British and French Togolands were one group that should be united under British trusteeship until they gained independence (Amenumey 1989: 39-40, 46-48; Austin 1963: 141; Kothor 2012: 4; Greene 2002: 22; Lawrance 2007: 1).

Ewe people under one polity free from French administration (1989: 1) Coastal Ewe groups largely preferred the minimal disruption of traditional political structures, including systems of local chieftaincy, under British colonial administration (Amenumey 1989: 9). The French had reinstated poll taxes, market taxes, and forced labor in ways that advocates of “reunification,” argued disabled Ewe peoples by impeding trade, cultural, social, and religious contact (Amenumey 1989: 22, 48; Nugent 2002: 31-35).

In 1956 the United Nations held a plebiscite in British Togoland to allow the residents of that portion of the former German colony separated from Togo after World War I by the League of Nations and placed under British administration to decide if they wished to join the Gold Coast (Greene 2002: 23). The United Nations plebiscite held in British Togoland led to the rejection of “reunification” with French Togoland as Ewe people in British Togoland gained immediate independence as a part of the Gold Coast on March 6, 1957, with those in Togo gaining independence on April 17, 1960. Though the reunification movement was partially a commercial endeavor of Ewe elites, nostalgic desires for an Ewe entity persist in the dramatizations and dances meant to promote cultural identification amongst Ewe-speaking people from multiple nations (Laumann 2005: 25-26). Though Ewe-speaking groups remain spread across three nations including a small minority of Guin-Mina people living in the Republic of Bénin, my study focuses on mobility and interrelationships between Ewe-speakers and traditional performers on either side of the Ghana-Togo border. In the wake of the plebiscite that divided Ewe people along national lines, narratives of the dispersal from Notsié have become central to Ewe representation, since links to this point of origin neatly unify different Ewe groups along cultural and linguistic lines, while glossing over national and religious differences (Green 2002: 34).

### *Neo-colonial National Contexts*

Present-day Ghanaians benefit from increasing access to education and entrepreneurial opportunities in a climate of intense Christian evangelization (Meyer 1999). Conversely, many Togolese face greater political exploitation and economic decline—due to political tension and opposition to the sitting president, Faure Gnassingbé—remaining far more rural and remote than their Ghanaian neighbors (Piot 1999: 3, 47-48). Currently, political and economic differences between the rapidly urbanizing Ghana and Togo, as a nation mired in the authoritarian regime of the Gnassingbé family, create very different religious climates in these neighboring nations. Many Togolese indigenous religious rituals draw participants from neighboring West African nations, including Ghana. I investigate how differences in economic opportunities might contribute to the suppression of indigenous religious practices in Ghana in contrast to more public manifestations of such worship in Togo amongst members who identify themselves as members of the same ethnic group. Ewe performances serve as a form of communication that links Ghanaian and Togolese Ewe people across national differences and an interface for discussions of economic, political, and religious differences.

### *Choreographic Analysis as Methodological Framework*

The use of the term “choreographer” within a study of ritual practice emphasizes ways Ewe religious practitioners situate themselves within networks of cultural and religious exchange. Performers also use improvisation as a choreographic tactic within performances that promote healing and perpetuate local perspectives on historical and contemporary wealth and commodity consumption. Though some dance scholars (Novack 1990) reject the idea of an

individual “choreographer” as an appropriate representation of the labor of the primarily white, college-educated dance makers, many dance scholars continue to claim the term as a means of challenging the dismissal of the choreographic and intellectual labor of those viewed as racially marked or as cultural others (Kraut 2008; O’Shea 2007).

Since “choreography” includes all decisions made about performance, training, and the presentation of a dance (O’Shea 2007: 11), choreographers involved in the perpetuation of traditional forms engage in discursive articulations of histories which are carefully localized and perpetually re-envisioned. Though the performers with whom I work do not claim the term “choreographer” for themselves, their performances demonstrate creative and intellectual labor within the construction of the syntax of various movements. This dissertation extends the work of ritual scholars who have not yet analyzed the importance of spacing, movement vocabularies, and training in their accounts of ritual activities that center around dance events (Wendl 1999; H. J. Drewal 1988; Rush 2013). I situate the role of these dances within Ewe communities and political networks to illustrate how performers use dance events to stylize and encode meaning while modifying and rearranging popular narratives. I also attend to the choreographic labor of ritual to analyze the movements through which performers render rituals effective.

By acknowledging the choreographic work of traditional Ewe artists who perform outside of the context of the concert dance stage and contribute to traditional canons, this study resists hegemonic histories that underpin notions of choreography and challenges assertions of European universalism (Foster 2009: 109; idem, 2010). In *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, Susan Leigh Foster traces the development of choreographic practice as an ideology through which Europeans constructed for themselves an unmarked, universal body which could represent all the peoples of the world (Foster 2010: 54). Such

methods of choreography uprooted dances from their contexts in order to display and codify them. Though notions of choreography are influenced by colonialist overtones, acknowledging the importance of choreographic choices and staging to understandings of the histories produced within ritual contexts continues the conceptually decolonizing work of critical dance scholars who examine collective representation in neo-colonial nations.<sup>14</sup>

This study contributes to the body of Africanist scholarship emphasizing the role of the embodied performance in ritual practice. Paul Stoller (1995) examines the visceral multi-sensory aspects of Hauka spirit possession and emphasizes the significance of hearing, smell, touch, and taste to his ethnographic approach. More recently, Yolanda Covington-Ward (2016) has drawn attention to religious “trembling” in the Lower Congo to address the role of bodies as conduits of power and sites of authority that undermine existing political structures (2016: 10-11). In contrast, illustrating how Luba peoples perform collective memories to promote group identity and political legitimacy, Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Robert (1996) demonstrate the cultural impact of body scarification, adornment, and sacred objects on local philosophies of gender and political authority in the same region. In a study more geographically proximal to Ewe performances, John McCall (2000) pointedly emphasizes dance histories as he theorizes war dances amongst Ohafia Igbo people in Nigeria as vehicles of non-linguistic historical knowledge (2000: 8, 65). In another contribution to performance studies in the region, Daniel B. Reed (2003) considers how Dan people of Côte d’Ivoire use masquerade performances to negotiate contested boundaries between sacred and secular. Judy Rosenthal’s foundational monograph (1998) on Ewe *gorovodu* as a dancing religion in which the body functions as a document of law and morality further underscores the importance of researching ritual gestures

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<sup>14</sup> O’Shea 2007; Srinivasan 2009; Soneji 2012

to better understand Ewe religious practice. This rich body of scholarship interpreting the mechanisms of ritual presentations through attention to the significance of bodies in motion, leads me to include choreographic analysis as an important additional methodological tool for understandings how ritual performers, specifically in Ewe contexts, produce and interpret social and cultural structures.

Western choreographers and dancers often create a distinction between cultural traditions, which are portrayed as the product of anonymous performers, and Western artists who possess renown career-based identities, “intellect,” and “intellectual property” (Kraut 2008). Although many non-Western movement vocabularies belong to communities and ethnic groups—rather than to a single genius choreographer or performer—these communities still recognize and acknowledge their own dance patrons, experts, dance makers, and virtuosos in ethnic dance contexts, whether or not they use such terms to describe them. Though sacred proceedings may follow codes of secrecy that conceal the names of specific artists and performers, traditional African artists are rarely anonymous (Walker 1994; M. N. Roberts 1998: 69).

Ewe community members classify the roles of choreographers according to notions of religious efficacy, balance, and authority. By lifting their pointer and middle fingers in a “V” pointing toward the most proficient performers, Ewe spectators display approval of the arrangement or presentation of movements. “We do this to show respect for the best dancing,” my translator Richard told me when I asked him about the gesture. Those whose dancing onlookers most commonly lauded were priests and priestesses—called *vodusi*, *hounoun*, and *mamissi* (pluralized as *vodusiwo*, *hounounwo*, and *mamissiwo*)—who are highly susceptible to possession, skilled in all the artistic practices preferred by the spirits they host, and who perform

the necessary annual sacraments and rites to appease the spirits and reinforce relations with them.<sup>15</sup> There are also helpers or assistants known as *senterua* who will care for *vodusiwo*, or Vodun adepts, once they fall into trance. These participants may pour white powder, water, or alcohol over the entranced performer, light gunpowder for such enraptured devotees, lead them into the shrine, or change them into appropriate clothing for the ritual to please and represent whichever Vodun manifests themselves (Rosenthal 1998, 265). Within ritual performances, individuals train for their roles through codified processes and each participant performs specific roles during ritual proceedings and, furthermore, in their communities. Contrary to Bourdieu's *habitus*, these performances involve praxis, processes of intentional training, and pointed enactments, more than habit; and they point to conscious selection rather than "subconscious inculcation."<sup>16</sup> Ewe rituals include formal constraints upon the behavior of both performers and spectators.

Though they perform polyvalent movements, communities structure and choreograph performances based on internal cultural values to achieve balance between planned and emergent elements. Despite present divisions and distinctions, Ewe people conceive of themselves as a united ethnic group based on specific historical narratives. In festivals, priests intervene on behalf of entire communities to bring cohesion. Since choreographies can never be divorced from body politics, these performances reveal Ewe perceptions of their bodies in the context of religious practices, and performances of collective representations that transgress geo-political

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<sup>15</sup> The title Hounoun translates to "owner of the sea" ("Hou" means sea and "non" or "noun" mean "owner of" or "the one with"). In my experience, the term is usually reserved for men (Rush 2001: 45). Vodusi means "wife of a Vodun."

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu theorizes the *habitus* as regulated improvisation through subconscious inculcation/habit memory as the body improvises within a given social system to perpetuate particular cultural practices as part of a delimited group (1990: 59-60).



boundaries. Such events demand interdisciplinary research that brings studies of spirit possession, ritual commodity consumption, and visual representations of invisible spirits into conversation with theories emerging from critical dance studies.

## **Ritual:**

*Belief in a pantheon of intermediary spirits who may be appeased through sacrifice and manifested through spirit possession; the liturgical efficacy of music and dance; the sacral power of images and spirit-infused objects; the generational cycle of death and rebirth; the benign orchestration of a distant god—these are common denominators of West and Central African religious practice.*

~ Donald Cosentino, “Imagine Heaven”<sup>17</sup>

*In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined...turn out to be the same world.*

~ Clifford Geerts, *The Interpretation of Cultures*<sup>18</sup>

The word “ritual” has a long history in scholarly discussions of religion, culture and social structures. Ewe practitioners view rituals as activities imbued with specific properties that practitioners conduct at prescribed times and in authorized places. Anthropologists Jean Comaroff and John F. Comaroff argue that ritual is “a means of experimental practice, of subversive poetics, of creative tension and transformative action” (1993: xxix) through which practitioners weave imaginative possibilities and produce new knowledge. Far from characterizing such practices as remnants of a previous historical moment, rituals include choreographic representations of contemporary collective identities expressed through the symbols and protocols of religious devotion.

Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner divides rituals into two groups, distinguishing “life

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<sup>17</sup> Cosentino 1995: 29.

<sup>18</sup> Geerts 1973: 112.

crisis rituals” from “rituals of affliction.” Whereas life crisis rituals indicate a transition from one life stage or social status to another, communities use “rituals of affliction” to propitiate spirits or pantheons of spirits causing illness and social disruption (Turner 1967: 10). Such spirits may grow restless and cause disturbances and imbalances when they feel neglected or when practitioners display inappropriate behavior. Such neglect might involve forgetting to make offerings of food, alcohol, dances, or sacred objects upon altars in shrines consecrated to specific spirits or pantheons. Since the rituals examined in this dissertation typically involve petitions for healing and sacrifices meant to appease spirits, my use of the word “ritual” typically indicates “rituals of affliction.”

Though any habitual practice (including Western surgical practices or culturally specific hygiene practices) may be called rituals following interpretations of the term based upon repetition, I use the term to indicate ties to the performance practices and institutional structures of Ewe Vodun. Amongst Ewe practitioners of Vodun in Tsévié, Togo, such specialists may identify the spirits as entities who “disturb” them (*déranger* in the French with its attendant implications of a perturbation that might lead to madness or other forms of illness). Like ritual theorist Catherine Bell (1992) and performance scholar Mundoli Narayanan (2006), I argue that rituals must be restored to the context of social activity in general, rather than isolating rituals from daily activities like cooking, learning, performing, and healing (Bell 1992: 7). In other words, ritual events include theatrical and artistic richness and multifaceted qualities that bear additional study as scholars examine choreographic and dramatic techniques practiced within culturally specific ritual forms (Narayanan 2006: 137, 147).

## **Ritual and Dynamic Traditions in Vodun Practices**

The words “Vodun” and “spirit” interchangeably indicate non-human persons with their own histories, personalities, whims, and desires. Religious practitioners communicate and collaborate with these intermediary pantheons to elicit healing and positive changes in their communities (Cosentino 1995: 29). Ewe practitioners use the word “Vodun” to denote ancestors, non-human powers, or personified topographical elements. The multivalent term also indicates nature spirits, the malicious spirits of the previously enslaved, and god-objects that may or may not house a specific Vodun but contain a portion of the power of one or more Vodun spirits (Rosenthal 1998: 266). The terms “vodusi” and “mamissi” designate persons who have dedicated and consecrated themselves as a spouse, or wife, of a Vodun or a pantheon of water spirits called Mami Wata. I explore the enactment of relationships between spirits and worshippers through conversations with practitioners who are also skilled performers, teachers, and important community members. These relationships form the core of the pan-West-African religious practices known collectively as Vodun.<sup>19</sup>

Ewe Vodun practitioners produce tangible, multi-media offerings—including dance, music, images, and sacred objects—as prayers to draw deities from “elsewhere” into local spaces in order to imbue these spaces, ceremonies, and bodies with protective and generative power. Art historian Suzanne Blier defines Vodun spirits as “messenger[s] of the invisible” (1996: 46-47) and illustrates ways that Fon and Ewe practitioners employ Vodun as a means of cleansing, calming, and easing their bodies and environments through symbolic images that evoke the power of the body to represent the unseen. Practitioners reveal Vodun practices as rhizomatic since Vodun epistemologies can suffer attack and destruction of specific elements while

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<sup>19</sup> Rush 2013, 1999, 2008; Cosentino 1995; Thompson 1984; Rosenthal 1998; Montgomery and Vannier 2017; Blier 1996; De Surgy 1988, 1994; Venkatachalam 2015

continuing to flourish in other ways through adaptations and evasions of (neo) colonial authority (Greene 2002; Rush 2013). Art historian Dana Rush claims that post-Enlightenment logic cannot effectively explicate Vodun practices since the complex practices cannot be broken into parts and must be understood in terms of integration rather than separation and classification (Rush 2013: 47). Combining understandings of spirit possession, dance and musical performances, and the power of intermediary spirits to intervene in lived realities, Vodun practitioners engage in systems of thought and practice that are at once global and local, since such practices continue to borrow images and philosophies from distant cultures and religious systems (Cosentino 1995: 29; Rush 2001). As a result of the rapid inclusion of new ideas into traditional systems, Vodun practices are characterized by change and fluidity.

### *Tradition as Innovation*<sup>20</sup>

Ewe practitioners often characterize Vodun as a collection of traditional religious practices in contrast to Christianity and Islam (Reed 2003: 10). Communities also often identify the dance practices, modes of dressing, and pedagogical practices most closely associated with Vodun practice as “traditional” as an acknowledgment of the ways that religious practitioners pass such knowledge through genealogies of practice. Genealogies of practice are akin to Joseph Roach’s “genealogies of performance,” which draws upon Michel Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” Roach’s genealogies of performance document transmission and dissemination of cultural practices to demonstrate Foucault’s assertion that what is “behind things” is not a “timeless or essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms...What is found at the historical

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<sup>20</sup> See Olabiyi Babalola Yai’s “In Praise of Metonymy: The Concepts of ‘Tradition’ and ‘Creativity’ in the Transmission of Yoruba Artistry over Time and Space” (1993: 35).

beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin...It is disparity” (Foucault 1977: 142; Roach 1996: 25). Genealogies of practice not only transmit knowledge among generations, but also reveal the sutures and innovation through which performers include various elements and combine, select, and reject specific elements in their efforts to strategically represent the past.<sup>21</sup>

In Tsévié, elderly community members translated the word “deconu” as “tradition” in French and English. Yet, as Daniel B. Reed notes in his study of Dan Ge performance in Côte d’Ivoire the boundaries between separate categories like “traditional,” “modern,” and “popular,” as represented by local performers, are “fluid, permeable, and historically contingent” (2003: 10). Though practitioners constantly adapt so-called “traditional” practices, they view certain movements and institutions as timeless because of the ways that they reference past events (2003: 10). Despite scholarly suspicion of the term “traditional,” Ewe people “traditionalize” (Hymes 1975: 353-354) religious dance practices to promote specific ideological values (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xii; Barber 1997: 1). Communities rhetorically affix the term “traditional” to certain practices as a means of lending them credence and authority (Gilman 2004: 33). Ewe traditional dance practices do not conform to “the dominant notion in scholarly discourse that ritual repetition is rigid, stereotypic, conventional, conservative, invariant, uniform, redundant, predictable, and structurally static” (M. T. Drewal 1988: xiv). Forms designated by locals as “traditional” often present collective theories of the role and purpose of histories in their daily lives. Within traditional Ewe dances, performers and religious devotees seek to relive and revitalize the past, teach modes of behavior and gendered identities, encourage social cohesion, and integrate, or at least frame, foreign influences. As historian Robert Baum

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<sup>21</sup> Gilman 2012: 33-34; Hobsbawm 1983; Hymes 1975: 353-354; Handler and Linnekin 1989; Glassie 1995: 395

contends in his study of Diola Religion and Society in Precolonial Senegambia (1999), communities maintain traditional religious practices because such institutions facilitate adaptation to social, economic, and political upheaval. Ewe communities view tradition as neither closed nor rigid, since traditional Ewe practices that remain in common use encompass innovation and versatility.

### *Spirit Possession*

Many of the ritual events explored within this dissertation foreground spirit possession as an essential and dynamic element of their social and religious efficacy. Though scholars have interpreted spirit possession with reference to social structures of deprivation and the imagination these practices represent both more and less than the enactment of “healing art[s], entertainment, social critique...and ethnography” (Behrend and Luig 1999: xv).<sup>22</sup> Performers use their bodies as a nexus where objects, movement vocabularies, ethnic identities, and historical imaginaries converge. Spirit possession is a religious experience that encompasses theoretical perspectives about histories, personhood, gender, property, and power.<sup>23</sup> To theorize spirit possession, I draw upon cultural theorist Barbara Browning’s argument that spirit possession involves the expansion, rather than the displacement of self so that when Vodun spirits mount practitioners the practitioner expands outward, fortified and protected by the Vodun as their physical gestures and experiences are transformed by their momentary fusion with these non-human persons (Browning 1995: 57-58). Through such interchanges and commingling, Vodun spirits house and are housed by the bodies of enraptured worshipers molding their bodies in the service of the

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<sup>22</sup> Kramer 1987; Evans-Prichard 1956; Lewis 1971; Lambek 1996; Beattie 1977; M. N. Roberts 2000; A. F. Roberts 1988

<sup>23</sup> Cornwall 1994, Middleton 1969; Browning 1995; Wendl 1999

character and desires of the spirit. In my first chapter, I expand upon notions of spirit possession as involving gestural invitations which performers choreograph in the moment through practices of structured improvisation. Within spirit possession, performers “mounted,” or inhabited, by Vodun spirits assemble objects and offerings on, in, and through their bodies as a means of encouraging encounter and activating and participating in powerful liaisons with Vodun spirits. Through possession experiences, worshippers intimately apprehend specific spirits that portray the characters and establish and expand relations between individuals, families, communities and specific spirits.

### **Mami Wata’s Many Roads**

Scholarship focusing on practices honoring Mami Wata, as a pantheon of water spirits who mediate between West African devotees and cultural “others,” serves as a point of departure from which to understand Ewe performances of otherness and troubled histories in ritual discourses. Since devotees associate the pantheon with wealth and otherness, these deities illustrate the ongoing importance of transnational flows and colonial histories in West African communities. Art historian Henry John Drewal’s path-breaking work (1988) theorizes the water spirit Mami Wata as a longstanding center of devotion adapted by many Africans to translate and understand European “others.” Mami Wata appears in sweeping pan-African, transnational, and transatlantic forms and Drewal argues that the spirits reflect cross-cultural coastal interactions brought about by colonial encounters, trade, and cultural exchange (1996, 2008a). Drewal’s work as editor of the extensive, landmark anthology on Mami Wata (2008b) and as curator of the traveling exhibition entitled *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas* (2008), which originated at UCLA’s Fowler Museum, shows that Mami Wata worship often

transcends and travels across borders, cultures, and temporalities.



Figure 1. Mural of Mami Wata. Aflao, Ghana, 2015.

Since practitioners often perceive the water spirits —whose name is a pidgin version of the English words “mother” and “water”—as wealthy, wavy-haired, or otherwise stereotypically “foreign,” Mami Wata worship provides a fitting frame for thinking through ways that West Africans understand the economic predations and opportunities afforded by wealthy foreigners and colonial and neo-colonial administrations. A dangerous benefactress, Mami Wata promotes the financial concerns of those who serve her well, while bringing misery to those who ignore her. In fishing communities and amongst small-scale entrepreneurs, Mami Wata regulates the



trades through which these groups make their living by controlling ocean tides and the conditions of local wealth and health.

As an ethnic group concentrated in coastal and riverine locations, many working-class Ewes continue to gain their livelihood through fishing and commerce along the Atlantic, the Volta River, and various lagoons and sacred bodies of water. They worship Mami Wata spirits. By inviting Mami Wata spirits, as wealthy foreigners, into sacred spaces, performers adopt secret knowledge of how to procure expensive commodities from across the seas. For Ewe people, a foreigner is anyone considered not indigenously Ewe. When questioned about Mami Wata's origins, performers and practitioners gave me many different answers including that Mami Wata was from Ghana, Nigeria, India, or under the sea. Though they acknowledged that the practices through which they worshiped the spirits were their own, Ewe people never claimed Mami Wata spirits as Ewe. Though the practices often arise from long-held indigenous practices collected under the name of Mami Wata, practitioners still view the spirits as characteristically foreign. Though Osa Egonwa (2008) argues that Mami Wata is a case of "old wine in a new skin," devotees intentionally exoticize the spirits as sources of power. Yet, Mami Wata spirits are not an imported idea that Africans then claimed as their own since the practices and philosophies evoked by images of Mami Wata have been in existence since ancient times in African cultures and religions (Egonwa 2008). Rather, West Africans evaluate other West Africans from different ethnic groups and backgrounds through the lens of Mami Wata (Nevadomsky 2008). Mama Wata spirits exemplify and illustrate knowledge about various kind of "others" including ethnic, national, and non-human "others." Though Ewe practitioners view many pantheons of spirits as otherworldly strangers Mami Wata is also associated with foreign people because of her links to wealth and trade. Additionally, complicating notions of foreign and familiar spirits, the entire

pantheon of Mina clan spirits spends four lunar months in the ocean and eight with humans, which may be one of many reasons for the pervasive worship of Mami Wata spirits in the predominantly Guin-Mina town of Aného.<sup>24</sup>

Though many communities worship Mami Wata spirits in Ghana—especially in coastal areas near large bodies of water including the Volta region which is bordered by the Volta River for which the province is named—the spirits have become understood lately primarily through a Pentecostal Christian lens. Many Ewe people conceal or renounce relations with the spirits in search of reputability and social currency, assimilating with dominant cultural narratives that frame traditional religious practices as demonic, misleading, and intellectually stilted (Meyer 1999, 2008). During the interview with which I began this introduction, when I asked professor Believe if he knew anything about Mami Wata, his eyes bulged and he leaned forward in his seat, shouting “MAMI WATA!?!” In surprise and disgust, he exclaimed:

you will have to go naked to the ocean to find her and when you find her the dancers will not be dancing anything that you can write about, they will be turning in circles and waving their arms! How can you write about that? Mami Wata is a myth, we don't worship her in Ghana. Why do you all want to learn about these Vodun things? (Personal Communication Jul 19, 2012).

Due to the prevalence of Christian ideologies and social pressures derived from them as “modernity” is understood according to more Eurocentric parameters, many Ghanaians, like Professor Believe, seek to disassociate themselves from traditional religious practices. Similarly, Professor Believe sees ritual as antithetical to dance as in the assumption that practitioners would “be turning in circles and waving their arms” in ways that he did not consider to constitute dancing, let alone choreography. Such notions of dance and choreography as antithetical to spirit possession deny the danced invitations and planned steps through which possessed performers

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<sup>24</sup> Assiom, Eccoc-Aduadje, Kuakuvi, and Amenroume 2005: 52-53

join with spirits to produce acceptable movements as offerings and exchanges between Vodunwo and humans. His statement also reveals latent fears of perversion and impropriety when he surmises that I will have to “go naked” to learn about Mami Wata performances. Mami Wata arises in debates about progress and traditionalism across much of Africa, but debates about Mami Wata in Ghana are especially tense due to the nature of Christian missionization in the nation.

In Ghana expressions of Pentecostal Christianity often become entangled with notions of traditional religious practices. Through the spreading influence of Pentecostal-inflected films emerging from Lagos, Pentecostalism becomes a part of how Vodun practitioners see themselves and represent their ritual and traditional practices.<sup>25</sup> During my time in Ghana, I observed debates by wealthier Ghanaians and academics about Ewe and Ghanaian representation through which individuals sought to suppress memories of certain cultural practices in an effort to control their cultural legibility. Such debates illustrate shifting and conflicting perceptions of economic prosperity. Mami Wata is seen as a demon, a temptress, and a myth in part because wealthy and Pentecostal West Africans often seek to distance themselves from traditional practices as a means of privileging pathways to economic success introduced to West Africa by Westerners.

Mami Wata has a complex and contradictory history that varies depending on local contexts. The demonization of Mami Wata by missionaries has led to current perceptions of the pantheon of water spirits as taboo and dangerous. Though Mami Wata was often seen as a Christian saint in the 70s, from the 80s onward she has been demonized by African Muslims and evangelical and Pentecostal Christians in films and paintings. In *Translating the Devil* Birgit Meyer argues that German missionaries in Ghana distinguished between Christianity and Ewe

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<sup>25</sup> Meyer 2008, 1999; Jewsiewicki 2003; Edmondson 2009

traditional religious practices by demonizing Ewe religious concepts (1999: 84). Contemporary Pentecostals in Southern Ghana view Mami Wata as a demon which they ardently oppose, discuss, and portray. Many Pentecostals believe that Satan is in league with Mami Wata, commonly depicted as the wife of the Devil (Meyer 2008). Within Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, leaders often encourage a break with past traditions, which members label as tainted by conflicting and unacceptable “pagan” and “idolatrous” overtones. This perspective on Mami Wata also betrays anxieties about the changing roles of women in urban and semi-urban communities. Though Ghanaian Christians reject many traditional religious practices in this way, Mami Wata spirits have been particularly targeted because of their association with transgressive sexuality and destructive greed (Bastian 2008).<sup>26</sup>

Yet, in many communities that depend on the ocean and waterways for their livelihood, Ewe Vodun associations worship Mami Wata spirits and may also contend with both colonial and neo-colonial histories and experiences of trade within the worship of water spirits. Western technology has not yet managed to tame the Atlantic or stop the onward march of the ocean up the shore as it crawls inexorably inland, eroding the land and threatening to consume athletic fields, businesses, cemeteries, and homes (Greene 2002: 53-54). Historian Sandra Greene argues that Mami Wata practices grew in popularity due to the failures of efforts by colonial administrations and the independent government of Ghana to use Western technology “to break the force of the sea” on the coastline of the Ewe town of Keta, near Anloga in Ghana’s Volta Region (Greene 2002: 54; Akyeampong 2001a). Since the Atlantic plays by its own rules, many Togolese and Ghanaians in the maritime regions have chosen to adhere to the technologies that work and the epistemologies with which they are familiar, appealing to Vodun spirits, including

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<sup>26</sup> Meyer 2008; H. J. Drewal 2008; Shaw 2008; Jewsiewicki 2003

Mami Wata.

Even embracing Western technology and education has not served to strip the Atlantic Ocean of religious significance in the lives of many Ewe communities (Greene 2002: 55). An aside in a novella by Nigerian author Chris Abani may shed light on some of the tensions between Western and indigenous West African knowledge systems that Vodun practitioners negotiate through Mami Wata worship. In his “Song for Night,” which depicts how memories adhere to water, land, and bodies, Abani includes a quick reference to a battle of wills between Mami Wata and a British engineer, representing the strength of British colonial intellect and technology, who pays the price for refusing to acknowledge the dominion of the spirits. Abani’s protagonist muses about the naming of the Cross River, recalling that

There are many tales about how the Cross [River] got its name... Some say it was named after the frustrated British engineer who worked for the Colonial Service Works Department. Not that he was named Cross. Just that he refused to make sacrifices to placate the water spirits, so the mother of them, the mami-wata, pushed down every bridge the man tried to build across it to link the first colonial capital of Calabar with the hinterlands... Eight bridges this unnamed British engineer tried to build, until in frustration he threw down his T-slide and retired to Sussex muttering about ‘bloody... river can’t be crossed, I won’t let it become my cross.’ But it did... mami-wata came for him on his deathbed, or so I imagine (Abani 2007: 70).

Abani’s protagonist remembers a version of the story that acknowledges the significance of indigenous knowledge and practices. Due to the engineer’s refusal to offer sacrifices to the water spirits, the water spirits prevent him from building his bridges, defeating his colonial technology much as the Atlantic Ocean continues to consume coastal Ewe coastlines in both Ghana and Togo, unimpeded by government-led efforts to control the encroaching ocean. Both Abani’s allusion to Mama Wata’s clash with efforts to reshape the landscape based on colonial agendas and the realities of coastal erosion in Eweland demonstrate why water spirits like Mami Wata continue to influence notions of historical continuity and physical well-being for those living

near large rivers (like Ghana's Volta River) and along the Atlantic coast. These large bodies of water dominate local economies and communities must shape their lives around the whims of the waters. To do so, Ewe Mami Wata devotees fuel the enduring allure and continuing relevance of water spirits by using them to make sense of colonial pasts as well as economic exchanges in the present. In fact, many Ewe objected to colonial administrations on the basis of obstructions to commerce caused by shifting colonial borders and exploitative practices, including forced labor and unfair taxation that favored European businessmen (Nugent 2002: 46, 76; Lawrance 2007: 22-26; Laumann 2005: 24, Amenumey 1989: 4). African entrepreneurs in German Togoland were forced to sell their goods to European middlemen since they were prevented from importing and exporting by laws that withheld equality of economic opportunities from indigenous people (Amenumey 1989: 9). In part, Mami Wata spirits contend with and interpret such inequalities by critiquing such inequalities, as indigenous groups access foreign intermediary spirits to gain knowledge about imports, exports, and commerce through worship of water spirits.

Even currently, Togolese people have not forgotten German colonialism and the legacies of their time in Togo. During fieldwork in Togo, I went to Coco Beach in Lomé, Togo, with a group of friends. When we arrived, a Togolese friend soon pointed out a long stone ridge emerging from the waves parallel to the shore about 20 body lengths into the ocean. "That," he told me solemnly "is the road that the German's built." The "road" now forms an eroded lip for the roiling ocean as the depths continue to reclaim the stones and earth of what used to be a paved road. As I stood watching the Atlantic from the shores of Coco Beach, the waves seemed content to beat the German road, grinding it to sand as if the Mami Wata spirits within were swirling this remnant of colonial ingenuity into a silty cloak with which to cover themselves. The

Atlantic continued to consume this German relic, designed to move goods and serve European agendas, with a salty chuckle of the waves. Due to proximity to the ocean, an important site of trade and encounter, Mami Wata worship continues as an important element of debates about wealth and illustrates the ongoing importance of transnational flows and the entanglement of colonial histories with Christian missionization. Ewe communities also understand their imbrication within colonial histories of wealth and cultural exchange through narratives of the historical long-distance and domestic trade in enslaved Africans. Ewe devotees often perform joint rituals for Mami Wata spirits with a feared and respected pantheon of spirits called Mama Tchamba.

### **Mama Tchamba: Dancing Narratives of Enslavement**

Investigations of how West African communities encode memories of slavery in ritual repertoires are crucial to my project. Ewe Vodun practices treat the full life text of the individual including mental and physical ailments without “teasing apart...the body from the mind or from the numerous souls that make up an individual in all his or her overlapping with totemic plants, animals, deities and ancestors” (Rosenthal 1998: 42). Consequently, Ewe practitioners often embody a deep-seated awareness of their involvement in histories of domestic and trans-Atlantic enslavement, and an understanding of the local legacies of the slave trade within Eweland, through devotion to Mama Tchamba. During my first visit to Togo, I followed one of my collaborators and his sister as he gave me a quick tour around his neighborhood in Lomé. As we passed a local “drink spot,” a small café, a friend of his called out to him in Ewe. He replied and they both chuckled. My friend’s sister kindly explained the joke to me: “He is calling us his slaves, or his servants,” she whispered, “because our mother is from the North of Togo. Even

though our father is Ewe, he is teasing us because many of the slave women came from the North when Ewe people bought Northerners to serve their families.” Though a bit startled at the teasing, I chuckled with the others at the jovial demeanor of their neighbor. It was not until later, when I began to learn more about Mama Tchamba, that I could understand the ways that domestic slavery laces discussions of wealth, especially familial wealth, in Ewe communities. Encounters like the exchange between neighbors that I witnessed during my first week in Togo represent interplays of collective memories that manifest themselves in daily life, in dance, and in ritual.

Mama Tchamba is a group of Northern spirits of “bought [or enslaved] people” (*amefleflewo*) who possess descendants of Ewe families that purchased them (Rosenthal 1998: 130). Practitioners identify these spirits of previously enslaved people as originating in the northern regions of Togo and Ghana upon which Ewe people waged war during the transatlantic slave trade in search of profitable commodities, including captives. Mama Tchamba worship is a part of what is known as *brekete* or *gorovodu*. Brekete is seen as a highly effective branch of Vodun because practitioners hold that Northern gods wield more power than the southern, coastal Vodunwo (Friedson 2009: 25). The brekete drumming rhythms sound over the movements of Tchamba dances and are composed to echo the sounds of music from the north. This musical accompaniment has become so identifiable with the movements and ritual gestures of Vodun practices that venerate the north that such practices are sometimes known locally simply as “brekete.” This rhythm is an integral part of gorovodu, or “medicine” or healing Vodun, which is also known as “kola nut Vodun” (Rosenthal 1998: 264). Building upon scholarship examining Mami Wata in relation to Mama Tchamba (Rosenthal 1998; Rush 2013), my second chapter discusses how artists who participate in Ewe historical festivals and



ceremonial devotions use choreographic forms to deploy their bodies in history-making and place-making.



Figure 2. Mama Tchamba mural. Aného, Togo, 2015.

Vodun associations display distinctions between northern spirits and Ewe worshippers through clothing purchased from Muslim merchants from the north, creating palimpsest histories that combine memories of the processes and symbols of domestic enslavement with contemporary exchanges with Muslim traders, as techniques for explaining and remedying circumstances of economic deprivation. For Ewe and Guin Mina people, the abolition of the slave trade and the gradual decline of the transatlantic slaving era after 1807 corresponded with

the end of a golden age of wealth and prosperity when their chiefdoms had prospered from revenues obtained through the trade in human captives and ivory (Venkatachalam 2015: 4; Wendl 1999: 112). As Ewe communities experience worsening financial conditions, many Vodun practitioners argue that their enslaved ancestors and the Northern gods those ancestors served became angry and began to prevent the accumulation of wealth as punishment (Venkatachalam 2015: 4). I examine Mama Tchamba as a pantheon through which Ewe people actualize sacred geographies and position themselves physically and cosmologically in relation to their historical and contemporary participation in local and global systems of trade. Through Mama Tchamba and Mami Wata worship, Ewe people have theorized linkages between the domestic and the transatlantic trades in enslaved persons and between these related commercial enterprises and current economic challenges faced by Ewe people living in neo-colonial West African nations. Tchamba worship serves as a staging ground for understanding the interconnections of West African economies and social structures with global systems of trade and cultural exchange.

By examining Tchamba healing events as choreographed narratives that reframe histories of enslavement in terms of current economic need, I frame a dialogue between the extensive body of scholarship on transatlantic enslavement and recent, historically-based fictive explorations of the experiences and tactics of enslaved persons. Literary scholars categorize these novels portraying the subjectivity of enslaved persons or the legacies of enslavement in present socio-political realities in the Americas as “neo-slave narratives.”<sup>27</sup> In such works, contemporary authors indicate their indebtedness to antebellum slave narratives as they intentionally and strategically rethink representations of enslaved persons in light of the lingering

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<sup>27</sup> See Ashraf H. A. Rushdy’s *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999).

legacies of histories of enslavement that manifest in contemporary social relations. These novels, including Toni Morrison's oeuvre *Beloved*, bring discourses on memories of enslavement into popular imagination through forms that fuse fiction, histories, and the poetics of transformation. These narratives often depict the ways that suppressed histories of enslavement resurface accompanied by supernatural elements through which survivors attempt to describe that which cannot be spoken.

Ewe Mama Tchamba worshippers in Tsévié, Togo, also told me of the difficulty of speaking of the dangerous spirit group. Ewe practitioners often worship both Mami Wata and Mama Tchamba as a means of combining understandings of the Atlantic trade with the social legacies of the domestic trade (Rush 2013; Rosenthal 1998). Tchamba spirits evoke histories of domestic slavery and familial wealth. Though anthropologist Judy Rosenthal interprets the body as a text, bodies surpass texts as conduits of ecstatic and sensual experience. In Mama Tchamba rituals, practitioners use techniques of spirit possession and choreographed gestures that evade the limitations of presenting layered narratives of domination and debt through the frameworks of the European languages through which the bodies of enslaved Africans were racialized and objectified during the advent of the transatlantic slave trade. When using the Ewe language, wealthy Ewe families categorize enslaved Africans as persons, albeit "bought persons," with very limited economic and political authority, while in English they become slaves and in French "des esclaves," human cargo with no legal rights to personhood.<sup>28</sup> Within Tchamba rituals, Vodun practitioners construct their own revitalization and reimagining of narratives of enslavement by illustrating the tensions between culpability and debt and master and mastered as

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<sup>28</sup> In the Ewe word for "enslaved person" or "bought person," ameppeple, "ame" means person. For Ewe people enslavement was never an attack on personhood but involved demoting adults to the status of subservient and exploitable dependents (Wendl 1999: 112-113). See also "The Case of the *Zong*, 1783" for an example of the legal rights of enslaved Africans in Western legal systems.

the descendants of people purchasing families seek the help and advice of the spirits of “bought persons” purchased by their families. During these events, performers present mnemonic gestures meant to connect histories to visceral personal and collective experiences through embodied religious experiences. Performers conduct such events in a present informed by memory to serve the needs of a given moment.

## History-Making:

*The traumatic event lies first in individual and collective memory before entering the discourse of the historian.*

~Jean Fisher, “Diaspora, Trauma and the Poetics of Remembrance”<sup>29</sup>

*The ultimate container for holding memories is the body itself, the vehicle through which the intimate relationship between memory and place is realized.*

~ Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts, *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History*<sup>30</sup>

*Forced into the sugar plantation, mansion, hell-hole, cathedral, whorehouse, Masonic lodge, armory and opera palace of a place called St. Domingue, Africans reassembled the objets trouvés according to an aesthetic they carried in their heads, their hearts, their entire bodies. Out of torn lace, sequins, feathers and empty whiskey bottles they made working models of heaven, Guinées of cracked crystal. Theirs is the work of artists....Their aesthetic is improvisational never ‘finished.’*

~ Donald J. Cosentino, “Imagine Heaven”<sup>31</sup>

In examining history-making, or histories-in-process, rather than a singular definitive History, ethnographers and historians theorize narratives of the past as processes rather than products.<sup>32</sup> Much like Donald Cosentino’s description of the improvisational aesthetics of

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<sup>29</sup> Fisher 2008: 195

<sup>30</sup> Roberts and Roberts 1996: 41

<sup>31</sup> Cosentino 1995: 28

<sup>32</sup> See Roberts and Roberts 1996; Apter and Derby 2010; Shaw 2002; Baum 1995; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993

assemblage, which apply to contemporary Ewe Vodun practitioners in Togo and Ghana as much as to enslaved Africans developing Vodou practices upon arrival in St. Domingue, the aesthetic of Ewe history-making is embodied, unfinished, and adaptable. Ewe people claim the tools necessary to remember, taking on imported objects that they mix with the requisite items from their environment. Such processes do not demand completion but elaboration. Processual histories allow Ewe people to reconstitute the terms of their identifications with one another and also to seek to evade the weakness of divisions implied by national boundaries and to deny and reinterpret current economic marginalization. Processes of history-making unveil the gaps between what happened and what is said to have happened. Michel-Ralph Trouillot examines the tension between socio-historical processes (“what happened”) on the one hand and knowledge and stories about those processes (“what is said”) on the other (1995: 2). This dissertation examines the latter, concerned more with what is said to have happened and the presentations and power dynamics of those narratives than an attempt at retrieving with positivist exactitude “what happened.”

### **Cultural Memory and Choreographing Histories**

Many scholars of Ewe history and archaeology have retrieved the details of histories of migration and political conflicts and exchanges so that this study need not undertake such a task.<sup>33</sup> Instead, I consider ways that Ewe communities and individuals seek to embed past events in present practices to claim a heritage as a source of social and economic gain. In the case of Ewe people, history-making often occurs at points where communities must assert a ritual lineage in an effort to secure blessings from specific spirits or economic uplift from the state and

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<sup>33</sup> Amenumey 1986, 1986; Adabra 2012; Akyeampong 2001a, 2001b; Nugent 2003; Greene 1996, 2002; Lawrance 2007; Spieth 1906; Gayibor 1983; Laumann 2005; Mamattah 1976

wealthy, foreign patrons. The process of history-making encompasses Pierre Nora's theories of *lieux de memoire* (1989), or sites of memory, since social groups often enact history-making through adhering memories to specific spaces but may also attach such memories to bodies, to narratives, jokes, rumors, games, naming practices, and adaptations of mapping systems.

The reconstruction of such memories by individuals for collective sharing in an effort to produce specific outcomes in the world illustrates the sensuality of processes of history-making. In such cases, history-makers retrieve recollections gained through experience through physical sensations, and remembering becomes an action, a specific movement, like the flooding of a river, rather than the distancing and completion implied by the removal of the narrator within positivist histories purporting to present a factual past absent of bias and emotion.<sup>34</sup> Novelist Toni Morrison expresses an aspect of history-making in "The Site of Memory," when she observes that

they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory-where the nerves and the skin remember how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our 'flooding.' (1990: 305).

What Morrison calls "emotional memory" often takes form in Ewe contexts through choreographies, as performers infuse established gestures with their own memories and experiences as resonant mnemonics through which communities retain specific narratives within contemporary understandings of themselves and others. Through ritual choreographies, selected and approved transformative gestures and movement patterns, Ewe people put histories through

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<sup>34</sup> One danger of positivist frameworks of histories that frame historical narratives as objective texts is that they present power as unproblematic and irrelevant to the construction of narrative (Trouillot 1995: 14).

tests of credibility, “opening,” interpreting and arbitrating oral narratives (Trouillot 1995: 14; A. F. Roberts 2013: 60). The religious symbols and aesthetic events attached or appended to historical narrative reveal current understandings of Ewe identity and the place of Ewe people within the national contexts of Ghana and Togo and within global networks of African identities.

Scholarship on collective memory and West African ritual practice undergird my theorizations of rituals honoring Mami Wata and Mama Tchamba as important sites of collective remembering in the service of healing and navigating troubled histories. Drawing from studies that show how cultural memories are displayed through public performances and “bodily” rituals (Assmann 2010; Connerton 1989), I analyze the impact that re-embodied memories presented in festivals and possession dances have on specific Ewe communities. Where Pierre Nora (1989) and Paul Basu (2009) focus on how memories adhere to sites, I examine ways that performers present and adapt memories as they transmit knowledge to others through embodied contact and discursive exchanges. Just as Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts (1996) indicate that communities construct and adapt the past based on present needs and that histories are constantly in the process of being remade through embodied practices, I study ways Ewe devotees perform memories through which their communities contend with submerged pasts that have been excluded from historical records. In this study, memory is not used as a means of recovering the past but, rather, to “analyze the way memory is constructed, reconstructed and deployed for particular...purposes” (Greene 1997: 5).

Many recent studies acknowledge that scholars must look beyond national frameworks to delve into the processes of historical production within West African communities.<sup>35</sup> Rosalind Shaw adamantly connects histories of colonial terror in Sierra Leone to transoceanic trade to

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<sup>35</sup> Shaw 1998; Rush 2013; Piot 1999, 2001; Pierre 2013

“fold together past and present experiences of capitalism, transregional flows, and violence” (2002: 42). Dana Rush (2013; 1999) also explores the influences of cultural practices from outside of Togo and the Republic of Bénin on Vodun practice in coastal regions of the Bight of Benin, recognizing the nation as a nexus of trade while considering how religious practitioners borrow aesthetic inspiration from Hindu images and an imagined “India” to comprehend and question disproportionate acquisition of wealth. In line with these studies, Charles Piot (2001) and Jemima Pierre (2013) demand that scholars include African efforts to reconstruct the past and rehabilitate the present through collective representation within global discourses of histories of enslavement and colonial domination. The dispersal of Ewe people across multiple nations necessitates a transnational approach to histories in order to portray Ewe histories through Ewe self-representation. Ewe people use methods of history-making as a tactic to downplay national divisions in favor of unity along cultural and historical lines enacted through performances of solidarity that ignore internal divisions amongst Ewe people groups.

In the case of Ewe performers and religious practitioners, the movements and stories they express have not been “forgotten” but incompletely suppressed and often remembered through evocative images rather than through written language. For example, amongst Ewe and Guin Mina communities, the memory of chains as emblematic of enslaved Africans remains within words used to describe enslaved persons, including *ame kluvi* (chained person) and *ame gato* (iron person), and in rituals used to reactivate such memories (Wendl 1999: 114). In such cases, communities make narrative sense of past events and institutions through physical experience as individuals move between different ritual spaces, cycles, and processes. Though the image of chained captives remains vividly entrenched within popular consciousness, Tchamba performers exclude chains from dances of enslavement but include shackle bracelets (called *Tchambagan*)



within the dance and in preponderance upon Tchamba altars (Rush 2013: 116-119). In such cases, performers must assemble and accumulate these different elements by passing from one space to the other, connecting language with choreography and altar practices with other social interactions. Mama Tchamba rituals allow narratives of enslavement to resurface through prior knowledge gained from multiple settings while portraying violent histories of dislocation and exploitation through the seductive finery of sequined and brightly colored scarves, fez hats, and caftans purchased from Muslim traders. Through such rituals, worshipers render histories of enslavement comprehensible as performances, though they remain controversial and stigmatized in political and social discussions (Wendl 1999: 114; Akyeampong 2001b:1).

Rather than formalizing a difference between discourse and performance, I argue that ritual choreographies constitute their own kind of discourse that obscures the difficult historical knowledge that they retain through the aesthetics of secrecy by using coded symbols and images (Nooter 1993). Communities build histories through contestations and memory performances that influence their understanding of the present. During such performances, communities select gestures through which they call upon specific elements from a corpus of oral-historical narratives and apply these theories to contemporary debts and power dynamics unfolding within the moment of performance. Such memory performances provide the raw material for histories in-the-making (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 27). In such cases, multiple counter-memories persist as sources of ontological alternatives (ibid 1996: 28). In *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History*, Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts demonstrate that objects and performances generate memories for historical documentation, political negotiation, and problem-solving (ibid: 24). This dissertation contributes to such work by elaborating upon the processes through which communities produce and approach such memories. As such, the conflicts between Pentecostal

Christian and Ewe Vodun communities reveal how and why histories are interpretive processes inexorably in flux. These religious groups convene debates through embodied ritual practices in various contexts, from churches to shrines, in both Ghana and Togo. Memories of past encounters with missionaries and past migrations influence how these groups construct histories in order to achieve specific political, cultural, and economic agendas.

This dissertation frames choreography as the oft-missing element through which scholars can reevaluate the “work” and the processes of producing, establishing, and negotiating representative historical narratives. Since, in practice, histories are developed through ongoing debate among community members, since histories must be “opened,” or reviewed, clarified, and reinterpreted. Through ongoing arbitration, historical narratives are reestablished and reinvented according to shifting agendas (A. F. Roberts 2013: 60). Ewe communities continue to compile chronologies and conjunctions between past events by binding memories to disputes, places, and images.

West Africans construct alternative, unwritten histories through which they cope with situations of poverty, sickness, and political marginalization. Ritual events function as “vehicle[s] of history-in-the-making” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xxix) and generate memories for historical documentation and political negotiation. I expand upon Rosenthal’s claim that Vodun practices are characterized by change and fluidity as a result of the rapid inclusion of new ideas into traditional systems, by investigating how Ewe people use various notions of “otherness” within specific festivals to commemorate popular migration narratives, as well as other ritual practices, including Mami Wata worship, as sites through which to negotiate memories of the transatlantic slave trade and contemporary understandings of those deemed to

be foreign.<sup>36</sup> Ewe practitioners often demonstrate an understanding of the entanglement of their genealogies with histories of enslavement, through devotion to Mama Tchamba. Building upon scholarship examining Mami Wata in relation to Mama Tchamba, I discuss how artists who participate in Ewe historical festivals and ceremonial devotions deploy their bodies in history-making.

This text intentionally engages with indigenous processes of historicization to combat lingering ideas of the temporal fixity of African communities. Discourses on Africa as an untouched and untainted landscape arise from theories of “the folk.” The concept of the folk was adapted from European theories concerning the fascination of dominant European groups with the “exotic” rural cultures living on the European continent. Such theories represent one way that scholars have imposed ideas of authentic blackness and veiled references to primitivism with reference to black communities and individuals. In *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (2008), Anthea Kraut addresses the crisis of authenticity caused by scholarly notions of “the folk” in literary studies. Such “folk,” whether in Europe or the U.S. are seen as premodern and untouched by the taint of commercialization. By engaging with the choreographies and narratives of Ewe dance masters and religious practitioners, this study demonstrates the ways Ewe performers contend with the past to produce ideological alternatives to the economic, social, and political realities of their neo-colonial nations. This study of performance amongst Ewe and Mina people in eastern Ghana and coastal Togo also draws upon ways that performers represent themselves through choreographic choices since, though collectively produced, choreographers engage in discursive articulations of global histories that they carefully localize and perpetually re-envision. Attention to choreographic labor reveals the

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<sup>36</sup> H. J. Drewal 1998; Nevadomsky 2008; Shaw 2002; Rush 2013

ongoing dialogue between devotee and Vodun, between local performers and foreign wealth, and within regional politics as performers negotiate narratives that shape their communities.

## **Fieldwork**

During my first trip to Ghana, I interviewed dance scholars at the University of Ghana, Legon, and traveled to Cape Coast in search of communities practicing performances honoring the pan-African water spirit Mami Wata. My initial study of Mami Wata's manifestations in Ghanaian dance forms and visual culture revealed the extent to which many educated Ghanaian Christians rejected water spirits finding them emblematic of "primitivism," "superstition," and "backwardness." I was often told during this trip that Mami Wata was a myth invented by foreign anthropologists.<sup>37</sup> What I found was that Mami Wata, depicted as a malicious spirit by many Pentecostal Christians in Ghana and Nigeria, was present on Christian television programs and in common parlance as a dangerous seductress (Ross 2014: 25).<sup>38</sup> Yet, murals and painted signs along roadsides and in home compounds revealed the importance of the water spirits to the lives of many local practitioners. Though different groups of Ewe people debate issues of success differently and trust in divergent sources for financial gain and prosperity, many still use Mami Wata as a means of framing discussions of dangerous and prohibited wealth. Whether through embrace or denial, kinship or rejection, many of the Ghanaian and Togolese people with whom I spoke continue to express the dangers and allure of wealth and success through their

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<sup>37</sup> Professor Kid Quayson began our first interview by flatly stating that dances for Mami Wata were a myth but later softened his response by saying that "there is nothing that has a name that doesn't exist," to indicate that performances for Mami Wata must be taking place though he had never seen them amongst Ewe people during his own research (Personal Communication 24 July 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Mami Wata spirits often make appearances as evil spirits possessing young women in publicly televised exorcisms that take place at T. B. Joshua's Nigeria-based mega church, Synagogue Church of All Nations, and are televised on his channel, Emmanuel TV.

knowledge of water spirits. The warring interest in and fear of Mami Wata evident in my interactions during my initial trip to Ghana left me with more questions than answers about the significance of dances for water spirits in the lives of Ghanaians.

### *Ghana-Togo Crossings*

After spending many months in Dzodze, Ghana studying Anlo-Ewe language, I decided to venture into Togo to conduct comparative work examining differences between Ewe dance styles in Ghana and Togo. In 2013, I first crossed the border from the Volta Region of Ghana into Lomé, the capital city of the Republic of Togo, an experience I was to repeat many times during my fieldwork. As I passed from the red dirt haze of Aflao, Ghana into the open, beachside Lomé road, the sudden change from English to French road signs and the lack of merchants and shopfronts crowding the sidewalks were the primary markers of my shift from one nation to another. In the small francophone nation, I received an open welcome and invitation from performers and religious devotees to conduct research on local dances, especially in the town of Tsévié, where I conducted the bulk of the research for this dissertation. In Tsévié, I first experienced a ritual held in honor of Mami Wata at an event, conducted by the Association Deconu as a training activity for young association members, which I analyze further in my first chapter. The number and diversity of the dances performers identified as dances dedicated to Mami Wata was my first hint of the complexity of the performances through which Vodun communities encounter this pantheon of spirits.

At this event, I first met Mamissi Sofivi Dansso, who remains my primary source of knowledge about Ewe Vodun practices and performances in Tsévié. As the granddaughter of a well-known Vodun priest, or *hounoun*, and the niece of a Mamissi who served Mami Wata,

Tsévié locals often described Mamissi Sofivi as a practitioner born with the spirits, since she inherited the Vodunwo of her predecessors. With Mamissi Sofivi, I attended rituals and preparatory ceremonies as the inhabitants of Tsévié readied themselves for their annual festival and documented the festival itself for the first time. Interviews with Mamissi Sofivi about her experiences as performer and practitioner form the core of my first two chapters. Vodun practitioners, performers, and community members in Tsévié and Lomé eager to share their dance practices urged me to conduct a study that included both festival and ritual performances. In towns like Tsévié, Vodun practitioners like Mamissi Sofivi, identified as specialists in local traditional dance forms, participate in both.

I returned to Ghana for four months in 2014, from September to December. I focused on the Hogbetsotsoza festival that Ewe scholars including historian Sandra Greene and anthropologists Wicker and Opoku credit as one of the oldest and most popular festivals presenting Ewe ethnic identities and migration narratives.<sup>39</sup> I spent nearly two months in Anloga, Ghana, documenting preparations for the festival, including the reconciliation ceremony explored in my fourth chapter. I also documented the mini *Hogbe* festival, a school version of the Hogbetsotso festival, attending rehearsals to investigate how Ewe primary school teachers transmit migration histories to students by teaching them to perform in festivals.

In 2015, I moved to Lomé, Togo for nine months between April and December to apprentice with a “traditional” association in Tsévié, called the Association Deconu. I again trained with Mamissi Sofivi, who holds a leadership role within the Association Deconu. The association trains young women in Ewe performance styles and codes of behavior characterized as traditional. Through the Association Deconu, I studied Ewe dances with young, uninitiated

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<sup>39</sup> The festival was inaugurated in its current form in 1962 (Greene 2002: xviii).

performers and gained insight into the physical experience of performing the dances. Through observation and discussions of the dances with Mamissi Sofivi and the founder of the Association Deconu, a local leader and community activist named Dela Dzifomor, I learned about the purpose of the association in promoting Western-style education while validating what members consider as distinctly Ewe cultural practices. Yet, I also found that the Association's determination to protect young women from STDs and teen pregnancy by promoting abstinence revealed underlying fears of cultural decline and moral atrophy that were framed through discussions of the bodies of women. During my training with the Association Deconu, as I attended rituals to which I was invited by Mamissi Sofivi, performers began to tell me about the social and generational tensions related to histories of domestic enslavement. They also introduced me to the dances through which Ewe Vodun practitioners perform such histories. During this year, I crossed and re-crossed the Ghana/Togo border many times, documenting festivals and learning dances in both nations.

### *Selection of Research Sites*

I chose the towns of Tsévié, Togo and Anloga, Ghana as primary sites for my research since residents of both towns identify themselves as predominantly Ewe, hosting annual festivals celebrating Ewe migration and boasting large populations of traditional religious practitioners who frequently hold performance events honoring specific spirits. As a primary site of Guin-Mina religious and cultural events, I also examine practices and communities in Aného, Togo. Throughout my research in both Ghana and Togo, I recognized the difficulty of obtaining women's perspectives due to the nature of women's labor in many working-class West African communities. In particular, non-professional, working-class women, including Ewe women who

I interviewed and with whom I apprenticed, spend much of their time divided between small-scale commercial enterprises in markets and working within the home washing, cleaning, cooking, teaching, and caring for children. This population was also less likely than men to have a mastery of either English or French or even an ability to read or write local languages. Many such women rely on traditional religious practices when facing financial crisis, infertility, deaths in the family, and illness and turn to Vodunwo as practices through which they contend with a long list of challenges.

With this in mind, I made early efforts to gain a basic understanding of Ewe language and greetings through private lessons with Dr. Charles Mikado during my time in Ghana and a linguistics student at *L'Université de Lomé*. I also worked closely with an Ewe translator from Tsévié who lives in Lomé to facilitate conversations with women who could not speak either French or English. I worked with both Richard Azi and Gertrude Ezame as research assistants at different points during my time in Togo, and friends of mine often served as Ewe translators and assistants in Ghana. Through such methods, I managed to gain the perspectives of women who could not speak English or French even as I improved my skills reading and speaking Ewe, a process made more difficult by the many variations existing between different dialects. In both Tsévié and Anloga, I learned about dance practices and interpretations of Ewe cultural performances through casual conversations, dance training, public and private events, and personal interviews with women who were leaders in their communities.

### **Choreographies of Writing<sup>40</sup>**

To convey the experience of the flow of events interrupted and reoriented by the haptic

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<sup>40</sup> Subsection heading inspired by the title of a seminar class taught by Dr. Susan Leigh Foster in the World Arts and Cultures/Dance Dept at UCLA.



encounters of spirit possession, this dissertation is divided into two larger sections comprised of two chapters each. In each of the dissertation chapters, I use writing strategies to convey the immersive experiences of the researcher and the immediacy of spectatorship. In the first half of the dissertation, chapters 1 and 2, the italicized text exemplifies how onlookers may experience spirit possessions as surprising suspensions of previous proceedings. Practitioners use these interruptions to reflect current distress about economic downturn and performances of this kind often expose and may even remedy social disjuncture within communities. In writing, these interjections portraying dance movements intrude upon the chapters as commentaries and interventions, as options and revisions, as declarations of certain narratives and denials of others. In the latter half of the dissertation, chapters 3 and 4, similar breaks in the flow of the writing present the spaces and positions occupied by the walking, dancing, and documenting body of the ethnographer. In these chapters, the offset writing illustrates the participation of the ethnographer as observer and interlocutor as she charts improvisational paths in concert with Ewe friends, collaborators, and acquaintances. Such moments in the writing emphasize the movements of the ethnographer when arriving, meeting, touching, and watching in the learned steps of ethnographic practice. The writing demonstrates how the experiences of the ethnographer flow in concert with the movements and choreographies of Ewe people, as they share their histories and adapt personal narratives to fit the demands of the present. Through techniques that engage with viewership and performance, descriptive accounts of specific dance events entangle the reader in processes of spectatorship and interpretation experienced within the singular moment of the dance.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The techniques of ethnographic writing that I employ in this dissertation are inspired by the work of James Clifford in “On Ethnographic Authority” (1983) in which he argues that ethnographers now represent “others, and themselves, in a bewildering diversity idioms” that he calls “heteroglossia,” a type of cultural multi-vocality (1983:

In Chapter One, I trace ways Ewe performers address circumstances of personal distress by incorporating notions of alterity into choreographies honoring water spirits. Practitioners use power drawn from relationships with spirits from “elsewhere” to heal, protect, and regenerate their communities by engendering social cohesion within ritual settings. This chapter takes Mami Wata worship as an example of the ways that practitioners employ sacred objects, including those arrayed upon Vodun altars, as forms of communication. Within Vodun choreographies, communities express theories of what may be termed intersubjectivity—empathetic, non-verbal exchanges of knowledge—and religious devotion through the aesthetics of spirit possession and structured improvisation. Throughout the chapter, instances of spirit possession interrupt the flow of organized events as practitioners comment on the dangers of selfish consumption through worship practices honoring Mami Wata.

Chapter Two demonstrates Vodun practitioners in Togo mobilize their bodies as sites for memories of enslaved ancestors through performances for the pantheon of slave spirits known as *Mama Tchamba*. Ewe women devoted to Tchamba mirror the non-discursive sharing of memories of enslavement novelized in Paule Marshall’s 1983 “neo-slave narrative” *Praisesong for the Widow*. Through attention to stylized walking and the ambiguities of spirit possession, this chapter argues that both mediums shape silences about the slave trade through culturally determined tools and techniques. Where novels interrogate the slave trade discursively and syntactically, Mama Tchamba choreographies examine histories of bought persons through the manipulation of space, movement vocabularies, adornment, and ritual discourses. Yet, Ewe dances inscribing histories of enslavement move beyond text to serve as coping mechanisms for

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119). In *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (1996), Johannes Fabian also powerfully includes the glitches and interruptions of fieldwork in his presentation of ethnographic material in ways that inform my methodological approach.

collective memories founded on obligations to the spirits of enslaved ancestors. Through events honoring this pantheon, practitioners produce what I call “spectral geographies.” The term accounts for reconstituted places of ritual power that reference distant locations, like the reconfiguration and exaggeration of symbols of Northern Togo. Using choreographic analysis, personal interviews, and my experiences learning Ewe dances, I combine Paul Connerton’s theory of “bodily...acts of transfer” (1989: 2, 39) with an investigation of the significance of spatialized “memoryscapes” (Shaw 2002; Basu 2007; Nora 1989). This chapter demonstrates how ritual choreographies complement and complicate oral histories while also diagnosing social disjuncture within local communities.

The third chapter addresses how Ewe traditional associations and primary school educators perpetuate and transmit embodied memories to younger generations through a focus on performance idioms. I consider the role of the Togo-based Association Deconu in educating young women in Ewe traditional dances, ways of dress, musical forms, and Ewe language. This chapter also examines ways that Pentecostal discourses about and critiques of Vodun practices inform how Ewe elders train young women to comport themselves as representatives of their communities. Members of traditional dance associations in Togo and organizers of school festivals in Ghana use performances to redefine the terms of their collective identities and control the conditions of their cultural legibility to their children. I examine connections between dance performances of young women and cultural anxieties about the bodies of women as measures of collective social morality. I theorize my own disorientation in contrast with the ways that Ewe communities teach young women to balance and orient themselves through traditional and French education. Yet, even with the idealized and gendered body politics accompanying movement vocabularies, traditional performances become important forms through which young

Ewe women fashion themselves, even as they are cultivated and shaped by their elders.

In Chapter Four, I explore the ways that Ewe people produce histories that transcend the borders of the nation-state through processions, regalia, and pageantry in annual cultural festivals. Local leaders use festival presentations as catalysts for agricultural and economic development. Ewe performers present histories of migration through forms that have given birth to histories canonized through performance. In Ewe festivals, communities present triumphant accounts of migration histories enacted through dance and musical performances from multiple ethnic groups. Communities across the Volta region of Ghana and in coastal Togo claim authority by portraying themselves as an expanding regional and international diasporic group, rather than by denying histories of migration and cultural mixing. Though some of the narratives framed within the festivals were invented through the strategic external intervention of missionaries, Ewe performances of popular histories are of particular salience as they struggle to counteract narratives of economic decline in Eweland by staging festivals as alternate histories of return, unity, and development. I reconstitute my movements as an ethnographer in writing through de Certeau's meditations on walking in the city. I chart an improvisational path based on the demands of the moment, and experience Ewe festivals through multiple gestures, disorderly encounters, and juxtapositions that demonstrate how festival viewership depends upon individual experiences and the ways the movements of spectators affect and intermingle with official festival performances.

## Chapter One:

### *Choreographies of Healing, Wealth, and Identity in Ewe Mami Wata Devotions*

In a single year, Sofivi Dansso had suffered the deaths of four close family members. To address the wider implications of wrongdoing and relational imbalance within the household, she held a ritual to consult with Mami Wata and her other household spirits. *Mamissi* Sofivi performs in the *Ayiza* festival, trains young initiates, and presides over a local Mami Wata Association in Tsévié. Her title, Mamissi (plural *mamissiwo*), means “Mami priestess” or “wife of Mami” and indicates an initiated and seasoned practitioner. As a Mami Wata priestess, she has positioned herself as an intermediary between local water spirits and her semi-rural community in Togo. *In the midst of the event, Mami Wata manifested in a young woman dressed in a white African wrap dress. Her face crumpled with concern and distress as her movements became increasingly insistent and agitated. She held her arms behind her with her hands flexed and body bent over as she moved her feet in jaunty stomps. At times, she joined in with the same steps as the other dancers, following them unsteadily. She soon returned to flapping and waving her arms furiously, as if in frustration and discomfort. At one point, she suddenly broke into a run, heading directly into the tight circle of singers sitting facing each other in plastic chairs. Stumbling into the circle, she sat upon Mamissi Sofivi, who was singing with the others, and began to make her demands.*

#### **Introduction:**

This chapter draws upon experiences participating in dance events as well as notes, photographs, and video documentation of ritual performances that I collected in the field. Practitioners use specific dances to reestablish and articulate ontological stances and historical perspectives that position nature spirits, sacred objects, and ancestors as important sources of

knowledge. As an uninitiated performer, ethnographer, and foreigner in the communities within which this research was conducted, I prioritize Ewe dance forms taught to young people who were also uninitiated. I chose to access public knowledge that local community members invited me to witness and record.

This chapter emphasizes choreographic intent and improvisation in discourses on healing and prosperity. I bring scholarship examining ritual practice and ontology<sup>42</sup> into dialogue with performance theories<sup>43</sup> in order to draw conclusions about performance spaces, costumes, and movement vocabularies and to analyze the social implications of contemporary dance practices using choreographic analysis. Such analysis reveals the importance of historical and personal narratives to the selection of movements, staging, locations, music, and adornments integral to indigenous Ewe dances. By tracing the various performance styles Mami Wata practitioners use as they move between different contexts where they improvise and perform, this chapter expands the range of events considered as choreographic. Furthermore, West African devotees operate as improvisational artists in dialogue with the spirits to whom they are related.

During field research conducted between 2012 and 2015, I apprenticed with a traditional association in Tsévié, Togo, to work with Mamissi Sofivi—a middle-aged Mami Wata priestess and grandmother—who trains young girls in Ewe dances, songs, modes of dressing, and codes of behavior. Mamissi Sofivi is a *trosi* (plural *trosiwo*) and *vodusi* (plural *vodusiwo*), an initiated Vodun practitioner who is susceptible to possession and hosts Vodun spirits, also called *tro* (plural *trowo*) that have been passed down in her family. She honors and encounters these pantheons through a shrine in her home. By working with Mamissi Sofivi to learn Ewe

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<sup>42</sup> Rush 2013; Hallowell 1975; Shorter 2016; H. J. Drewal 1988, 2008a, 2008b; Roberts 2013; Rosenthal 1999; Friedson 2010; Cosentino 2010; Thompson 1984, 1993

<sup>43</sup> Browning 1995; Foster 2009, 2010; Kraut 2008; O'Shea 2007; Novack 1990

performance idioms, I was invited to local rituals as community members arranged and hosted them. I observed the movements described in the vignette above during a ritual held by Mamissi Sofivi. During this Vodun ritual, I joined the other dancers to perform movements learned as an apprentice of the traditional dance association over which Sofivi presides. Italicized movement descriptions weave in and out of this chapter in ways meant to invoke the entanglement of these gestures and performances with the life texts of Ewe traditional religious practitioners.

Devotees revere Mami Wata spirits for their ability to control and convey ships laden with cargoes of expensive luxuries, food, and modern conveniences. By this same token, if devotees carelessly offend Mami Wata spirits through shoddy performances or insufficient offerings or tributes the spirits may withdraw their support and seek retribution on the families and close associates of the offending parties. In Vodun cosmologies and worldviews, these spirits continue to dominate the grand, aquatic two-lane highway of the Atlantic Ocean upon which fancy cargoes and beneficial technologies are brought to the Vodun-centric regions of the Bight of Benin (Cosentino 2010: 87). Practitioners appeal to these water deities to transform problems into opportunities through specific gestures, choreographies, and communal processes used as forms of healing.

Movement vocabularies associated with Mami Wata have not yet been extensively studied from a critical dance studies perspective. Though the musical performances of Ewe people and the intricate histories and meanings of visual representations have been well documented, the specifics of the dances have been neglected. Through attention to these movement practices, this chapter not only seeks to account for the movements of the performers but also grapples with their efficacy and significance in Ewe communities. The growing body of work emerging from the disciplines of Anthropology and Art History concerning Mami Wata

explores how devotees employ images and objects to worship Mami Wata, but as largely understood through visual culture rather than performance.<sup>44</sup> Such studies effectively present the transformation of meanings and symbols over time represented by images of Mami Wata, but often divorce Mami Wata spirits from specific local contexts and communities and generalize the domain and efficacy of worship practices associated with the pantheon of spirits (Nevadomsky 2008: 353). Mami Wata spirits have also been detached from the movement vocabularies performed by devotees during spirit possession events that practitioners view as essential to eliciting help from and evoking these water spirits in towns like Tsévié and Aného, Togo and other sites along the West African coast.

Robert Gore and Joseph Nevadomsky (1997) formalize the boundaries fundamental to culturally specific work on Mami Wata. Nevadomsky argues that Mami Wata is not exclusively about European others but also about ethnic “othering” between different peoples in the West African region. Consequently, many of the water spirit beliefs now harbored under the banner of Mami Wata are West African traditions borrowed from various ethnic groups that water spirit worshippers link through understandings of Mami Wata spirits as a general name for the types of work that water spirits perform in different communities. Yet, many of these practices and concepts existed long before the common use of the name “Mami Wata” to identify them (Egonwa 2008: 217; Wicker and Opoku 2007: x, 28-29). This chapter emphasizes local distinctions of Mami Wata worship through specific localized case studies, as advocated by Gore and Nevadomsky (1997). As a result, the practices examined in the chapter mostly occur in Tsévié or Aného, Togo. Focusing on the context of the movements themselves and the performance environments in which these movement vocabularies are produced counteracts

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<sup>44</sup> Gore and Nevadomsky 1997; Egonwa 2008; Meyer 2008; Wicker and Opoku 2007; Shaw 2008



homogenous presentations of Mami Wata's various manifestations and related choreographic practices. Yet, this study also links these performances across cultures and ethnicities to broaden discourses of choreography and spirit possession.

As a result of Mami Wata's close association with wealth and strangers, dancers invite water spirits while interacting with important symbols of capitalistic exchange, including cowrie shells, imported perfumes, and talcum powders that participants employ as tributes to Mami spirits.<sup>45</sup> Ewe devotees use dance events honoring Mami Wata to secure external, or foreign, power with which to intervene in the health and prosperity of their communities. By taking on the signs and signals of otherness within the context of performance and by carrying and dancing with objects and adornments associated with powerful foreigners, practitioners transform liminal alienation into power. They use the aesthetics of danced devotions to Vodun spirits as forums for cultural exchange, community-building, and debates about collective and personal prosperity and wellness. They make aesthetic choices through which they communicate with spirits, viewers, and other participants.

Choices made about movements, locations, musical accompaniment, and adornment during ritual gatherings illustrate relationships to divine power and economic wherewithal. Ewe Mami Wata devotees use their bodies as points of encounter through which they reimagine and redefine their world and their local communities. Water spirits dancing within rituals are at once close kin and foreign intercessors who bring external power and opportunities for healing.

Building upon understandings of intersubjectivity to demonstrate the ways that men and women

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<sup>45</sup> Cowrie shells were widely used as currency in Eweland and other parts of Africa during the slave trade. Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson call them *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade* (1986). These shells have a long and complicated trade history. Money cowries had their longest-lasting circulation in India and have a name taken directly from Hindi and Urdu word *kauri*. Charles Piot notes that the shells were used as ballast to balance vessels sailing to West Africa and then the shells were traded for enslaved Africans on the coast and into the interior (1999: 36; Hogendorn and Johnson 1986: 5, 104-109; Manning 1990: 99-102).

live as wives of Mami Wata, I approach the dancing body performing indigenous choreographies as a nexus of choreographed movements and accumulative sacred objects. In conclusion, I shall illustrate how devotees merge personal narratives with collective choreographies to intervene in the success and well-being of their communities.

### **Dancing Chromolithographs and Foreign Benefactors:**

While I was in Togo, I found that there was not just one spirit that Ewe people identified as Mami Wata. Mami Wata is, rather, a class of spirits with many different names and purposes. The principal unifying feature of all of these spirits is their domain over bodies of water and their association with wealth and outsiders. As I sat with Mamissi Sofivi on the day of our last interview, I urged her to tell me more about Mami Wata. I wanted her to pinpoint Mami Wata's iconography and how dances for the spirit could be recognized. As I pressed her for more details, she began to laugh at me. Deeply amused, she observed that:

Mami Sika, Mami Densu, Mami Ablo, *Anyidohuedo* —the rainbow— these are all Mami Vodunwo! The rainbow is not the same as the serpent [Vodun] but Mami [spirits], the rainbow Vodun, and Mammy Da [the serpent] all [arrive] together. When someone says Mami Wata they are speaking about multiple Mamis all at the same time" (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015).

Mamissi Sofivi maintained that since manifestations of Mami Wata spirits are varied, dances for water spirit can be quite heterogeneous between regions and communities. The dances, in short, can be as diverse as Mami Wata's manifestations. There is not merely one dance for each Vodun since performers use different dance "syntax" (Foster 1988: 58) and vocabularies to worship various trowo, spirits, depending on the performer, the town, the occasion, and the purpose of the ritual. Mammy Da is essentially a combination of or marriage between Vodou Da, the serpent Vodun, and Mami Wata. Many devotees closely associate this mermaid spirit, who arrives

through spirit possession at rituals with the serpent spirit Dan, with a popular chromolithograph depicting a South Asian snake charmer who worked in a “people show” in Hamburg, Germany in the 1870s (Drewal 1988).<sup>46</sup>

In “Performing the Other: Mami Wata worship in Africa” (1988), Drewal traces the origins of the most popular chromolithograph depicting Mami Wata. Through a research process akin to archival detective work, Drewal discovered that this image of European origin was reprinted in India and England and widely distributed in sub-Saharan Africa (1988: 170-171; A. F. Roberts 2009: 128-129). He argues that Europeans and Africans saw the image as exotic for very different reasons. For Europeans the image portrayed a foreign snake charmer, including serpents and costume. On the other hand, for Africans the chromolithograph was a “photo” (Pinney 2004: 226) of Mami Wata, an image of the realities of the submarine life of a water spirit (H. J. Drewal 1988: 169-170). Images like that of the snake charmer often migrate in complex, unintended, and unpredictable ways. Allen F. Roberts addresses how such images “float” based on the specific economic, political, and social agendas of different groups. Such images often provide links between seemingly disparate locations and time periods (Roberts 2009: 119). These images also become deeply linked to social structures. In the case of the Mami Wata chromolithograph, the financial success of South Asian merchants inspired and fueled local incorporation of the image of Mami Wata and of other related Indian religious imagery into Vodun practice (H. J. Drewal 1988: 165). Chromolithographs not only “float” to different places and contexts but also become embodied, and even danced, as practitioners represent the

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<sup>46</sup> Lithography is the process of making prints from a metal plate or flat, stone surface and was invented in 1796 by Alois Senefelder. Chromolithograph presses have been operating in India since the nineteenth century. Art historian Christopher Pinney notes that lithography was immediately appreciated in India for its “cheapness, portability and relative ease of production” (2004: 14). Dana Rush foregrounds the portrait and landscape painter Raja Ravi Varma as an influence on the spread of popular portrayals of gods, goddesses, and legends on poster and calendar art (Rush 1999: 63; Iglis 1995: 58).

character and appearance of the Vodunwo they serve by employing imported images of various water spirits.

Mami Wata adapts view rituals for the pantheon as contemporary opportunities that serve relational and economic needs. Coastal water deities worshipped along the Bight of Benin have gained their religious significance due to the immense wealth that coastal Ewes gained through economic exchanges with Europeans and South Asians visiting or residing in colonial entrepôts along the Atlantic coast (H. J. Drewal 1988: 165). Through ritual practices associated with water spirits, devotees reflect upon the opportunities presented by cultural exchange in postcolonial nations. When asked about Mami Wata's origins, one of my Togolese collaborators informed me that you can find Mami Wata anywhere in the world

Mami Wata is always added to other deities, she never comes alone. What Indian people do in India is the same as what we do here in Togo.... There have been Indians who want to become Mamissiwo [priestesses] because it is the same thing. What Indian people do in India is the same as what we do here in Togo... With Mami... the same Vodun are found... at the bottom of the sea [in other places] as here (Personal Communication Nov 11, 2015).

Many other Togolese devotees also claimed that all water spirits share the ocean and are not bound by nationalist or ethnic divisions (Personal Communication Nov 17, 2015). Mami Wata (Mammy Da amongst some Ewe) holds sway over trade and mobility because of her dominion over the Atlantic Ocean and because her depiction as a mermaid may have originated with sightings of majestic mermaid figureheads on European trading and slaving vessels off of the West African coast (H. J. Drewal 1988). In ritual events, Mami Wata spirits display their expensive tastes by demanding gin, imported perfume and powders, sweet imported drinks, and other expensive foods and toiletries, as Geneviève did when clamoring for scented talcum powders and perfumes. Some devotees argue that Mammy Da can manifest in anyone, whether he or she is initiated or not, because all humans are born out of water with the snake of their

umbilical cords attached to their bodies. *Anyidohuedo*, the rainbow Vodun, visually represents Dan, the serpent, as a rainbow serpent.

Another Mami Wata spirit called Densu, or Papi Wata, was translated from a print of the Hindu deity *Dattatreya*. In “Eternal Potential: Chromolithographs in Vodunland,” Dana Rush discusses the popularity of calendar art and the rapid spread of foreign images in West Africa during the second half of the nineteenth century (1999: 63). She emphasizes the multiplicity of uses to which practitioners put chromolithographs as representations of various Vodunwo. According to Rush, many mamissis see images of Shiva as Mami Dan, Dattatreya as Densu or Papi Wata, and Hanuman as Egu, Vodun of iron (1999: 65-70). Densu manifests in ritual performances as a riverine deity, often wearing scarves in pink or red imported from India to match the imported chromolithograph of *Dattatreya*, who sports a red wrap around his waist in the image. Worshipping Mami Wata places devotees in dialogue with Hindu religious practitioners through such flows of images and performances. Practitioners worship Mami Wata spirits through a vast array of songs, forms of dress, dances, poetry, and murals, yet these spirits are also welcomed into the bodies of practitioners and invited to join in the movements of bodies enthralled in worship. Such movements constitute gestural manifestations of long-standing, often generational and intimate, relationships with these gift-giving water spirits.

Water deities worshipped along the Bight of Benin have gained their religious significance due to the immense wealth that coastal Ewes gained through economic exchanges with Europeans and South Asians visiting or residing in colonial entrepôts along the Atlantic coast. These exchanges and shifts in power and affluence are remembered through performances that caution against prohibited or selfish wealth and jealousy and theft while soliciting collective wealth through prayers and invitations. Mami Wata often becomes prominent in communities

changing from gift-giving to cash economies as they oversee shifts from a focus on collective prosperity to preoccupations with personal commodity consumption and individual affluence (Bastian 2008; Frank 2008; Meyer 2008; Shaw 2008).

### **“Wives” of Mami Wata:**

Men and women initiated into the worship of Mami Wata are known as “wives” of Mami Wata spirits. Much as Mami Wata moves between land and water and merges human and fish, Mami Wata also exemplifies gender fluidity through the plasticity of spirit possession (Browning 57; Rosenthal 1998: 113-114). Adepts of Mammy Da, and Densu— whose adornment, iconography, and significance I will examine further later in the chapter—exemplify ways performers evade and complicate gendered identities through Vodun practice and Mami Wata performance. Initiated men perform as female spirits to characterize Mammy Da, an iteration of Mami Wata who appears as a snake-charming mermaid wreathed by Vodou Da himself. In the *Yeke Yeke* festival in Aného, male Mammy Da devotees were described as men who adorned themselves like women and who danced effeminately to show that they have been possessed by Mammy Da. These men wear the beads and body decorations of Da along with their clan beads for their Mina clan Vodunwo.<sup>47</sup> Since linguistic designations of gender are much more fluid in Ewe language than in English or French, in an Ewe context, a man can be identified linguistically as a “spirit wife” just as easily as a woman (Rosenthal 1998: 185-186). For example, Hindu chromolithographs of Densu, sometimes locally known as Papi Wata and the

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<sup>47</sup> During an interview in Aného, Togo, a young man named Pierre and his mother-in-law, who is a mamissi, told me that the beads and decorations of one dancer in the *Yeke Yeke* festival represented *Edan* (also spelled Dan and Da). They also told me that “the decorations [on his body] are also to show that he worships Edan, the serpent, because they are made in the shape that a snake or reptile makes as they slither. The men who dance more effeminately are Mammy Edan worshippers” (Personal Communication November 17, 2015).

husband of Mami Wata, depict him as a three-headed man (A. F. Roberts 2009: 127; Rush 1999: 65-66). At a ritual held by a friend of Mamissi Sofivi's in Tsévié, Densu manifested himself in a young woman.

*She wore a large blue scarf imported from India over a white scarf that had been wrapped into a topknot that projected from her head, replicating the look of Densu's turban in the popular renderings of his likeness through paintings on the walls of shrines. For most of the performance, Densu stood and surveyed the dances, but at one moment the dancer suddenly leaned over with her knees bent and her grasping hands nearly touching the dirt. Her feet beating out the rhythm of brekete even as her hands seemed to clutch at the air just above the dirt, each shoulder dipping in time with the pull of her arms. She quickly finished her dance and returned to her aloof stance, with arms crossed, watching the other dancers.*

In such ways, women, in the thrall of a Vodun, perform male spirits. In Ewe language, personal pronouns are never gendered and many Ewe speakers have trouble getting personal pronouns right when they speak English. As such, the fact that all devotees of Mami Wata are known as “wives of Mami Wata” reveals the significance of gendered labor and roles within Ewe communities, commenting more on devoted service and partnership than on rigid notions of gender identity.<sup>48</sup> In many cases, the spirit is represented through postures and the convergence of a variety of sacred objects and embellishments that demonstrate the relationships between trowo and their “wives.”

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<sup>48</sup> In an interesting contrast, Luba people hold that only women, as child bearers, can withstand and embody powerful spirits and the sacred knowledge that accompanies encounters between spirits and spirit hosts (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 41; M. N. Roberts 2013: 68).

## Ritual Choreographies:

In Tsévié, locals identify Sofivi Dansso as a mamissi who was born with spirits. She was chosen by and dedicated to the Vodunwo from her infancy. She has mastered the movements required to venerate the spirits she serves and has undergone extensive and arduous training to become a teacher of traditional dance practices and an important fund of knowledge within the community. Another member of the community, a young man named Dodzi, is a priest known to host many Vodunwo including *Sakpata*, a Vodun whose domains include smallpox, healing, and the earth. Dodzi is not only one of the most revered healers in Tsévié and the surrounding towns, called upon to help with difficult births or long or violent illnesses, but also a respected lead drummer for ritual functions.<sup>49</sup> Dzifomor is a leader in Tsévié and patron and founder of the Association Deconu and the arts including the annual cultural festival. He was inspired to encourage knowledge of the arts amongst young people because of the dwindling familiarity with formal Ewe ways of addressing elders, dressing, and performing amongst young people in the town. These men and women work within groups and communities that include nature spirits, ancestors, and animate power objects to teach, choreograph, perform, analyze, and perpetuate traditional performance idioms.

Ewe performers narrate and perpetuate notions of authenticity through choreographic choices as they perform local histories. Ewe choreographies involve aesthetic choices made to communicate or accomplish a certain type of work. Such aesthetics relate directly to choreographic practice since communities must judge which dances to perform for specific occasions and, in communication with visible and invisible persons, must decide which

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<sup>49</sup> In Tsévié, Togo, Vodun practitioners also call Sakpata by the local name *Anyigbato*. Though devotees historically turned to this Vodun to heal small pox, in contemporary times Sakpata manifests in rituals to heal HIV/AIDS and other diseases (Thompson 1993: 216-219).



movements, performance sites, and presentations will best address present needs. The visual presentation of dance events illustrates kinship with nature spirits linked to sacred sites and with ancestors through whom power is inherited. These performances are also choreographic because they are culturally accessible and legible. Dancers and spirits choose amongst movements that are intelligible to practitioners and that serve specific purposes. Together, Mami Wata spirits and their worshippers choose movements, objects, and symbols that convey the meaning, character, and purpose of the Vodunwo.

During Mami Wata rituals, dancers summon spirits through the movements of their bodies. As dancers perform the winging arm gestures of the *agbadza* dance and the various choreographies associated with specific water spirits, one among them may become possessed by these spirits and manifest Mami Wata bodily. Since the spirits often travel away from their devotees on their own business, worshippers welcome them back through rituals that center around offerings, dance, and musical performances. A Vodun will often join these performances through spirit possession by temporarily displaying their character and desires through movements performed by the bodies of one or more participants.

Debates rage about whether devotee or the Vodun control the terms of this confluence of the tangible and the incorporeal. At the University of Ghana, Legon, a dance professor argued that performers have to learn the technique of possession and told me that he stages trances as part of his artistic practice (Personal Communication Jul 24, 2012). Dancer, choreographer, and ethnographer Kimberly Miguel Mullen emphasizes different perspectives on the process and staging of trance and possession dances (2006: 45). Her mentors, dance masters and choreographers Juan De Dios Ramos Morejon and Juan Carlos Blanco, argued that the performer must invite the spirit and that many performances represent the character of the spirit through

movement rather than through the actual arrival of the spirit to possess a performer.<sup>50</sup> Others, like performer and Afro-Cuban religious practitioner Teresita Dome Perez, contended that the *orisha* has absolute control and can manifest at any time and in any way, even within the context of a staged performance. Yet, in each case, the protocols and techniques of possession must be learned and observed in order to maximize the chances that a person will experience manifestations of the spirit without incurring the wrath of the spirit.

Spirit possession involves a physical encounter between a practitioner and one or more Vodunwo. Once a Vodun arrives at a ritual event by claiming or “mounting” specific practitioners, the Vodun often orchestrates and dictates the ways that the event progresses by demanding certain dances and offerings. They may also lead a specific person to sacred sites, including altars, to offer additional offerings in private to appease and please the spirit and set relations right between spirits, worshippers, and communities. Ewe performers experience and recognize spirit possession through familiar gestures, musical accompaniment, power objects, offerings, and improvised choreographies. Ewe devotees perpetuate such practices through systems of regulated improvisation in possession rituals and performances of traditional dances that are intentionally codified and transmitted. These performances are neither spontaneous nor unconscious. Practitioners performing in relationship with invisible spirits and power objects use choreographic practices to reach into the past in order to preempt future difficulties.

Though choreographic practice functions differently within possession dance than in the contexts of concert dances, performers structure and prepare movements in ways that are culturally legible and comprehensible. As culturally decipherable patterns, symbols, and shapes

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<sup>50</sup> Morejon worked as founder and performer in the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba. He argues that religion is not present in secular performances of Afro-Cuban dances and that choreographers make artistic rather than devotional choices when choreographing theatrical performances (Mullen 2006: 45).

(Browning 1995: 35), spirit possession dances are clearly choreographic, relating to the etymological root of the term “choreography,” which—when deconstructed from the Greek into “choreo-,” meaning dance or dancing, and “-graphy,” denoting drawing or writing—means “dance writing.” Though performers improvise within culturally and collectively determined frameworks based on the whims of the *tro* and the movement patterns that best represent ancestors and nature *Vodunwo*, they constitute forms of cultural literacy (Browning 1995: 50).<sup>51</sup> In short, possession dances constitute performed systems of communication and representation, which define and represent *Vodunwo* more clearly than textual forms could, by demonstrating how the spirit moves and physically representing the interventions into the social and physical health of a community of these amorphous entities (Browning 1995: 49). Though performers construct movement vocabularies through communication across metaphysical boundaries, these practices constitute choreographic practices within sacred contexts including spirit possession dances.

Improvisation is choreography in the moment. Through such choreographies in the moment, spirits and devoted worshippers communicate with one another and debate the terms of their contractual, sometimes contentious, intimate, and often familial relationships with these healing and dangerous spirits. Performers choose movements and gestures as the dance unfolds based on techniques developed beforehand: “creat[ing] as well as performing what [she] will do next” (Foster 2002: 13), demonstrating the high value placed on improvisation within established movement patterns in *Vodun* communities. Ewe communities choreograph possible and

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<sup>51</sup> Mary Nooter Roberts, Christine Mullen Kreamer, Elizabeth Harney, and Alysson Purpura challenge assertions that Africa is not a part of the literate world by presenting a history of literacy in Africa and examining the visual aspects of textual forms. These scripts function as “technologies of communication” and as “ways of knowing and affecting the world” (2007: 14). Many of the alternate literacies they examine originated in performance idioms so that reading becomes a process of translating visual images in similar ways to interpreting dance movements (2007: 23).

desirable futures that align with their ritual objectives by reproducing, rearranging, and reshaping narratives of the past through associative, accumulative, metonymic strategies. In improvised dances, the construction of movement vocabularies become collective processes so that creative authority lies with the group rather than with specific individuals (Novack 1999). In such cases, as in many spirit possession dances, the roles of the performer and the choreographer are enmeshed (1990: 189). During Mamissi Sofivi's ritual to heal her household, a young woman called Genevieve, became possessed by a Mami Wata spirit called Mami Ablo ("Mami Wata Who Loves Colors").

*She skipped in like a leaf caught on the wind. Her white dress, over a lacy petticoat, was like a puff of smoke around her or a cloud caught on a gust of wind as she bounced in a circle, leaping from one leg to another as her arms whipped around her. Her body was bent forward and she faced the ground. Her arms moved in the air beside her body, outstretched to the sides and wavering up and down as if to trouble the air around her. As she spun out of control, her assistant moved to catch her by the shoulders to prevent her from falling. She regained her balance, righting herself and stopped with a wide stance, arms held out like an inebriate. First, she moved aimlessly from one foot to the other as if the ground was shifting under her, then she sashayed toward the other dancers, joining the very end of the agbadza movements. She wove in and out of the dances as needed, picking up the thread of the movements only to abandon them.*

Genevieve's movements as she hosted a spirit of Mami Ablo were an interactive conversation between the performer and the Vodun as well as between the spirit and the other participants. The improvisational nature of the performances does not negate the intentional structures and stylistics through which the movements take shape and achieve social legibility. Possessed by Mami Ablo, Genevieve was not at liberty to omit the *agbadza* movements because

those movements open a path for certain spirits to allow for more open and clear communication between spirits and dancing devotees. Performers intentionally layer and juxtapose certain steps and behaviors within the context of the moment. Indigenous performances of this kind are interactive social practices in which form and content are responsive to history and open to improvisation (Gilbert 2013: 179).



Figure 3. Genevieve possessed by Mami Ablo (“Mami Who Loves Colors”). Tsévié, Togo, 2015.

*She flew across the dirt of the courtyard with her arms outstretched, her feet seeming hardly to touch the ground as she ran. Once within the circle of singers her legs splayed and stretched. She raged, her body moving up and down as she bent and straightened her knees while resting her head on Mamissi Sofivi’s lap. Sofivi began to tap her with a percussion stick, lightly smacking her back as if to awaken her and exhort caution. Eventually, and with much coaxing, she sauntered out of the circle of vocalists. She bent her body as she spun in a tight circle with*

*her arms seeming to test the wind like shrunken and useless wings. As she spun and paced unsteadily, another woman followed her movements closely. Her helper was a senterua whose role in the ceremony was to care for Vodun adepts once they fall into trance. When Geneviève was in the middle of the circle, her senterua pulled on her hands and adjusted her clothing so that her dress would not be displaced by the exertions of the spirit. Whenever she stumbled, she was guided by others toward surer footing. Geneviève, locked in Mami Ablo's grip, continued to spin in lazy circles with her head and right shoulder angled downward and sideways as she spun. She soon pushed her body into the energetic full body contractions of the agbadza dance, abruptly falling into step with the other dancers performing movements that circled the seated vocalists. She stopped dancing just as sharply. As if waking from a dream, her eyes regained focus as she walked toward the altar room in search of talcum powder and perfume. Her frustration culminated in gestures toward her mouth and erratic movements of her fingers in the air as she moved toward Sofivi making grimaces of pain. At the height of these gestures, she threw her arms up in frustration at not getting what she was looking for and stormed into the altar room once more. She emerged holding powder mixed with water in a gourd bowl and a bottle of powder in her hands. She covered herself with the powder and continued dancing. When the dances for Mama Tchamba, a pantheon of Northern slave spirits, began she poured out powder on everyone and began to pass the water and powder mixture around for the drummers and initiates to drink.*

This foreign spirit took Mamissi Sofivi to task, invading her space and making wordless demands for appropriate offerings. Though the dancers were not expecting that the performer would suddenly leap in amongst the vocalists, such gestures are within the scope of movements that can be performed by Mami Ablo when communicating with her mamissiwo. Some of

Genevieve's gestures arose from the fact that she had not yet had her mouth-opening ceremony (*nuvuvu*). Before this, observers find difficulty telling which spirit has descended since these performers wear simple white calico wraps and communicate without speech (Venkatachalam 2015: 75; Friedson 2010: 18). In such cases, dance and gestures become the spirit's only means of communicating with others through tight-lipped performers. Geneviève demanded powder and dumped a whole bottle of it over the heads of the drummers. She also took a bottle of perfume and doused dancers, singers, and drummers with it. Based on her desire for offerings of talcum powder, perfume, and sweet lemonade soda, Mamissi later identified the spirit she encountered through Genevieve's movements as Mami Ablo, a manifestation of a very wealthy, gift-bringing, Mami Wata spirit.

Genevieve's movement patterns reveal the character, disposition, and orientation of the spirit towards the hosts and beneficiaries of the ritual. Vodun spirits come to hold court and to demand change and adjustment within communities. They come restlessly, demanding appeasement in order to settle themselves and refrain from causing illnesses and conflict or agree to heal families and communities. Dances are often given as gifts to appease the spirits and become forums where deities physically encounter their adherents and sites where their knowledge and "social medicine" (Daniel 2005) are temporarily fused to the intimacy of familiar spaces and historically marked topographies. Dance movements and musical performances form bridges and doorways between the material and the ethereal, between human flesh and the stuff of the spirit. Before Mami Wata spirits bring healing or gifts, those responsible for the ritual proceedings must clear themselves of any debts to the spirit. Mami Ablo comes from the water to restructure power and to correct adepts like Sofivi for omissions in her care for the spirits and deference to their power. Once such things are set straight then the spirit can readjust

circumstances that cause pain and deprivation. Through such choreographies, entranced performers, and participants moving in agreement with dancing deities, bring the space, the power, and the knowledge of the other to displace, reinterpret, and overwrite troubling circumstances. These practitioners reconsecrate ritual spaces and rededicate their bodies to the work of the spirits.

### **Vodun Practices as Intersubjective Relationships:**

Close examination of the gestures performed by spirits in the flesh (during spirit possession) and the negotiations through which spirits are invited, celebrated, and consulted, are critical as means of avoiding juxtapositions of materiality and religious encounters. Since Vodunwo may assume many different material forms, the relationships of devotees with various non-human persons demonstrate the transient incarnations of many spirits, such experiences disturb convenient binaries between material and metaphysical realities. Through performances, Ewe people practice intersubjective relationships with non-human persons, which emphasize “mutual connectivity, shared responsibility, and interdependent well-being” (Shorter 2016: 446). Ewe spirit possession rituals concern relationships between the spirit and entire communities, including the many species, bodies of water, land masses, trees, and natural phenomena surrounding and affecting the performer.

Intersubjectivity is an integral element of Ewe philosophies of Vodun practice and of many indigenous choreographies. Attention to intersubjectivity, as the intersection between individual and collective experience, and essentially, the ability of individuals to see others as parts of the self (Rushdy 1994: 129, 132), is critical to understanding ritual efficacy and the



importance of performance within Vodun practice.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, intersubjective choreographies involve the ability to see other persons as extensions of one's own body and consciousness and to see individuals as contiguous with larger communities, including both human and non-human persons. These communities hold to what ethnographer David Delgado Shorter identifies as "dividual," rather than individual, ways of being, knowing, and valuing.<sup>53 54</sup> In other words, such indigenous communities perceive knowledge and existence as shared amongst many, and view interrelations between human and non-human persons as essential to survival and prosperity. During spirit possession, for example, spirits inhabit the bodies of individuals to intervene on behalf of entire communities, molding collective well-being and cohesion. Furthermore, relations between spirits and vodusiwo are based on generations of interactions and mutual benefit rather than solely on the life experience of each individual.<sup>55</sup> In such ways, Vodun practices, and performances in particular, confuse easy distinctions between the self and others.

Within Vodun practices, Ewe people expand categories of personhood and agency to

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<sup>52</sup> Writing of BaKongo people, Wyatt McGaffey argues that "the Kongo universe consists of invisible persons or souls and visible objects, including human and animal bodies" (1986: 120).

<sup>53</sup> Shorter also argues that scholars should avoid the word "spirits" because it allows for a dangerous level of vagueness within scholarly portrayals of indigenous perspectives. In my case, the word "spirits" is quite close to the meaning and mutability of the term *Vodun*, which Ewe people use to describe a variety of sacred objects, non-human persons, and rituals. In fact, the word *Vodun* suffers from the same polyvalence that causes him to take issue with the word "spirit," since "Vodun" may indicate something either (or *both*) dangerous (and) or benevolent found inside or outside of the body (Shorter 2016). I do, however, make a point of avoiding the vague term "spirituality" for the very reasons Shorter advocates.

<sup>54</sup> Alfred Gell also explores the individual person as multiple or "distributed" (1998: 140, 153). McKim Marriott first theorized the "dividual" person in his *Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism* in which he argues that "persons – single actors – are not thought in South Asia to be "individual," that is, indivisible, bounded units, as they are in much of Western social and psychological theory as well as in common sense. Instead, it appears that persons are generally thought by South Asians to be "dividual" or divisible. To exist, dividual persons absorb heterogeneous material influences. They must also give out from themselves particles of their own coded substances – essences, residues, or other active influences – that may then reproduce in others something of the nature of the persons in whom they have originated" (1976: 111).

<sup>55</sup> Vodusiwo is the plural form of vodusi, meaning wives of the Vodunwo.

include non-human, or what Native American studies scholar A. Irving Hallowell would call other-than-human, persons.<sup>56</sup> In “Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View,” Hallowell shows that Ojibwa people of North America leave room within their linguistic categories for all classes of objects to display the characteristics of animate persons. In similar ways, Ewe Vodun practitioners enjoy complex relationships with such non-human persons and acknowledge the possibility that seemingly inanimate objects may manifest animate characteristics (Hallowell 1975; Gell 1998: 99, 122-123). In Ewe Vodun communities, certain drums, sacred objects, or trees may display personal agency by demanding nourishment or specific rituals. These relationships with natural elements, places, animals, and ancestors are negotiated through past and present experiences and hold as much weight within Vodun communities as interactions between human persons. Devotees, like Sofivi and Maman, conduct rituals as intersubjective performances through which they maintain familial relationships between human and non-human persons, rather than as efforts to access disembodied power.

These relationships with non-human persons can be bewildering to outsiders since many sacred objects resemble quite ordinary elements of the outdoors and of domestic space. A Vodun can be housed in an inconspicuous mound of earth in the middle of a small forest clearing that Sofivi called “*dafeme*,” or “dwelling place of Vodou Da.”<sup>57</sup> Sofivi and a few others labored to explain that the mound was the dwelling place of the serpent Vodun whenever he is in Tsévié

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<sup>56</sup> Although I agree with Hallowell’s reasons for using “other-than-human” persons rather than “super-human” as a way to avoid confusion about the agency and power of other-than-human persons (who may not be seen as more powerful than human persons), since the term is quite unwieldy I have chosen to substitute “non-human persons” for many of the meanings that Hallowell includes within “other-than-human persons” (Hallowell 1975).

<sup>57</sup> Vodou Da or Dan, who sometimes manifests with Mami Wata as Mammy Da, corresponds with the Fon Dan Ayido Hwedo of Ouidah in the Republic of Bénin, the Yoruba Oshumare, and the Haitian loa, or spirit, Damballah (Thompson 1984: 176).

and that, as a result, dances for Vodou Da are often performed at that spot, in a circle around *dafeme*.<sup>58</sup> Such objects are not inconsequential, inanimate objects but persons with whom *trosiwo*, Vodun spirit hosts, have interactions and exchanges. Practitioners will often converse with, pray to, feed, and perform for the Vodun within what Judy Rosenthal calls “god-objects” (198: 266).

Choreographies often form an important part of these consultations between devotees and Vodunwo. I witnessed danced conversations and accompanying choreographies of this kind at a ritual in Kpomé, Togo:

*I sat waiting directly behind Mamissi Sofivi, an invited official at this ritual for Atigeli, a witch-killing Vodun.*<sup>59</sup> *We were shaded by a large homemade canopy constructed from palm fronds and branches so that the light slanted through without the full force of the sun’s heat. We were in the home compound of the hosting priest in a village near Tsévié, called Kpomé. The musicians congregated across from us, leaving a rectangular section of dusty ground under the canopy free for dancing. One young woman began to interpret the music of the percussionist with foot shuffling and exaggerated arm gestures that stood out from the other dancers. A few observers laughed as the young woman frolicked. Those around me praised her as a consummate comedian as she parodied the steps of the dance, silently mocking the musicians and the seriousness of the occasion before returning to her place amongst the singers.*

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<sup>58</sup> Sofivi told me that “there are some *mamiwo* [Mami Wata Vodunwo] who live under the water. There are others who live under the trees. Then you will see a tree and the people will tell you that it is a Vodou tree. There are trees that are for Da, Vodou Da. You might also see a river, and they might tell you that this river belongs to Vodou Da” (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015).

<sup>59</sup> Dana Rush writes about Atigeli, or Atingalli, as “a powerful witch-fighting Islamic Vodun concentrated in and around the city of Abomey-Calavié in Bénin” (1999: 66). This deity is closely associated. Images of the Attingali Vodun Fulani Agbokani is recognized in the chromolithograph with imagery that Hindus would recognize as Hanuman, the monkey king, because the figure is carrying two figures on his shoulders. Amongst Vodun practitioners, these two figures represent witches captured by this fierce witch hunter (1999: 67).

The young woman's jokes were told through movement, through exaggerations that lightened the mood but also demonstrated the agency of the performing practitioner to challenge and critique the Vodun through the delivery and style of familiar and commonly accepted movements.

*As other dancers moved back and forth across the sun-dappled patch of ground, I took note of the solemn strength and zealous locomotion of one man in particular. His feet smote the ground, one after the other, raising the dust with each footfall. He seemed caught, held in a continual two-step. One foot stepping forward and slightly to the side and the other foot raising off the ground behind him and then striking down hard beside the first: step-STRIKE, step-STRIKE, step-STRIKE as if his feet were two drums in conversation with one another. He moved toward the drummers, seeming to fly because of the billowing yellow and green cloth loosely tied around him. After his first dance, a chair was set out for him in front of the honored guests and hosts of the event. The worshippers strove to clear paths for the spirit to join them. Before the hunter spirit arrived, two women sprinkled water along the path where he was to dance. They each pulled water from the buckets they carried in their hands, shaking it to the ground to cleanse and clear the way for his arrival.*

Indigenous choreographers and performers, like the Atigeli dancer in Kpomé, enacted social relations with non-human persons by developing “listening countenance[s]” (Moses 2010: 18; Gilbert 2013: 178) in order to communicate through a variety of modes. Sitting beside me, my friend Richard was delighted with the man's dancing and pointed him out in particular. “This man,” he said “dances with real force! Do you see it?” As performers prepared their bodies to receive a Vodun, practitioners also prepared the space by drawing geometric designs on their skin or the ground using a variety of materials. Scholars writing about Haitian Vodou and Ewe

and Fon Vodun call these designs, typically drawn on the ground in yellow cornmeal, vèvé (Thompson 1984: 108-113, 188-191; Janzen 1982: 284-285). Art historian Suzanne Preston Blier notes that artists inscribe vèvé cosmograms on a number of key Vodun arts, including markings made during important rituals and on ancestral stools, Vodun drums, and ceremonial umbrellas (1995: 63). Ethnomusicologist Steven Friedson, who writes about brekete drumming in Togo, calls these libations—which trosiwo may draw in chalk, water, lemonade, black gunpowder, rice, clear gin, or any other gift desired by the Vodun— “the remains of ritual” (2009: 155). Friedson argues that once such a gift is poured, the items from which and objects upon which the gift is poured become sites where Vodun spirits manifest (2009: 89). During the ritual in Kpomé, the Atigeli dancer requested the necessary items, leaves, gunpowder, and a knife, to draw the Vodun to the gathering.

*We waited long for the hunter Vodun to arrive. The zealous dancer sat for a long time, facing the dancing, waiting for the Vodun to come. At one point he asked a helper to pull leaves from the tree hanging above them and place them on the ground in a diamond with four leaves on the outside and one in the center. Then an assistant poured gunpowder on each leaf and lit vèvé as the man directed, emitting five plumes of smoke. Shortly after this invitation, which also served as a warning to harmful spirits and malevolent sorcerers, Atigeli arrived. As the dancer grew quiet and seemed to turn his focus inward, he was stripped of the cloth that he was wearing over mid-calf length blue jean shorts and dressed in a leather jerkin and fez.<sup>60</sup>*

A vèvé, like the one Atigeli requested, often serve as a form of communication between Vodun spirits and devotees. The burning of gunpowder on such a vèvé sends messages to particular spirits. Sofivi later informed me that the vèvé became necessary because of the priest's

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<sup>60</sup> Since Atigeli comes from northern Ghana he outfits himself with fez hats and flared tunics according to Ewe perceptions of an Islamic aesthetic.

lack of communication. When asked about the leaves and gunpowder placed on the ground, she chuckled, “what does it mean?” she asked. Then she related that

The leaves were put on the ground because it was necessary to make a meat offering. The meat offering could not just be put on the ground like that because the priest who had performed the prayers did not inform the Vodun Sakpata [whose domain is over the earth]. So he had to alert the spirits that there would be something coming for them... The Vodun that possessed the man was called Atigeli or *Djaba* and he is a hunter. What we saw in Kpomé was the new year (*fetatrotro*) of Atigeli. It was necessary to please the Vodun of the earth by laying down the leaves and burning the gunpowder.

Since one of the host priests forgot to ask permission from Sakpata, Vodun of the earth, the dancing was suspended until a meat offering could be made. The word “fetatrotro” means “turning” ritual and implies the turning of the year and renewal of agreements between Vodunwo and community members. Though Vodunwo direct choreographies when present in the bodies of worshipers, performers must develop techniques of offering their bodies in worship and perform dances and other sacred arts in a stance of communication and respect. Spirits like Atigeli often take over an event once they arrive.

*Atigeli soon rose up from his seat and began to walk the perimeter of the circle while wagging a disapproving finger. I was told that Atigeli had been wronged. He was offended by the host priest who had neglected to request protection from sorcery during his invitational prayers, thus allowing evildoers to attend the gathering, endangering everyone, but especially the priest himself. As a result of this oversight, the spirit demanded that meat be offered and a chicken be slaughtered to prevent the priest’s death for his mistake. Atigeli spent much of the ritual, now speaking through the body of the man whose powerful dancing had distinguished him from the others, scolding, instructing, and debating with the priest. As the devotees carried out the necessary sacrifices, the Vodun began to rectify the primary concern, that the priest’s incomplete prayers had exposed all attendees to the possibility of attack by local witches. First, Atigeli*

*requested the assistance of his first wife and one woman singing with the others suddenly swooned. When the spirit called for the help of his mother, Mamissi Sofivi also fell into trance, spinning and stumbling. Both women then launched into steps of their own before being ushered away to an inner chamber.*

Atigeli devotees—performing as dancers, musicians, and trosiwo—produce intersubjective movement vocabularies through which they diagnose obstructions to collective unity and address imbalances and disjunctures within their communities. Vodun practitioners intercede for communities and families whose health and success they present as contiguous with their own within the space of performance. Vodunwo often debate and negotiate with their worshippers. If performers do not attend to the desires and tastes of the Vodun they may damage their relationship with the specific spirit in attendance at their ritual. In such cases, the Vodun will typically demand various forms of recompense that may take a variety of forms.

Despite the unpredictability of the Vodunwo, choices made by performers—in conjunction with related spirits—determine the aesthetic presentation of ritual dances and correspond with collectively determined frameworks and structures through which the spirits customarily communicate. Sofivi later confided to me that Atigeli required the priest hosting the ceremony to give meat and the leaf and gunpowder *vévé* as offerings because he did not properly seek the will of the Vodun “as he renewed the year.” She told me this as if the priest had improperly renewed a contract without observing the laws governing the exchange. “He was in danger of death!” she told me a number of times. “After the smoke cleared [from the *vévé*], they could offer the meat” (Personal Communication June 20, 2015), she added. She observed that the meat was important to protect the priest and all those participating in the new year celebration.

*After the sacrifices had been given, Atigeli seemed soothed. Participants pulled their*

*voices together and then threw them out as if seeking another encounter with the leather-clad spirit dancing before them. As the vocalists demanded and proclaimed the presence of the spirits, one of the hosting priests precipitated a moment of energetic climax. After speaking with Atigeli a few times requesting that the Vodun accept the offering, the priest rose from his seat and crossed the courtyard to speak to the musicians. He sang out to the drummers and singers who responded in kind until suddenly they gave a shout and played a new rhythm. The priest, dressed in the loose toga style of an elder, began to dance like a free bird descending on his prey. He spun and lunged and the blue African print material he wore danced with him, enveloping, enlarging, and emphasizing his movements until he suddenly turned on his heel and returned to his seat as the music pulsed on, awaiting the dance of the spirits.*

Devotees call upon their relationships with the spirits to alleviate and critique social problems, including the detrimental self-interest that characterizes witchcraft. Vodun practitioners often call people who do not want others to succeed and who “destroy their communities,” “witches” or “sorcerers.”<sup>61</sup> The musicians and dancers communicated with one another through the structures of stylized sounds and gestures in order to draw out the spirits and stir them to action. A few days after the ceremony for Atigeli and his accompanying trowo, I sat with Mamissi Sofivi in her home after one of my dance lessons had to be canceled due to the rain. I asked her about the concern with witches and if there were many witches in Tsévié. She responded that there were not so many in Tsévié but too many in Kpomé. She spoke of how the fetatrotro, or new year, celebrations for Atigeli had solved that problem. She explained that

the priest who performed the meat offering did not pray against the witches. The meat was sent to the outskirts of town so that the witches could claim it...If the witches will not accept a sacrifice, Atigeli will kill them. The witches will tell all the evil that they

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<sup>61</sup> As Peter Geschiere points out “African beliefs in the occult are highly varied and may have no more in common than the word “witchcraft” applied to them by English-speakers” (viii). I use the word here because of my translator’s instance on the word “sorcière” to designate dangerous and selfish community members.



have done when faced with Atigeli. There are many witches in Tsévié and in Kpomé. Since there are many of them in Kpomé it was necessary to satisfy them before the new year ritual could continue. Witches destroy things because they are jealous of others and don't want others to develop and have success. They are people who choose to destroy their communities (Personal Communication June 20, 2015).

Since Atigeli hunts and kills witches, communities use gatherings held in his honor as opportunities to contend with the tangled threads of various narratives by layering them one upon the other as concerns about exploitative capitalist frameworks bleed through the fear of selfishly individualistic community members. Though many debates about wealth and exchange within the community are mediated by various Vodunwo, including Atigeli, Mami Wata is often seen as a powerful figure who expresses the lure of selfish consumption and the hazards of such desires to the construction of interdependent collective identities.

### **Gestures of Healing and Wealth:**

Ewe Vodun practitioners prioritize the material tangibility of movements, spaces, and ritual objects in their conceptions of prohibited wealth, healing, and collective prosperity. In Ewe philosophies, ritual efficacy and embodiment are intimately linked. I use the term “ritual efficacy” to indicate the “work” of a particular performance or ritual as “medicine” (ritual power) used to divert and commandeer foreign wealth, vigor, and success. Within many West African communities, distressing circumstances are often attributed to specific, and often animate, malevolent sources. Such malevolence often arises from the jealousy of community members or from the disapproval of ancestors or spirits for specific offenses against them by an individual or by their family line, household, or associates. Through ritual acts and interplay, Mamissi Sofivi navigates fraught relations with her household spirits and vindictive community members, who might turn to occult attacks in jealous response to prosperity gained through the

benevolence of Mami Wata spirits (or other “wealthy” foreigners).

During the tenure of my dance apprenticeship with Mamissi Sofivi, I pressed her for information about when she would hold her annual celebration to renew her relations with Mami Wata. I was anxious not to miss the festivities since she had implied, on many occasions, that they would include many dances for water spirits. She often avoided answering, repeatedly noting that the timing of the function, and the attendant feast, depended on the amount of money at her disposal because of the many expenses involved in holding a welcome banquet for one’s patron spirits. As my apprenticeship drew to a close and my time in Togo neared its end, discussions about Sofivi’s Mami Wata new year were subsumed in conversations about when I would sponsor an event to showcase the dances that I had learned in Tsévié. Sofivi encouraged me to invite my friends and informed me that I would fund the event, including food for the drummers and dancers. We negotiated a price and set the date.

Months before, as I readied myself for my first day of training with Mamissi Sofivi early in the morning, I had received a text from my research assistant that read:

Hello Elyan, Mamissi dit qu’il y a deux décès de sa maison. Ces gens sont mort parce qu’ils n’ont pas respecté les interdits de Vodun. A cause de ça, demain vous ne pouvez pas dancer.

Hello Elyan, Mamissi says that there are two dead in her home. These people are dead because they did not respect the interdictions of the Vodun. Because of this you will not be able to dance tomorrow.

That day my training with Mamissi Sofivi and the association was canceled due to the protocols surrounding death in a household. Yet, when I later spoke with her, Sofivi noted that she and her spirits must be on bad terms for such misfortune to strike their household in this way. She accused the two who had passed of not observing the laws of the spirits. The calamities that befell her family did not end with the death of those two family members as her young daughter,

still in her teens, died tragically in childbirth a few weeks later, a mere week before Sofivi's father and mentor, a man reputed to be well past his one hundredth birthday, also passed away. In the wake of so much death, my showcase took place.

Mamissi Sofivi determined the timing of my showcase based on the availability of funds and the fortuitous, but costly, flooding of Tsévié with specialist dancers and musicians for her father's funeral. During many of our impromptu trainings, we had waited in her compound as she sent out children as messengers to the homes of the best-known drummers in town. On such occasions, we were obligated to wait for the drummers to assemble to begin our trainings. I would later realize that, in view of practical considerations including the availability of funding and skilled performers, Mamissi Sofivi had transformed this performance event, ostensibly arranged simply to further my research and demonstrate my mastery over specific dances, into a Vodun new year celebration to seek the health of her entire family.

On the day of the showcase, I traveled from Lomé to Tsévié with an Ewe friend of mine from Ghana, a young woman schoolteacher from Dzodze, and we took a motorcycle from my house to the main road where we caught a taxi. We folded ourselves into the back seat of a small sedan next to four other passengers. Upon arriving at the petrol station in Tsévié, we boarded more motorcycle taxis to take us directly to Mamissi Sofivi's door. Entering Mamissi Sofivi's compound, I took note of the arrangement of the space. The musicians were situating themselves to my left, setting up the drum ensemble common to traditional Ewe musical performance. The assembled drumming ensemble also included a rusty and dilapidated metal barrel required for *brekete* drumming and the "gon gon," "gungon" or *brekete* drum borrowed from Dagbamba (or Dogomba) people in Northern Ghana near the border with Togo and brought into Ewe styles of music in the 1930s (Friedson 2009: 26) for use in rituals where healing is sought from Northern

spirits and in many events honoring Mami Wata.<sup>62</sup> Some of the drummers wore the black, white, and red vertically striped cloths of Sakpata, or Anyigbato, an earth Vodun with dominion over diseases and healing. While the lead drummer, a local healing priest named Dodzi, who serves *Hebieso* (Vodun of thunder), Sakpata/Anyigbato, a number of bloody (or hot-blooded) hunting spirits, wore the red of the thunder Vodun.<sup>63</sup> Directly in front of me was the raised cement porch and the doorways to the two altar rooms. In the middle of the courtyard near a large tree were placed four plastic chairs where the lead singers would later seat themselves.

As we walked across the red dirt of the small courtyard towards the porch outside of the altar rooms, two young girls with whom I often danced during my training ran to hug me and disburden me of my large bag, my camera, and my motorcycle helmet. Mamissi Sofivi emerged from her room to greet us and we all sat on the porch waiting for the events of the day to begin. As we laughed and chatted in a mixture of Ewe, French, and English, other visitors arrived. Many wore beads marking them as servants of Mammy Da, the serpent Vodun, who often comes with Mami Wata, and the multiple colors and shapes of beads that represent the diversity of Mami Wata spirits. Since the ritual was meant to heal Sofivi of imbalances in her health and within her family, practitioners devoted to Sakpata, the Vodun of the earth who is often worshiped through brekete drum rhythms and dances known as *Atikevodu*, or “medicine-vodu” (Rosenthal 1998: 263), also arrived wearing their colors, beads, and regalia.

The celebrations began with *agbadza* dance drumming. The movements honored the

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<sup>62</sup> *Brekete* drums are consecrated with drink and chicken blood and contain chalk (referred to as kaolin clay by Ewe devotees) and kola nuts; see Friedson 2009. Since these drums are never to touch the ground, drummers often move into the space of the dancers when playing them. The drums are secured with a shoulder band so that drummers can bend almost to the ground, moving in amongst the dancers to interact with them and feed off of and contribute to their energy and engagement.

<sup>63</sup> Hebieso is also written as *Heviesso*, *Xeviosso*, and *Hevioso* (Rosenthal 1998: 21, 163; Rush 2013: 35-38, 1999: 66).

group of spirits to whom Sofivi is most closely related: *Adela*, the hunter; *Hebieso*, the Ewe Vodun of thunder who is closely related to the Yoruba *orisha*, or spirit, Shango; Vodou Da, the serpent; Mama Tchamba, the northern slave spirits; and Mami Wata. During the opening *agbadza* dances, Genevieve fell into trance and manifested a spirit that Mamissi Sofivi recognized as Mami Ablo even though Genevieve was dressed in the white calico of an initiate whose mouth has not yet been ceremonially opened, as mentioned earlier in the chapter. The ensuing dances honored each of Mamissi Sofivi's Vodunwo in turn. After the *agbadza* dances, performers moved on to dances honoring *Hebieso*. As *Mami Ablo*, messenger and treasurer for Mami Wata (De Surgy 1988: 311), moved amongst the dancers becoming increasingly agitated, Dodzi led the drummers in the *brekete* songs for Mami Wata and Mama Tchamba, the Northern spirits to whom Mamissi Sofivi owes a debt of remembrance since her family owned enslaved "bought persons" (Rosenthal 1998).

The dances took place in a prescribed and collectively prearranged order. Performances that honor the hunter Vodun *Adela* must begin with the *agbadza* dance. Practitioners perform *agbadza* at the start of most Ewe Vodun events because the dance is performed to honor hunters and warriors. *Agbadza* can be translated as "gunbelt," and was historically seen as an element of preparations for war (Friedson 2009: 34). In an interview, Mamissi Sofivi reminded me that "No matter what the ceremony is we must dance *agbadza* when we use the drums, it is obligatory" (Personal Communication Oct 31, 2015).

*The arms of some dancers move as if cushioned by the air while others snap back violently as if spring loaded. All of the dancers rotate their arms as if flapping short wings from the elbows. As their hands lift and they draw their elbows close to their bodies, their backs and shoulders arch strongly. As they open their elbows back away from their sides and their arms*

*partially unfold, they depress their chests and stomachs as their backs round out into bowed shapes. As their trunks contract, the dancers march on deeply bent legs in time with the graceful swiveling of their arms and the energetic curving of their spines.* As the dancers pay tribute to *Adela*, they also assert the health and vitality of the community in relation to triumphant historical narratives of hunters who ensured collective survival through their physical prowess and mastery. By layering popular narratives with choreographic practice, Ewe choreographers frame ideas about health and requests for healing in terms of mutually beneficial relationships with the flora, fauna, and nature spirits of their ancestral landscape.

During the ritual event, as Genevieve moved gradually and unevenly from disorientation to orientation, her movements mirrored Sofivi's emotional disorientation. By righting herself within the movements, adhering to the formalities governing such rituals, and returning to the movements of the group to reestablish a relationship with the gathered participants, Mami Ablo sought to bring Mamissi Sofivi back into physical equilibrium and into alignment with her Tchamba spirits. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed indicates that orientation involves aligning one's self with specific spaces in order to *reorient* oneself based upon access to financial and material resources. The importance of moments of disorientation lies within their use as opportunities for positive and generative reorientations (Ahmed 2006: 158). The processes of West African colonization, transatlantic slavery and current circumstances of economic disadvantage and political unrest are a few examples of periods of disorientation which have made Mami Wata practices necessary as meaningful and significant tactics of reorientation in West African contexts. Such reorientations involve techniques of adapting the responses of the body based on changing environments and shifting needs. Where Ahmed demonstrates the importance of orientation and reorientation in everyday gestures as related to social access based on race,

gender and class, Ewe performances reveal the importance of notions of reorientation within these stylized and carefully orchestrated therapeutic performances.

At twilight, two priests spoke of the deaths and disasters within Sofivi's family and begged the spirits to protect them from harm and attack. They poured the libations that shaped a *vévé*, the designs mentioned above as a part of the rituals welcoming Atigeli, on the ground as offerings and invitations and spoke prayers asking water spirits for grace and mercy. They emptied an entire bottle of Youki, a brand-name carbonated lemonade, and then poured perfume after it. They spread powder on a circle crossed by two perpendicular lines and then cracked an egg in the center of the cross. In "Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou," Suzanne Preston Blier demonstrates that priests show that the Vodunwo preside over the cardinal directions by including cosmograms "composed of a circle, square, or diamonds with an enclosed cross" (Blier 1995: 62) in rituals. Blier calls this particular *vévé* symbol, *weke*, the cosmos. Through the symbol and concept of *weke*, *troisiwo* depict the cardinal directions and the sun at its zenith in the middle and represent a miniaturized version of the world, including the Vodunwo who manage various natural elements and sites (Blier 1995: 62-63). The priests used the *vévé* to join their dances and worship space to the place of the spirits and then they set off gunpowder at the four corners of the design and at its center. The *brekete* dancing intensified after these prayers were drawn in the sand and raised to the skies and the spirits present were asked to solve social ailments and to correct the fortunes of an entire household. The dances, music, and libations were all "medicine" for a family in crisis, tangible tools of healing and empowerment.

In such rituals, choreographies bring healing through a prescribed order of things. In Vodun dance events, *troisiwo* make the world into a microcosm so that they can consider many divergent elements at once without classifying or separating them out. Vodun spirits heal by

remedying past ills, collapsing the past into the present; they demand active collective remembering in return for prescribed solutions to anticipated difficulties. The suffering of an ancestor and wealth of an outsider are brought to bear upon present circumstances of lack and misfortune. Exchanges and shifts in power and affluence are remembered through performances that caution against prohibited or selfish wealth and jealousy and theft (especially thefts or attacks against community members accomplished through illicit means that other community members identify as witchcraft) while soliciting collective wealth through prayers and invitations. Such negotiations produce medicinal choreographies. By addressing financial prosperity, community disputes, physical healing, and relations with foreigners, with land and with animals in one ritual event, all of these elements are knit together so that the performances re-chart important possibilities for moving into futures not already determined by circumstances of poverty and need but rather, shaped through negotiations with specific spirits.

**Mami Sika, “Golden Mami”:**

Mami Wata spirits embody capitalism by representing the snares, seductions, and opportunities presented by global capitalist exchange. Ideologies of whiteness and foreignness (tied to understandings of trade between Africa, Europe, and India) remain coupled with power and are often perpetuated in nations like Ghana (Pierre 2013) and Togo through religious and political agendas, as persistent legacies of colonialism and facets of postcolonial global structures of political economies that subordinate African nations. Through Mami Wata dance events, African performers trouble such ideologies by inhabiting and receiving invigorating power from foreign spirits. In Mami Wata possession dances, practitioners often thread their way through complex disputes about the disproportionate distribution of wealth within their



communities, while evading realist strictures including the disadvantages of poverty, gender, and race by blending and amalgamating the “self” with the “other.” The economic and hierarchical transformations with which Ewe practitioners engage through Mami Wata worship dramatize the perils of global markets for systematically disadvantaged neo-colonial states and the communities they represent.

After months of apprenticing with Mamissi Sofivi, I asked to learn Mami Wata dances. She offered to teach the dances for Mami Sika, or “Golden Mami,” the richest of the Mami Wata pantheon, a vainly adorned beauty much like the Haitian loa, or Vodou spirit, Ezili Freda.<sup>64</sup> Sofivi and Mamma, another Mami Wata priestess within the association, began the dancing instead of the children, as was typical. As they sang and I recorded, I shot questions at my companions: “What songs are they singing? What do the lyrics mean?” and was told that they were singing a song about a lover who wanted to enter the ocean. However, Ewe onlookers who spoke French, English, and Ewe began to lose the thread of the lyrics as the songs changed again and again and the languages switched from Twi, a dominant language in Ghana, to French and to other languages that they could not recognize. These shifts between languages mirror Mami Wata’s ability to shift between different material realities in order to bring wealth and blessings to her devotees.<sup>65</sup> As the dancers oscillated their upper bodies from side to side, they seemed to

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<sup>64</sup> Although Mamissi Sofivi never mentioned any direct connection between her Vodun practices and Vodou in Haiti, Dana Rush demonstrates in “Contemporary Vodun Arts of Ouidah, Bénin” that exchanges between the related knowledge systems are multidirectional and ongoing (2001: 46).

<sup>65</sup> In “Mami Wata, Mr. White, and the Sirens of Bar Beach: Spirits and Dangerous Consumption in the Nigerian Popular Press” (2008), anthropologist Misty Bastian shows how discourses about modernity and the seduction of capitalism are conducted through the figure of Mami Wata by examining the Nigerian popular press (Bastian 2008: 87). She relates the tale of Mr. Tony C. White to illustrate popular belief in Mami Wata’s ability to bring wealth in contemporary settings. In Bastian’s account, Mami Wata’s ability to change into any shape and into any type of person allows her to speak perfect English. Such skills of adaptability and transformation, when transferred to Mr. White allows him to become a successful writer and celebrity, turning himself into the perfect model of Bar Beach corporate success.

represent the mermaid manifestations of many Mami Wata spirits, who are creatures of both earth and water, as they sway and move in the interstices between land, river, springs, and ocean. Sofivi presented these gentle, undulating movements as steps through which she herself sought to please the wealthiest and most sophisticated Mami Wata spirits.

*In a dance for “Golden Mami” (Mami Sika), the performers’ arms moved across their bodies to pull up alternately at each hip. I joined, moving my arms and hands as if displaying bracelets, bending my elbows and lifting my forearms to wave them from side to side in front of my chest as if showing off the glimmer and glint of arms festooned with bright jewelry. As the drummers sped up the rhythm, I followed the other to adjust the gestures of my arms and placement of my feet. In contrast to the former tipping of the forearms twice to each side in a slow rhythm, our hands moved back and forth as our wrists bent like people fanning themselves in the heat. Our feet also beat a faster rhythm and our heels tapping down as we flipped our hands and accelerated the swing of our hips over bent knees.*

With these gestures, we traced paths forward and backward and circled ourselves, still turning our hands in the afternoon sunshine, illustrating how Mami Wata priestesses—who typically make a living as small-scale entrepreneurs, farmers, or laborers—personify and embody affluence to solicit and invoke riches and success in lives often characterized by toil and economic limitations. Mami Sika is rich, vain, self-absorbed, light-skinned, and capricious. Yet, through spirit possession, Mami Wata also functions in rituals as a Vodun through which memories of the opportunities and dangers posed by colonialist policies can be layered onto contemporary experiences of globalized capitalist modernity; some practitioners commune with Mami Wata as a means of reinventing personal and collective identities.

Through such events and movements, performers seek material benevolence in ritual

contexts through the intervention of non-human persons. The gifts of Vodun spirits generally include good health, yet water spirits specifically bestow entrepreneurial knowledge and financial blessings (Bastian 2008). Much as Mami Wata spirits bring financial blessings, they also bring emotional well-being and help practitioners balance and stabilize relationships within their communities and between themselves and histories of trade and dispute. Such ways of knowing and understanding personal and collective wealth and health cannot be isolated from politics, power, or economic shifts, or even from Christianity (Cosentino 2010). Mami Wata spirits bring healing by reorienting practitioners and communities and shifting attention from despair and loss to generative possibilities. Performers petition water spirits for protection from impoverishment, while also embodying and adoring the space of the ocean from whence they derive health and prosperity, through livelihoods dependent on import/export and industries like fishing and salt production. Yet, practitioners live in complex and intimate relationships with these benevolent and dangerous spirits, demonstrating their devotion and ongoing communication through movement vocabularies that evoke wealth, adornment, and prosperity, while conjuring collective and personal equilibrium and renaissance.

### **Sofivi's Mami Wata Altar:**

Practitioners represent these relationships between themselves and the spirits through altars and by using their bodies as altars by assembling a variety of sacred objects and designs as adornments. Altars come in many forms and can be stationary, drawn in chalk or sand, or inscribed through the movements of the body. The objects that rest at times on Sofivi's Mami Wata altars—from perfume and powders used to douse performers, to oranges and eggs split open as a part of the *vévé* for Mami Wata—can often be seen in motion in the hands of

performers and officiants. Altars serve as thresholds between visible and invisible worlds (Thompson 1993: 30). Mamissi Sofivi's altars are not only emblems of two worlds meeting, they are enmeshed within choreographic exchanges.

After my last interview with Mamissi Sofivi, a week after her new year celebration where she had welcomed Mami Ablo amongst her other household Vodunwo, she invited me into her home to see her Mami Wata altars. The room was dim as I moved from the bright outdoors. Sofivi moved around the room making last minute adjustments to the presentation of objects. Within the room, Sofivi displayed glinting mirrors and gleaming tin bowls filled with gifts for the water spirits including imported mouthwash, sweet biscuits in crackling wrappers, scented talcum powders, and colorful artificial flowers. Another bowl was filled with liquor bottles of gin and other kinds of liquor. She had also placed a ceremonial stool draped in a white cloth in front of the Mami Wata altar. On the other side of the room, stood a painted, wooden, three-headed Densu figure with what resembled a painted green serpent wrapped around his waist. This figure had been painted wearing a Western-style button-up shirt and trousers and black boots. The Densu figure rested on an altar between two stools and beside a bottle of Youki lemonade. Sofivi also uncovered a framed illustration of a European mermaid with red hair. Devotees furnish such altars as banquets for the spirits. Sofivi offered Mami Wata, and Papi Wata, food, including eggs and bananas, as well as little pleasures like liquor, cigarettes, perfumes, lemonades, scented talcum powders, and decorative flowers (A. F. Roberts 2009: 127).

Sofivi had arranged the items on her altar in a way that indicated an understanding of histories as accumulative rather than progressive or linear. She did not group items according to age but by purpose and the ways that they serve the trowo. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson argues that such altars “overthrow time” by allowing the dead to return in a new form (1993: 27).

Rusted and patinated inherited objects, like old bells, metal tools, and bracelets were lined up next to new acquisitions of food, drink, and images of mermaids. Twin figures stood stoically beside images of deceased family members, including depictions of Mamissi Sofivi's great aunt, from whom she inherited many of her spirits. Through her altars, Mamissi Sofivi exhibited the ways that she strings together what Donald Cosentino describes as a peculiar "way of seeing history, contemporary society, and the superstructure of religion in one master narrative" (1995: 27). Through the perspectives inspired by Ewe Vodun, and Haitian Vodou about which Cosentino beautifully exposit, "history collapses into myth, the secular into the sacred, the punctual into the durative" (1995: 27).

Devotees use altar practices to entangle sacred objects with their biographies and genealogies so that these objects of worship become extensions of their bodies and evidence of kinship and accord between spirits and spirit-hosts. The accumulated objects on display in Mamissi Sofivi's altar room also attest to intimate ongoing relationships with revered divinities. Further investigations into the social histories of individual objects would yield even more complex narratives of relations to the spirits and to various local histories. Sofivi's presentation of these objects also offers a palimpsest presentation of familial and personal histories. When I asked Mamissi Sofivi if she was born into a Vodun-practicing family, she told me that her grandfather was a devotee of Hebieso and her great-aunt, her grandfather's sister, was a *mamissi*. According to Sofivi's family histories, her great-aunt who was a *mamissi* died when Sofivi was still quite young. From that point on Sofivi began to manifest Mami Wata spirits even though she was only a child. When I asked her if she chose to follow the Vodunwo, she told me that two of her brothers became pastors but that Vodun spirits chose her from a young age. "Even if I tried to leave the Vodunwo" she mused, "they would disturb [déranger in French] me until I returned"

(Personal Communication June 20, 2015). For many practitioners, worshipping water spirits is deeply entangled with family histories and clan allegiances represented through sacred objects set in motion.

In short, Mami Wata altars like Sofivi's constitute ways of understanding and constructing personal histories through relationships between objects. These objects become representations of the concerns of families as well as individuals. As discussed before, Ewe Vodun practitioners often view personal concerns as indivisible from collective and intergenerational ones. Sofivi's altar demonstrates her engagement with generational and familial histories and her accumulation of various objects to represent the luxuries that Mami Wata spirits bring from the ocean. The aesthetics of the altar place multiple objects in associative relationships that devotees continue to develop. Yet, the same objects assembled on Vodun altars may be distributed among performers during rituals and festivals and end up in motion. In the midst of performances, sacred objects may develop new meanings and suggest new ways to understand the bodies and biographies of devoted performers. In such cases, might people carrying and wearing various sacred objects not function as dancing, rather than stationary, altars?

### **The Yeke Yeke Festival and Dancing Altars:**

Within festivals, as well as smaller scale ritual performances, bodies become intersections for many different forms of art including twin figures, beads worn as symbols of allegiance to a specific Vodun and clothing worn to show respect to deities through specific colors, and *vévés* drawn onto the skin as welcome to festival participants and Vodun alike<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> Twin figures are carved and cared for when one or both twins die (Kraemer 2005: 294; Merlo 1977; Peek 2011).

Performers identifying themselves as Guin-Mina, a group closely related to Ewe people through language and religious practices, include regalia and movement vocabularies honoring Mami Wata, Densu, and Mammy Da within their annual festival called *Yeke Yeke*. *Yeke Yeke* is hosted in Aného, Togo by Guin-Mina people and culminates in the revelation of a sacred stone, the color of which predicts the future of the town for the coming year.<sup>67</sup> During the festival, specialist diviners perform what Mary Nooter Roberts calls “promises” by interpreting the relationships between seemingly unrelated phenomena, such as good health and the color of a sacred stone, to guide future actions and behaviors (2000: 64).<sup>68</sup> Anthropologists Komi Kossi-Titrikou and Inouissa Moumouni describe the significance of the sacred stone to Guin-Mina religious life:

Une pierre blanche présage d’une année heureuse, une pierre noire est par contre un signe de deuil, le rouge indique un éventuel danger qui peut agir soit sur les hommes, soit sur leurs activités: agriculture, pêche, artisanat, et commerce. Le vert est la couleur classique de l’espoir et le jaune annonce très précisément une année de bonne santé.

A white stone predicts a happy year, a black stone is, on the other hand, a sign of grief, red indicates an eventual danger that might cause problems for people or [obstruct] their activities: agriculture, fishing, artisanal professions, and commerce. A green [stone] classically suggests hope and yellow clearly announces a year of good health (Kossi-Titrikou and Moumouni 2009: 217).

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<sup>67</sup> Local Guin-Mina people call this ritual *kpesoso*, “la prise de la pierre sacrée” in French or “the taking of the sacred stone” in English. This act of uncovering and showing a sacred stone to those gathered for the *Yeke Yeke* festival is one of the highlights of Guin socio-religious life (Kossi-Titrikou 2009: 207, 217).

<sup>68</sup> Two stones, one in white and one in color, are placed side by side to speak for the Afa. Togolese undergraduates at the Université de Lomé, Messan Kossi Assiom, Foli Fonyo Eccoc-Adu Adje, and Augustin A. Amenoume note that if the message is favorable the stone chosen is white, if the message is needs clarifying a stone of and color is chosen. They describe these practices as a means for the dead and other Vodunwo to carry messages to the living (2005: 59).

*Afa* diviners preside over the process of determining the yearly message conveyed by the stones to reveal the “signs of the new year” (2005: 59).<sup>69</sup> The rituals are meant to foster cohesion and cooperation between ancestral spirits, local leaders, and inhabitants of the village. The festival also marks the Guin Mina lunar new year and the final quarter of the moon’s phase (Kossi-Titrikou and Moumouni 2009: 217; Assiom, Adje, and Amenoume 2005: 58).

Before the stone is revealed, priests and priestesses and new initiates gather on the festival grounds dressed in white, pink, or blue and wearing white clay body decorations, beads, and jewelry to perform for the thirty-one clan divinities of Aného, who come from the sea for the occasion, and for closely associated water spirits, including Mammy Da and *Ajakpa*, the crocodile. Many of the performers in Yeke Yeke adorn themselves in honor of spirits like Mammy Da and Densu. Even as they worship local, clan Vodunwo associated with specific families, many performers carry silver tridents, called *apia*, to worship Vodou Da. The state-sponsored festival in Aného, called both “Epé-Ekpé” and “Yeke Yeke,”<sup>70</sup> is hosted in the village of *Glidji-Kpodji*. After these festivities, the celebrations continue on the beach where possessed initiates throw themselves into the ocean to honor the water-dwelling clan divinities, who typically spend four months in their ocean homes and eight months of the year with their human spouses visiting and inhabiting their shrines and altars, taking time with their followers before returning to the water. When the spirits return to the shrines and altars of Aného, they are welcomed through a village-wide festival.

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<sup>69</sup> *Afa* is a local system of divination and personal law through which people examine past behaviors and occurrences to better understand problems occurring in the present. *Afa* is also a Vodun who is a linguist and the first and strongest of the Vodunwo (Rosenthal 1998: 160-161). For more on *Afa* Divination see Albert de Surgy’s *Le Geomancie et le Culte d’Afa Chez les Evhe du Littoral* (1981) and Judy Rosenthal’s *possession, Ecstasy, and Law in Ewe Voodoo* (1998).

<sup>70</sup> While the name “Epé-Ekpé” refers to the revelations of the sacred stone, “Yeke Yeke” is the name of a local specialty, somewhat like couscous, which represents unity through hospitality.



Since a number of the clan Vodunwo in Aného are also water spirits, many of the performers in Yeke Yeke adorn themselves for Mami Wata spirits like Mammy Da and Densu even though the festival principally concerns the unity of the thirty-one clan spirits. Even as they worship their familial Mina clan Vodun, by carrying the *apia*, performers present themselves as adepts of Vodou Da. Festival participants use tridents as notable elements of the choreographies for water spirits in the Yeke Yeke festival. The *apia* visually links Mammy Da to the Hindu god Shiva whose iconography includes river water flowing from his hair, a third eye in the middle of his forehead, a trident, and snakes wrapped around his neck and arms. Many mamissis see the Hindu deity Shiva as a version of the serpent Da, whom they often represent with a water pitcher, a drum, and a trident. Devotees reproduce this symbol of dominion over the waters as protective tattoos (Rush 1999: 69) or as consecrated silver objects with which they perform during events honoring Mammy Da.

*The Mammy Da dancer sits upon a ceremonial stool amongst many other mamiswo at the Yeke Yeke festival watching the other dancers perform. His forehead is laced with a design drawn in white that follows the curve of his brow and projects down onto the bridge of his nose. Between his eyebrows, his head is marked with a red design like a large bindi, or a red third eye. His neck is ringed with a string of red, white, blue, and silver beads tied close to his neck like a choker. He wears three other strings of beads including more in red, white, and blue. The exposed skin of his arms and shins is decorated with wavy vévés. Drawn on the white vévés on his legs are bright spots of blue and red as if his body was also a thread onto which bright spots of white, red and blue are strung. His forearms are ringed by silver armlets in the shape of serpents, representing the small snakes often coiled around Mami Da's arms in popular Indian-made chromolithographs. On his right hand are silver rings of two small porpoises while his left*

*hand sports a large silver dolphin ring. He also holds his silver trident, his apia. His eyes, eyebrows, and lips are lined with makeup and he wears garments of white lace.*



Figure 4. Vodou Da dancer holding an apia at Yeke Yeke festival. Aného, Togo, 2015.

Celebrants, like this wife of Mammy Da, worship through their choices of display and decoration as well as through their representation of the character and movements of the spirit. The initiated often wear vèvés as declarations of their allegiances to a specific spirit to whom they have pledged their devotion. Vèvés are important forms of inscription that can take the form of prayers or messages drawn on the skin. Artists design the decorations on the skin of Mammy

Da dancers to resemble a reptile moving in waves on the ground. By undulating their hands as they draw the markings on the skin of the performers, they both mime and evoke the serpent spirits (Personal Communication Nov 17, 2015). Such worshippers represent not only Vodou Da, who Vodun practitioners identify in the iconography of Shiva, but also Mammy Da, a wife of Vodou Da, who is closely tied to the Indian-made chromolithograph of the South Asian snake charmer discussed earlier in the chapter (Rush 1999: 69-70). West African Vodun devotees reinterpret and simulate chromolithograph images by using an array of imported objects in the service of culturally specific ends. In such ways, performers like the Mammy Da dancer described earlier, recognize their own realities in chromolithograph images produced by others. These performers adorn themselves through processes of critical consumerism by purchasing and reusing available objects according to their own needs.

By integrating imported sacred imagery, Ewe and Guin Mina performers participate in Afro-Asian cultural exchanges between themselves and South Asian merchants enacted in microcosm upon the canvas of West African bodies. Ewe and Guin-Mina performers in Togo use stylized gestures and adornments to transform understandings of commercial relations with foreigners, including ongoing exchanges of religious images and concepts with Indian merchants, into sources of empowerment. These movement vocabularies—including choreographies, physical adornment, and spirit possession—represent desires for social, transcultural, and transnational mobility. Due to social interactions and commercial exchanges with wealthy Indian merchants and grocers, many Ewe people argue that riches come to them from afar by way of affluent, foreign benefactors, both human and spirit. Through multiple levels of representation, including beaded jewelry worn as regalia, drawings upon the skin, objects carried and worn upon the body, and movements performed across ritual spaces, performers

indicate and encapsulate multiple mobilities and flows.

The work of the dancing devotee is to stop spirits in their tracks, to arrest their progress in the invisible world and tempt the Vodun into the visible one, to encourage them to make themselves manifest for a time in the bodies of entranced practitioners. In his paradigm-shifting publication *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas*, art historian Robert Farris Thompson indicates that possessed devotees become icons in the flesh, doubling the altar at which they worship. In such cases, the altar functions to encode memory in order to sustain belief (Thompson 1993: 30, 147). Performances honoring Mami Wata are site-specific, transformed based on the spaces—in towns or cityscapes, sacred forest clearings, courtyards, seashores, or shrines—where they take place. As embodied altars, practitioners often increase in power through the accumulation of signs over time. The compilation of beads or the carrying of *apia*, for example, serve to indicate the immense fund of power, knowledge, and wealth that are Mami Wata's primary gifts to those who serve her faithfully. Bodies can be festooned to recall genealogies of practice, just as shrines accumulate vestiges of supplication and thanks. Through spirit possession, the bodies of performers become prayers in motion, bridges between visible and invisible worlds, and thresholds through which spirits arrive (Thompson 1993: 30, 56). The aesthetics of the altar are layered upon the dances, as histories colliding with family narratives. Spirit possession and the accumulation of adornment transform the bodies of adorned performers in intertextual palimpsests of meanings, “little worlds” (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 206) made up of fragments that present and represent various relationships to claim access to authority. Both stationary and embodied altars remind viewers of other times and places and display objects that reassert the power and potential of specific deities in the present. The previous lives of the objects on the dancing altar become important aspects of the efficacy of the events in which they

are worn. By bringing foreign Mami Wata deities into conversation with local spirits found only amongst Guin-Mina people, they demonstrate that they can bring their many allegiances into line with their needs and into conversation with personal narratives. Through the shapes they make with their bodies, performers indicate their ability to traverse borders between themselves, their communities, and the dwelling places of the spirits.

Against the backdrop of the intimate stories of priestesses like Maman and Mamissi Sofivi, ritual dances function as entry points into understanding how communities are refracted through the self in the context of sacred choreographies. These events are accumulative presentations of power objects and performances crafted through communal processes. The assembled beaded bracelets, anklets, and necklaces in combination with the white skirts or wraps, tridents, blades and/or mirrors which make up the appropriate attire of devotees who dance for Mami Wata, are carefully selected for their relationships to Mami Wata's divine attributes. Such performances communicate through the relationships between different objects and spaces and through implied connections between combinations of objects. The objects dancers carry and wear: white wraps and *vévés*, twin figures, and colorful beads, demonstrate the permeability of boundaries between deities and the bodies of their followers.

In effect, performers who participate in the Yeke Yeke festival exemplify the transformation of their bodies into dancing altars. As on Sofivi's Mami Wata altar, each sacred object added to such perambulating altars conveys messages and implies relationships between objects and among various persons and groups. As devotees of Mammy Da perform, they multiply the meanings of Hindu chromolithographs in relation to their lives and communities. They also imply ritual and commercial exchanges between devotees and Indian merchants and religious practitioners. Yet, the objects that performers wear also acquire new meanings through

the care that their owners take of them and the ways that they serve as reminders of pledges to and encounters with specific pantheons of spirits.

### **Beads, Biography, and Regalia:**

Through beads, necklaces, anklets, bracelets, and armlets, Ewe devotees show allegiance to specific spirits, asserting their ability to traverse borders between themselves and metaphysical and cultural others. A middle-aged devotee from Aného who performs in *Yeke Yeke* described the meanings of her beads and her allegiance to the spirits as deeply entangled with her life and private space. Invited by Pierre, a young man originally from Aného, to speak with his brother and his sister-in-law who is a Vodun initiate and mamissi, I crowded into a small room with a rough, untiled floor. I sat on a low bench that wobbled and searched for a perch for my little computer, hoping to show images and get answers to questions about the *Yeke Yeke* festival that had taken place a month earlier. Pierre introduced me to his older brother and his sister-in-law who chuckled and chided him in Mina about the fact that he had not visited for a long time. “Maman,” as the men both called her during our visit and interview, began to bring out and arrange her ceremonial beads based on use. She spread a cloth on the floor and set up rows of necklaces nestling them down on top of the cloth like the curled bodies of snakes. I saw combinations of black, brown and white beads and white cowries with blue and red beads and other beads of many sizes and colors mixed together. She looked up at me expectantly, waiting for me to ask questions.

My Ewe and Guin-Mina interviewees told a few related narratives about the origins of the expensive, local beads, called *dzonu*, or *gumé-dzonu*, meaning “beads from the earth” (Kossi-Titrikou and Moumouni 2009: 208). Such local dzonu were historically created from a base of

clay, ivory, or shells, as natural objects that could be found in the earth and excavated for use in bead-making. Ewe and Mina Mamissiwo tell of the origin of beads with Da and his companion *Anyidohuedo*, the rainbow serpent (Personal Communication June 20, 2015).<sup>71</sup> This colorful serpent—known to bless his followers with wealth—plunges his head into the waters of oceans and rivers while leaving his tail in the land, leaving the raw materials for fabricating beads at the edges of rivers and streams for his devotees to unearth. In other retellings, practitioners mention that beads can be found in the ocean with Mami Wata spirits (Moumouni and Kossi-Titrikou 2009: 208). Now, artisans make the beads (*vodu dzonu*) worn by mamissiwo by pounding glass bottles into powder and devitrifying the powder with intense heat so that they can be poured into molds.

Devotees like Mamissi Sofivi and Pierre’s sister-in-law (hereafter “Maman”) wear beads in ceremonial contexts to denote established contractual relationships between themselves and specific deities. Maman showed me her beads for *Ajakpa*, the crocodile spirit who is closely linked to Mami Wata. As I continued to question Maman about images of performers in *Yeke Yeke*, another vodusi stopped by the house with her baby and joined the interview. Such initiates are inscribed with marks that function much as beads do. Vévé body markings and Vodun beads call out to the spirit and indicate the claim that a specific spirit or pantheon has over the bodies of their trosiwo. I also learned to recognize Ajakpa's beads by the cowry shells that adorn them like the great teeth of Mother Crocodile herself. Upon seeing the beads for Ajakpa, I became confused since the colors of blue, white, and red seemed so similar to necklaces for Dan. Pierre’s brother noted that beads for Dan and Mami Wata vary greatly from one person to another in part because both are related to the rainbow serpent Anyidohuedo and, thus, the beads sometimes

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<sup>71</sup> Sofivi Dansso told of how her ancestors “wore beads that were gathered from the rainbow Vodun [Anyidohuedo]. [These beads] came from the body of the rainbow” (Personal Communication Jun 20, 2015).

resemble the rainbow but also because Mammy Wata and Mammy Da come in so many different forms that the beads may commemorate a particular manifestation of the Vodun or the ways that a specific practitioner perceives the spirit rather than adhering to general iconographies.

In such ways, sacred arts like Maman's beads can become a means of telling biographical stories by moving from one tangible reminder of relationships with spirits and with living and deceased persons. Initiates exchange devotion and tributes to specific spirits for tangible healing and renewal as another aspect of the intimacy existing between themselves and specific Vodunwo. As Maman touched each of her beads and told me which Vodun they represented, she began to add information about how she came to be devoted to each of the Vodunwo represented by the beads arrayed before us. She told me, with interjections from her husband and Pierre, that she decided to become initiated after enduring frequent bouts of sickness as well as the stillbirths of two sets of twins. When she went to the diviner to ask which Vodunwo were giving her trouble, she learned that the twins were demanding attention and that she had to make a physical representation of them (Personal Communication Nov 17, 2015). The Afa diviner told her that a few spirits were also disturbing her, including *Ajakpa*, *Ata Kpessu*, Mammy Da, and Mama Tchamba, and that her twins must be initiated into these spirits with her in order to be appeased. Maman went into the corner of the house where her beads and sacred objects are kept wrapped away from prying eyes and unwrapped her four twin figures (Kraamer 2005: 294; Merlo 1977; Peek 2011). Pierre's brother explained to me that *venavi*, meaning "twins" in Ewe, are wooden twin figures that the parents of deceased twins must commission. After commissioning the twin figures, Maman sought healing through initiation as a priestess and her *venavi* were also initiated. When Maman was ritually bathed, the twins were also ritually bathed, when Maman wore beads, the twins wore beads. Such sacred objects often imply complex relationships and



personal histories as they are layered upon and around the body of dancers during rituals or cared for on altars in shrines or in domestic spaces as a part of the daily lives of worshippers.

In smaller scale rituals, including the one held in Mamissi Sofivi's home courtyard with which this chapter began, dancing altars also weave together personal narratives with collective health through performed tributes to specific spirits. The bodies of those dedicated to specific Vodunwo from birth, including Mamissi Sofivi and a young initiate named Aku, perform in ways that echo the role of stationary altars in striking ways. When I first met Aku she wore the blue of Mammy Da and was kneeling down beside the table where offerings for the Vodunwo had been placed. At an event in honor of Mammy Da, Sakpata (also called *Anyigbato* and *Aholu*), and Mama Tchamba, the offerings included bottles of gin, bowls of chalk nibs, kola nuts, water in colorful plastic kettles, and perfumes and powders. As others milled around, laughing and joking, young Aku crouched in the dirt beside the table with her hands touching the ground in front of her and her face inclined downward. She wore beads for Dan, Mami Ablo (Mami Wata who Loves Colors"), and Sakpata.

This girl of twelve had been dedicated to Sakpata from infancy since she was prone to illness and a Fa diviner told her family that Sakpata had claimed her.<sup>72</sup> Her family had styled her hair in locks as a testament to this exchange. Many children play and dance on the periphery during rituals for Sakpata, frolicking around the drums wearing the vertical black, red, and white stripes of Sakpata, their hair adorned with cowry shells and rolled into locks. As a child, Mamissi Sofivi had also worn *dada* hair, as the locks are called, as an indication that Hebieso had claimed her (Jell-Bahlsen 2008: 256). Like Aku, Mamissi lived in the shrine for over three years without leaving. Aku had just left the shrine of Sakpata and her head had been shaved. As such, she was

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<sup>72</sup> Dansso, Sofivi. Personal Communication, Nov 22, 2015.

free to worship all of the Vodunwo who had chosen her, though still obliged to attend rituals and dance for Sakpata.

As she moved to join the adults in dances for Sakpata, Dan, and Mama Tchamba, Aku sustains relationships with Vodunwo who accept performances, liquor, kola nuts, and devotion as currency. Though a servant of Sakpata and though Mamissi Sofivi was originally dedicated to Hebieso, these women have come to Mami Wata and Mama Tchamba, a feared pantheon of northern slave spirits, to negotiate family histories of wealth gained through trade, including the domestic and transatlantic slave trades. Through such performances, involving inherited and accumulated sacred objects, practitioners inhabit a personal past and proffer cultural genres of collective remembering by displaying relationships with humans, power objects, ancestors, and spirits. In preparation for rituals, Ewe performers make choices not only about the movements of their bodies but also about which embellishments and objects will best accomplish the meaning and purpose of their choreographic work. As *mamissiwo* (priestesses) seek healing and unity through personal relationships with powerful spirits, their choreographies constitute acts of reciprocity between Vodun and devotee.

### **Conclusion:**

Vodun practitioners choreograph invitations to the spirits through techniques born of intensive training. Though they often improvise within the parameters of long-held movement vocabularies, these choreographies-in-the-making demonstrate active communication between performers, communities and Vodun spirits.<sup>73</sup> Through such intersubjective choreographies in which dancers consider their communities as extensions of themselves even as their bodies are

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<sup>73</sup> Inspired by Jean and John Comaroff's "histories-in-the-making" (1993: xxix).

redirected and animated by specific spirits, like Mami Wata, trosiwo seek to alter public opinion, urging unity and reform. Devotees set choreographies apart from everyday life as interfaces between the visible and the invisible, reaching from the actual into the possible. Initiated “wives” of Vodun spirits reinterpret relations with foreigners and with one another through encounters with Vodun spirits in the bodies of community members.

During performances for Mami Wata, devotees comment about threats to social accord while soliciting and celebrating abundance and renewal. Trowo and Trosiwo experience intimate relationships with each other through choreographies that, like altars, assemble accumulated sacred objects that represent relations with spirits, family members, and the past. Though Vodun priestesses and priests keep Vodun altars and employ many forms of visual culture as a part of their devotional practices, they use ritual choreographies as public declarations that link altar practice, to *vévé* markings, libations, sacred objects, and uttered prayers, and musical adoration through the gestures and embodied exertions that each of these activities entail. Accordingly, dancing altars portray cultural exchanges and multiple mobilities, intertwining personal narratives with public performances. By portraying cumulative interpretations of foreign cultures and neighboring ethnic groups, performances provide for creative negotiations across and within cultural differences (Gilbert 2013: 179). Devotion to Mami Wata spirits proliferates amongst Ewe and Guin Mina Vodun practitioners, in part because of the need for a dynamic way to acknowledge and atone for problematic wealth, whether gained through mercantile ventures, political abuses, or through historical involvement in the slave trade. In the next chapter, I examine such ritual choreographies as ways that Ewe people construct environments of memory and personalize narratives of the domestic slave trade.

## Chapter Two:

### *Danced Narratives of the Slave Trade in Mama Tchamba Worship*

#### **Introduction:**

Through performances for the pantheon of slave spirits known as Mama Tchamba, Vodun practitioners in Togo mobilize their bodies as sites for memories of enslaved ancestors. Mama Tchamba is a group of Northern slave spirits, known as the spirits of “bought people” (*ameflelewo*), who possess descendants of Ewe and other Togolese families that purchased them (Rosenthal 1998: 130). Though the coast-dwelling Ewe people were captured and sold into the transatlantic slave trade themselves, they also participated in raids through which they supplied enslaved Africans from Northern regions to the domestic and transatlantic trade in enslaved people.<sup>74</sup> Mama Tchamba worship produces memories of such raids and of bought persons, primarily women, who were often integrated into Ewe patrilineages (Sofivi, Personal Communication Nov 29, 2017). In Mama Tchamba performances, narratives of enslavement are enacted by embracing “otherness” as an essential aspect of Ewe identity and family structures. Mama Tchamba devotees characterize the North through the religious foreignness of Islam, which very few coastal Ewes have adopted. Since many enslaved Africans sold through the domestic trade in Togo were brought from a place called Tchamba located in the northern part of Togo’s central region, Tchamba spirits often manifest clothed in Northern or Muslim clothing and carrying objects imported from the imagined and resymbolized “North.” These performances also indicate and embrace ways that Ewe identity converges and intertwines with the imported religious and cultural practices brought from the North by enslaved women who were often

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<sup>74</sup> For example, after the Dutch captured Elmina—a major center for the trade of enslaved persons along the coast of Ghana, from the Portuguese—Anlo Ewe people in Ghana became suppliers of captive Africans for the slave trade, working with both the Dutch and the Spanish (Akyeampong 2001b: 5).

practicing Muslims.

Ewe Vodun communities use performances of narratives about enslaved people to cope with and integrate such histories into their socio-cultural identities. Practitioners create “spectral geographies,” spaces of ritual power that connect past traumas to present needs. By layering histories and a variety of time periods simultaneously within the performance space, they situate themselves within specific histories of the domestic and Atlantic slave trades. These ritual histories are the microcosmic tactics through which Ewe families remember the spirits of their enslaved ancestors and the paths taken by their ancestors to lay the foundations for contemporary social networks and relations.

Mama Tchamba performances serve as both ritual archive and a dynamic repertoire of movements and gestures. Many historians (Blier 1996; Apter and Derby 2010; Baum 1999; Palmié 2002) have questioned the exclusive reliance on written documentation as sources for histories of oppressed and enslaved people by turning to what Apter and Derby term “a voodoo archive,” that includes altars, shrines, and sacred objects. The primary sources in this chapter include “modes of activating and repossessing the past that are generally excluded as primary sources...[,] opening up the archive to embrace ritual associations and performative gestures” (2010, xviii-xix) to trouble binary notions of the archive as static and reliable and the “repertoire” of lived experiences as unstable and corruptible. These practices are constantly in flux due to the dynamics and adaptability of the repertoire. In the *Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor explores the rift between the archive of materials, which are seen as enduring, stable and unmediated and the repertoire of body knowledge, or lived experience, which is often dismissed or devalued as an inferior way of generating and preserving knowledge (2003: 19-21).

Since these performances engage with the histories of bought persons to critique current socio-cultural circumstances, rituals honoring Mama Tchamba also serve as danced slave narratives. I place Mama Tchamba dances in dialogue with a novel in which the protagonist uses choreographic interpretation to grapple with the significance of slave narratives to her personal identity. Whereas contemporary fictional narratives of enslavement in the Americas, called “neo-slave narratives” (Rushdy 1999), give textual form to missing voices within archival records and positivist histories by emphasizing embodiment and intersubjectivity, Mama Tchamba practitioners do so by communicating with enslaved ancestors through spirit possession and ritual choreographies. Ewe people continue to use repertoires of ritual choreographies to seek reconciliation with the past in ways comparable to narrative techniques employed by Paule Marshall’s (1929-) *Praisesong for the Widow*, published in 1983, in which she re-situates slave narratives by prioritizing embodied religious epistemologies. Marshall theorizes and illustrates blacks in the Americas re-inhabiting memories of slavery through “bodily” forms (Connerton 1989: 2). Her narrative displaces neat binaries to demonstrate how memories of slavery, still present though obscured, recur in choreographic forms in the present. More importantly, like literary neo-slave narratives (D’Aguiar 1995; Morrison 1977, 1987; Butler 1979; Johnson 1990; Reed 1976),<sup>75</sup> these interpretive ways of knowing prioritize embodiment and ritual experience over written narratives as means of remembering histories of enslavement. By juxtaposing an American novel with a West African ritual practice, I seek to highlight the ways that Ewe communities conceptualize and contribute to narratives of the Black Atlantic through indigenous frameworks. Furthermore, Tchamba devotees use these ongoing performances to re-spatialize

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<sup>75</sup> Each of these neo-slave narratives foreground, in some way, what Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson call “the inordinate difficulty of gleaning the histories of the enslaved through the objects and material traces left within the archives of the governing classes” (2011: 3).

histories by mapping sacred places while using their bodies as points of encounter through which they reanimate and redefine local histories in ways that expand Paul Gilroy's theories of the "restless, recombinant" relationships of the "Black Atlantic" (1993: 31)

To contextualize Ewe performances as aspects of global networks of exchange, this chapter expands Paul Gilroy's term "Black Atlantic" to include West African performance practices. Gilroy historicizes the Black Atlantic by positioning transatlantic slavery as the beginning of modernity, yet—since Ewe identities have been creolized through the dislocation and rupture caused by the transatlantic trade in enslaved persons—traditional West African religious practices also take part in the types of modernities Gilroy theorizes (Gilroy 1993: 15; Piot 2001: 161). Though Gilroy constructs an important two-way conception of the continuous exchanges between European intellectual histories and the black diaspora, by defining the Black Atlantic based on a temporal break with Africa, he leaves insufficient room for contemporary African subjectivities (Gilroy 1993: 81).<sup>76</sup> Vodun practitioners express perspectives on domestic and transatlantic slavery by embedding such perspectives within choreographies taking place within semi-rural communities in Togo. This chapter extends and resists Gilroy's model by accounting for the cross-fertilizations and continued transformations of traditional African practices and the applicability of such practices to discourses of the transatlantic African diaspora.

By attending to the creation of choreographic cooperation through which devotees assert their religious, cultural, and historical group identities, I combine Paul Connerton's theory of the importance of "bodily...acts of transfer" (1989: 2, 39) with an investigation of the significance of spatialized memories. I posit Ewe ritual practices as a model for experiencing and

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<sup>76</sup> A number of scholars of Anthropology, Literature, and Cultural Studies argue that Gilroy's Black Atlantic overlooks the cultural complexity of African practices (Goyal 2010; Piot 2001; Pierre 2013; Zaleza 2005).

representing memories of enslavement in ways that question the boundaries between “master” and “mastered,” since Ewe Mama Tchamba devotees embrace spirits of enslaved persons portrayed as “strangers” in order to reason through past and present shifts in power and authority. In this chapter, I illustrate how ritual choreographies often structure and activate embodied memories, imagined places of power, and the transmission of historical knowledge to young people. Ewe people in Tsévié choreograph indigenous dances in cooperation with one another and with non-human spirits called *Vodunwo* to remember the part played by their ancestors in histories of domestic enslavement. The place delimited by the ritual choreographies affords practitioners opportunities to speculate about connections between their own sacred places and distant landscapes of power. The spirits of previously enslaved northerners, called Mama Tchamba, come to commandeer ritual performances through spirit possession and they advise and critique practitioners who are typically the descendants of enslaved and slave-holding ancestors. Through such interactions, Tchamba devotional practices confuse easy distinctions between domination and subordination within the context of the ritual.

### **Embodied Memories of Enslaved “Others”:**

As a descendant of both slave buyers and their wives of northern origin, Mamissi Sofivi performs memories of the domestic slave trade that have been passed down in her family. In November 2015, towards the end of my year-long research in Togo, I sat on the porch of Mamissi Sofivi’s home compound in Tsévié. She relaxed in a plastic chair with her back to the door of the room in her home that she reserved for her Mama Tchamba altar. When I asked her why she dances for Tchamba, she lowered her voice to explain that worshipping Tchamba



identifies her initiates, or “spirit wives,” as people coming from historically very wealthy, slave-holding families. She recounted how

in historical times there were very rich people amongst them. They were rich in cowries and these rich people sold other Africans to the colonizers. In order to find the people that they would sell, they went up North to a town called Tchamba. From there they would take slaves to sell on the coast. They would take iron bars and use them to make shackles to bind their prisoners around their wrists and ankles. The bracelets and chains, these objects made of iron, we now call Tchamba and they have become a symbol or sign of slavery. Tchamba has also become a Vodun that we worship (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015).

Sofivi confirmed that to replenish the ranks of enslaved populations some Ewe people captured people during wars and slave raids to sell into the domestic and transatlantic slave trades. Ewe raiders often traded captives from neighboring groups, who would might have escaped to their nearby homes soon after capture, to European merchants or local intermediaries so that they could be sold into the transatlantic slave trade. Wealthy Ewe families like Sofivi’s often preferred retaining captives from places like the town of Tchamba in their homes as laborers since distance from their homeland made rescue and escape unlikely (Wendl 1999: 113; Montgomery and Vannier 2017: 252-253). For many Ewe people, the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade by the British in 1807 corresponded with the end of a period of economic of wealth and prosperity when polities and families had prospered from revenues obtained through the trade in human captives (Venkatachalam 2015: 4; Wendl 1999: 112). Sofivi illustrates the links between Tchamba and old family money as she begins her story of the significance of Tchamba by discussing the wealth of her family, which she measures in cowries.

During our discussion, Richard and Sofivi described embodied dimensions through which local Ewe communities interpret histories of enslavement. I turned to my translator Richard and asked him “Why does Sofivi have Tchamba?” He asked her and then relayed her

answer: “Her ancestors were rich so they bought slaves. From amongst these slaves that were bought by her family, one manifested in Sofivi.” As he spoke, Sofivi cut in and said in quick Ewe that “If your parents never owned slaves you will never have Tchamba.” Since I was curious about how this knowledge was passed on, I persisted: “But how will they know if their family owned slaves? Will they ask the Vodunwo? Or do they know from their families?” Richard turned to me, still listening as Sofivi continued to speak, then responded “It is an oral history that people know through word of mouth to this day. In her family, for example, you will see that there are people who are very, very dark. That is because the people from the north were very, very dark.”

Though Richard mentioned oral histories, he also asserted that Sofivi’s heritage from enslaved persons was visible through her skin color. Both Sofivi and Richard assess the presence of histories of enslavement in their lives through embodied factors. Though Sofivi’s complexion may imply no such connection to outsiders, local people familiar with Tchamba worship interpret her body as an indication of past histories and her Northern heritage. In Sofivi’s narrative, Tchamba refers to both a physical town in central Togo and a Vodun that Sofivi encounters at her altar for Tchamba and within her body as she dances in the grip of spirit possession.

Though Mamissi Sofivi identifies with her wealthy ancestors, through spirit possession the desires of enslaved people purchased by her family manifest in her body and movements. She remarked upon the fact that she has experienced “manifestations” of Tchamba spirits in her body since she was “very, very small.” As a child, she started to fall into trances after the death of her aunt, who had been a devotee of Tchamba. Through familial narratives, Sofivi views her allegiance to Tchamba as an inheritance from her aunt. Her perspective on the ways that her

body and lineage testify to histories of exemplifies how memories constitute “system[s] of categorization in which the past is recreated in ways appropriate for the present” (Lopez 1992: 36; Roberts and Roberts 1996: 44). Sofivi’s deductions and interpretations based on the manifestations of spirits in her body illustrate how Ewe people continue to attach narratives of distant pasts to their contemporary lived realities. Her encounters with the spirits of previously enslaved people demonstrate that Tchamba practitioners question nineteenth-century notions of memory as a fixed record of past experience (Gyatso 1992).

Tchamba practitioners portray the North through elaborate projections of northern aesthetics. They wear sequined headscarves, fez hats, and kaftans to attract Northern spirits and make them feel at home. Such clothing forms the baseline from which these performers and their companions accumulatively represent and exaggerate imagined Northern or Muslim aesthetics by modeling their adornment after the dress and practices of Hausa traders and groups like Kabre or Mossi people. In Aného, Pierre’s brother (“Frère” hereafter) had mentioned that “Tchamba is a group of Vodunwo [and] *Mossi, Trokosi, Donkor* are all spirits within Tchamba. Tchamba is a general name for all of these Vodunwo who are slave spirits” (Personal Communication Nov 17, 2015). By this admission, he identified enslaved persons that devotees classify as akin to Mossi people from Burkina Faso as one type of “othered” spirit that practitioners encounter. Frère also used the word “donkor,” or *adonko*, as a gloss for referring to the many ethnically heterogeneous groups of Muslim northerners (Wendl 1999: 113-114). Through aesthetic portrayals of “northernness” and “foreignness,” Tchamba devotees draw Northern spirits to the coast and repave the roads by which histories of enslavement can be used by the families into which enslaved Northern women married. During events honoring Tchamba devotees carnivalize depictions of people located in the central and northern regions of nations including Cameroon,

Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Sudan, Senegal, Togo, and Ghana, and represented through objects purchased from traveling Hausa traders.<sup>77</sup> Tchamba performers improvise based on oral histories of migrations and trade routes between the North and the South to produce new memories and incite new debates about wealth, power dynamics and cultural exchange.

*My vision of the dancers was partially obscured by the sparkling silver and white headscarves and the white-powdered backs of two priestesses. From between the window frame made by their bodies and the off-white plastic chairs in a row before me, I watched a woman shuffling her feet. Beyond her, a trio of men took leaping steps that stayed close to the ground as they moved their arms, each creating two invisible parallel furrows in the air in front of them, as if to clear a path for themselves. Their heels lifted from the ground declaratively as their arms waved in unison. Their feet kicked up higher and their steps sped up, syncopating as Sofivi and a few priests and priestesses in full regalia rose in a line to dance. The priests and priestesses wore multiple scarves. As they lowered their bodies in deeper crouches and kicked their feet higher, women holding more scarves surrounded them in a flurry of arms and fluttering material. They quickly clothed them to mark their distinguished status. As the scarves accumulated, some women placed the scarves over the heads of the women dancers to mimic the look of Muslim women in hijabs. As the layers of scarves were brought a white-clad vodusi continued to pulse, bending her knees deeply and hiking her elbows with each dust-raising, caressing march of her feet. As the dancers began to move forward together, her feet, encased in white sandals, slid forward and back along the ground. More people rose to run forward and*

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<sup>77</sup> By the word “carnivalize” I suggest the imaginative excesses of the festival form in reference to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of grotesque realism of “carnival festivities,” in such contexts “all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable” (Bakhtin [1965] 1984: 5, 18-19).

*place their scarves over the bowed heads of the dancers. Other women slowly walked behind the dancers fanning them with more scarves.*<sup>78</sup>



Figure 5. Mama Tchamba ritual. Tsévié, Togo, 2015.

Efforts to draw foreign power include an understanding that culturally specific goods attract northern spirits. Performers dance wearing Sahelian warrior shirts, sparkling head ties, and offer bits of white clay and bowls of kola nuts in teetering piles on altars (Rosenthal 1998: 113). In these events, everything overflows. The offerings overlap their containers, scarves drape over heads, shoulders, and arms, and sometimes even fall to the ground as performers continue to dance. The dancers also get “hot,” as Sofivi termed it, with a gesture like a closing fist that she also used to describe someone strong or physically powerful. She added to this statement, saying “when they fan them, it is to cool them off because they have grown too ‘hot’” (Personal

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<sup>78</sup> Through italicized segments, I offset my own experience of ritual choreographies in the moment and designate the ways that *Vodunwo* interrupt and inform ongoing discourses during spirit possession.

Communication Nov 22, 2015). Practitioners use scarves, kola nuts, white clay, northern dress, libations poured from plastic kettles, and dances to please and “cool” Tchamba spirits.

Tchamba devotees use these symbols to blaze a path to northern power, using family histories as a conduit to integrating the “other” into their families and their bodies through possession. Though the pantheon has become a marker of familial identity since practitioners worship enslaved Northerners who married into their patrilineages, coastal Ewes view Tchamba as distinctly foreign. Mama Tchamba spirits are seen as powerful foreigners (Rosenthal 1998, 44). Accordingly, Ewe devotees worship Tchamba through objects imported from Northern Togo including plastic water kettles, fez hats, and ornamented scarves associated with Muslims.<sup>79</sup> Ewe people identify themselves as the descendants of sellers enslaved persons and as a people that have intermixed and intermarried with enslaved or “bought people.” Historically, persons were bought as a wise investment since the enslaved could produce wealth in people by bearing children (Rush 2013: 113). In Mama Tchamba worship, the spirits of the enslaved are extended through the bodies of the descendants of slave masters.

Many Ewe traditional religious practitioners retain histories of enslavement as a part of their cultural and familial identities and domestic space. Amongst Ewe people, discourses on enslavement have become enmeshed with debates about trade, class, wealth, and cultural exchanges and intermarriages with foreigners. While consulting Mr. Dela Dzifomor, a local leader in Tsévié, to explore the role of local traditional associations in the lives of community members, he began to speak about the importance of presenting the conditions and narratives of enslaved Africans. As Dzifomor rose from his chair, he said “I can even show you some of the

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<sup>79</sup> During the ritual event excerpted above, a man spoke through a microphone to inform those in attendance that only initiated priestesses were to dance wearing sequined headscarves or fez hats since it was “forbidden” to all others.

chains that I have with me” (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015). Richard and I followed him from our shady interview spot in his home compound into his dimly lit home. He rustled around in a back room and soon brought out large, thickly rusted chains, manacles, and a large knife.

Gesturing with the heavy items in his hands, he described how les *adrafos* (militias or hunting bands) would travel to the North “to capture those who were to become enslaved. This knife is not the same as the knife that we use for working...They would use these shackles to bind the people before they were put into the boats...People were forced to communicate through songs rather than words because they were not allowed to speak” (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015). These histories of enslavement often shape the domestic spaces and cultural identities and social status of many Ewe people living in semi-rural areas. Dzifomor noted that he kept the chains in a back corner of his home because his ancestors had been slave raiders but also because he felt that it was necessary for Tsévié to have a slavery museum, a point that I will elaborate on later in the chapter. Although Dzifomor is doubtless atypical in keeping such relics in his home in the hopes of founding a local museum, he also related a number of other ways that locals commemorate domestic and transatlantic enslavement.

Ewe communities convey histories of domestic enslavement through a variety of mnemonic techniques. When Dzifomor mentioned the treatment of enslaved people, he connected these commercial practices to familial identities when he mentioned that “you can still see on the ancestral stools...which families held slaves and which families were enslaved” (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015). When asked how enslavement is remembered, he spoke of the chains in his home as well as the ancestral stools stored with chains, decorated with cowrie shells (an important currency of the African trade in enslaved persons), and festooned

with other symbols representing slave histories that are passed down within families through ritual practices and oral histories. Additionally, Dzifomor's trip into a corner of his own home to find the relics of the slave trade implies that the remnants of the enslavement are "at home," sometimes even within the domestic space, for Tchamba devotees in this region. For those like Dzifomor and Sofivi, narratives of enslavement represent domestic realities, rather than distant histories.

Tchamba practitioners view histories of enslavement as deeply linked to their bodies, homes, and family histories. By representing otherness gestures of power that they identify as "hot," performers produce dances in which their bodies become vehicles for narratives of enslaved others. Devotees draw these spirits of "bought persons" by offering such movements in addition to excesses of sacred objects meant to represent the Muslim aesthetics that Ewe communities associate with people of the "North." Though these descendants of wealthy Ewe families did not view the past involvement of their families in the domestic slave trade with shame, they did indicate that these pasts continue to shape their lives and the ways that they understand their bodies and lineages. Yet, despite narratives of Ewe dominance and prosperity during the era of the domestic trade in enslaved persons, devotional practices for Tchamba revealed local connections between ritual power, silence, and fear.

### **Reversals of Power and Unspeakable Fears in Tchamba Devotions:**

By welcoming Tchamba spirits to command, demand, and orchestrate the lives of practitioners, performers honoring bought persons also destabilize binary notions of the location of power and mastery by blurring the lines between masters and those mastered. As I spoke with Tchamba practitioners, I noticed that discourses of domestic and transatlantic enslavement were



often broached as discussions of wealth rather than confrontations of guilt, shame, victimization, and grievance in the ways that activists might frame such dialogues in US contexts. Such differences in expressions of enslavement might result in part from the ways that Tchamba worship destabilizes binary notions of the location of power and mastery.

The intimate relationships between the spirits of enslaved Africans from the northern regions of Togo and the descendants of slaveholding families complicate simple binaries between slave buyers and slave owners. In Ewe there is no clear or direct word for “slave master” and even bought-persons referred to those who purchased them as *afeto* or *afeno*, the equivalent of “sir” and “misses” (Rosenthal 1998: 130). Ewe categories of enslaved persons trouble and redefine easy binaries between dominant and dominated. In *Vodun in Coastal Bénin: Unfinished, Open-Ended, Global*, argues that the word “slave” in English does not fully convey the complexities of West African institutions of enslavement. In contrast, in African languages specific words distinguish domestic bought persons, from persons purchased for export, or even enslaved persons in chains. Rush argues that such “culturally defined, multivalent local meanings of the unidimensional English word ‘slave’” (2013: 113) helps to clarify how bought persons could be purchased as laborers or as adopted children. Yet, despite the variations in the terms, the word “ameflelewo,” or bought person, still indicates a servant or subordinated member of Ewe and Guin-Mina communities (Wendl 1999: 114).

However, the spirits of previously dominated enslaved persons claim different relationships to power in Tchamba performances than they reportedly did in life. Tchamba danced enactments portray multiple versions of narratives of the movements of enslaved northerners. These stories of the descendants of enslaved and enslaving peoples hosting the spirits of the enslaved in their bodies contribute new perspectives to the roles played by West

Africans in the transatlantic slave trade. When the “other” is a part of the self, dancing narratives of enslavement becomes processes of contending with the “hegemony in the fibers of the self” (Williams 1977: 212; Rushdy 1999: 227). Stories in which the descendants of slave-holders cannot be neatly divided from those of the enslaved decenter notions of slave narratives as pitting the perspective of previously mastered and continually oppressed subjects against the master texts of dominant culture.<sup>80</sup> In Tchamba the previously enslaved may be master and spirit, while the descendants of slave masters come as supplicants and hosts. For Ewe people, reanimating the perspective of enslaved Africans cannot be decoupled from the perspectives and subjectivities of the families who purchased enslaved people.

In September 2015, Sofivi invited me to attend a ritual held to welcome a number of Vodunwo including, Mama Tchamba. Once we arrived, she introduced me to her friends and told me to sit directly behind all of the priests and priestesses. She also introduced me to woman hosting the ritual. This initiated Mamissi wore beads indicating her allegiance to Tchamba, Hebieso (thunder Vodun), Mammy Da (serpent Vodun), and Ajakpa (crocodile Vodun) amongst others. She also wore a white head wrap decorated with silver sequins and a lacy white wrap dress. Once the dancing began, the priests and priestesses seated in front of me soon rose in a line to perform. Though they all began by dancing the walking steps commonly performed to *brekete* drumming rhythms, the priestess to whom I had been introduced, and others falling into trance, soon began to move in distinct ways.

*During the ritual, one possessed priestess began to trail behind the others, dancing backward as her movements transitioned into the drunken quality of a “danced” spirit host. As*

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<sup>80</sup> Further research on Tchamba performances may also yield narratives of “fictive kinship,” familial ties not based on blood ties or marriage, at work as in the historical cases of enslaved persons adopted into slaveholding families (Meillassoux 1986; Lovejoy 2012; 2011; Rush 2013: 114).

*the others continued to march forward, she relished a small area, returning to a limited patch of dirt and dancing backward, engraving it with her footfalls before pushing forward a few paces only to return, sailing backward on bobbing knees and backpedaling feet. Her feet began to cross, her arms to raise, the movements taking on a separate personality and intention. An attendant rose from the onlookers, running to her aid with a wordless shout as if surprised by the sudden change in the movements of the dancer. She began to adjust the sequined scarves adorning the possessed priestess as other initiated performers gathered around them. By the time four other women had gathered around her, the Tchamba spirit had slowed the motion of the spirit host's arms and legs into commanding marching steps. As two women placed firm hands on her back she stiffened in a half crouch with her knees bent. A priest dancing beside her seemed to challenge the drummer to play faster, beating out quick stomping rhythms on the ground and delaying the alternation of his legs. He raised his feet high off the ground, his knees bending into them as if spring-loaded. He tapped his feet frolicsomenly, as if insisting on his way. Drawing his feet from the ground at times as if burned, rejecting the soil only to place one step behind another. He arrived at the point where the libation had been poured and moved no further. An attendant also came to his side. With a vague smile on his face, he was led to his seat like a child. Others, surrounding the first dancer in a tight huddle, poured libations of water out of a plastic kettle before the woman's feet to appease the spirit visitor animating her body.*



Vodunwo appropriated and transformed the movements of both dancers, slowing down those of the *mamissi* and prompting the more frenzied gestures by the hounoun. When I asked about the importance of Mama Tchamba in the lives of practitioners, Sofivi declared that “Once Tchamba arrives, they unveil everything and impose rituals [on us] to arrest misfortune. The Tchamba spirits will show us these rituals through the movements of their entranced adepts” (Personal Communication Nov 29, 2017). By moving in such ways, Tchamba spirits take control of the pace of the ritual, often intensifying or interrupting the dancing to demand that those present perform in new ways or offer additional gifts, like the libation poured out for the *mamissi*.

The role reversal of Muslim “others” controlling the lives and bodies of Ewe performers, rather than wealthy Ewe people exploiting and controlling the labor of northerners represents understandings of the tenuousness of power and affluence. Ewe people interpret histories of enslavement in the context of current political tensions between north and south that Togolese are loath to speak of aloud. The president Faure Gnassingbé and his father Eyadéma belong to a minority group, called Kabre people, from the north who have held power in the neo-colonial nation of Togo since 1967 (Piot 1999: 3). Even as tensions mount between northern groups and Ewe people, due to the stranglehold of Eyadéma’s son Faure Gnassingbé on the presidency, *Vodun* practitioners continue to perform dances through which they imagine themselves as northerners and stage forums for exchange and communication between themselves and northern others. Relations between the north and south were amicable before the bloody conflicts between Ewe people and northerners over control of the government. In many regions, Ewe and Kabre people have a long history of cultural cross-fertilization and ritual collaboration. Such practices and interactions were often ruptured and forgotten in response to Ewe opposition to Eyadéma in the 1990s (Piot 1999: 159). Since performers avoid making rigid historical connections that

would exclude further interpretation and accumulations of meanings and complexities, these performances leave room and remain flexible enough to evoke current political tension and danger as well as past relationships to power. Yet, these interpretations represent the “potentiality” (Rush 1999: 61) through which practitioners use Tchamba performances to represent and reinterpret countless circumstances, themes, and histories, as they express their perspectives in the contemporary moment.

In other words, due to the multivalence of Tchamba dances, performers can interpret various time periods and contemporary circumstances through ritualized narratives of shifts in control and the tensions between dominance, service, and cooperation. Tchamba performers weave histories together in order to apply them to circumstances of illness, death, and debt faced by the descendants of enslaved people. They supplement and reinforce oral histories of enslavement through personal experiences of ongoing arbitration and shifts in “movement dialectic[s]” (A. F. Roberts 2013: 60, 84). Performers also make space for interpretations of political changes, while refusing to assert rigid applications and meanings for each movement, by collapsing boundaries between dominant and dominating groups. By offering gifts of libation, dance, music, and delicacies imported from the northern regions, practitioners seek to please Tchamba spirits and to allay fears of harmful repercussions for neglecting to honor them.

During our interview, Sofivi grew increasingly nervous. The small group of visitors who had gathered to peer at the photos that I showed her gradually left as I continued to ask about Tchamba. Mamissi Sofivi expressed a sense of impending danger. When I asked Sofivi about the importance of Tchamba she began to answer, paused, then picked up a plastic water kettle. She poured water on the ground, a libation for Tchamba, as she said a soft prayer, pouring in four corners like the cardinal directions, then admitted that:

Tchamba is...very, very powerful. So powerful that it is making everyone afraid...I am afraid for myself when I speak of these things....That is why everyone else has returned to their homes, because they were becoming afraid when we started to speak of these things. It is because of this that I poured the libation....I will explain it to you since I know that you are doing your research but usually we would not explain. They are things that we do not commonly speak of. [T]his is a very dangerous Vodun. To make sacrifices to her you must not use a knife. Tchamba spirits do not like that. To make sacrifices for them you must just put your hand on the animal and use your hands and it will suddenly die. If Tchamba becomes angry with you, you will just begin to bleed out and die. Tchamba is very ferocious and very, very dangerous (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015).

Though Ewe people remember these histories, rather than discussing them openly and easily, they convey them through unwritten, embodied, and often unspoken forms of communication. Historically, Ewe people buried bought persons as “bad dead” outside of the village in “the wilderness” (Wendl 1999: 114). These slave spirits could not return as proper ancestors but were instead forced to become malicious vengeful spirits. The fact that Mama Tchamba does not allow the use of knives within sacrifices to her may reference the fact that enslaved people were not murdered but forced to give lifetimes of service for which they require slaveholding families to show appropriate gratitude (Rush 2013: 116).

Tchamba spirits attack the bodies and economic prosperity of their own descendants as well as the descendants of the families that purchased them for the offense of forgetting them by not performing necessary rituals. Performing rituals incorrectly may also result in Tchamba’s wrath, expressed through illness or sudden death. Sofivi once reasoned that many people in Tsévié who were “born to the *Vodunwo*” could not stop practicing Vodun because “if you neglect them, they will harm you” (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2017). Devotees not only conceive of memories of Tchamba as realities that can animate their limbs in new ways, but also as threatening forces that may threaten their lives and livelihoods. Ewe community members

often choose not to give voice to fraught histories of the slave trade, choosing instead to perform and convey them through unspoken forms of communication.

By demonstrating shifts of power and the interconnectivity between “bought persons” and their devotees, Tchamba dances mold silences as foundations for new narratives. Despite Tobias Wendl’s suggestion that the chaining of enslaved people during transport and at home to prevent escape became one of the major symbolic attributes of slave status (1999: 114), I saw no chains or shackles represented in any of the dances for Tchamba. Additionally, although the shackle bracelets that *Vodun* practitioners call *Tchambagan*, the “metal of Tchamba” (Rush 2013: 116), and the cowry shells that Sofivi mentioned as the currency of her wealthy ancestors were often evident on Tchamba altars, these elements of ritual remembrance of enslavement were rarely included in ritual choreographies for Tchamba. Tchamba dances offer different and complementary perspectives on enslavement than altars for the spirits of “bought persons” by portraying interactions between spirits and spirit-hosts in the moment. The open-ended family narratives of enslavement and confrontations of impending fear, rather than feelings of guilt or grievance, contrast with narratives of trans-Atlantic enslavement. Yet, through the improvisational potential of Tchamba rituals, we will next discuss ways practitioners place their narratives of domestic enslavement in dialogue with discourses and debates inspired by heritage tourism and histories of the trans-Atlantic trade.

### **Navigating Local Memories of Transatlantic Enslavement:**

Due to the presence of African Americans and others in search of “roots” in West Africa, Vodun practitioners leave room to incorporate transatlantic narratives into local ways of characterizing and comprehending enslavement. At times, Ewe people join others in Ghana and



Togo to mobilize memories of the slave trade as a part of efforts to acquire economic prosperity through the establishment of internationally recognized, heritage sites.<sup>81</sup> In “History, Memory, Slave-Trade and Slavery in Anlo (Ghana),” Emmanuel Akyeampong examines how heritage tourism has influenced Anlo Ewe memories of slavery in Ghana’s Volta Region. Since UNESCO designated the slave castles along the Ghanaian coast as world heritage sites in 1996, Anlo people have repackaged and repurposed their historical memories of slavery. Narratives linking international and national discourses on enslavement in Ghana illustrate the long-standing entanglement of Ewe people with various institutions of enslavement. For example, Anlo people continue to push for the recognition of *Atorkor* village as an international slavery site to commemorate the Anlo-Ewe people who were captured on a slaving vessel there in 1856.<sup>82</sup> Akyeampong also argues that involvement in the Atlantic slave trade led to increases in domestic holdings of enslaved African women from the northern regions of present-day Ghana and Togo and that the availability of bought persons contributed to practices of ritual female bondage amongst Ewe people (2001b: 10-11). Discourses on sites of transatlantic slavery have animated debates around such ritualized forms of bondage.

Many Christian activist groups have problematically interpreted various forms of ritual confinement as vestiges of the domestic slave trade, rather than as ongoing relationships and beneficial institutions through which participants engage in various types of ritual and social mobility (Madison 2010: 62; Akyeampong 2001b: 12). Though "liberation" ceremonies were held between 1996 and 1997 for the *trokosi*, women whose sexuality and labor was reportedly

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<sup>81</sup> Akyeampong 2001b: 2; Jeychandran 2014: 91-92; Pierre 2013: 148; Holsey 2008: 161-162

<sup>82</sup> By 1850, many Anlo-Ewe chiefs had gained great wealth from the slave trade and were well respected as traders on the Anlo coast. During the waning years of the slave trade, one such chief sold an entire drumming group from his own town because the lead drummer was having an affair with one of his wives (Akyeampong 2001b: 7-8).

rampantly exploited, women known as *fiasidi* were not liberated since locals view them as valuable and respected community members (Akyeampong 2001b: 13). As mentioned in the previous chapter, young initiates continue to participate in such confinements as a part of initiation into relationships with specific Vodunwo. When asked about the process of inheriting her Vodunwo, Sofivi described a lengthy confinement through which she gained her current respected status as a mamissi. She recalled that “It was during that time that I learned all the things to do for Hebieso. At the time I was dedicated only to Hebieso [Vodun of thunder]. It was not until after that time that I was free to serve all of the Vodunwo who had chosen me” (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2017). I suggest that increased attention to histories of transatlantic enslavement have led outsiders to classify diverse forms of ritual servitude—that serve an array of social, cultural, and religious functions—as vestiges of the transatlantic trade in enslaved persons. The increased attention to histories of enslavement along the Atlantic coast has also inspired different genres for remembering the slave trade in Togo, those aimed at drawing and developing tourism.

As a community leader in Tsévié who has helped to found local traditional associations and plan annual festivals, Dela Dzifomor repeatedly expressed a desire for a local museum presenting histories of the slave trade. After he had shown me and Richard the rusted chains, knife, and manacles that he kept in his home as relics of the transatlantic and domestic slave trades, he mentioned that “[Ewe people in Tsévié] really need a museum to display all of these things... I want a museum so that people can know how their ancestors were treated before they were sent to the Americas” (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015). His discussions of the importance of the museum centered around visitors to the region, rather than on the need for a museum to help local people remember histories of enslavement. For Dzifomor, a historical

museum would serve the community as a means of drawing tourism and representing diasporic kinship. His ardent desire for a museum suggested an impulse to position histories associated with his inherited artifacts of the slave trade as links between Ewe people and returning African Americans.

Dzifomor also noted that African Americans should be introduced to and reintegrated into Ewe culture since many of them might have been taken from the coast of present-day Togo. He spoke of his hopes to play a role in reconnecting returning African Americans to their heritage:

We want to have relationship with our brothers who were deported to America; they are now far from their culture. We want them...to experience their culture. There were Togolese people who were taken to America during slavery. We would love to reintegrate them into their culture since they are now a part of a hybrid culture. If we want to have our festivals, we want them to have people in the country to come and visit. We can then welcome African Americans who wish to come to Togo. We want them to know that they have arrived in their own nation (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015).

Dzifomor expressed concerns about deracination but also defined memories of enslavement through kinship ties across difference. Much as Tchamba devotees remember domestic enslavement by acknowledging the “others” who form a part of their lineages, Dzifomor seeks to “reintegrate” those from a “hybrid culture” back into “their culture” through performance. When he spoke of Africans in the diaspora, he evinced similar concerns to those he often expressed in relation to young Ewe women who know little about the Ewe language or traditional ways of dressing.

Dzifomor reported that he had already begun to organize young people in Tsévié to learn sketches and danced skits displaying histories of slavery as a project calculated to educate foreign visitors. He presented festivals as important means of communicating with African Americans and other visitors from Africa’s diasporas. He also confided that he planned to

institute an entire festival devoted to narratives of enslavement, “we need to have these things so that our brothers from America will feel at home when they come to us” (Personal Communication Aug 18, 2015). The development of new practices and performance and maintenance of legacies, relics, and institutional remnants of the slave trade in Ewe communities demonstrate the need to remember and reinvent memories of slavery that align with local needs and cultural understandings of the trade in enslaved persons. Though Dzifomor discussed histories of transatlantic enslavement from a secular perspective, with reference to tourism and local development, Tchamba devotees often approach histories of enslavement through Vodun epistemologies.

Initiated Vodun practitioners perform in ritual through which they characterize the institutions of domestic and transatlantic slavery as separate but related systems of trade, labor, and social negotiation. Mama Tchamba rituals are by no means the only ways that devotees performing histories of the slave trade. Since community members associate both Mami Wata and Mama Tchamba with aspects of enslavement, these pantheons serve as important means of navigating troubled histories of debt and exchange. An important difference between Mami Wata and Mama Tchamba is that Tchamba represents “old money” that is in the family rather than contemporary imports, exports, and foreign luxuries. Priests and priestesses of Mami Wata understand the pantheon as guardians of ports and markets. For instance, Mami Wata spirits guard the Grand Marché, called *Asigame*, in Lomé (Rosenthal 2005: 189). Practitioners examining histories of transatlantic enslavement in comparison with domestic narratives of servitude and bondage increasingly connect Mama Tchamba with Mami Wata as a way to remember their ancestors’ involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Devotees of both pantheons tend to associate domestic trade with Tchamba and transatlantic trade with Mami

Wata (Rush 2013: 111).

Tchamba devotees sometimes framed stories of transatlantic enslavement in relation to the pantheon. When I asked Frère about the meaning of Tchamba, he told me that “Tchamba expresses slavery.” When I asked him to which type of enslavement he referred, his face elongated in surprise. He asked me, incredulously, “You don’t know about slavery?” When I told him that I was trying to distinguish between transatlantic and domestic enslavement he seemed to relax. “Both, in fact, all! Tchamba expresses all types of slavery.” He claimed that there were many different types of Tchamba and some of them were sold into the Atlantic trade though most remained on the coast as part of the domestic trade (Personal Communication Nov 17, 2015). In one narrative she told when I asked about the meanings of one of the Tchamba dances, Sofivi took such connections between the domestic and transatlantic trades a step further. Mamissi Sofivi also connected her devotional practices and histories of Tchamba to a narrative of the transatlantic trade. She asserted that:

There was a colonel in the army who bought a slave woman and took her to the Americas and she gave birth to a mixed-race daughter who was also enslaved. The daughter was getting sick a great deal and she kept falling sick so they realized that it was Tchamba making the child sick because Tchamba was not being worshiped. The Vodun was demanding that they worship Mama Tchamba (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015).

Such narratives bring the work of practitioners to place their own situations in dialogue with the plights, triumphs, travels and exchanges of their forebears into stark relief. As with the daughter in Sofivi’s narrative, Mama Tchamba obliges performers to shape and occupy space in ways that translate familiar landscapes and stylized movements into mnemonics for reimagined past events and experiences. Sofivi’s method of telling about Tchamba illustrates how specific practitioners create narratives linking domestic slavery to transatlantic chattel slavery as a means of theoretically uniting genealogies of practice to extend the reach of practitioners into distant

places. Sofivi told this vignette about a multiracial woman claimed by Tchamba in the Americas to demonstrate how Tchamba moves within families according to “spiritscapes” that defy space and time (Roberts and Roberts 2016: 62). Ewe Vodun practitioners continue to develop philosophies forged through rituals as a response to discourses about the transatlantic and domestic slave trades. Sofivi’s narrative also demonstrates how Tchamba spirits cross oceans, as Mami Wata spirits do, unfettered by borders and geographical boundaries as the Vodunwo link practitioners through ritual practice.

Since practitioners of Afro-Atlantic religions perpetuate epistemological frameworks through practice rather than through sacred written texts, they rely on multivalent performances and rituals to convey sacred precepts. In Afro-Atlantic religious practices, “dance rhythms and songs induce the worshipper to embody the feelings and complexities of the multiple beings who personify aspects of the social and physical universe” (Matory 2009: 236). In the “Many Who Dance in Me: Afro-Atlantic Ontology and the Problem with ‘Transnationalism,’” J. Lorand Matory argues that transnationalism, as a way of thinking about the world and the nation-state, was exemplified by Afro-Atlantic “sacred ontologies” long before Western thinkers coined the terms “transnationalism” or “globalization” (2009: 231). Vodun spirits always come from “elsewhere” such that personal identity is not based on the borders of the nation-state in which the dancing body resides; Afro-Atlantic religions based on spirit possession are always already transnational. She assumes that the enslaved woman who was taken to the Americas must have been from the North and then builds a narrative that applies Ewe notions to the memories of others. Sofivi’s story illustrates one way that Ewe people use various notions of “otherness” within ritual practices as sites through which to negotiate memories of the transatlantic slave trade and contemporary understandings of those recognized as foreign (Drewal 1996;

Nevadomsky 2008; Shaw 2002; Rush 2013).

Performers construct identities in conversation with local and global systems of oppression and exploitation. African practices form essential elements of Atlantic systems as West Africans constitute and reconstitute their religious and cultural practices through transatlantic encounters and exchanges (Piot 2001: 156; Rush 2001: 42-45). In “Atlantic Aporias: Africa and Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic,” Charles Piot presents Africa as diasporic and as part of the Atlantic system since African nations and communities have been made and remade by forced migrations and encounters with “modernity.” He illustrates how so-called “traditional” rituals link past events to oppression in the present and argues that societies on both sides of the Atlantic shared common histories rooted in and derived from colonial modernity. He points out that Kabre communities in rural northern Togo meet Paul Gilroy’s criteria (1993) for modern, Black Atlantic communities since they have faced racial terror, destruction of family and community, and the rupture of linear history.<sup>83</sup> Kabre people have also endured dislocations since, if not before, the advent of the transatlantic slave trade that have created cross-fertilizations, improvisational mixing, and cultural exchange in their communities and practices.

The transatlantic slave trade transformed geographical and social landscapes for Ewe people as well as ethnic groups to the North. Piot explores the extent of the reach of the slave trade into rural and semi-rural areas of Togo, arguing that many centralized polities benefited from slave raiding while other interstitial groups fled and resettled in new areas (2001: 161; footnote for interstitial). Once the Germans arrived and began to establish colonial administrations, northern Togolese groups including Kabre people were forced to build roads

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<sup>83</sup> Piot argues that every village in West Africa was touched by the ravages of the slave trade which included slave raids and expanding kingdoms. Kabre people in northern Togo still have cultural memories of slave raiding and some villages even paid slave tribute to keep raiders at bay. Such practices produced many dislocations and migrations not unlike those experienced in the Americas (2001: 159).

and railroads and pay taxes annually. Many were also forced to migrate to nearby Ghana where they farmed coffee, cotton, and cocoa, not to mention those displaced to other African polities through the domestic slave trade (Piot 2001: 159). Colonization set in motion social dynamics among different ethnic groups in Togo. Since coastal groups like Ewe people were favored by the French and became an indigenous bourgeoisie, their ideas of people from the interior were influenced by European rhetoric and they came, in many cases, to see Northerners as fit primarily for manual labor (Piot 2001: 162).

Tchamba practitioners acknowledge their participation in and contributions to such systems as a means of repositioning themselves within interpreted and localized elements of foreign cultures. As in the case of the daughter in Sofivi's narrative, Mama Tchamba obliges performers to shape and occupy space in ways that translate familiar landscapes and stylized movements into mnemonics for reimagined past events and experiences. Local remembrance of domestic enslavement has come to integrate other narratives as they consider the North and the far-off places that they evoke within Tchamba, they also include and affix narratives of transatlantic locations to their dance practices in response to ongoing exchanges occurring through tourism.

These performers reverse the model of thinking through histories of the African diaspora with histories of domestic enslavement as their point of departure. Both Sofivi and Frère use transatlantic narratives as starting points from which to adapt local narratives of domestic enslavement. In *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature*, Yogita Goyal argues that Paul Gilroy's theories of the Black Atlantic deny the complexity of the African subject and the African continent because his presentation of diaspora tends to gloss over local and historical specificity (Goyal 2010: 223). In contrast, Goyal positions Africa as an important point of



departure that has fueled the imaginations of various members of the transatlantic African diaspora as they theorized dispersal and nationalism (2010: 7-10, 234-236). By applying the frameworks of Tchamba with “the North” as a starting point from which to connect narratives of the transatlantic diaspora to local systems of thought, Togolese devotees map “an alternative genealogy of the black Atlantic, a different diasporic terrain where movement is not linear or singular but crosshatched by journeys and uprootings and political commitments to home and to ‘elsewhere’” (Goyal 2010: 235). In opposition to Gilroy’s proposed rootlessness, these performers exemplify Edouard Glissant’s theory celebrating processes of cultural mutation involving multiple routes and the constant creation of roots (1989: 67). They build branching “submarine roots [that are] neither free-floating nor fixed” (Goyal 2010: 238) in their constructions of narratives of enslavement designed to facilitate further interpretations and accumulations of meanings and complexities.

In Mama Tchamba devotions, practitioners navigate local and international narratives of enslavement through processes of meaning-making that begin with narratives of travel to the “elsewhere” of the “North.” Even as locals like Dzifomor align their family memories with performances produced in response to popular concepts of heritage through which they seek to participate in global discourses about enslavement and return, Tchamba practitioners present memories of transatlantic enslavement as extensions of their veneration of spirits of Northern enslaved persons. In so doing, they make connections between their own narratives and distant places, including the “Americas” and the “North,” that become detached from rigid empirical interpretations as they emphasize relationships between local rituals and imagined landscapes.

## **Spectral Geographies:**

Histories of the slave trade continue to manifest as spirits that menace the landscapes and inspire fear but who also yield great power and mobility (Shaw 2002: 9; Basu 2007: 232; Wendl 1999: 114). These narratives are neither neat nor complete, but communities connect them clearly to geographical landscapes. Such geographies bear witness to histories of exploitation through ritual experiences and practices that evoke memories of the transformations that resulted from purchasing, transporting, and selling enslaved persons. In *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*, anthropologist Rosalind Shaw shows how landscapes become moralized and stand as witnesses to violent histories and continued performances of memory. In Sierra Leone, some such performances occur through divination practices and stories told about specific sites. In Tchamba performances, people make connections between dances, ritual practices, and narratives of the domestic and transatlantic slave trade to retrace historical migrations over familiar landscapes.<sup>84</sup>

Through choreographies, Tchamba practitioners position themselves in relation to narratives of enslavement. Sofivi suggests that Tchamba performances represent, among other things, the joy of their ancestors at acquiring enslaved persons. When “our ancestors...bought people in the North [,]...They wouldn’t show their joy over there. It was upon returning home to the South that [our ancestors] played [music] and danced because their bought persons [ameflelewo] were beautiful and had safely reached the South” (Personal Communication Nov 29, 2017). Practitioners acknowledge the participation of their ancestors in systems of

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<sup>84</sup> For many African societies, the dichotomy between culture, religion, and nature are inapplicable since communities view landscapes as historical processes that are constantly changing (Akyeampong 2001a: 188; Shaw 2002: 3, 46-47; Greene 2002: 82).

enslavement as a means of repositioning themselves within interpreted and localized elements of Northern cultures. By reproducing the joy of their ancestors, while negotiating their own fear of ignoring Tchamba, performers en flesh histories of slavery as platforms for connecting distant landscapes and far-off people to familiar ones. Such “histories of arrival” become impressed on the skin and on bodies as territories of memory.<sup>85</sup>

*As the dancers travel from one point to another their elbows seem to speak volumes of the type of dancer performing and the contribution that the dancer makes to the collective quilt of narrative and movement in which all present invest. Some elbows move elegantly, slowly brushing back and forth, accentuating brash steps that mark the earth with intention, embedding long blurred footsteps as marks of passage. Other elbows jerk with evident force, evincing barely contained strength and framing marching steps that seem to close like vices upon the dirt, as if daring the ground to unbuckle or topple the unyielding dancer. Yet other pairs of elbows move nonchalantly complementing calm shuffling steps that caress, rather than challenge, the dust over which the dancers state and restate, iterate and reiterate, remember and retrace, both through microcosm and metonymy the treks, paths, and migrations known by the feet of their ancestors and witnessed by the landscape upon and into which they re-inscribe these memories. Even these swinging elbows trace lines across the space and in the air of Sofivi’s courtyard as an accumulative declaration of departure, arrival, residence, and endurance.*

Through possession dances, Ewe performers construct personal and collective identities in conversation with local and global systems of oppression and exploitation. Transfers of embodied knowledge within these communities work through doubling, replication and proliferation rather than a direct “substitution” (Taylor 2003: 49; Roach 1996: 4-6). The enigma

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<sup>85</sup> I use Sara Ahmed’s theory of “histories of arrival” here to indicate the cumulative labor, strategies, and migrations required for an object, individual, or community to arrive a certain point in time and space (2006: 41-44).

of the figure of Mama Tchamba exemplifies such multiplicity. Tchamba spirits cannot be clearly or completely defined since they exist as part of a broad and ever-expanding pantheon, and because worshippers continue to remake them. Through these modes of cultural production, Ewe communities use specific gestures to inscribe sacred places.



Figure 7. Inscribing the dance space in a Tchamba ritual. Tsévié, Togo 2015.

Performers create “spectral,” or invisible and overlaid, geographies fabricated through practice. Much like the culturally innovative processes of visionary experiences that religious studies scholar Lee Irwin theorizes as an *epistémé* and outlines as pivotal, culturally-constructed ways of knowing and understanding the world. I use the term “spectral geographies” to account for reconstituted spaces of ritual power that reference distant locations, like the reconfiguration

of idealized images of northern Togo found in Tchamba worship.<sup>86</sup> These ritual topographies are layered upon domestic spaces and places set aside for ritual choreographies as a means of spatially connecting past encounters to present difficulties. In such cases, performers use their bodies to map sites of enslavement onto familiar landscapes. Through these landscapes, traced and defined through ritual and performance, practitioners reject hegemonic systems of mapping and classification by redefining outdoor dance spaces. Performers share knowledge about the interconnectedness of geography with the patterns and memories portrayed through sacred gestures. Since histories of enslavement explored in Tchamba rituals relate directly to domesticity, family histories, and trade routes, dances honoring the pantheon reinterpret spaces and seek to transform environments.

By engaging in choreographies honoring slave spirits, Ewe *Vodun* practitioners present their bodies as sites of memory through which they personalize histories of the slave trade as narratives about family. As in Pierre Nora's definition of the term "lieux de mémoire," or sites of memory, these dancing bodies perpetuate and reconstitute memories as a consolidated heritage to "block the work of forgetting" (1989: 11-12, 19). In *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History*, Africanists Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts demonstrate that "the ultimate container for holding memories is the body itself, the vehicle through which intimate relationship between memory and place is realized" (1996: 41). Tchamba dances create a landscape that allows practitioners to express ideas that Ewe communities would otherwise suppress for fear of stigma and the repercussions of debts of remembrance owed to the spirits of previously enslaved persons.

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<sup>86</sup> Judy Rosenthal (1998) and Dana Rush (2013) both discuss the ways that Tchamba practitioners constantly mention and revise understandings of a "North" in relation to gender, class, and wealth. This North is often grounded not in personal experiences of physical travel, but in understanding gained through ritual interpretation (Rosenthal 1998: 100-110; Rush 2013: 114-115, 120-124).

Communities often debate and reconstitute the relationships and continuities that coalesce into histories during various performances of memory. They link such memories to bodies and objects as mnemonics that hint at the implications and complexities of narratives of the past.<sup>87</sup> Practitioners described the importance of the “braided metal rings” of Tchamba, the Tchambagan. They described these as ways that performers remembered that their families held enslaved persons. These Tchambagan also help people to fall into trance so that they do not anger or offend Tchamba who’s “strength to heal is as great as her strength to kill” (Personal Communication Nov 29, 2017; Rush 2013: 116-119). In an example of the way Tchamba spirits roam the landscape to punish those who do not remember them, Sofivi mentioned that: “if your ancestors adored Tchamba and you do not, sooner or later, Mama Tchamba will make you sick. No matter where you go....you will not be healed....[She] will apprehend you” (Personal Communication Nov 29, 2017). By engaging in choreographies honoring slave spirits, Ewe Vodun practitioners personalize histories of the slave trade. By moving repeatedly across the dance space, they literally retrace their own steps and those of their fellow dancers while paying homage to the histories of their ancestors. Through repetitive polyrhythmic movements and choreographic patterns, performers frame illness and poverty as conditions brought about through debts of remembrance owed to enslaved ancestors. The dance becomes a space of imbrication and transformation, an ecstatic moment into which the dancers move in order to step away from one place and push into the choreographic reality of another, and the possibilities presented by such embellished perambulations. By linking the story of an enslaved person in the Americas as the meaning of the distinctive steps of Tchamba, Sofivi demonstrates the “eternal potential” (Rush 1999: 61) for narrative invention within Vodun repertoires.

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<sup>87</sup> Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts examine such memory performances of mnemonic sacred objects in Luba culture (1996: 126-136, 127).

Through the endless association of specific types of narratives to gestures and Tchamba rhythms, devotees use movements as mnemonic devices so that each new performance can encompass different meanings to accompany new situations, from fears and familial debts, to triumph and power funneled from elsewhere.<sup>88</sup> The places where people dance can then be connected to “the Americas,” to the “North,” and to past and present knowledge of the town of Tchamba. Practitioners effect such connections by drawing “othered” spirits into sacred places and by defining contemporary menaces to their communities, whether political, ethical, medical, or economic. By performing memories in multivalent ways that link certain types of recollection to generalizable landscapes, practitioners “actively conjoin” (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 41; Casey 1987) place and memory through lived experience.

### **Intersubjective Ritual Choreographies in Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*:**

Caribbean American novelist Paule Marshall also demonstrates this interplay between landscape, memory, and ritual choreographies in her novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). Marshall, who was born in 1929 in Brooklyn to immigrants from Barbados, positions choreography as a means of participating in intersubjective relationships with ancestors and strangers. Marshall’s protagonist Avey Johnson is a middle-aged widow alienated from her family history on rural Tatem Island in South Carolina through internalized notions of respectability. Prioritizing intersubjectivity—defined here as the intersection between individual and collective experience, or the ability of individuals to see others as parts of the self—Marshall presents the moment when Avey joins the Carriacou dances as an experience of spirit possession. Avey's given name, Avatara, with the root word “avatar,” indicates her capacity to embody her

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<sup>88</sup> In their multivalence and connections to notions of embodiment these performances are reminiscent of interpretations of *lukasa* memory boards by Luba peoples (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 37-38).

ancestors through spirit possession and to display what she sees as the “essence” of their narratives through movement as a type of vessel (Busia 1991: 210).<sup>89</sup> Her unusual name betokens her willingness to invite “the Spirit” through dance (Marshall 1983: 251).

Through choreographies that collapse the barriers between the self and others and between various time periods and locations, communities like the Carriacou islanders and Ewe Vodun practitioners question the importance of the self and Western conceptions of individuality. Literary scholar Ashraf Rushdy presents spirit possession as a basis for intersubjectivity and cultural exchange since African spirits who possess their worshippers (called loa, Vodun, or orisha at different sites across the Afro-Atlantic), are concerned with the community at large and serve to link individuals to particular communities. The loss of the distinction between self and other experienced in the midst of possession leads to a sense of collective identity and demonstrates how what Rushdy terms Neo-HooDoo aesthetics (Sirmans: 2008). Such expression involves syncretic, Vodun-based practices that prioritize the importance of spirit possession and writings that are bound to the writer’s body, so that the possessed person can be at one with the community and facilitate genuine interpersonal exchange across cultural divides. As such, Neo-HooDoo stories represent communities rather than an individual (Rushdy 1994: 129, 131). In *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, Rushdy further argues that the writers of the antebellum slave narratives, especially Fredrick Douglass, evinced suspicion of solipsistic individualism, preferring intersubjective

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<sup>89</sup> The word “Avatar” comes from the Sanskrit word Avatara meaning “descent” and, in Hinduism indicates the incarnation of a deity in human form to maintain cosmic order (*dharma*) and accomplish important tasks (Rigopoulos 1998: 42).



representations of the self so that their tales could give voice to communities rather than individuals through illustrative versions of experiences of enslavement (Rushdy 1994: 130).<sup>90</sup>

In contrast to Douglass, Marshall locates the power of intersubjectivity within dance practice and the body, rather than in the writing of one's own narrative. Avey illustrates the Vodun aesthetic of integration rather than separation and classification as she adds her knowledge of the Ring Shout—a dance performed by elderly, Southern, African American churchgoers—to her understanding of the Caribbean Carriacou Tramp.<sup>91</sup> Marshall suggests that Avey's friend Lebert Joseph, behaving like the trickster *Papa Legba*, opens up the barriers of her body to accept the deities resting dormant within her: Oya, of wind and rain, Yemoja, of rivers and seas, and Erzulie the adorned (Marshall 1983: 148, 127).<sup>92</sup> Both Marshall's text and Tchamba performers present techniques through which intersubjectivity serves as a means of constructing territories of memories and mapping internalized mnemonic geographies of enslavement. As in our discussions of intersubjectivity in the previous chapter, communities adapt such structures to foster collectivity, which Avey experiences within the dance; she feels “the threads streaming out from the old people around her in Lebert Joseph's yard [as]...she

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<sup>90</sup> In his slave narrative, Douglass calls his enslaved brethren “a society of fellow slaves” and further describes himself as linked and interlinked with others who have suffered enslavement, asserting that “we [the enslaved] never moved separately. We were one” (Douglass 1845: 56, 105, 144, 115).

<sup>91</sup> Robert Farris Thompson discusses the links between the Ring Shout and the cosmology of Kongo peoples from Central Africa. He argues that the Ring Shout, a foot shuffling dance practiced by African Americans in the Southern United States, is closely linked to the Kongo cosmogram. He describes “the Kongo lines of Afro-Cuba and the Ring Shout of the Deep South Old Time Religion” as altars in motion, which enact the circle of the cosmogram by tracing it on the ground with their feet (1993: 56). These dances and objects, including the diamond shaped limbs of the *kota* figure, express the movement of the soul across boundaries and present the transgressive capabilities of the body to defy the limits of both time and space (as understood through Western empiricism) through the power of the altar (1993: 26).

<sup>92</sup> Eshu Elegbara, or Legba, is an *orisha*, or spirit, known as a trickster with the force to bring transformation (Thompson 1983: 18-20). Oya and Yemoja are Yoruba water deities with links to Mami Wata (72-78, 84, Erzulie is known to love luxury, sweetness, flirtation, and pretty items like mirrors and crowns (Cosentino 1995: 240; Mama Lola and Karen McCarthy Brown 1995: 229).

used to feel them streaming out of everyone...to enter her, making her part of what seemed a far-reaching, wide-ranging confraternity” (Marshall 1983: 249). In this moment, Avey represents her own community while also constructing an integrated history for herself that has room for her many, previously fractured, identities.

Marshall emphasizes the importance of movements restrained between dancing and walking when Avey launches into her own version of the “nation dance” and “her feet held to the restrained glide-and-stamp, the rhythmic trudge, the Carriacou Tramp, the Shuffle designed to stay the course of history” (Marshall 1983: 250). Stylized walking arises again during the slave narrative that Marshall tucks into the flow of Avey’s story. Marshall presents the story of Ibo Landing as a reflection of how the slave trade touched lives of Avey’s ancestors and left a mark and a name upon the landscape of the riverside. Marshall mediates this narrative through the voices of generations of black women who relate how, upon arrival in the Americas, enslaved Ibos returned to Africa across the water:

they just kept on walking right on over the river. Now you wouldn’t of thought they’d of got very far seeing as it was water they was walking on. Besides they had all that iron on ‘em. Iron on they ankles and they wrists and fastened ‘round they necks like a dog collar. ‘Nuff iron to sink an army....When they realized there wasn’t nothing between them and home but some water and that wasn’t giving them no trouble....they started in to singing (Marshall 1983: 39).

Marshall emphasizes the emancipatory instrumentality of redefining mobility and access in terms of narratives like that of Ibo Landing where the river was crossed through the defiance of Western empirical conceptions of space and embodied experiences.

Marshall demonstrates the importance of structured improvisation to these processes when Avey participates in the transhistorical “tramping” movements of the Carriacou islanders. Avey’s concern with remaining true to the structure of the movements of the dance reveals Marshall’s prioritization of embodiment as a mnemonic tool and as a technique for participating

in intersubjective identities. The novel elaborates ways that performers use “in-body techniques” and “moment-to-moment maneuvering” (M. T. Drewal 1993: 7) to remember enslavement and dispersal by connecting narratives to places. At the “nation dance,” Avey enters the unfamiliar movements of the dance as if

“her feet of their own accord had discovered the old steps, her hips under the linen shirtdress slowly began to weave from side to side on their own, stiffly at first and then in a smooth wide arc as her body responded more deeply to the music. And the movement in her hips flowed upward, so that her entire torso was soon swaying. Arms bent, she began working her shoulders in the way the Shouters long ago used to, thrusting them forward and then back in a strong casting-off motion....Not once did the soles of her feet leave the ground” (Marshall 1983: 249, 250).

She connects the understated movements of her feet to the movements of her grandmother and her grandmother’s peers within the Ring Shout dance even as she feels herself bound to those around her performing the “nation” dances. She performs within the parameters of the dance, submitting to the authority of the community in order to enforce and promote social cohesion and collective remembering.<sup>93</sup>

Marshall revisits the theme of walking as transnational and transhistorical movement as Avey moves in ways that she denounces as dancing. Her movements are rendered more efficacious by “the restraint and understatement in the dancing, which was not even really dancing” (Marshall 1983: 240) but choreographed walking. In the case and the story of the Ibos as well, they do not dance but walk, accompanied by the sound of their own singing. They sing and walk all the way across the river. This brand of transnational walking, that can take a group of Ibos from the Southern U.S. back “home” to Nigeria, defies empiricism. As Avey performs

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<sup>93</sup> Robert Farris Thompson discusses the tendency to social critique of comportment in African cultures as a form of social regulation (1974: 2).

and observes the Carriacou tramp, she repeatedly studies the movements of the feet.<sup>94</sup> Marshall emphasizes walking that can cross temporal and physical barriers throughout the novel, from Cuny's "dead husband's old brogans that, on her feet, turned into seven-league boots" (Marshall 1983: 33), to the movements of the Carriacou tramp that Avey experiences as "a stride designed to cover an entire continent in a day" (ibid: 242).<sup>95</sup> By performing movements that keep her feet upon the ground and her legs uncrossed, Avey recalls the importance of the structures of steps meant to anchor black bodies to the ground—"even when the Spirit took hold and their souls and writhing bodies seemed about to soar off into the night, their feet remained planted firm. *I shall not be moved*" (Marshall 1983: 34)—as they engrave their stories upon physical and ephemeral landscapes.<sup>96</sup> Through Avey's participation in ritual choreographies, Marshall demonstrates how knowledge constructed through collective practices of this kind overflow geographical boundaries.

Within the novel, Avey connects multiple seemingly unrelated geographies, time periods, and persons through performance. Marshall illustrates how ritual mapping can serve as a technique for creating "spectral geographies," spaces of ritual power and protest that practitioners inscribe upon familiar locations to connect multiple histories to current difficulties. Within such spectral geographies, histories can be remapped in new places, just as Avey remaps her ancestors' narratives onto Carriacou Island. In such cases, stylized walking works as a type

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<sup>94</sup> She remarks upon the "rhythmic trudge that couldn't be called dancing, yet at the same time was something more than merely walking" (Marshall 1983: 246).

<sup>95</sup> Charles Perrault's fairytale "Hop-o'-My-Thumb" ("Le Petit Poucet"), "seven league boots" (les bottes de sept lieus) allow the wearer to walk seven leagues (the distance walked by an average man in seven hours) per step.

<sup>96</sup> Robert Farris Thompson emphasizes the importance of grounded and flat-footed dancing as a display of personal emotional balance (1974: 24, 26).

of inscription so that choreographies serve to label geographies and temporalities even as they tie such temporalities to the present. Marshall builds Avey's story upon journeys and upon walking to bind her narratives to those of enslaved Africans who reframed their steps in order to create paths across unfamiliar geographies and as means of adapting to and inhabiting to new cultural landscapes.<sup>97</sup>

Though dances like Avey's Carriacou tramp and those performed in Mama Tchamba rituals often do not have a formal historical project in mind, the movements performed by Avatara and the Carriacou islanders seek to preserve only the most essential elements of their stories. As they build these danced histories, they focus not on the positivist details of historical narratives but upon the tone and the overarching themes, retaining visual, choreographic and ritual elements meant to portray the core elements of cultural exchange and collective transformation that they judge as essential to retelling their migration narratives. These evocative mnemonics can be tied to current systems of exchange, trade, and personal identities. Avey soon recognizes that the dance was

the essence of something rather than the thing itself she was witnessing. Those present—the old ones—understood this. All that was left were a few names of what they called nations which they could no longer even pronounce properly, the fragments....the shadowy forms of long-ago dances....the bare bones. The burnt out ends....Thoughts—new thoughts—vague and half-formed slowly beginning to fill the emptiness (Marshall 1983: 240).

Communities, like Marshall's fictional Carriacou performers and Ewe Tchamba dancers, recover

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<sup>97</sup> Marshall includes an epigram from 1962 poem "Runagate Runagate" at the beginning of the novel. This epigram hints at how Marshall uses themes of walking and tramping as techniques of mapping in ways that connect to the Underground Railroad. The poem begins with the lines "Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness" (Hayden 1962: ln 1) but continues with Marshall's chosen excerpt "and the night cold and the night long and the river/to cross" (Hayden 1962: lns 4-5) which both hearkens back to and frames Avey's story in terms of Ibo Landing where the river was crossed in a way that defies Enlightenment rationality. Systems of symbolic mapping, including patchwork quilts, that made connections between places and collapsed distances were also important forms of coded communication between enslaved people seeking liberty (Tobin and Dobard 1999: 91-93).

and present such “bare bones” histories as ever-present transcripts for the present, since the traces of such narratives linger in modern social relations. Communities continue to extend such histories through continued contributions, rather than fixing and arresting them.

Though perhaps unusual to compare a novel written by an American author with dance practices taking place in Togo, in this section, I have emphasized how Marshall consistently illustrates themes of remembrance of enslavement that deepen our understanding of Tchamba performances. Marshall represents Avatara’s performance of the “nation” dance as a type of spirit possession, in which her ancestors Avatara and great-aunt Cuny incarnate. She remembers the story of the stylized walking of the Ibo’s even as she performs her own steps. As a result, she connects Tatum and Carriacou as a means of healing herself from the sickness of self-loathing. Finally, Avey grasps that the dances performed contain only that which is necessary to inspire new narratives and “new thoughts...slowly beginning to fill the emptiness” (Marshall 1983: 240), and she determines to share her narratives with younger generations. Despite the opposing, divergent cultural and historical context, through the logic of what Dana Rush calls “Vodunland” and J. Lorand Matory calls “simultaneous inhabitan[ce in] *multiple* nations” (2009: 233), the textual dances Marshall presents reflect many of the realities that Tchamba performers execute in the flesh.

### **Narrative and Place Beyond Text in Tchamba Dances:**

In contrast to Marshall’s text, Tchamba dances reconfigure specific spaces in the moment and emphasize public negotiation by mapping the narrative threads of bought people visually, spatially, and linguistically through practices that evoke certain oral histories passed down within

families. Furthermore, these dances give visual and material form to stories that Ewe people rarely share publicly. Ewe danced narratives of the slave trade constitute a genre meant to allow practitioners to experience and share memories of the slave trade spatially as well as discursively. Ewe danced slave narratives also resolve some of the internal tensions of the written antebellum slave narrative and contemporary neo-slave narratives by not necessitating that enslaved and colonized subjects express themselves through written or spoken European languages or Western forms of documentation and categorization. In Tchamba rituals, performers arrange and occupy space in ways that translate familiar landscapes and choreographies into mnemonics for past events and experiences. Yet, Marshall's presentation of Avey's dances reminds us that processes of structured improvisation, intersubjectivity, and the conjoining of disparate places have salience in the Black Atlantic as well as amongst Tchamba performers in Togo. Marshall suggests that ritual choreographies not only produce memories but also serve as a means of experiencing and redefining narratives. Choreographic "bare bones" and "burnt out ends," left intentionally incomplete, allow for additional agglomeration of narratives and ideas like the inclusion of Avey's version of the "nation" dance (Marshall 1983: 247-249).

*One dancer shifted her weight in preparation, her movements easy and almost distracted as she waited for the music. She launched into the dance, taking purposeful steps away from the drummers. Her arms waved as her heels and flexed feet propelled her forward and then backward as she traced an oscillating route across the courtyard. When she reached a dancing pair she released both arms out as a type of punctuation and stepped casually between the dancers to return to her seat on the bench with a group of other women. As she took her seat, the pair of dancers, dancing in place until that moment, begin to move forward. Once the two arrived at the spot where the previous dancer loitered, they also cross and re-cross the spot,*

*moving forward and backward twice, as if deepening the impressions of their feet into the dust, before turning to retrace their steps.*

Communities describe the meanings of the movements of Tchamba dances as intentionally open-ended and adaptable. As they trace paths across the space of the dance, they make way for the spirits to move between multiple sites through the vehicles of the bodies of devoted practitioners. Steps traversing the space of the dance create a sense of personalized place within the dance. Such movements carve out a place where they can simultaneously evoke many different impressions and versions of difficult narratives. The movements resist an over-arching interpretation while producing multiple possibilities for portraying elements of the purchase of bought persons. The paths taken within Mama Tchamba dances can, like migration, “be described as a process of disorientation and reorientation: as bodies ‘move away’ as well as ‘arrive,’ as they re-inhabit spaces” (Ahmed 2006: 9). The paths traced across the space, the arcs bodies make in the air, and the signature gestures made at the conclusion of each pass of a dance combat sickness and destitution and reestablish financial success through the healing of exploitative relationships. Through repeated gestures, as well as spatial arrangements of bodies and sacred objects, Ewe choreographers create spectral geographies through which they recollect past migrations. They temporarily and repetitively overlay spectral realities upon situations, property, and people. They perform “repetition with revision, . . . repetition that signals difference” (M. T. Drewal 1993: 4), a form of perpetual revision that Henry Louis Gates Jr might call “signifyin(g)” (1988: xxiv, 63-65). Like the Carriacou Tramp represented in Marshall’s novel, Tchamba ritual choreographies serve as epistemological frameworks that enact and reform histories in the midst of producing them as tools for collective communication. These practices propose new possibilities for knowledge within a community. Tchamba performances are an



apparatus for sharing

complex culturally conditioned and learned [ways of organizing] thought[s], perception[s] and action[s] shared within a particular community of people and sanctioned through symbols, images, objects, behavioral norms, and recogniz[able] modes of social discourse and interaction (Irwin 1994: 19).

These dances often map paths through which participants personalize and internalize relevant histories by capturing the tone of such narratives. Tchamba dances afford multiple interpretations and evoke a variety of learned and adapted narratives by which practitioners understand through ritual and transmit historical knowledge to young people through dance.

### **Intergenerational Transmission:**

Mama Tchamba dances form part of an ongoing repertoire of movements that represent effective adaptations of traditional forms. Memories and histories differ based on the ways that communities internalize and embody these pasts since memories form the building blocks through which individuals and social groups produce histories. In "Performing Memory: Between Individual and Collective Forms of Constructing the Past," Aleida Assmann argues that communities must re-embodiment, or otherwise perform memories since, without tangible, embodied forms, these histories fade from memory and living knowledge. She indicates that cultural memories are mediated and must be re-embodied, must take on new forms, in order to have meaning to new generations and to outsiders (2010: 42). These movements perpetuate stories and philosophies that Ewe communities hold as vital for shared remembering. Such performances, or what Paul Connerton calls "acts of transfer," make remembering in common possible (1989: 39). Rather than being "sedimented" (ibid: 59) in the body, performers work together during acts of transfer to create and sustain memories through action and exchanges as a part of communities of practice. Dancers train their bodies to remember the narratives that the gestures invoke and

participate in processes of interpretation through which they reinvent family narratives with each performance.

Experienced Tchamba performers also use their bodies to activate sites and convey difficult histories to young initiates and uninitiated alike through various realms of experience. In *Vodun* rituals, past and present narratives are layered to construct new interpretations of the past that build upon and reframe past narratives. Many competing versions of historical events accumulate, displace one another, overlap and merge depending on the social usefulness of various versions of histories. These debates—often taking place in Ewe contexts in the form of ritual performances—are the fertile ground upon which groups produce historical narratives and adapt historical imaginaries. These movements reveal the bare bones of historical narratives in the moment of creation, reinterpretation, and debate. During Mamissi Sofivi's ritual for Mama Tchamba, the young uninitiated girls joined the dancing from the slightly removed refuge of the porch as the adult dancers occupied the courtyard dancing toward and away from the drummers.

*Sofivi's courtyard was abustle with the movements of dancers, singers, instrumentalists, and onlookers. Eva, a young girl of nine who danced with sophisticated grace, and Sophie, a little jokester of seven often in trouble for getting the dances wrong, or not taking them seriously enough for the sensibilities of her instructors and elders, stood side by side across the porch from me. I watched them avidly, hoping to internalize the steps before my turn to dance. The drummer stood on the porch, other participants, including myself, sat on either side of the porch on wooden benches. Many sang out or played small percussion sticks as they watched the two young girls traverse the space. There was a jauntiness to the steps of both girls as the shifting of their shoulders and elbows were echoed in the movements of their hips. Their bodies bent far over as they inched their feet slowly forward. Eva's hands hung below her knees, her head*

*cocked as if in grief, pain, or exhaustion. Her feet shot forward as her legs straightened at intervals. When her feet left the ground she carefully flexed them, showing the whole sole of her foot. The girls' feet never moved far from each other as they sustained a rhythmic shuffled forward on alternating feet that seemed linked together by invisible threads. Though they made their way forward, the two girls occasionally shuffled backward or remained in place, reducing the size of their stylized steps if savoring the feel of the ground under their feet or memorizing or revisiting specific spots along the path of the dancing. Their arms continued to wave across their bodies like the limbs of marionettes as the movements of both arms and legs wove between the rhythm as if evading the downbeats. At times they appeared to dance to music that I could not hear, or perhaps as if their bodies: feet, hands, knees, elbows, and arms, make their own whispering music as they wind their way toward me, a melody that hid beneath the rhythms of Tchamba. Their heels slapped down in dialogue with the sounds of the percussion sticks and the hollow jarring clang of a rusty metal barrel.*

Through whispering gestures and familiar rhythms, young, uninitiated girls learn the movements through which practitioners invite Tchamba spirits to join the celebrations of the living. Through the symbolism of stylized walking and by implying ties to northern regions through adornment, ritual choreographies provide a path into histories of enslavement and entice observers and performers to learn more. Yet, by participating in such performances, these young performers also add the motion of their bodies, their foibles, missteps, personalities, and individual heritage to the histories being woven within dances honoring the spirits of ancestors purchased as bought persons and transported from homes and villages in northern Togo to the foreign coastlands bringing their own religious practices and familial spirits and ancestors. Even as learners and participants in the processes of transmission, the youngest members of the

association—the uninitiated young girls—actually co-produce histories about their communities and encounters with outsiders.

While attending Mamissi Sofivi’s Tchamba ritual, Mamissi Sofivi invited me to join the dances along with some of the young girls:

*My feet pounded out an insistent shuffling triple step next to five young girls. Though we all danced with elbows akimbo and forearms crossing in front of our bodies, each of us danced in our own style. Some moved their arms as if gently waving a skirt in front of their legs, others as if rhythmically brushing something from their thighs. I labored to keep time, my heels hitching on shallow depressions, as my feet moved over the uneven surface of the porch.*



Figure 8. Dancing Tchamba with Mamissi Sofivi. Tsévié, Togo, 2015.

As I perform Tchamba, I dance and stumble toward my own understandings of the paths through which Ewe religious practices forge connections between histories of enslavement and present realities. As an uninitiated and inexperienced performer of Ewe ritual choreographies, Tchamba dances often inspired more questions than answers (e.g. Might the inclusion of a rusty barrel amongst the musical instruments for Mama Tchamba suggest the jangling of iron chains?). Training and igniting my awareness of sound, movement, and touch helped me to understand narratives of domestic enslavement gradually through theories presented in dances as well as casual conversations (Stoller 1994: 636). These movements inspire individuals and communities to produce and connect various narratives of enslavement to their own daily challenges.

Choreographies fusing northern spirits with southern worshippers demonstrate that “memory always lies on the border between self and other. The body constitutes the frontier of difference and sameness, a sieve through which historical facts are negotiated through remembrance, obliviscence, and signifying games of representation” (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 41). Such structures promote social harmony and extend its limits. In Tchamba rituals, practitioners ask how the actions of an ancestor are not separate from the actions of their children and how inherited obligations transform the lives of entire families and communities, rather than merely the individual. Ewe Vodun practitioners examine the bonds of violence and exchange between themselves and northerners, as both dominated (historically, as bought persons) and dominating (as powerful spirits who visit illness upon those who do not respect them).

### **Conclusion:**

Through seasonal performances for spirits of previously enslaved ancestors, communities of Vodun practitioners in Eweland mobilize their bodies as epicenters of historical narratives that

they map onto a variety of geographical landscapes. These performers use dance movements and stylized walking as tools for transforming their bodies into territories of familial memories of domestic enslavement. Vodun communities deploy these multiple sites of memory, both embodied and geographical, during Mama Tchamba worship to enact and reinterpret narratives of domestic slavery based on contemporary interactions with Muslim traders from Northern Togo. By evoking memories through performance, these practitioners assert the importance of collective memories of slavery to their contemporary realities while challenging binaries that present West Africans as either victims or villains within histories of the slave trade. These performances expressing narratives of the domestic slave trade through repetitive, accumulative, polyrhythmic movements, welcome the spirits of enslaved ancestors through possession dances and invite the desires, wisdom, and knowledge of the spirits of enslaved Africans to intrude upon the present.

This Ewe Vodun genre of remembering provides interpretive strategies through which African American neo-slave narratives can be re-read and reexamined as texts prioritizing embodied experiences as essential and transformative systems of knowledge. Like the authors of neo-slave narratives, Ewe practitioners force histories of enslavement into view, to urge them into a semblance of tangibility. Mamissi Sofivi and Paule Marshall each present bodies as sites of memory for recovering and deploying difficult and intimate histories. As in Avey's transnational and transhistorical perambulations, Tchamba performers continue to encode memories of the enslaved as "embodied present and memorialized past" (Soneji 2012: 18). Tchamba practitioners reframe narratives of transatlantic enslavement as extensions of their devotions to Northern enslaved persons in ways that provide a window into indigenous West African theories of diaspora and the "modernities" of the Black Atlantic.



Figure 9. Mama Tchamba priestesses dancing toward a line of flaming gunpowder. Tsévié, Togo, 2015.

Through Tchamba performances, practitioners enact what dance studies scholar Davesh Soneji calls “cultural genre[s] of remembering” (2012: 47). By inhabiting histories of enslavement, Tchamba devotees like Sofivi perform narratives coauthored in cooperation with the spirits of enslaved family members. Tchamba practitioners also use ritual choreographies to negotiate the terms of their welcome of blacks from the diaspora into Ewe cultural forms and communities. Through such practices, whether through text or movement, memories of the past become entangled with the bodies of those who choose to remember. Within discussions and rituals addressing the domestic trade in bought people, Ewe practitioners also navigate fears that reprisals by the uneasy spirits of the previously enslaved might manifest as illness and economic downturn. Practitioners use choreography to conjure spectral geographies in the moment of the

dance, re-labeling and redefining physical landscapes through *Vodun* aesthetics that “exit the domain of logical positivism [to] enter the domain in which *Vodun* exists” (Rush 1999: 61). These spectral geographies connect Togo with the Americas and North with South. Upon these places of power, young people imitate and modify the choreographies of their elders as tools for understanding and expressing current social realities and shifts in authority. By performing these movements, dancers train their bodies to remember the narratives that their gestures invoke and participate in processes of interpretation through which they continue to fashion personalized narratives of domestic enslavement. In my next chapter, I investigate how these communities interpret and educate young women as cultural representatives and traditional performers in the face of critiques of Vodun philosophies and practice from educated and Christianized middle and upper class groups.



## Chapter Three: *Traditional Education, Community Building, and Body Politics in Eweland*

### **Introduction:**

Ewe elders and community leaders often view festival dances performed by young women as an aspect of the construction of Ewe ethnic identities that transcend the national borders of Ghana and Togo. However, performances constitute only one of the many types of labor through which elders seek to shape and define the bodies of young women in conformity to Ewe social ideals. The Association Deconu—a group based in Tsévié, Togo that trains young girls in Ewe dances—constructs appropriate women’s bodies through skills including dancing, cooking, correctly speaking Ewe, and dressing in indigenous Ewe fashions. Through such forms of “traditional” education, elders in Ewe communities assess the respectability of young women. Ewe organizations like the Association Deconu and primary schools in Ghana’s Volta Region, produce creditable dancing bodies to participate in festivals.

In this chapter, I consider cultural values and codes embedded in the pedagogical practices through which women and “traditional” institutions produce performances for public festivals. Older community members of both genders describe dance and proper comportment as indications of upstanding citizens. They seek to combat rising rates of position and sexually transmitted diseases by teaching young women to move like and emulate “their grandmothers” (Mamissi Sofivi, Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015). Through training and deciphering the bodies of young women in preparation for festival performances, the impact and significance of the event extend beyond the final product. Yet, young women also turn choreographies taught by their elders to their own ends as means of self-expression and communication.

Though scholars have problematized the term “tradition” as relating African practices to a static past (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xii; Barber 1997: 1; H. J. Drewal 1988: xiv), I use

the term to illustrate ways the “traditionalization” (Hymes 1975: 353-354; Gilman 2012: 33-35) of dance practices continues amongst Ewe people. Communities rhetorically affix the term “traditional” to certain practices as a means of lending them credence and authority (Gilman 2004: 33). Forms designated by locals as traditional often present collective theories of the role and purpose of histories in their daily lives. Within traditional Ewe dances, performers and religious devotees seek to relive and revitalize the past, teach modes of behavior, encourage social cohesion, and integrate foreign influences. Yet, boundaries between “traditional,” “modern,” and “popular” practices are “fluid, permeable, and historically contingent” (Reed 2003: 10). Discussions of “tradition” are further complicated in the case of the Association Deconu because the leaders of the association make highly permeable distinctions between “deconu,” an Ewe word for traditional culture, and Vodun practices that they often also designate as traditional. Since many “traditional” performances have origins in religious practice, efforts to secularize “deconu,” or at least to distance it from Vodun initiation and practices of spirit possession, can yield interpretive challenges for outsiders.

In short, Vodun practices may also be called traditional and included within deconu education but “deconu” is adamantly not Vodun, as I will discuss later in the chapter. The Association Deconu, for example, continues to transmit social norms through a focus on “cultural” practices while ostensibly distancing themselves from Vodun practice due to a climate hostile to Vodun in neighboring Ghana. The association also seeks to move away from the idea that traditional culture is inseparably linked to Vodun. In such cases, traditional associations do not teach girls Vodun altar practices, techniques of spirit possession, or about the construction, assembly, or care of sacred objects. Instead, elders instruct young women but in cultural values and the steps of deconu choreographies. Debates continue about the place indigenous religious

practices should maintain amongst Christian Ewes in Ghana and Togo. In semi-rural communities in both republics, concerns over female sexual, reproductive, and economic independence influence efforts to teach young women about histories and to encourage them to learn to dress and performing ways that display idealized versions of Ewe femininity.

In this chapter, I draw attention to the disciplining of the body and the cultural specificity of sensory awareness to demonstrate how dances serve as a means of citizenship training through which community leaders transmit values and protocols to young women. Many community members view traditional Ewe womanhood as passing away or disappearing. Consequently, traditional dance training often serves as a tool for constructing dancing bodies that educators view as acceptable and as a means of weaving young people into the social fabric of the community. Since anxieties expressed by older community members about the “loss” of tradition often center on women’s bodies, elders read women’s performances in ways that indicate overarching anxieties about the economic and sexual independence of women. To train women able to contribute economically to their communities, both traditional associations in Togo and primary schools in Ghana promote Western-style education. Yet, since many leaders view women as essential to perpetuating Ewe social norms, they promote Western education in conjunction with indigenous values and practices. Evaluation of women’s suitability as cultural representatives occurs through dance training, deconu beauty pageants, and the language that onlookers and educators use when describing women’s festival performances. Community elders and leaders also organize systems of indigenous education in an effort to produce wealth and knowledge for subsequent generations, co-opting women’s performances in the service of collective ethnic, cultural, and religious identities.

Ewe women perform counter-narratives to popular murmurs of the loss and destruction of

traditional Ewe culture in the face of capitalism and Christianity. They influence their communities through bodily practices that function as means of making sense of their identities and engaging in the tensions surrounding their social status. Through creative and practical tasks and performances, women trained in *deconu* comportment and practices build performed histories and influence public discourse on cultural identity and local economies. Through traditionalized movement vocabularies, trained performers materialize their inner worlds and subjectivities through movement as a means of imparting their own priorities and values. Communities transmit these movements and consciousness of the dynamics of these traditional practices by means of long-term apprenticeships with recognized dance masters. These dances not only show the mechanisms through which communities co-opt the personal identities and individual performances of women as representations of ethnic, national, and religious communities, they also reveal the empowerment that can come through dance apprenticeship. The labor involved in choreography, training, performance, and everyday comportment is especially important in cases where older women do not speak a European language or write well in Ewe language since unwritten bodily practices become a primary means of passing information and values on to successive generations (Giard 1998: 153).

Ewe apprenticeships and training practices play into networks of relationships and exchanges often overshadowed in festival performances. Inspired by Priya Srinivasan's "unruly spectator"—a device she uses to signal the accumulation of meaning around the dancing body and the labor involved in such efforts—I structure this chapter from the perspective of a "distracted observer" (2009). The distracted observer recuperates some of the overshadowed work of women to prepare and present festival performances. The "distracted observer" corporeally engages with the dances, dance spaces, and the dancing bodies of women, allowing

different elements of a given performance to branch into various other narratives of the tasks, technologies, and processes through which these women help to produce public festivals. The distracted observer also moves between different temporalities and settings, to make connections between indirectly related events. I use my distraction, a product of my cultural disorientation, to relate the processes through which older men and women train younger women in social comportment and culturally recognizable gestures. I draw upon personal interviews with Association Deconu founder Dela Dzifomor and observation of dance training sessions in Anloga, Ghana and Tsévié, Togo. This chapter collages the many types of work and relationships reverberating within training sessions, festival preparation, and performances by young people rather than prioritizing the “event” of the dance.

Through this technique of the distracted observer I shall also illustrate how ethnographers operate in terms of what sociologist Anthony Giddens calls (1986: 374) “a double hermeneutic,” that is to say, “the intersection of two frames of meaning,” the meaningful social world—as constituted by local specialists, religious practitioners, and artists—and the “metalanguages invented by social scientists.” John McCall argues that ethnographers live the ethnographic experience with the communities with which we engage (2000: 49). I add to McCall's assertions by including my lived experience of moving between multiple frames of reference and the disorientation, and even distraction, that can result from switching among different cultural “vehicles of knowledge” (McCall 2000: 65).

After briefly illustrating the ways that girls use their mastery of traditional dance forms as a means of communicating among themselves and with their elders, I examine the mission of the “Association Deconu” to teach traditional culture to young girls. Next, the chapter addresses how attitudes of Christian groups toward traditional religious practices in Ghana and Togo

contextualize anxieties about the sexual and economic independence of women. Throughout the chapter, my experiences as a trained dancer who remains untrained in Ewe pedagogy stands as counterpoint to the training received by young Ewe girls. In conclusion, I briefly examine how local performances become important forms through which young members of the Association Deconu fashion themselves, even as they are cultivated and shaped by their elders.

### ***Dancing in the Stands 2015, Tsévié, Togo***

The girls had been waiting for over an hour to perform. They drooped, their bodies lazily draped on the concrete stair-step stands of the festival arena in Tsévié. I sat among them watching the cultural “demonstrations” taking place below us. Cultural troupes including drummers, singers, and dancers arranged themselves in wide circles as they moved on the festival grounds. Though the successive performances of other groups persisted, the girls had not received their call to perform from the Master of Ceremonies. The audience was sparse, mostly a few chaperones for the girls of the association. Mamissi Sofivi—leader, trainer, and mentor to this gaggle of girls—relaxed in a plastic chair at the front of the stands wearing her traditional finery. The girls were also dressed in their best festival attire: bright wrap dresses, chalk-designed shoulders and forelegs with beads encircling arms, legs, and necks as they waited to descend to the festival grounds to represent their families, their community, and their cultural histories.

When the adult cultural group performing on the festival grounds below began to play a different song familiar to all the girls, one of them jumped up in excitement. “We know this song!” she laughed, accompanying the traditional agbadza rhythm with exaggerated movements as if taunting her friends. Another girl, of about eight, took up the challenge implied by the

movements of the first and rose to begin combining agbadza movements with celebratory fist pumps and humorous gestures of her own devising. As a group, the other girls rose in the stands and began performing their own versions and variations of the movements to entertain themselves and demonstrate their mastery to their companions.



Figure 10. Girls of the Association Deconu add their own flair to agbadza movements. Tsévié, Togo, 2015.

Hearing the commotion, Sofivi turned in her seat. Upon seeing the variations of movement and playful attitude amongst the girls happily mis-performing, re-designing, and exaggerating the steps of a quintessentially Ewe festival dance, she rolled her eyes and turned her

attention back to the official performances below. The girls only danced harder, drawing their elbows to their sides and then fanning them back out as if flapping folded wings. When the song ended, Sofivi shouted up to them that they would not have an opportunity to perform on that day and the girls began to climb down the stands laughing and chattering as they headed out of the festival arena.

This stolen instant of self-fashioning in the midst of an official event of the programming for Ayiza, the bean harvest festival in Tsévié, demonstrates how women repurpose the traditional movements that they internalize. Though these traditional forms draw women into larger debates about religious ideologies, sexual and economic independence, and national and ethnic identities, women, and girls, still manage to create spaces for themselves to adapt these traditional forms to their own needs and preferences. They use their knowledge of these forms to communicate their own perspectives to their elders. Even when they were not called upon to represent their community through quintessential movements, the girls performed these steps, in combination with their own additions, to stave off boredom. On their own terms and to their own ends, they simultaneously protested their sidelining in the programming of festival performances and participated in the official narratives unfolding below them. Though groups like the Association Deconu seek to produce acceptable representatives of collective concerns through specialized training, such training also becomes a way that young women negotiate their roles within their communities. The ways that communities train Ewe young women performers reveals dichotomies between the prescription of gendered identities drawn from bodily disciplines that represent ideals of Ewe femininity and the performances of women making space for themselves within traditional forms.



### **Constructing Traditional Ewe Womanhood:**

In 2007, a group of elders and community leaders founded the Association Deconu in Tsévié, Togo, with the express purpose of promoting traditional culture amongst young girls in the community. When discussing the Association Deconu, Dzifomor and Mamissi Sofivi placed a great deal of emphasis on girls learning the dances, drumming rhythms, songs, and manner of dress through which many aspects of Ewe histories and culture persist. Members of the Association train girls between the ages of eight and twenty-one, many of whom are the children and grandchildren of the elders who lead the association. The group combats cultural shifts, like the efforts of highly educated Ghanaian and Togolese Ewes to discourage adherence to indigenous pedagogies. With dance as a focal point, leaders in the Association Deconu teach young people moral obligations through showing them correct ways to remember their histories and that every aspect of daily life, from dancing to dressing and cooking, should be done according to collectively determined standards.

The Association Deconu works to train young people about the culture and history of the town of Tsévié and Ewe heritage through the arts. The leaders of the Association, including Mamissi Sofivi Dansso and Mr. Dela Dzifomor, restore practices that they view as in decline by providing access to training and apprenticeships. These young people, primarily girls and a few young boys, learn deconu practices, including performing wearing indigenous fashions and adornments, as forms of communication. These systems of arranging and adorning the body become ways of understanding one's position in the world and one's place in relation to other generations. The processes of training and teaching lead to exchanges between different generations that foster better understandings of the past. Though Western empiricism, philosophies, and practices overlap with indigenous cosmologies and knowledge, the students

are often forced to navigate between different ways, or modes, of knowing. Exchanges with their elders during apprenticeships often help young people, who may find themselves caught between the worlds of Western education and indigenous cultural forms and practices, to understand themselves in relation to their communities.

Though the Association has rhetorically distanced itself from traditional religion to perpetuate cultural forms rather than religious devotion, disentangling religious aspects and philosophies from most important tasks within the community is often a merely cosmetic change. The older members of the Association Deconu are often heavily involved in Vodun practices. Mamissi Sofivi, for example, presides over the Association Deconu while continuing to lead another Vodun association, which includes a number of married priestesses and initiates (Personal Communication June 20, 2015). In keeping with historian Robert Baum's statement about Diaola religion in precolonial Senegambia, Ewe Vodun communities regard indigenous religion as "a continually changing body of customs, rituals, practices and thought that touches on all aspects of community life....that provides means to influence events [and]....a sense of linkage to one's community in the present" (Baum 1999: 37). Due to the ways that Vodun philosophies permeate social life, concepts drawn from indigenous religious practice influence the pedagogical practices of the Association. Since education, preparing meals, walking, dancing and dressing all have aspects tied to understandings drawn from Vodun practice, Association members continue to teach girls dances and drumming rhythms for certain spirits even while resisting the integration of the young women into the secret knowledge of local Vodun associations. Despite rhetorical distinctions made between "deconu" and "Vodun," the association seeks to transform young people into appropriate participants in community events through the acquisition of specialized knowledge and training in performances originally

designed to represent the character of specific Vodunwo. The rituals through which the Association Deconu trains young women frame the various types of participation and pedagogical practice used to teach social comportment through sacred idioms.

***Mami Wata Ritual 2013, Tsévié, Togo***

During a training ritual held by the Association Deconu to welcome Mami Wata and train the young members of the group, three long wooden benches were arranged like the three sides of an open rectangle in a small clearing carpeted with fine red dirt under the shade of many large trees. The observers and performers assembled in “the bush” of many large baobab trees and farmed fields crowded together. As a procession, drummers, priests and priestesses, young dancers and onlookers including myself, my research assistant, Richard, and his father, all walked out of town and away from houses, churches, and shops. Once we arrived at a clearing amongst the trees, Mamissi Sofivi began a prayer at the altars set in three large baobab trees surrounding the space. Each round altar was composed of large earthenware vessels and white and red strips of cloth bound around the immense trees. Sofivi wore an aquamarine wrap that left her shoulders bare, her waist was tied with one white scarf and her head another. She had adorned herself in many heavy beaded necklaces, armbands, and bracelets displaying her allegiance to Hebieso (thunder), Ajakpa (crocodile), Mami Sika (Golden Mami), and Mammy Da (serpent). Her beads attested to her prestige and knowledge of the spirits and displayed her mastery much like the medals and stripes on an army sergeant’s uniform. She spoke out in prayer to invite the water spirits into the clearing where the dancing would soon begin, asking permission to begin performing. Before the procession could even enter the space of the clearing, Sofivi performed a ritual of opening and preparation. As we all watched—the girls, myself, other

observers, and the two priestesses at Mamissi Sofivi's elbow to assist her—Sofivi poured libations: first water mixed with white talcum powder and then fire hot gin. After her prayer and libation, Dodzi, a local priest (*trosi or vodusi*), moved forward and poured black gunpowder on the ground. Once the powder was lit by a match it drew a quick line of fading flame across the space. Mamissi Sofivi stepped over this threshold of fire and smoke to lead us to the clearing where the dancing would take place.

The young girls between the ages of eleven and about sixteen sat demurely arrayed on two long benches. They watched as the drummers readied themselves and adjusted their instruments. With their wrists and ankles crossed, each of them was the picture of Ewe feminine propriety. They wore bright African prints and bedecked in beads, their hair was cut close to their heads, and their skin gleamed against the white clay that they used to decorate their shoulders, backs, and lower legs with intricate designs.<sup>98</sup> Soon four of the smallest girls rose and prepared to dance *agbadza*, a dance to call and open the way for encounters with the spirits in many Ewe ceremonies and that features prominently in Ewe festivals. The little dancers' shoulders rolled to the music, they pulled the elbows of both bent arms out and away from their bodies. The whole effect was of a full-body generated unfurling of their upper arms while their lower arms stayed close to their bodies. They pulled back their shoulders and arched their backs over bent knees, carrying the ripples of the movement of their arms through their entire bodies. The motion carried to their legs so that they moved in a rhythmic step that beat time with the drums as they made their way across the clearing. They completed each "pass" of the dance by

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<sup>98</sup> Sofivi later told me the meanings of many of the designs: "These designs are not just decorations. Women in the old days used drawings on their bodies before they performed any important ceremony. These drawings on these girls mean the same thing." She also pointed out interlocking circles that she described as a prayer for protection, mentioning that "this [circle design] asks the spirits to surround and protect us. These little circles that you see on the body are a request for protection from the Vodunwo" (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015).

moving their bent elbows from side to side and then tipping slightly forward as if dropping a heavy load from their arms.

The girls moved in ways meant to evoke past ways of dancing and behaving and dressed in a fashion meant to recall their ancestors. They wore bright cloths tied with scarves around their chests. As I watched the drummers prepare for the next set, Sofivi joked that the next dance could not be performed with Western clothes on because Vodunwo like Hebieso do not like for performers to wear clothes and he would punish them with sickness or feebleness if they disobeyed. During an interview about the training of the young girls in the association, Dzifomor mentioned that the association teaches women to dress appropriately in an effort to promote cultural values: “There are many realms of culture and one is the wearing of our clothes....[T]he ways of dressing are being lost, since it is becoming rarer to see women dressed in the traditional way since they have abandoned that in favor of Western garb” (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015). Though members of the Association Deconu teach young people deconu rather than Vodun, they continue to use rituals like the one I have described for Mami Wata to teach codes of conduct, including ways of adorning and dressing the body.

### **Clothing and Nudity:**

Clothing and nudity continue to play important roles in Ewe ritual systems. The thought distracts me from the movements of the girls dancing in a performance caught within the delicate interplay between the sacred and the secular. Though I initially scoffed at his statement that I would have to go naked on the seashore to learn about Mami Wata performances, Professor Believe’s statements during my interview with him in Ghana hinted at the role of nudity in

Vodun practice.<sup>99</sup> His allusion contained a grain of truth about the ways that devotees worship. In addition to wearing cloths as wrapped dresses during ceremonies, men and women must uncover their torsos to enter certain sacred spaces within shrines—especially during seasons of preparation to welcome the Vodunwo.<sup>100</sup> When I was told—after driving to Aného, Togo, to see a Mami Wata shrine—that women and men must bare their chests to enter, I remained outside of the shrine. Sitting beside the buzzing flies spiraling around the meat sacrifices, I began to understand the ways that dress, nudity, and the style of one’s garments communicate religious devotion, the renunciation of tradition, or the embrace of moral codes governing the bodies of women and men in Vodun communities.

My own experience with the cloth wrap dresses was limited to a few dance-training sessions with the Association Deconu and my attendance at the Reconciliation Ceremony in Anloga. When preparing for Reconciliation Day, or Nugbuidodo, in Anloga, Ghana, in the midst of a project to document the Hogbetsotsoza festival, my host mother warned me that I would not be able to wear Western clothes if I wished to enter the reconciliation grounds to film the event.<sup>101</sup> On the morning of the event, she arrived early with a beautiful length of green and tan African wax print cloth. She wrapped the cloth firmly under my arms and then tied a scarf over the cloth under my armpits and pulled the edge of the wrap dress over the scarf cloth to hide it. She also tied a long scarf around my waist noting that a second scarf was not necessary but that

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<sup>99</sup> Personal Communication Jul 19, 2012

<sup>100</sup> See Joanne Bubolz Eicher (1976) and Elisha Renne (1995) for more on how West Africans wear and use textiles.

<sup>101</sup> Reconciliation Day is an important preliminary festival event at which Ewe chiefs air their grievances and wash them away with a medicinal liquid as a means of bringing reconciliation. I expand upon the importance of this event as a practice of Anlo Ewe political identities in my next chapter.

she was worried that I might not be able to “manage” the garment.<sup>102</sup> She then tied a second matching length of cloth so that it draped over my wrap dress like a toga.

This moment of exchange with my host mother illustrates how women physically balance their social identities through learned habits that eventually become second nature, “managing” clothing so that they are able to walk in a specific way. In *African Art in Motion*, Robert Farris Thompson notes that West African communities can be highly critical of comportment, especially in children who are told by parents that the way they walk signals their station in life (1974: 1). Though Thompson writes about Dan people in Liberia and Akan people in Ghana, Katheryn Geurts observes that Ewe people encourage their children to walk in a balanced way rather than meandering, or walking in a *lugulugu* (“walking as if drunk”) way that indicates wayward character (2002: 51, 75-77). This brief exchange with my host mother highlighted many of these elements of teaching women proper behavior and also emphasized my lack of balance and training in Ewe comportment since I was not expected to have the skills necessary to manage indigenous styles of dress.

Amongst my friends in Togo, this traditional way of wrapping clothes into garments was often referred to as “not wearing clothes” and was an important aspect of many rituals as a sign of purity and respect to spirits. The dress code of such rituals distinguishes them from the everyday experiences of many West Africans, who commonly wear Western-style clothing. A wrapped garment is required to enter the compound of the chief and the reconciliation ground where Nugbuidodo is held. Men also wear wrap garments around their waists and attend the events without shirts, while women, as described above, wrap their wax print cloth as a simple dress. No person wearing trousers, shoes, or Western-style clothing may enter or even approach

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<sup>102</sup> Marion, Personal Communication October 30, 2014

the reconciliation grounds. Those I spoke with on the day informed me that not wearing Western clothes preserves the sacredness of the reconciliation ground and not wearing shoes indicates that each person has pacified their gods.<sup>103</sup> Yet, clothing also indicates different levels of participation and spectatorship within religious rituals and traditional performances.

### **Participant Observation as Observant Participation:**

Reflecting upon the cultural import of appropriate dress, I continued to watch the young girls dancing in the clearing in the bush. While the girls and women danced in the center of the space, the toddlers, babies on their mothers' backs, and boys too young to join the drummers and unaffiliated with the association form a specific type of audience. These young people mill around the dancers and musicians with rapt attention, a fixture of such events. One such little one spent the majority of the performance hanging onto his mother's wrap skirt and then moved on to handing my translator Renaud, and any of the girls who would take them, leaves that he had plucked off of the nearby trees. Watching from her peripheral vantage point, a girl of two or three years old moved in time with the other dancers as she tried to coax her short limbs into the steps she saw her elders perform. These young participant observers illustrate an important aspect of how Ewe communities teach dances to young people. Though formal dance apprenticeships exist, as in the case of the Association Deconu, elders expect young people to know the basics of traditional dances and rhythms from watching and practicing as a part of their play. Before they are ever called upon to dance the steps or beat a drum these young performers are often familiar with the rhythms and have watched the dances frequently.

Though Ewe dance masters encourage students to learn by doing, many dances remain

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<sup>103</sup> For an extended look at the import of dress and the Reconciliation Ceremony see *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in and African Community* by Kathryn Geurts (2002: 146-152).



the sole province of Vodun initiates and all others, including the uninitiated your girls of the Association Deconu, must watch rather than perform. As the music changed to rhythms played in honor of the snake spirit Da, women including Mamissi Sofivi replaced the girls in the center of the clearing. They danced in a circle around the mound of earth called *dafeme* (literally “Da’s home”). The women traced their circle by walking sideways, leading with one foot and then letting the second slowly join the first. They moved both arms to complete one of the dances representing the serpent spirit.

Adherents reserve these particular movements for those who have been possessed by Vodou Da. As a girl of about thirteen, named Avril, began to dance with the other women, Mamissi Sofivi removed two of her own cowry shell necklaces to adorn the young girl. She arranged the necklaces so that the two long strings of cowrie shells crossed the girl’s chest in an “X,” matching the others performing. Cowrie shell necklaces arranged in this way represent initiates of Vodou Da. Most of the girls performing in the clearing had never experienced spirit possession. Avril had already encountered Mammy Da by falling into trance as she performed. Through her experience of spirit possession, she gained the right to perform with the adult initiates. Yet, because of her youth, Sofivi later confided, they had declined to give her the scarifications that would indicate her full initiation as a mamissi and servant of Vodou Da.<sup>104</sup> Instead, they used the crossed cowrie shell necklaces to indicate Avril’s right to perform with adult initiates.

Avril’s induction into the small group of Da devotees illustrates how participants often

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<sup>104</sup> Sofivi told me that Avril would one day become an initiate but that her parents had decided to wait until she was older for the child to become a fully initiated priestess of Vodou Da. Until that time, she can perform the dances of Vodou Da, though the other girls cannot, and she can wear cowrie shells. Even so, she does not have the right to wear cowrie shell necklaces with small bells attached, since such objects are restricted to initiates (Personal Communication Aug 16, 2012).

move from one level of involvement to another as their training progresses. The training ritual held by the Association involved many levels of participation that I perceived as concentric circles of involvement and access. Mamissi Sofivi, the married women from her Vodun Association, and the drummers, including the lead drummer Dodzi, a priest in his own right were all essential to the proceedings. These performers lead the dances, coached others, and assessed the quality of the movements of other participants. The drums, as entities endowed with the power and sentience of Vodun spirits, also formed part of the inner circle (Montgomery and Vannier 2017: 156). The drummer and the drums themselves may reject performers by refusing to play properly if they dance improperly, wear incorrect attire, or behave inappropriately in any way.

The musical accompaniment was a tapestry of sound made up of music from the various participants. To my ears, the rhythms of the music came together like the throwing down of a jumble of sticks. The different sounds of shaker, drums of different sizes, and a rusted metal barrel seemed to push and pull at one another, clamoring against each other only to break apart again, each sound on its own complementary path, winding its way to the same goal. The drummers formed an ensemble that included an old rusty barrel played with drumsticks. The women from Sofivi's Vodun association also played shakers and some of the girls played two wooden percussion sticks against one another to keep time or clapped along with the rhythms of the songs. At Sofivi's instigation, the girls also sang, adding their young voices to the changing melodies. The duty of providing music was distributed amongst most of the participants. The dancers' feet often followed one sound while their arms picked out a slower rhythm as they

darted across the space or carefully traced a circle around the earthen altar for Vodou Da.<sup>105</sup>

The next level of participation included the uninitiated young members of the Association Deconu who wore African wrap dresses and beads and marked with chalk designs. These girls participated in most of the dances but were often criticized or dismissed from the dancing if the inner circle deemed their performance or level of concentration to be insufficient. One young dancer, Sofie, joined the dances with the others but moved with her eyes wide and searching and seemed to bob out of time with the others. Sofivi and two other women frowned upon her saying “Ah ah ah! Go sit down if you cannot at least respect the rhythm!” Thus dismissed, Sofie sat down and waited until the music had changed to another rhythm that she knew better to perform again. The young women usually did not dance when Mamissi Sofivi performed, lacking her specialized knowledge but learning through watching and imitating. They also participated in the music-making by singing and using percussion sticks.

The outermost level of participation in the training ritual were the youngest children or those young people who were not a part of the Association Deconu. They often watched the proceedings as a form of entertainment but might try the movements of the dances from the periphery or form little drum ensembles of their own using found and recycled materials to shape their play around the festivities. These differing levels of participation and training illustrate how those observing such site-specific performances within the context of semi-rural Ewe communities play a part in the production of knowledge within a given event though certain participants claim more authority over the proceedings than others. Oftentimes, training in these dances takes the form of moving people from one level of participation to another and a lack of

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<sup>105</sup> Robert Farris Thompson quotes Alan P. Merriam to describe dancing to multiple meter as a process of “learning to be conscious mentally of every instrument employed in an African orchestra and this has tremendous influence on...dance, all the various muscles of the body act differently to the rhythms of the instruments” (Thompson 1974:14; Merriam 1959: 58).

diligence in training often results in demotion from one level of participation to an outer level, with less access and responsibility.

Honored guests, outsiders, and patrons like myself and many of the men present who were not drumming also occupied a floating and unspecified level of participation. Since I paid a fee to the association for my dance training and because Mamissi wished to help me in my research, I was often given a place of honor in the dances. Yet, I also spent time documenting the dances that forced me to move between full participation and detached documentation. Dancers might pull those of use who documented the proceedings in one way or another into the dance space for a cameo performance. We were, however, not essential to the proceedings and often lacked specialized knowledge of the dances. From my precarious place as a patron and documenting participant who might be called upon to dance, I worried that, should I be asked, I might not be able to reproduce the rhythmic nuances of these dances. At one point during the dancing, Mamissi Sofivi pulled me from my safe perch beside the drummers and into the dance. As her feet raised the dust, pushing it before her, I tried to imitate. I attempted to relax into the unfamiliar rhythm. After a time, she dismissed me with the sign, two fingers raised in a sort of peace sign, of a job well done. Initially, during such moments trying to follow the steps of the dances and catch the train of the drum rhythms, I struggled to understand what constitutes correctly executed movements. My difficulty arose in part because “good dancing” amongst those with whom I worked was connected to many variables including age, position, and knowledge within the community, and because dances are performed in ways that are distinctive to each performer. Mamissi Sofivi often mentioned that, because she was initiated and properly trained, she could always tell when someone was performing correctly because of the way the interpreted the music and showed “respect” to the drums without “breaking” the music. When I

urged her to elaborate, she laughed, “if I see it and they are dancing well, I will know. If they are dancing badly, I will also know because I have been possessed by the Vodun. I will surely be able to tell you” (Personal Communication Nov 29, 2017).

### **Training Acceptable Bodies:**

The dancers of the Association Deconu also illustrate how comportment often encompasses a moral element. Bodily ways of gathering information form a critical aspect of developing cultural identities. Since Ewe people think about perception differently, they represent and remember everyday activities in ways that may seem unfamiliar to outsiders. Anthropologist Kathryn Geurts suggest that communities attach moral values to certain ways of moving and argues that balance is essential to the lives of Anlo Ewe people, a group who present themselves as closely related to Ewe people in Togo (2002: 10, 18).<sup>106</sup> Ewe performers link hearing to balance, using choreographies in conjunction with drum rhythms in rituals to help them restore balance and health in individual bio-physiologies and to entire village communities.<sup>107</sup> Through bodily training in rituals or in ceremonies, like the event held in honor of Mami Wata, communities forge and transmit their ethnic identities. Ewe people commonly encourage one another to remain balanced and calm to prevent sickness by maintaining coolness. They seek personal and collective health and prosperity by embodying notions and philosophies of the self in relation to others in their communities (Geurts 2002: 50, 202, 250).

Through bodily practices—including music-making, adornment, and dance training—the

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<sup>106</sup> Robert Farris Thompson also discusses equilibrium in the “beauty and meaning” (1974: 22) of a dance and as an aspect of what he calls the “aesthetic of the cool” (2011).

<sup>107</sup> Writing about Ewe people, ethnomusicologist Steven Friedson reports that such drumming rhythms are sometimes called “medicine” for their reputed healing properties (Friedson 2009: 25, 26). Also, see my first chapter on ways that communities reorient themselves through the intersubjectivity of possession practices.

elders of the Association Deconu endeavor to train young people in culturally defined moral imperatives, seeking to discipline the thinking of these young women even as they train their bodies. They teach women to behave and dress in ways that adhere to Vodun prohibitions and hierarchies of dress and behavior. Within training sessions for young women, elders use specific clothing and movements to evoke the past, while training young women in movements through which they learn to participate and contribute to contemporary communities. In the next section of the chapter, I will discuss how one primary locus of discipline in the Association centers on controlling and defining female sexuality as an asset of the community, rather than an aspect of personal identity. As a result, the Association discourages certain forms of gendered labor, especially prostitution, while promoting and fostering types of work, from domestic tasks to participation in deconu beauty pageants, as a way of perpetuating the notion that a woman should remain chaste until after she has completed her education.

The Association Deconu encourages young girls to commit to Western education while also providing them with training in local dances, Ewe language, and oral histories. Through this twofold Western and traditional Ewe education, association elders hope to prepare young women to navigate globalized capitalist modernity through dynamic cultural practices.<sup>108</sup> Through performance and the aesthetic presentation of the ideal female form, the association acknowledges the power of young women to shape Ewe communities while also disciplining and seeking control over the sexual, economic, and reproductive roles of women. Traditional associations and community leaders train women as works of art and useful members of society (Boone 1986: 15). In addition to evaluating a woman's moral character with reference to her

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<sup>108</sup> Dziformor remarked that: "we want these girls to make something of themselves and give back to their communities. Once they reach a certain age we are obliged to find an apprenticeship for them to set them up in a profession so that they will become someone important in the village" (Personal Communication August 11, 2012).

physical comportment and posture, many institutions designed by older performers and community members to train girls as respectable and contributing community members also claim women's chastity as an asset of the community.

***La Reine Ayiza Beauty Pageant 2015, Tsévié, Togo***

To encourage young women to aspire to higher education and knowledge of Ewe customs instead of the lure of personal financial gain through the sex trade, the association established a beauty pageant called "La Reine Ayiza." One of the major goals of the Association Deconu is to provide incentives for women not to resort to prostitution to alleviate financial instability. Association founders and leaders often told me that young women often became a burden on society when they became pregnant at a very young age or contracted sexually transmitted diseases. They also mentioned fears that, though women who became prostitutes were usually financially independent, they were also less likely, in Dzifomor's opinion to pass on "our culture to future generations" (Personal Communication Aug 12, 2012). He claimed that the beauty pageant was started to encourage young women to value both education and to help them to understand their value through the approval of their elders, rather than merely their peers (ibid). Judges choose the reigning queen of the "La Reine Ayiza" for her knowledge and answers to questions about local and historical values and culture rather than for their superficial beauty alone. The deconu, or traditional, beauty pageant takes place the night before the *Ayiza* festival and promotes the idea that young girls should know about their culture. I attended "La Reine Ayiza" beauty pageant late on August 7, 2015.

Through the pageant, festival organizers and the leaders of the Association Deconu encourage women to seek a university education and to portray a specific view of Ewe

traditional womanhood including comportment, language, dress, and dance. The grand prize awarded to the reigning “queen” of the pageant is a university scholarship funded by the Association Deconu and the planning committee for Ayiza. The young women represented were all Ewe and attending local universities. They dressed in Kente, in pantsuits made of the popular daishiki material, called Angelina, in various colors, and at one point, in perfectly identical African print dresses.<sup>109</sup> The judges asked each contestant how they would prepare traditional Ewe meals and required them to mime and narrate each step of the process of cooking an imaginary meal from memory to see if they would remember all of the ingredients and tasks required to properly prepare the meal. The judges also quizzed the young women about proper greetings for family members in formal Ewe language. The language questions and the ways that the pageant organizers required that contestants mime cultural practices and perform traditional dances suggested that their beauty was contingent upon proper comportment.<sup>110</sup> Within the pageant, these women were called upon to demonstrate and dramatize elements of cultural bearing and service, to aesthetically perform and stylize cultural correctness.

Though the pageant is meant to encourage girls to persevere in receiving their college degrees for the betterment of the community, the pageant is also designed to prioritize Ewe

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<sup>109</sup> In *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity*, Doran Ross writes about how *kente* cloth has benefitted from a healthy exchange of ideas. The woven cloth, made by Akan and Ewe groups alike, has also shifted in meaning from the trappings of royalty to a sign of African identity that has alternate meanings in parts of the transatlantic diaspora (especially amongst African Americans) (1998: 2). Adedze Agbenyega discusses the importance of kente cloth as a representation of chieftaincy during festivals (1998: 127). He also notes that, in Notsié, weavers offer prayers before they start work and pour libations for their ancestors who were weavers (1998: 137). Suzanne Gott, Kristyne S. Loughran, Betsy D. Quick, and Leslie W. Rabine write about the global reach, histories, and meanings of African print fashion, including the ways that styles like Angelina show up all over the Black Atlantic (2017: 57-58).

<sup>110</sup> When asked why the committee founded the pageant, a festival planning committee member remarked that: “We wanted to choose a young lady who knew how to speak her language and who understands her culture. How would you receive a guest and how would you receive your husband? We want to honor young girls who have mastered the traditional values” (Daniel, Personal Communication Aug 18, 2015).



knowledge systems over Western cultural practices learned in school and through popular culture. To this end, pageant guidelines require that contestants speak entirely in proper Ewe. At various points, the judges commented on the formality and correctness of the women's pronunciation and speech. Dzifomor, one of the founders of the pageant, expressed his concern over the embrace of "foreign" modes of speaking, dressing, and moving when he described how, because of the introduction of English Ewe young people

"say *moni* [morning], *goodivi* [good evening]. All of that... makes us lose our tradition for our future generations. Even the dances, our traditional dances, also. [Young people] are only interested in the music. Our daughters only want to wear modern, foreign clothing to the point that if you see an [Ewe] woman you would not even know that she was Ewe based on her clothing or the way she was walking, none of that would identify her as Ewe" (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015).<sup>111</sup>

Even in French-speaking Togo, young people have adopted many English greetings and expressions that they carry over to Ewe language. The cultural importance of comportment seems evident in Dzifomor's complaint that he can no longer recognize an Ewe woman merely by the way that she dresses and walks. He also betrays his concern about the transmission of Ewe culture to future generations as young women leave such values behind. Such fears of "losing" tradition and of generational disconnects cause day language barriers and cultural shifts, lead community elders to promote conservative values through embodied practices.

The association founded the pageant as a response to anxieties over the ways that teen pregnancies continue to curtail the formal education of young women. Dzifomor and Mamissi Sofivi also emphasized the importance of women avoiding promiscuity in order to stay free of

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<sup>111</sup> "Oui, à cause de l'introduction de l'anglais aussi on dit *moni* (morning) *goodivi* (good evening) tous ça non! Ça fait perdre la tradition à nos futures générations. Même la danse, nos danses traditionnelles aussi. Ils ne s'abordent qu'au musique. Et puis notre filles s'abandonné qu'au costumes moderne et étrangère du sorte que...notre culture...si tu vois une femme de notre ethnie tu ne saura pas meme pas que c'est elle, la costume qu'elles portent, et la marche aussi ne l'identifient pas" (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015). This is a transcription from a recording of an interview and I have written it in locally spoken French to present his particular mode of expression.

sexually transmitted diseases or unplanned pregnancies that might make completing degrees or securing employment difficult or impossible (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015). To promote abstinence and to encourage young women to finish their education rather than leaving school early to start families, another pageant queen—called “La Reine Vièrge,” or the Virgin Queen—participated in “La Reine Ayiza” and gave a speech about the benefits of virginity to the lives and communities of young Ewe women. The pageant for “La Reine Vièrge” is supported by an NGO called Association des Volontaires pour la Promotion des Jeunes Démunis (Association of Volunteers for the Promotion of Impoverished Young People) that partners with a global organization called “Girls Not Brides” to end child marriage and support education for girls.<sup>112</sup> By teaching young women traditional values and prioritizing and even staging “deconu” practices and histories, Ewe leaders express their desire to produce well-educated and contributing community members.

During an interview with Dela Dzifomor, he spoke of the purpose of the association to teach young girls between the ages of eleven and twenty: “the dances and little by little, step by step they are taught our culture. If we see that a girl is not doing well in school we take her on as an apprentice seamstress or hairdresser so that she will have a profession and not be pushed into prostitution” (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015). Dzifomor emphasized that the girls are integrated into the association with their parents to assure that they have the financial stability to discourage the young women from turning to prostitution as a relatively lucrative occupation to which they may have a great deal of access. He also explained that, sometimes, when the girls fail to achieve academic success and seem on the brink of dropping out of school because of the

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<sup>112</sup> The association has a page on the website for “Girls Not Brides” (<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/members/association-des-volontaires-pour-la-promotion-des-jeunes-demunis-avoprojed/>) and an article in French called “Sexuality According to ‘the Virgin Queen’” (“La Sexualité Selon La Reine Vierge”) shares the thoughts of the “Virgin Queen” from 2015 (<http://news.icilome.com/?idnews=813187>).

expense, the association establishes them as apprentices so that these they can gain skills to use in future professions. Association elders communicate these values by encouraging women to dress, speak, and dance in ways that they deem able to retain their labor and sexuality as the province and asset of their communities.

***Adjifo Dancers 2015, Anloga and Ho, Ghana and Tsévié, Togo***

“La Reine Ayiza” was not the only performance event on festival programs that community leaders used to promote chastity as a cultural value. Festivals including the *Hogbe* (or homeland) festival in Anloga and *Ayiza*, the bean festival, in Tsévié, display idealized images of Ewe womanhood as representations of prosperity and mores arising from Vodun practices. For example, festival planning committees include the practice of *adjifo* in public and large-scale festivals as a means of foregrounding women designated as chaste by the “order,” or system of law, of the Vodun *Adjidfo*. Virgin girls chosen by Adjifo dance wearing only a wide belt of waist beads slung over their hips under a long loincloth that identifies them as initiates. These performers feature prominently in festivals in both Ghana and Togo.

At the Palm Nut festival (Deza) in Dzodze, Ghana I was intrigued by an unusual form of dress that I had never before noted in the festivals of the Volta Region. Young women and girls walking casually, sitting on blankets, and processing onto the festival grounds wore vividly orange-red palm nuts strung together as necklaces, bracelets and waist beads. Others wore white head scarves and white cloths tied like belts around their waists above waist beads constructed from cowrie shells. These performers wore matching cowrie shell necklaces, armllets, anklets and leg bands around their legs just below the knee. All of the young women *adjifo* dancers were bare chested and their upper chests and legs were marked with white chalk designs like those

worn by the girls of the Association Deconu.<sup>113</sup>



Figure 11. Adjifo dancer performing before the Ayiza festival. Tsévié, Togo, 2015.

Young women wearing adjifo also numbered amongst the performers re-enacting the migration epic in a grand procession at Hogbetsotsoza in Anloga, Ghana. Three preteens, wore white cloths, with one wide strip swinging in front of them to their knees and another covering them in the back from waist to knee. Like the dancers at Deza, they wore cowries as jewelry but

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<sup>113</sup> The vévé worn by one young adjifo dancer was one of interlocking circles that Sofivi had described to me as a prayer for protection.

also carried gourds piled with more cowries and strings of traditional beads upon their heads. Their bare chests were covered with a dusting of talcum powder rather than chalk designs. In the demonstrations preceding Ayiza in Tsévié, Togo, one young girl danced agbadza, snapping her elbows backward and together as she deeply arched her back with each forward step. Sporting a wide belt of beads slung low around her hips, two long rectangles of red cloth covered her in front and behind, reaching almost to the dusty ground as she bent her knees to dance. She also held a fly whisk in each hand and let them rest against her upper arms as her bent elbows moved flexibly backward, almost touching her lower spine. Upon her bare shoulders and upper chest were *vévé* designs drawn like interlocking circles covered only by the heavy strings of golden yellow and red traditional beads.<sup>114</sup> The beads constitute an essential element of the *adjifo* adornment by serving as the lynchpin of the clothing, covering nudity and supporting the undergarments. Women assemble *adjifo* clothing from materials including palm nuts and cowry shells from land or sea intimately affixing the bounty of the land to their bodies.<sup>115</sup>

Such practices teach young women how their bodies are understood politically and socially by elders and leaders within the community. The religious control exerted over women's bodies in the practice of *adjifo* supports efforts to control and protect young women. Those who wish to wear *adjifo* must go to a diviner to be selected by the Vodun. One collaborator in Tsévié claimed that "If you are sexually active and try to dress like this, to become an adept of the Vodun known as Adjifo, [you] will automatically die because the Vodun will know. Before girls are allowed to dress in this manner they are secluded in a room and the Vodun will tell if they are

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<sup>114</sup> I examine the significance of *vévé* in Vodun practice and in the Afro-Atlantic in Chapter One.

<sup>115</sup> Such found "beads," including shells imported from elsewhere and natural elements found in the local environment, are called *gume-dzonu*, or "excavated beads" (*perles d'excavation*), by Mina People. The term is used to distinguish natural beads from artificial, or man-made, beads (Kossi-Titrikou and Moumouni 2009: 208).

virgins or not” (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015). The language of sheltering, seclusion, and the secret knowledge that my friend used to describe the Vodun Adjifo’s process for selecting young girls, mirrors language used by community members to express the importance of traditional associations in sheltering women and the future of the young women. They often used words of shielding and surrounding, repeating the French words “encadrer” and “protèger,” meaning to surround or box in and to protect, respectively (Personal Communication June 20, 2015). Through performance and adherence to practices like *adjifo*, the bodies of girls become sites for debates about the value of Ewe practices and histories. Across the Volta Region, these festival dances also serve as a forum for including young people in the retelling of collective histories. Acceptable bodies like those of authorized *adjifo* dancers and the young members of the Association Deconu are meant to contribute to the financial and social stability of the community through Western education, perpetuate cultural practices, and attract revenue through participation in traditional festivals.

### **Female Sexuality and Ritual Servitude:**

Preoccupation with the chastity of young women, as a founding tenet of the Association Deconu, is reinforced by other Vodun practices, including Ewe practices of ritual servitude ways that bring to mind other Ewe institutions that regulate the sexuality of women in the service of collective well-being. Practices of ritual servitude, called *troxovi* or *trokosi*, demonstrate how members of indigenous religious institutions seek to make use of women’s labor and sexuality for the benefit of the community in highly contested ways. Families send young, virginal women in their family line to Vodun shrines to settle financial debts and ritual transgressions. In the debate about fiasidi and ritual servitude, Performance Studies scholar Soyini Madison observed

that language was of primary concern since the word *trokosi* means “slave of a deity” and has been used by outsiders in Ghana and abroad to criticize the practice, while the word used by local people is *troxovi*, meaning a “deity who adopts children.” *Troxovi* is a Vodun of justice and morality, public security, education, and welfare. A person trained in a *troxovi* shrine is seen by her community as a *fiasidi*, or a “queen fit for kings” rather than a *trokosi*, or “slave of the gods,” as they were presented by news outlets in Ghana (Madison 2010: 38). By using these two words, *trokosi* and *troxovi*, interchangeably or by replacing *troxovi* with *trokosi* Christian groups and other detractors framed the practices as a contemporary form of enslavement (Akyeampong 2001b: 3).

*Troxovi* is ritual servitude in which a woman in the family is sent to pay for infringements or financial obligations incurred by another (often male) member of the family. To pay the debt, women must dedicate the remainder of their lives to a temple and pledge themselves to the Vodun *troxovi*. This form of ritualized female labor has received disparaging media attention in Ghana.<sup>116</sup> Many Christian activist groups have spoken out against what they view as the sexual and economic exploitation of uneducated young women (Madison 2010: 62). Detractors from practices of ritual servitude argue that the practice, which they call *trokosi*, is a form of modern-day slavery and that priests sexually exploit women who serve in the temple and force them to work without compensation.

Supporters of *fiasidi* view the practice as an important indigenous institution since *fiasidi* shrines are based on models of education and learning (Madison 2010: 63). Ideally, young women leaving their families to pursue lives of education and service and come to shrines to

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<sup>116</sup> A few examples include articles on [ghanaweb.com](http://ghanaweb.com), [news.trust.com](http://news.trust.com), and [ghananewsagency.org](http://ghananewsagency.org) with titles including “Virgin wives of the fetish Gods - Ghana's *trokosi* tradition” (Mistiaen 2013).

better themselves in the company of other women. In this view, the practice of *fiasidi* positively effects communities by improving the level of knowledge of women from all over the region, since many women come from Togo and distant regions. Many of those who support the practice argue that those who abuse *fiasidi* are a part of breakaway shrines that no longer abide by the commonly held practices of the tradition, claiming that such abuses are not common. Positive aspects of *fiasidi* practices include collective learning and a focus on community service. In such cases, whether priests abuse the practices or carry them out with reverence to the protocols of the institution, the bodies of women are disciplined and molded for collective gain. In some ways, *La Reine Ayiza*, translated as “Queen Aziza,” might function as a secular translation of the values of women’s education and discipline encapsulated within *fiasidi* traditions.

Such translations of older practices result from external pressures exerted on Vodun communities due to stereotypes held by Christians in Ghana, Togo, and Nigeria about the moral uprightness of women in communities that practice Vodun.<sup>117</sup> To combat such stigmatization of their communities, community leaders like Mamissi Sofivi make a clear distinction between “deconu,” and “Vodun.” She claims that

the Association Deconu is nothing more than a group that seeks to valorize traditional practices and accoutrements for the women in the community. In ancient times, women did not sleep with men before they were married....When the women wore their beads, they waited for men to come for them to marry them. Deconu is not Vodun, the group seeks....to inculcate [the girls] with the cultural values of their great-grandparents. The association is especially important for young girls. There are boys in the association but the group focuses on the future of the young women of the community. The women are the one who have teen pregnancies and end up in trouble in Tsévié so the group focuses on young girls....What is done with the girls is deconu rather than Vodun (Personal Communication June 20, 2015).

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<sup>117</sup> I often saw television preachers, like T. B. Joshua on Emmanuel TV (<https://emmanuel.tv/>), discussing the ways that Mami Wata and other spirits possess women to turn them to prostitution and promiscuity.



Mamissi Sofivi indicates that the Association Deconu contains and channel the expression of the sexuality of the young women in the community. She downplays the Vodun affiliations of the leaders of the association its role in cultivating purity and chastity, in opposition to popular narratives of Vodun as linked to licentious semi-nudity and sexual depravity. Sofivi links wearing beads with abstaining from sex until marriage and with women “waiting” for men. Waist beads are seen as erotic and intimate items of dress and women are often instructed by their elders keep them hidden because seeing them is tantamount to having a sexual encounter with their wearer (Kossi-Titrikou and Moumouni 2009: 210).<sup>118</sup> When Sofivi mentions the wearing of beads as a part of waiting for marriage, she most likely refers to practices of keeping one’s waistbands hidden that are flouted in contemporary casual sexual encounters.

The values of their “great-grandparents” include practices through which women become sources of wealth for their communities, through bridewealth, small-scale entrepreneurship, and even ritual servitude. The association trains women to fulfill their role of bringing wealth into communities. To this end, the Association instructs them in performance styles through which even young girls produce wealth by performing traditional dances in festivals. Dzifomor argued that the traditional dances were important because they were culturally distinct and could bring revenue to the community since they are culturally distinct, claiming that “without cultural performances, there would be no tourists and no development for the village. We would even like to have partners from the US and from other places to support the young girls even more”

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<sup>118</sup> Kossi-Titrikou and Moumouni (2009) write that

“La ceinture de perles est par ailleurs l’objet de parure la plus personnelle et la plus intime de la femme. Ainsi, une femme, même célibataire, ne donne pas facilement l’occasion à un homme de voir ses ceintures de perles. Voir ces ceintures équivaut à accéder à l’intimité de la femme, ce qui n’est pas permis par la culture

waistbeads are a [Guin-Mina] woman’s most personal and intimate item of jewelry. Thus, a woman, even an unmarried woman, will not easily give a man occasions to see her waistbeads. To see someone’s waistbeads is equivalent to an intimate encounter with them, which is not permitted [or encouraged] by [elders in] the culture” (2009: 210).

(Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015). Through the work of associations and planning committees, Ewe festivals serve as sites for solving community problems through performance, a tool for remedying social problems and educating young people.

### **Body Politics and Anxieties about Cultural Decline:**

Through training in appropriate bodily practices, young women not only perform as authorized representatives of their communities but also become sites through which communities trace many debates about morality and economic independence. The body politics involved in the establishment and critique of women's bodies as representatives of community, ethnic identity, and nation can be read through the ways that acceptably trained bodies are discussed and characterized during the performance of the labor of collective representation. The term "body politics" indicates practices used by powerful actors within a society to regulate the bodies of others through custom, religion, and economic autonomy and dependence (M. N. Roberts 2000). Champions of traditionalized Ewe cultural practices in Tsévié frame the role of women in their communities through an emphasis on virginity, the rejection or embrace of images portraying the water spirit Mami Wata as a sexually independent mermaid, and through presenting young girls in the adornment and performing the labors of their "grandmothers." Though Mamissi Sofivi, as a Vodun adept, embraces and practices Mami Wata devotions and shares dance practices honoring water spirits with the girls of the Association, even she denies that the knowledge passed on to the young women is Vodun. When I asked her why the leadership of the Association Deconu chose not to instruct the girls in Vodun, she insisted that in Tsévié "there is liberty of religion and no one forces Vodun on their children" (Personal Communication June 20, 2015). Her unwillingness to claim Vodun as a part of deconu seems to

indicate local efforts to create secularized avenues for teaching deconu while also perpetuating knowledge gained from religious practices.

Discipline exerted upon women's bodies by the institutions of fiasidi shrines and the Vodun Adjifo, seem to contradict notions that Vodun practitioners condone sexual deviance. Despite Vodun institutions that seek to protect women and manage their sexual expression, Pentecostal Christians often portray traditional religious practices as indicative of inappropriate sexual conduct and moral decay (Meyer 1999: 203). The sexuality of women has become central to portrayals of traditional religion in comparison to Pentecostal Christianity. These conversations often include understandings of Mami Wata generated by Christian missionaries, churches, popular films, and visual artists (Gifford 2004: 87; Edmondson 2009: 36, 225).

### **Mami Wata as a Rampant Seductress:**

Mami Wata is known by those who worship her as a hard bargainer who may demand promises of loyalty that lead to disastrous consequences for those who make them (H. J. Drewal 1988). turn to the Held by many as a representative of the greatest perversions of traditional religion, Mami Wata spirits have been translated as a version of the devil and a demonic force, portrayed as a seductive mermaid who lures men to their deaths through sin and folly (H. J. Drewal 2008; Meyer 2008, 1999). Such demonized views of the spirits arose in part from the contradictions of translating of the words for God and the Devil in Christianity using words already existing in Ewe ritual discourse. German missionaries chose to use words and traits from fearsome Ewe Vodunwo to stand in for ideas of the devil, his demonic hordes, and his pernicious destruction and evil (Meyer 1999: 41, 45). Pentecostal Christians in Ghana have developed negative images of Mami Wata as a rampant seductress. As a result, they defame the knowledge,

images, and practices valued by those devoted to Mami Wata, who are seen as backward and superstitious. Though they view Mami Wata as a demon, many devout Ghanaian Christians ardently believe in and portray the water spirit in their Christian worship practices in order to discredit her, exorcise her, and rescue others from her grasp (Meyer 2008: 387). Many Ghanaian Pentecostals claim that Mami Wata is in league with Satan to lure Christians away from the faith through consumerism. Anthropologist Birgit Meyer emphasizes Mami Wata's role as the spirit of modernity and capitalism, since the pantheon functions for many as a means through which they negotiate ambivalence about neo-liberal capitalist modalities (Meyer 2008: 396; Bastian 2008; Frank 1995: 342).

Ghanaian Pentecostal Christians incorporate Mami Wata into their understanding of the Christian faith. Pentecostal Christians incongruously include Mami Wata in many religious practices and beliefs which, ostensibly, have little to do with her. As a result, Mami Wata constitutes an important part of the very religious practices that denounce her. In the West African media, specifically in Nollywood films produced in Nigeria, Mami Wata is also linked to lesbianism (Meyer 2008: 391-394).<sup>119</sup> In Pentecostal visions of Mami Wata, like the films *Women in Love I and II* (1996), in which Mami Wata demands that her female followers become lesbian and abstain from heterosexual encounters. Images of Mami Wata have long been adapted from imported images by likening images of Mami Wata to Christian imagery of Eve in the garden since both Eve and Mami Wata are associated with serpents and provide access to forbidden worlds (Jewsiewicki 2003: 122).

Such images of Mami Wata speak to collective concerns about the sexual independence of urban women as they become more financially independent, sexually liberated, and control

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<sup>119</sup> Scott Edmondson (2009) also addresses the presence of Mami Wata characters in Gollywood films made in Ghana in his unpublished doctoral thesis.

their own reproductive power. Bogumil Jewsiewicki explores the effect of economic scarcity on views of Mami Wata. In *Mami Wata: La Peinture Urbaine au Congo (Mami Wata: Urban Painting in Congo)*, Jewsiewicki views Mami Wata as a spirit that synthesizes the cost of entering into Western capitalist modernity in the intensely competitive economic market of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The spread of Christianity in the region has created an environment hostile to images of Mami Wata. Since the 1970s when refugees from Uganda and Sudan flooded into the urban centers of the country and employment became harder to find, antipathy toward Mami Wata has increased along with notions and images of the spirit as a dangerous seductress or concubine. His arguments nicely frame the ways that debates sparked by Christian hostility to Mami Wata have changed how practitioners worship, understand, and depict water spirits.

Reception and rejection of Mami Wata indicate a deeper conflict amongst Ewe people about how traditional histories and performances should be passed down and the purpose of traditional religion in peoples' lives. When asked why the Association Deconu was founded, Dzifomor confided: "our culture is disappearing... Yes, it is in the process of disappearing... because of the introduction of the Christian religion our traditions have started to disappear little by little" (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015). Where Dzifomor and the leaders of the Association Deconu see traditional religion as an important means of maintaining their culture and educating their children, Evangelical Christians and highly educated community members often view the practices as destructive to the character of young people, arguing that practices like Mami Wata worship lure Christians away from faith and family through consumerism (Meyer 2008).

Though different classes of Ewe people debate issues of success differently and trust in

divergent sources for their financial gain and prosperity, many of these groups still use Mami Wata as a means of framing discussions of prohibited wealth and transgressive sexuality. Whether through embrace or denial, kinship or rejection, Ewe people continue to express the dangers and allure of wealth and success through their knowledge of water spirits associated with foreign affluence and the power of the ocean that remains untamed by locals and foreigners alike.<sup>120</sup> Whether seeking success by playing into national and international respectability politics or through rituals imploring the aid of nature spirits, many engage in discourses around wealth in terms of the controversial and well-known figure of Mami Wata and her panoply of water spirits. Local Pentecostals may do so by exorcizing Mami Wata from church members to release wealth and faith healing in their lives.<sup>121</sup> Entrepreneurs may seek wealth through Mami Wata by selling imported products from India, a place that devotees have conceptually linked to the ocean, or by producing and distributing films or paintings about the hazards of entanglement with water spirits (H. J. Drewal 2008; Meyer 2008; Ross 2014). Many highly educated professionals across the West African coast discuss Mami Wata as the province of the superstitious and impoverished, while watching sermons, exorcisms, and films about the spirits (Gifford 2004: 87) and entrusting their future gain to foreign experience and international business contracts that many Vodun practitioners would see as Mami Wata's domain. Though Ewe Vodun practitioners are often politically and economically marginalized, through their training rituals and efforts to distance themselves from traditional religion, the Association

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<sup>120</sup> Sandra Greene speaks of the coastal erosions by the ocean in Anloga that have not been controlled or impeded by modern technology as a possible reason for the popularity of mermaid and ocean Vodunwo whose force remains unchallenged by foreigners and local Christians (2002: 12).

<sup>121</sup> The practice of *blumhardt*, or healing and delivering, gradually led pietist Christians into Pentecostalism. Meyer demonstrates that the devil became the link between pietism and traditional religion. Though *blumhardt* rhetorically subordinated traditional religion to Christianity, the practice also validated indigenous religion by acknowledging the existence of spirits, rather than dismissing them (Meyer 1999: 52).

Deconu participates in larger debates and tensions pertinent to the lives of Christians, educated professionals, and small-scale entrepreneurs alike.

When asked about why many Ewes seem ashamed of traditional religious practices, Mamissi Sofivi criticized Christian Ewes for what she saw as their greed and individualism. She told me that many people have left the Vodunwo because they think that Christians are rich since the pastors “make money off of the backs of those who attend their churches...[T]here are a multitude of churches and they aren’t even real churches, they are churches for making money” (Personal Communication June 20, 2015). Yet, these Christian communities feel much the same about Vodun practitioners, believing that they take money from the superstitious in return for false cures, as evinced by currently used names like “charlatan” used for Vodun priests across much of francophone West Africa. Meyer also argues that Christianity has long represented prosperity to many Ewe people since Christians were called “school people” (1999: 11) and education and Christianity were viewed as intertwined since the “church-school complex was considered the ultimate symbol of, and road towards, ‘civilization’” (1999:22). As ethnic minorities within Ghana, many young Ewes have embraced respectability politics, attempting to present their social values as compatible with mainstream doctrines. In fact, the need to assimilate and evade dominant negative stereotypes of Ewe traditional religious practices in Ghana has driven many to deny or condemn practices associated with Mami Wata spirits. For many Pentecostal Christians, Mami Wata spirits and images of luscious mermaids continue to represent the illicit economic and sexual independence of women through the sex trade and selfish and conspicuous consumption.

In such cases, rejection of Mami Wata often reveals anxieties about the appropriateness of traditional practices and performances as a part of contemporary indigenous education for

young women and girls. These conflicts have taken root in the ways that women's bodies are perceived, trained, and presented by their communities, especially Ewe communities in Ghana's Volta Region. Yet, even in festival performances and training sessions in Ghana where instructor excise obvious connections to Vodun practice, the performances of young women are seen as representative of the cultural condition of an entire ethnic group.

### ***Mini Hogbe School Festival 2014, Anloga, Ghana***

Even dances performed by Ghanaian primary school students with no clear connection to Vodun communities show the mechanisms through which Ewe communities co-opt the personal identities and individual performances of women as representations of ethnic identities. Though the migration narratives that form the basis of Ewe ethnic assert identities that transcend the borders of the nation-state, the differences between the dances taught by the Association and those taught as a part of student festivals in Ghana illustrate points of schism and communication between Ghanaian and Togolese Ewe-speakers. In October 2014, I attended the Mini Hogbe festival held by the primary schools in Anloga, Ghana as a precursor to the well-known *Hogbestosto* festival. The Hogbetsotsoza festival celebrates the migration of Ewe people from Notsié in Togo to the Volta region in present-day Ghana. The word "hogbetsotsoza" derives from the words "ho," meaning to "uproot or move," "gbe," or day, "tso," which means to cross over, and "za," the Ewe word for celebration. When translated into English, the word refers to celebrations of the day the people were uprooted and crossed over to leave (Notsié) (Ahiabor 2014: 40). Host communities welcome those who have moved away and educate young people about Ewe culture and history. In Mini Hogbe, the primary school festival held in Anloga, the young women have an opportunity to dramatize the concerns and movements of their "great-



grandparents” to portray cultural and moral examples as they internalize migration narratives through choreographic repetition and kinesthetic engagement.



Figure 12. Mini Hogbe Festival Anloga, Ghana, 2014.

As the procession began to move, the dancers swung their arms in unison as if rowing a large boat seaward, their bodies shifting in unison as they clapped out the rhythm and sang out war songs. The girls wore head ties, colorful beaded necklaces, armllets, and bracelets. Girls dressed as older women walked with long sticks and danced with baskets full of their belongings on their heads. Their loads included powders, toiletries, and African print cloths passed down through their families as precious objects that women brought with them when they escaped from Notsié (Renne 1995). Some performers carried lit flames atop their bundles to perform the

practical work of migration, essentially the labors of moving house in a hurry. Young men and women representing hunters wielded wooden toy guns and shot off fireworks to evoke rifle fire. They mimed stalking and hunting in imitation of a hunter's stealth and prowess. Those outfitted as kings, chief-makers, and chiefs carried the staffs of their office and wore costumes intended to simulate royal regalia.

Once the procession of school-aged dancers arrived at the old market grounds they began to perform in honor of those representing their chiefs. A group of five girls arranged in a "V" shape, with one positioned in front and the others fanning out in two diagonal lines behind her, began to perform the *husago*, or *misego*, dance. On the old market grounds, six young women perform *husago*, their bodies shifting from foot to foot in time. Their backs undulated, making their entire bodies sway from side to side. Their arms were the focus, moving from a position with their hands hovering up above their ears. Their elbows were lifted, their faces models of stoicism, their hands moved to rest on their tired shoulders as if trying to manually work the kinks out of shoulders and backs that have seen too much travel and too little rest, then their hands rest on their hips and their shoulders continue to move rhythmically as if they could shrug off the troubles of their journey.<sup>122</sup> They marched in remembrance of the long journey of their mothers to get from the city of Notsié to Anloga. In the Mini Hogbe festival performers reenacted Ewe migration narratives through the *husago*, or *misego*, dance, in which dancers move backward and forwards while performing the movements described above. *Husago* dance movements show how Ewe people escaped the dictator Agorkoli in the Togolese city of Notsié by walking backward away from the city so that their escape would not be detected by looking at their footprints. In a festival context, even Ewe school children in both Togo and Ghana are

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<sup>122</sup> When I first learned this dance, I was forbidden to smile while the movements were performed since my instructors felt that such levity would display a lack of respect for their Ewe ancestors who endured migration.

transformed into ancestors and historians, dressed as they are in beads and textiles while carrying objects that represent histories of power, service, and ingenuity. Tourists may also be invited to fit their bodies into these moments as a way of teaching them Ewe histories of oppression and resistance. Watching the dancers closely, I remembered the way my own body had struggled with the movements during my very first trip to Ghana.

### ***Learning Husago 2008, Ho, Ghana***

Watching the girls dance I remembered my first experience with the husago dance. During a study abroad program undertaken before I had even embarked on my research in Ghana, I was taught the Ewe dance with a group of American college students as a part of a study abroad program. I stood on the porch of one of the conference rooms of the Freedom Hotel. I stood wearing a long skirt for modesty and a leotard and tights, a habit from my years of training as a ballet dancer, which makes it strange to sweat and dance in anything but a leotard. The drummers practiced, the different sized drums were arrayed. We had learned the drum rhythm for husago the week before and the rhythm spun lazily in my head as I moved over the steps of the dance once more. As our dance instructor and two women from his town got up from their short break he pulled me forward as the dance leader, partnering me with a man from our group.

We stood in two parallel lines. The drums began to play, we began to sing and to dance. My hips swayed as my feet caught the quick higher notes of the smallest drum while my arms and upper body followed the driving rhythm of the lead drummer. I remember the understated way that the women who taught us moved and tried to coax my body to relax into the moments as the others had. I also recalled the admonition that we were not to smile since we performed a

dance of remembrance, a dance for ancestors and a commemoration of both suffering and victory. I let my face embrace weariness and worry. I let my features fold into the shape they might have taken on after a long journey. As I danced, I attempted to step into a history of travel and transformation, about walking that turns into dancing. We advanced in a wide circle, sometimes forward and sometimes backward, our arms settling on our heads, our stomachs, hips, knees, and backs, each arm movement powered by our swiveling shoulders. As the drummers signaled the end of the song, we danced backwards out of the conference room of the Freedom Hotel into the sunlight of the patio, becoming young Americans learning unfamiliar Ewe dances once more, but with the rhythms and histories of Husago somehow still clinging to our skin like the sweat still running down our brows. Even at an introductory level of training in husago movements, dance masters encourage performers to imagine the perspectives of the men and women who migrated to the Volta Region. Rather than learning by moving a laser pointer or a finger across a map, those learning husago must stand in the heat and move together while maintaining a facial expression appropriate to the narrative and keeping time with one's neighbors.

Teaching young people how to enact their histories and how to actualize the stories that they have heard about the journeys made by their ancestors by bending their bodies into movements through which Ewe people convey their historical survival and victory over difficult circumstances. Public spectacles in festival encourage children to explore the motivations of their ancestors. The dancers step into the skin of Ewe predecessors, wearing clothes that they feel resemble those worn by ancestors and moving in ways meant to simulate historical conditions so that they can learn and remember histories through kinesthesia. On festival days, performers use their entire bodies to tell the histories of how they came to be who and where they are as they

sing and dance to take hold of Ewe migration epics.

Despite anxieties about the perversion of women through traditional religious practices and knowledge, including knowledge of Mami Wata, community elders in Tsévié have chosen to use elements and traditional culture to reform and train the women of their community. The body politics of Ewe women has become a means of debating a variety of pressing local concerns even as women perform as cultural representatives. Within such practices, women make space for self-expression within the parameters of what they understand as traditional forms by using traditional techniques to convey the concerns of women and manifest female agency as a public text.

### **Occupying the Margins:**

Marginalized Ewe girls and women use knowledge gained through indigenous pedagogies to cultivate public identities and influence social practices as tactics for self-expression. Uninitiated performers turn movements meant to represent their communities into ways of training their bodies to receive information as they refine and cultivate their understanding of the many ways that spectators interpret their movements. Even in institutions established by concerned community members to claim the sexuality of young women as the province of the family and community, one aspect of the training provided by the Association Deconu empowered the voices of young women to speak out to their communities and their elders. The girls and I were learning the dances for *Adela*, the hunter Vodun. The drummers played *atopany*, the talking drum, for Adela. Since some drums require alcohol before they will speak, the drums were given water from a gourd and liquor from a bottle held by the drummer before we even began the practice session. We sat in the home courtyard of Dzifomor's

compound. The twin atpany drums were propped up on two cinder blocks and the drummer stood over them. Playing upon the drum, the drummer called one of the girls by the name that she was given in the language of the talking drum. Beside the drummers, Dzifomor had set up a small table and was sitting with a notebook to remind the girls of their drum names. When a name sounded, all the young people repeated the name, often pointing to the young woman the drums had identified. One girl rose, approaching the drums she took a small gourd to dip water from a larger gourd and then poured the water on both drums, after which she drank a little before pouring what remained onto the ground. Turning to face the drums, she yelled out, pointing emphatically, “if we have no thumb, we have no fist! If there are no women amongst the men, the men will be like a hand with no thumb and will not be strong like a fist! You will not have power!” Then she danced, accompanied by the drums, drawing her right arm across her left as if her right arm were a blade that she sharpened upon her left (Sofivi, Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015). She bent low over her legs with her knees drawn up almost to her chest as she took large steps, slicing her arm back and forth as she stepped. As she danced, those gathered around to watch joined in her song and clapped along.

Each of the girls was called up in turn by their drum names and they rose and spoke the meaning and importance of their names in the community. Through such practices, their instructors seek to form and mold their bodies in the shape of their understandings of the ways of women of the past, but they also seek to present the girls with fitting roles to play within their communities. Hélène Cixous argues in “The Laugh of the Medusa” that

woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement (Cixous 1976: 875).

By claiming the value of women within the rigid systems and movements of the institution of the

talking drums, designed to assert the power of men in battle and government, young Ewe women insert themselves into the text of dominant discourse, into the world and into histories through their own movements. When speaking of atopany, Dzifomor reminded me that important men often perform atopany dances, rather than women. He observed that

There are songs and proverbs that preserve these memories and indicate these histories. In atopany, you dance proverbs. If your father was a farmer, you will want to show in your dances how your grandparents have worked and you will show it in your dancing....Such dances would be performed by very important men. The dances that you have seen are for children and for women. The children are not at a level to dance choreographies like that because you must dance them in a specific way

Yet, though they have not yet attained the level to perform certain important dances in the proper way, young women learn to speak in praise of themselves and to consider their place in their communities even as they rehearse the steps of the dances.

Though the Association Deconu encourages young women to learn to read and write French, Togo's national language (with Ewe and Kabre). Many of the older women rely most heavily on spoken local languages and on movements to make their contributions to the narratives through which subsequent generations will remember them. The interiority of Ewe women manifests in such bodily practices not only through words but also through the labors that women use to influence dominant cultural values from the periphery. By challenging ostensibly fixed hierarchies of masculinity (Briganti and Davis 1994) women promote their own perspectives and ways of performing so that their voices and gestures persist in the margins and gaps of a male-dominated culture.

### **“Doing Cooking”:**

Ceremonies like the Ayiza festival and many ritual ceremonies that include cooked food offerings or food tasting in their schedule of events, begin in the kitchens of women and in

markets all over Tsévié and other parts of the Bight of Benin as women prepare, purchase and arrange food that will attract and please spirits and human celebrants. During the training session held by the Association, two priestesses brought small clay pots containing white rice as a sweet and soft food that Mami Wata enjoys and they added beans in honor of the bean harvest and the Ayiza festival which celebrates the bean harvest. These ceremonies begin before the first sound of the drum, before the dancers take their places, and before the prayers are uttered and libations poured, as women make selections and improvise upon recipes that they have already memorized. Labors like food preparation bracket and flow into and out of the many tasks required to carry out the activities through which performers and practitioners honor spirits and ancestors. In “The Nourishing Arts,” historian Luce Giard discovers that she “had been provided with a woman’s knowledge and that it had crept into [her], slipping past [her] mind’s surveillance. It was something that came to [her] from [her] body and that integrated [her] into the great corps of women of [her] lineage, incorporating [her] into their anonymous ranks” (Giard 1998: 153). She indicates that bodily practices not only cultivate the mind but also reshape and prepare the body for performing other tasks. In the Ewe case, nourishing arts serve as a necessary preparation for serving the spirits along with musical and danced offerings.

Despite Giard’s assertion, woman’s knowledge does not “slip past” the mind, since these activities reform and reorient mind and body to participate in a specific lineage and legacy. In the case of Vodun practitioners in Tsévié, the sacred lineages to which worshippers contribute includes legions of ancestral spirits—who pass on their knowledge through exchanges enacted through performances of cooking, adornment, and dance—and nature spirits who are integrated into familial and intimate relations with humans through service and physical exchanges of gifts. These gifts and embodied offerings function as bodily inscription that serves the community and



perpetuates itself through the continuation of the practices and innovations rather than the names of individual practitioners. When defining public writing, Giard laments the lives of

women excluded from public life and the communication of knowledge, women educated at the time of my grandmothers' generation of whom I would like to retain a living and true memory. Following in their footsteps I have dreamed of practicing an impoverished writing, that of a *public writer* who has no claim to words, whose name is erased. Such writing targets its own destruction and repeats, in some way, that humble service to others (Giard 1998, 153-154).

Giard frames cooking as a body practice in which gestures are both intentionally and unconsciously passed from one body to another (Giard 1998: 153). She further acknowledges the insignificance of the “name” of one person when faced with a community in need of service. Throughout my research in both Ghana and Togo, I experienced difficulty speaking with Ewe women because they were often hard at work in the markets or washing clothes, tidying, and preparing food at home. I found that non-professional, working-class women in particular spend much of their time divided between small-scale commercial enterprises in markets and working within the home washing, cleaning, cooking, and teaching and caring for children. These women were also less likely than men to have a mastery of either English or French (depending on the national context) or even an ability to read or write local languages. Many such women rely on traditional religious practices and other indigenous knowledge systems when they face financial crisis, infertility, deaths in the family, and illness. Giard examines the practice of “doing cooking” as bodily inscriptions worthy of analysis. She expresses her longing to reconstruct the stories of the women whose inventive tactics have been erased by the words of written history through practice, rather than written words (Giard 1998: 153). She confirms the power of gestures and the body as sites of historical retention and transmission. For young women in Tsévié, such domestic tasks form a large part of their informal education and “doing cooking” and participating in local performances become important forms through which they fashion

themselves even as they are cultivated and shaped by their elders.

### **Stylistics and Sensory Engagement:**

Months after learning atopy with the Association Deconu, I found myself shuttling between my place as a patron/researcher/documenter and my role as a trainee during a training to learn dance for Mama Tchamba. My utter inability to keep up with the speed of the drums made me bitterly aware of the levels of sensory engagement required of the young apprentices of the Association during their training with the association. The dancers with whom I learned always seemed to hold multiple possibilities within their bodies and maintain a flexible, improvisational stance toward the style and energy of the movements. Their ability to balance and accommodate many different elements, rhythms, and levels of energy and tension in various parts of their bodies simultaneously became obvious to me because of my own sensory disengagement and disorientation (Thompson 1974: 24).

As I accompanied five other girls, beating the ground with my own version of Tchamba's stylized walking steps, I watched them out of the corner of my eye to reassure myself that I was performing the dance correctly. As I tried to decide which dancer to emulate, I noticed the range of variation between their movements. Farthest from me, a young initiate danced with her feet close together, barely lifting from the ground. She held her elbows out away from her torso with her forearms crossing her body as if she was waving a skirt in front of her knees. Her emphasis was on the strong bending of both knees as she quickly lifted one foot slightly off the ground only to bring it back down hard beside the other, lining up the feet in a parallel position in a quick triple step that shifted from one foot to another. The next dancer moved her hands and forearms more energetically as if she was pushing something away from her, unlike the gentle

waving of her companion's arms. She clunked her heels down strongly as she performed. Her flexed feet whipped out strongly in front of her as stretched one knee at a time to bring it down strongly beside the opposite foot. Another dancer almost sat in place, her body crouched in a low plié with both knees bent as she also waved her arms across her body. Each of us shifted our feet along in small steps. The dancer immediately to my right performed with a casual rightward tilt of her head as she nodded steadily, keeping pace with the music. She straightened one leg completely each time she lifted one of her feet, swinging the foot out at a slightly turned out angle so that it seemed to fling diagonally before she brought it strongly down to restart the triple step. Once her outstretched leg came down her supporting leg seemed to snap forward, sliding quickly along the ground, to meet it.

Watching such movements and performing alongside dancers who had been practicing such movements since they were toddlers, led to questions about how such bodies are conditioned and trained to move within traditional dances. Understandings of comportment also form a part of the training and cultivating of appropriate bodies to perform traditional dances within festivals and rituals since they cultivate flexibility, agility, and balance in the body that are seen to have aesthetic and moral, as well as practical, dimensions. Since dance forms often evolve as a complex relationship of individuals to their communities, individuals participate in and reflect culture while also *creating* culture through movement practices that illustrate their position within a community and level of embodied knowledge about the values of specific social structures.<sup>123</sup>

In Ewe dances, performers do not aspire to the notion of a “perfect” technique of performing the dance that will look the same on every body type or on people of every age and

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<sup>123</sup> See *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* by Cythia Novack (1990: 8).

strength level or on people of different genders. Though some perform the dances more correctly than others, the dancer's skill is judged based on her cultivation of a unique style that operates within the parameters of the dance style and properly interprets the music. I was often told that dances were judged as correct when performers "respected" the rhythm and avoided "breaking," or "destroying" the music with their movements.<sup>124</sup> Performers adapt such dances based on their own physicality and inclination. During my training, I realized that even during times when the dancers all performed the same steps, they intentionally moved in their own style, seeking individuality rather than conformity. Though we all danced with elbows akimbo and forearms crossing in front of our bodies, each of us danced in our own style. Some moved their arms as if gently waving a skirt in front of their legs, others as if rhythmically brushing something from their thighs. Such instances illustrate the ways that dancers include their own moods and perspectives within these traditional dances styles, taking the training that they receive and beginning to turn the movements to their own purposes.

Though young association members are encouraged to embody histories through adornment and practice, these movements provide avenues for self-expression that exceed their use in public ceremonies. After the ritual was completed and we all picked up and took our various conveyances back to town, we went to visit Mamissi in her compound to ask additional questions about the ritual and about Mami Wata. When we entered an hour or so after the ritual had ended we found the members of the association still dancing in the compound. One young girl wore a long black shirt that brushed her knees. Stripped of the ritual finery, her feet and legs still shot out as she practiced the movements, casually settling each nuance into her flesh as if

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<sup>124</sup> Sofivi claimed that those who respect the rhythm are the best dancers. She also often declined to answer the question of which dancing was the best, answering instead that she knew the best dancers and the best dances. Her responses indicated that authority played a part in how dances were judged. Like Dzifomor's statement about "important men" dancing, the prestige of a dancer may influence the way that others perceive their skills as dancers.

trying them on for size and stretching them out for use, testing their durability and versatility. These are not merely movements performed in the service of collective representation. By disciplining themselves and adapting traditional movements to their own bodies and personal needs for entertainment, knowledge, belonging, and personal identity, Ewe women add their perspectives to cultural funds of knowledge.

**Conclusion:**

Through the Association Deconu and festival performances, young women learn about their place in the world and are called upon to discipline their bodies in order to present themselves as acceptable representatives of their families, communities, and ancestors (O'Shea 2007: 13). Within traditional associations and dance festivals, learning traditional dances helps Ewe women to gain an education and fashion themselves as community leaders. Women often alter traditional dances to fit their bodies and needs, using them as a way to represent their own desires, perspectives, and personalities, as they assert their presence in the world and pass on cultural knowledge. Communities train young women through many different types of labor that represent networks of power relations and historical conditions ranging from Ewe migration to German Christian missionization. Dances, like *husago*, that tell histories through steps and facial expressions reveal a commitment to shaping the bodies of young people through performance. Elders in Tsévié consider these performances of Ewe dances as instrumental to local development through tourism and partnership with outsiders. Yet, many Ewe people choose to understate the role of Vodun in their pedagogical practices in response to pressures that arise, in part, from concerns over the shifting economic roles of women that contribute to demonized versions of Vodun spirits like *Mami Wata*. Though festivals serve as important ways of teaching young people and navigating debates fought upon the battlegrounds of women's bodies, these

festivals also set the stage for many perspectives on the linkages between Ewe ethnic identities and transnational mobility in the past, the present, and the future.

## Chapter Four: *Staging Festival Narratives of Migration and Development*

### **Introduction:**

In Ewe festivals, collective histories inspire embodied enactments so numerous and superimposed that they dazzle the casual observer and resist systematic documentation. Open-air festivities include processions by performers and chiefs, choreographed displays by various cultural groups, speeches, food tasting, stalls from which vendors tantalize passersby with cultural products, historical reenactments, and dance parties in the streets. Festivals typically culminate in grand durbars, as processions of chiefs carried in on palanquins and accompanied by dance and musical performances representing local agricultural production and illustrating the cultural richness of the region. The various events on festival programs mark the passage of another year and confer prosperity upon individual towns dotted across the Volta region and in the coastal regions of Togo. Festival planning committees and cultural organizations design events to attract locals, Ewe-speakers who have moved away, and foreigners with little knowledge of Ewe culture. These festivals also provide opportunities for communities to gather, feast, and celebrate the lives of family members who have passed away.

Since the versions of Ewe histories that these festivals portray coalesce through contestations, performances often reveal competing perspectives and conflicting agendas at play. Ewe communities hotly contest the politics of each of these festivals for a number of reasons, including the ways that the festivals portray chieftaincy or tailor programming to the tastes of non-Ewe foreigners. These conflicts arise through disagreements about ways to “properly” prepare for the festivals and the types of religious representations and narratives given precedence upon the festival grounds. Although public festivals involve accompanying ritual practices, festival committees often relegate practices involving Vodun to the background to

avoid offending Christian participants and to protect the secrecy of such endeavors. Some Ewe and non-Ewe Ghanaian and Togolese nationals also view the festivals as diluted and inauthentic or, conversely, as hyper-ritualistic in focus and execution.<sup>125</sup>

With such debates in mind, I emphasize narratives and performances of belonging and place-making that arise within these celebrations of ethnic identity. Though dances are not necessarily the main events of these festivals, I approach these events as staged, outdoor, multi-site performances presented in the round. This chapter approaches the staging of ethnic histories using dances, textiles, elaborate regalia, music, and props chosen to portray migration, as movement vocabularies designed by performers to communicate specific narratives to large audiences. Festival organizers and community leaders gather yearly to produce narratives of the past, while also using the space of debate and flux afforded by the excesses of the festival form to speculate about and influence possible futures.

Focusing on festivals that take place across the Volta region of Ghana and in Togo, in the following chapter I shall analyze the *Ayiza*, *Hogbetsotsoza*, *Agbogboza*, and *Asogli* Yam festivals with special attention to embodied performances linked to politics, agricultural development, and transnationalism. Host communities and local political officials re-conceptualize Ewe ethnic representation by including transnational and interethnic exchanges within the festivals, in the form of masquerades and dances borrowed from other groups. Local leaders also use festival presentations as catalysts for agricultural and economic development. Communities rally behind idealized and exaggerated presentations of ethnic unity and historical triumph to present

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<sup>125</sup> Mamissi Sofivi complained that “in some of the festivals they trick people by not showing them the real thing” (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015) in reference to a specific masquerade performance at Agbogboza (in Notsié, Togo) that she described as inauthentic. On the other hand, a non-Ewe Christian acquaintance in Togo remarked in frustration that “Ewe festivals include so many demonic elements” (Personal Communication Aug 22, 2015) that she had to pray in tongues just to sit through the event.



narratives that defy notions of West African economic or cultural decline. Through such festivals, host communities distill traditional forms for consumption by outsiders and younger generations.

Through the strategic curation of space, Ewe festival participants and organizers remap histories to overwrite narratives of the neo-colonial division of Ewe people across colonial borders. By continuing to create danced histories through which they reinvent and reimagine themselves as an expansive and dynamic diasporic group that overlaps and evades neo-colonial borders and divisions, Ewe people contest the sway long held by nationalist ideologies over official versions of the past. These festivals show the machinery of Ewe tactical kinship at work through the ways that politicians perform reconciliation, attendees reestablish kinship ties, and performers cross the borders between Ghana and Togo. Ewe festivals also constitute a modality of government and enact what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-me Shih (2005) might call minor transnational identifications through which communities account for and encourage increasing mobility amongst people of Ewe descent.

According to local participants and organizers in Ghana and Togo, Ewe festivals promote agricultural and economic development and affirm and present Ewe unity. I shall illustrate these elements of festival efficacy through descriptions of festival spectatorship and textual analysis of historical, ethnographic, and performance studies scholarship. My interviews with festival planning committee members, founders of cultural troupes, and festival performers revealed ways that these individuals characterize local festivals and the historical narratives that accompany them. I structure my arguments based on experiences and memories of moving through and observing the festival as I sat, strolled, perused, filmed, and jostled, across, upon, and around the festival grounds. To illustrate the ways that the performances and choreographies

of spectators intersect with those of the participants enacting the planned gestures of the festivals. By tracing such movements, I shall illustrate how festival performances allow for multiple readings and continue to proliferate and produce Ewe identities and experiences.

Inspired by Michel de Certeau's analysis of walking as a way of appropriating topographical systems (de Certeau 1984: 97), I propose that the movements through which I performed as an ethnographer function in concert with the dances and gestures of communities presenting themselves to the world. Moving between locations on the map of Eweland in the southern part of the Volta region of Ghana and across much of coastal Togo, I attended festival events including SASADU (outside of Ho), Deza (in Dzodze), and the Asogli Yam Festival (in Ho), all in Ghana and Adzinukuza (in Vogan), Agbogboza (in Notsié), and Ayiza (in Tsévié) in Togo. I suggest that the movements through which festival participants engage with the festival performances and ceremonies reflect and reinforce Ewe migration narratives. Just as the previous chapter examined the ways that elders engage and train the senses as a means of preparing festival performers to represent their communities, in this chapter I consider the ways festival events provoke kinesthetic responses to strengthen imagined identifications with others. Far from focusing exclusively on the past, or even the present, communities use performances to protect and mold the future by providing new possibilities for partnership and mobility.

As Ewe performers processed into festival grounds and enlivened festival grounds as places of knowledge and territories of Ewe cultural pride, I charted paths directly and indirectly in conversation with their discussions of mobility, cultural legibility, and ethnic exchange. In presenting my experiences of the festival form, I posit the moment of festival as a singular occurrence, as an ongoing present enacted upon the stages of entire towns and sometimes confined to smaller spaces, like the reconciliation grounds, the forest, or the festival grounds. By

walking through the festivals, ethnographers search for gestures that will bring them closer to the many dances and tellings of Ewe festivals, histories, and powerful imaginaries.

I based the selection of case studies for this chapter on my own paths through Eweland: connections made, trips taken, and the proximity of these venues to Lomé, Togo, the home base for my longest stretch of fieldwork in 2015. Though this chapter moves between different festivals based on thematic confluence, the data collection for the festivals involved long car rides, lots of motorcycle taxis, countless treks on foot, and an array of border crossings. In this chapter, I selectively detail two festival celebrations in Togo: *Agbogboza* in Notsié and *Ayiza* in Tsévié, and two Ghanaian festivals: *Hogbestostoza* in Anloga and the *Asogli Yam* festival (*Teza*) in Ho.<sup>126</sup> I also pull specific examples from *Adjinkuza* in Vogan, Togo, and *Deza* in Dzodze, Ghana.<sup>127</sup> I attended *Ayiza* in 2013 and 2015 and *Hogbestostoza* in 2014 and 2015. I documented each of the other festivals mentioned once over the course of 2015.

In this chapter, I shall frame ways Ewe migration narratives allow participants to imagine themselves as members of an expansive ethnic group to identify common narratives and themes promoted and refined through Ewe festivals. Then, I overview ways Ewe identities transcend the borders of the nation-state through festival attendance and interethnic cultural borrowing meant to propel local agricultural and economic development. Lastly, I consider how cultural organizations and political leaders exhibit adaptations of past practices to influence future opportunities. As a festival spectator and ethnographer, I recreate excerpts of my memories of festival events to illustrate one example of the range of possible types of viewership that the Ewe festivals inspire.

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<sup>126</sup> “Agbogbo” is the Ewe word for the great wall of Notsié, which stood during the reign of King Agorkoli I. “Teza” means “yam celebration,” or “yam festival.”

<sup>127</sup> “Deza” means “Palm celebration.”

### **Experiencing Ewe Festival:**

Local organizers design festivals as places of secular revelry and reunion as well as sites of historical memory and sacred renewal. Ewe friends often admonished me for expressing more interest in the “cultural” aspects of the festival than the “fun” parts. My Ewe friends often repeated that the only parts of the festival worth attending were those that occurred in the night time after the heat of the day had passed. During the Hogbetsotso festival in Anloga, Ghana, I entered into this scene with mild trepidation. The crowds surged and danced, packing the streets and singing to music blaring from speakers lining the road. Shops opened their doors to offer food and drink as people of all ages crowded together, illustrating unity more completely even than the durbar and processions of chiefs. Our casual enjoyment and unpredictable paths through the crowds—as we flocked together, laughing, dancing, and eating in a street-wide dance party—typified the movements of festival attendees through the multiple simultaneous events occurring as a part of festival celebrations. Such casual celebrations also set the scene for subsequent narratives of triumph and unity dramatized on the festival grounds.

Due to an emphasis on the return Ewe-speakers who have moved away from home, organizers design festivals to appeal to broad audiences, packing programs with sporting events, pageants, and multi-faith prayers as well as demonstrations of traditional arts and the spectacle of durbar events. Festival attendees move through the performance based on their own whims, constructing and revising their experience as they search for specific elements or performances. Outdoor festivals compound and overlap performances, inundating viewers with sensory stimulation. Festival performers disgorge their narratives, unfolding different elements of Ewe histories and cultural practices as viewers chart paths through the celebrations. In “Outside

Inside: The Space of Performance,” Mary Nooter Roberts employs theatre designer John Conklin’s statement that he prefers the performance of architecture to art:

to walk around in, to experience changes, and things opening up, sudden shifts. There’s something so boring about paintings. Maybe it’s frames—the gold frames drive me berserk...There is no event. We remove the work from a performance...the work has been taken out of a flow of time and the specific way its energy was meant to be released is distorted” (Conklin in Roberts 1994: 71).

Conklin’s frustration illustrates how cultural objects reclassified as fine art often become dislocated from their cultures and histories. Unlike the gold-framed art to which Conklin refers, the festival events in which dancers participate are framed by the towns that host them and the tactics of spectators, as they choose which events to attend and which to bypass.

Inspired by dance scholar Lisa Hammergren’s musings on reconstructing memories of festivals, I designate my own movements through the festivals as the tactics of a participant who strolls through festivals based on “paths constructed by my intended research project” (Hammergren 1996: 54). Through casual navigation of designated spaces, I observed the work of the festival and apprehended the strange and the familiar at the same time. I began to better understand the correlations of identities occurring in festival performances through movements that sometimes “separate[d] things that belong[ed] together” (Hammergren 1996: 55) and united disparate events. The movements of festival participants and observers take place in crowds that trace interactive trajectories invisible to themselves since they lack the cartographer’s eagle-eyed view of the event. In similar ways to de Certeau’s theories of walking in the city, participants engage with a spatial order that organizes “an ensemble of possibilities” and impediments. I propose that, like de Certeau’s walker, festival participants actualize some possibilities afforded by festival events, making them exist as well as emerge, as they invent other possibilities through the paths along which they cross over, drift away, and draw near to specific events and spaces

(de Certeau 1984: 98). Through such navigation, as ethnographer and festival pedestrian, I experienced Ayiza, a traditional Ewe festival held in the town of Tsévié just outside of Lomé in mid-August that celebrates the migration of Ewe people to the region. Ayiza celebrations include a recitation of the historical narrative of the town, the migration story of Ewe people, and performed reenactments of the migration story.

### **Walking in the Festival: Ayiza (Tsévié, Togo)**

*The air was heavy with humidity and red with the dust of our passage. The fast-moving motorcycle offered momentary relief from the extreme heat. I arrived at the festival grounds. This large field is encircled by seats placed under the shade of colorful tarps. As the festivities began, I realized that, due to the size of the crowd and amount of different performances occurring simultaneously, that I would have to move around the performers to capture footage of the event. As the hunting association processed on to the festival grounds, I abandoned my seat. Ushered in with the booming sound of firecrackers to announce their presence, the hunters carried rifles and machetes with which they mimed cutting away brush and foliage. The hunters carried symbolic weapons that included a blunted iron sword held by the leader of the hunting procession. As they advanced, they sang to the beat of hand-held drums. The women of the hunter's association entered after them with labored steps as they mimed a footsore passage through the perils of travel. As more performers and curious onlookers entered the space, I retired to my seat trying to catch the thread of the multiple groups dancing to different drum rhythms that seemed to compete for attention.*

*During a pause in the dances, an official narrated a history of the name of the town. I learned that the festival's name, Ayiza, was connected to the migration epic of the town. Some of*

*the Ewe migrants had decided to stop the place that they would later call Tsévié long enough to allow a crop of beans to grow. A master of ceremonies announced that, since Ayiza is named for the bean harvest, participants in and spectators of the festival are encouraged to taste the beans. “By tasting the beans,” the Master of Ceremonies continued in French, “You will remember what our ancestors have endured to arrive in Tsévié.” From four large, steaming bowls of beans, women began to serve the entire audience. Each observer in attendance at the festival was offered a plastic spoon and a napkin to take their taste of the year’s bean harvest. Another spectator eagerly told me that no matter how many people consumed the beans, they would replenish themselves. He claimed that the that we were to taste had been blessed and prepared in the forest with many rituals and prayers. Each person took a single spoonful of beans smothered in rich palm oil as the bowl moved on through the crowd. As the women continued to pass the bean through the crowd, I contemplated how the festival presents collective memories of migration as much through the taste of beans that still lingered on my tongue as through speeches, dances, and dramatizations.*

Experiences of Ewe festivals of the kind described above offer opportunities for multiple forms of engagement. From bean tasting, to night block parties, to changing seats or position to follow one’s favorite performing groups, spectators participate in the shape that festival take. Performers and facilitators present new versions of narratives that they connect to the past. My friends later compared the hunters performing in the festival with the ancestors whose prowess the performance lauded. Richard reasoned that “they perform in these ways because the people dancing are the descendants of the original hunters who led the people from Notsié. They dance like this to show respect to their ancestors” (Personal Communication Aug 8, 2015). Besides connections made between ancestors and their performing descendants, communities engage

anew with the specific significance of their personal identities in relation to broader notions of ethnicity through events, like the bean tasting in Ayiza, that remind them of the decisions and stories of their ancestors.

### **Imagining Ethnic Identities:**

Within festivals like Ayiza, communities continue to construct Ewe ethnicity through representations of local distinctiveness, like the story of the founders of Tsévié waiting on the bean harvest, and triumphant migration narratives. These presentations of ethnic unity combine oral histories with performance to create full-blown exhibitions of legitimacy and origin. Though the basic format of the narratives of migration remains the same, the variations abound.

Narratives of Ewe migration often begin as histories of geography and travel. These stories might take the form of origin narratives of particular towns and the names that Ewe ancestors chose for the towns. They also characteristically involve some mention of King Agorkoli and his cruelty in the city of Notsié. Ewe migration narratives often take the form of genealogies weaving across maps of Eweland. The ancestors of the peoples who now call themselves Ewe settled at Oyo in present-day Nigeria and Ketu in present-day Bénin over five centuries ago and then were forced east to the city of Notsié by the pressures of Yoruba expansion (Wicker and Opoku 2007: 1-4). During these migrations, the ancestors of Ewe people borrowed and adapted many religious and ceremonial traditions that came to define Ewe ethnic identities along genealogical, linguistic, and religious lines.

Historian Sandra Greene (2002) and Anthropologists Kathleen O'Brian Wicker and Kofi Asare Opoku (2007) agree that Ewe people have invented the tradition of originating from Notsié. This Notsié tradition of all Ewe people originating from the same city was meant to



suggest that the group was more cohesive and governable, to confer a collective identity through which different subgroups could work together. The Bremen missionaries, who standardized the Anlo dialect of Ewe as the official version taught in their schools and used in churches in Southeastern Ghana and Southern Togo, promoted the Notsié tradition. This version of Ewe histories expanded the Notsié origin story to emphasize a common Ewe identity and origin for all Ewe-speakers. The narrative grounded comradeship among different Ewe subgroups on the experience of shared oppression and successful escape (Wicker and Opoku 2007: 5-6).

Greene holds that colonialism changed the ways that Ewe people identified themselves, shifting these alliances based on religious affiliations to ethnic identifications grounded in specific locations, like the town of Notsié. The city of Notsié had maintained its place as a sacred site since the town was seen as the home of the Vodun *Mawu*, a supreme or “high god” (Rosenthal 1998: 61) from whom Anlo chiefs received the religious authority that underpinned their right to rule (2002: 15, 30).<sup>128</sup> In the hands of Bremen German missionaries, Notsié was stripped of its religious significance and reinvented as the home of all Ewe-speaking people. European missionaries and colonialists encouraged the development of different memories about the past and worked to deconstruct the religious significance of important Ewe sacred sites. In this way, missionaries appropriated the symbolic capital of the city of Notsié and filled that symbol with alternate meanings and memories that contributed to colonial agendas by omitting mentions of the fact that Notsié was the home of the god Mawu. The German missionaries modified existing narratives of Notsié as an important political and religious center to use the town as a symbolic site of origin for Ewe people. They did so to promote notions of Ewe people as a *volk*, a group of people with a shared language, history, and geographical origin. They

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<sup>128</sup> German Christian missionaries also used the Anlo-Ewe word “Mawu” to represent “God the Father” or “Creator God.”

argued that the members of such a group could realize their full cultural and moral potential as Christian, colonial subjects (ibid: 20). By redefining Notsié and teaching refurbished Notsié narratives in Christian schools, European missionaries also began to erode socio-religious connections that Ewe people maintained through indigenous religious practices (ibid: 22).

### **The Establishment of Ewe Exodus Festivals:**

Through festivals like Hogbetsotsoza communities continue to popularize and disseminate “the Notsié narrative” as their focus (Wicker and Opoku 2007: 5). The Hogbetsotsoza festival was inaugurated in the town of Anloga, Ghana in 1962 and subsequently adopted by other Ewe communities in Ghana under different names. By including a variety of non-indigenous and indigenous religious practices as well as secular events, like soccer (football) tournaments, these festivals became a meeting place for Ewe people with a variety of religious affiliations. Ewe festival traditions arise from recent historical shifts and are often, at least in part, the result of strategic invention by both Bremen missionaries and Ewe leaders. Through these invented traditions, communities inculcate norms of behavior by repetition and seek continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 1983: 4). These inventions often take place when a transformation in society weakens or destroys the “patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed” (ibid). Postcolonial movements across the republics of Ghana or Togo, the West African region, and into the Black Atlantic in search of financial prosperity and gain have increased the need for traditions to address mobility and hybridity based in histories of migration and prosperity (Gilroy 1993). Though these festivals are based on important histories, communities reform differences and discrepancies between versions of Ewe migration narratives to fit current narratives of prosperity and unity. Since these narratives of origin from Notsié

replaced identifications founded upon other elements or aspects including language and religious practices, popular narratives of migration, and the festivals through which these narratives are reaffirmed, have become essential elements of Ewe collective identities.

These histories, as common narratives through which Ewe people imagine their shared culture and ethnic identities, have become shorthand for expressing Ewe identities. Oral histories perpetuating stories of the migration of all Ewe-speakers from Notsié form the basis of Ewe ethnic identities. Through narratives of unity and common struggle during the flight from Notsié, Ewe people imagine themselves as a community engaged in “a deep, horizontal comradeship...regardless of inequality and exploitation that may prevail” (Anderson 1983: 7). When asked about the purpose of the festival, Daniel, a member of the festival organizing committee, related the Notsié narrative from memory:

Historically, our people lived under the tyranny of King Agorkoli who is the supreme chief of Ewe people. Our people fled Notsié in the year 1720 and scattered in many directions. Those who went to the south came to Tsévié...Ayiza wasn't initially a festival but a time when people could come to have big funerals every year. But people said that they couldn't just come for sadness, to have big funerals. As a result, we decided to come together to eat and enjoy. The first festival was held in 1970 (Personal Communication Aug 18, 2015).

He indicates that the purpose of the festivals has shifted from a period for funerals to a time of celebration. He also obliquely referred to popular narratives of the founding of the town of Tsévié that relate how the travel-worn migrants pleaded with their leaders to “Ayi a ne tsévié,” or wait for the beans to produce some fruit. The festival is an important time to “remember the determination of our ancestors to remain here when they could have been caught by Agorkoli and the fact that beans kept them here, we...call it Ayiza to remember our history” (Personal Communication Aug 18, 2015).

Though festivals like Ayiza present a specific history, they still draw people together to

celebrate and commemorate the lives of the deceased. The festivals are often called exodus festivals because they celebrate flight and triumph that many participants compare to the flight of the Israelites from the cruel Pharaoh in Egypt. Similarities between the narratives are often exploited by Evangelicals to downplay the inclusion of indigenous religious practices in the festival in the service of Christian agendas. Yet, the phrase “exodus festival” also suggests an impetus and a call for return. The festival provides a rallying call for Ewe people to return to their respective hometowns but also to return to an imagined Notsié. A delegation of Anlo Ewe chiefs from the Volta Region of Ghana, the descendants of the Ewe people who escaped Notsié, enact such a return to Hogbe, or Notsié, annually. The narrative of return to origins is clear in Daniel’s story of the founding of the festival so that people from Bénin, Ghana, and the wider diaspora may return to celebrate and remember. These chiefs and elders return to reestablish relations with Notsié both politically and ritually.

The use of the term “exodus” by Ewe people to identify these festivals takes up a Pan-Africanist strategy born in the United States that aims to put the scattering of blacks in dialogue with the dispossession of Jews around the world (Edwards 2001: 50). Currently, Notsié is lauded as the birthplace of Ewe civilization. When entering the town in Togo there is a monument built to resemble the thick clay stones that can still be found in the place where the walled city of Notsié used to stand. This monument proudly boasts in French that the town is “le Berceau du Peuple Ewe,” the cradle of the Ewe people. The festival also serves to define the local area. The festivals are the public face of Ewe ethnicity and royal polities as opposed to the more peripheral and marginalized festivals hosted by Vodun associations, families, and private individuals throughout Eweland. Festivals present nationally authorized versions of the past. In Ghana and Togo, republics reestablishing themselves in the wake of postcolonial independence movements,

festival organizers align specific choreographies with dominant national and ethnic narratives to bolster local level political power. Exodus festivals also differ from private rituals through the strategic use of images of an idealized Ewe woman smoking a pipe while carrying all of her household items on her head as an emblem of Ewe migration and the perseverance of Ewe people. These festivals are communal and political rather than personal and familial, as in the smaller-scale rituals. While patrons and priests often fund Vodun rituals as needed for specific purposes, government ministries of tourism, art, and culture fund Ewe exodus festivals designed to establish identities through which to commodify the cultural strengths of different regions.<sup>129</sup>

The exodus festivals have become an important element of historical enactment, tourist attraction, and establishing political equilibrium. When asked about the contemporary significance of Tsévié's exodus festival, Daniel indicated that tradition is linked to development and that celebrating together "reminds us about unity and cohesion" (Personal Communication Aug 18, 2015). For him, the festival stands as a symbol of progress by engendering cohesion and anchoring people firmly to the past as they acquire modern technologies and advancements that will facilitate local development. Festivals distill many elements of local culture, as participants celebrate plenty while invigorating collective memories. Community organizers in Tsévié started Ayiza in Tsévié over a decade after Anlo Ewes in Anloga founded the Hogbe festival. Communities designed Ayiza and Hogbe festivals to promote and present the Notsié Narrative as a rallying cry of ethnic unity (Greene 2002: xviii). Festivals are now not merely a time to remember those who have passed but also an important time of healing and return for members of the Ewe diaspora to a carefully delimited ancestral landscape. In the process of relating

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<sup>129</sup> In Ghana the government ministry responsible for cultural festivals is called The Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture. In Togo the funding ministries are called The Ministry of Industry and Tourism (Ministère du Commerce de L'Industrie de la Promotion du Secteur Privé et du Tourisme) and The Ministry of Communication, Culture, Sports and Civic Formation (Ministère de la Communication, de la Culture, des Sports et de la Formation Civique).

narratives of Ewe success and victory, festival organizers sometimes obscure or displace practices and knowledge that do not support such narratives.

### **Underlying Conflict and Marginalized Rituals:**

As I moved among different festivals at different points in my research process, elements of the festival unfolded around me through practices of daily life to which I had not yet become accustomed. During my first week working in Anloga, Ghana to observe and record any preparatory elements of the festival, my host mother took me to the market. She introduced me to all the nearby market women, informing them about the researcher interested in the homeland festival. Soon, a young woman approached me and offered to guide me to a ritual taking place in preparation for the Hogbetsotso festival. When I accepted she ushered me out of the busy, hot space of the market across a few dusty streets and into the comparative cool and quiet of the forest. Upon entering the grove, the green canopies of the trees swayed above us as if we had passed out of Anloga into a place set aside.

Approaching our destination, I spotted a number of elders sitting in a small clearing. Men wearing toga-like draped clothing and cloths tied around their waists stood beside a Vodun figure discussing. They debated what they should do next and many disputes were arising on one side of the clearing, while on the other side the men seemed bored and distracted. My guide explained that “young boys” in town had vandalized and profaned the Vodun object by breaking off its head, arms and legs and taking them away (Personal Communication Oct 3, 2014). The elders argued about whether or not the Vodun would seek restitution from the townspeople of Anloga for this egregious violation of protocol and respect. To intervene on behalf of the town the elders wrapped the Vodun in white cloth and repeated many of the rituals that they had already

performed for the Vodun in an effort to appease the spirit.<sup>130</sup>

In such ways, underlying conflicts and local politics sometimes transpire on the periphery. The festival itself and the dancing and music of the day are only the outermost superficial shell of the festival's efficacy within Ewe communities. Organizers and leaders often omit such sites of debate, conflict, and precariousness from public aspects of the festivals. They do so both to protect the secrecy and sanctity of specific rituals and as a means of appeasing those who do not approve of the religious aspects of traditional ceremonies. Nonetheless, part of the effectiveness of the festival lies in the peripheral, secret, and highly coded rituals that occur before the day of the public festival itself.

### **Hunter Associations:**

In contrast to the marginalization of many sacred practices, communities position performances by hunter associations (called *adrafo*) in honor of the hunter Vodun Adela at the very heart of public festival presentations. Festival performers present Ewe history primarily through a focus on the institution on *adrafo*, to the exclusion of other Vodunwo who are seen as foreign and dangerous. Though communities include Hebieso and Sakpata, taboo foreign spirits like Mami Wata and Mama Tchamba typically make no appearance in Ewe exodus festivals. However, communities hold the Vodun Adela and the members of local hunter's associations as important representatives of Ewe identity because they evoke and simulate migration histories

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<sup>130</sup> Though my host mother could not tell me afterward what, if anything befell the “bad boys in the town” (Grace, Personal Communication Oct 3, 2014) who damaged the Vodun, Anloga has had its share of conflict between religious orders. For example, the *Nyigbla* order, which serves the war Vodun of Anlo people, and the Church of Pentecost in Anloga have been known to disagree. Nyigbla practitioners have even sabotaged church drums when church members refused to respect traditional customs like the annual ban on drumming before the start of the Hogbetsotso festival (Greene 1996: 27, 56; *ibid* 1997: 1-3). The boys might merely have been making mischief, as my guide seemed to think, or they might have been protesting against what another acquaintance in Anloga called “the people who worship the idols” (Grace, Personal Communication October 3, 2014; Marie, Personal Communication Oct 13, 2014).

through military strength and success, portraying a specific relationship with land and environment that surfaces in the narrative scaffolding of the festival. As a part of the festival celebrations for Ayiza, a week before the durbar of chiefs and the culmination of the festival, the committee organizes an event through which they explain how their ancestors arrived in Tsévié. This event is held in the sacred forest rather than at the festival grounds and affirms the importance of the hunters' association in the festival since the descendants of the original warriors who guided the group to Tsévié perform as representatives of their ancestors.<sup>131</sup>

Two of the oldest traditional dances performed by adrafo organizations and others during festival durbar are *agbadza* and *gadzo*. These dances foreground military might and reject narratives of cultural decline. Ewe communities feature the dances *agbadza* and *gadzo* prominently in annual festivals. The word *agbadza* means fresh or pure life (*agbe*: life and *dza*: fresh) and celebrates life in the face of death, claiming victory after great battles or at funerals and festivals (Kuwor 2013: 81). After Ewe migration, Ewe communities adapted these movements from the war dance *atrikpui*. By performing military gestures with a gun and/or sword and including strong contractions of the torso, warriors performing *atrikpui* choreographed ways that they defeated their opponents in battle (Kuwor 2013: 81).<sup>132</sup> The Ewe word “*agbadza*” means “gun belt,” and it originally had military connotations of protection and martial prowess within the context of worshipping the Vodun *Yewe*, associated with the Ewe Vodun who rules thunder and lightning, *So* or *Hebieso* (Nyamuame 2013: 106).<sup>133</sup> Communities now view the

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<sup>131</sup> Daniel, Personal Communication Aug 18, 2017

<sup>132</sup> Movements like *atrikpui* form part of an extensive array of African martial arts across Africa and the Black Atlantic, for a history of such practices in the Atlantic World see T. J. Desch Obi's *Fighting for Honor: The History of African Martial Art in the Atlantic World* (2008).

<sup>133</sup> Ewe practitioners often compare *Hebieso* to the Yoruba orisha *Shango*, who also controls thunder and lightning.



movements as a popular and characteristically Ewe social dance (Nyamuame 2013: 131). The movements of the dance seem to blossom from the spine as dancers use the movements to open paths for blessings and celebration. Through gadzo movements, also developed from atrikpui, performers reenact battle scenes of running, chasing, balancing, and striking (Gbolonyo 2009: 507). These movements convey Ewe triumph and dexterity and evoke proud military histories through which Ewe people cling to their land. When I asked my research assistant Richard why dances for hunters were so prominent in Ewe festivals, he first blandly stated an answer that I had heard many times: “That is our tradition, Ewe tradition.” “I understand,” I told him. “But why those particular dances?” He seemed to think for a moment. “When we perform some of the dances we sing things like ‘We are the hunters! We are coming! Do not disturb us!’ So I suppose it is to show that we respect ourselves.” Richard describes what Robert Farris Thompson calls “dance...as an instrument of strong expression” (1974: 9) to imply that the movements of hunter dances have moral dimensions that “show” how performers esteem themselves and, by extension, their culture.

### **Walking in the Festival: Hogbetsotsoza (Anloga, Ghana)**

*I moved my arms in response to the gestures of the dancers in the center of the Hogbestostoza festival arena, remembering the feeling of dancing agbadza during my initial training with Mamissi Sofivi. The novel sensation of my elbows, shoulders, and hips simultaneously drawing towards my spine and then pulling away was uppermost in my mind. I drew my elbows in towards my sides, letting my back contract and release as I watched. The dancers formed a line moving away from and then returning to a semicircle of musicians. Amongst the musicians, a woman dressed in white with a scarf tied around her waist called out*

*the songs into a microphone. As the line of dancers began to move, I shifted, feeling sweat trickle down my arm. She picked a dancer upon whom to focus. I noted her stern face. The dancer's mouth was set as she placed each gesture, carefully coordinating arms, feet, back, and elbows. The performers moved with hands facing down as they pushed their arms down, letting their elbows wing out and then bringing their hands up to a parallel position as their elbows moved toward their waists.<sup>134</sup> Their feet kept time as they advanced and retreated with slow regularity. One pass of the dance ended and another began with a faster rhythm. Their spines rapidly curled and arched as their shoulders frenetically guided their arms. To match the faster rhythm, their elbows hardly stirred and their shoulders and backs pulsated in time with the rising of their flexed feet that seemed to scoop at the ground as each dancer advanced with larger and larger steps. The dust flew as they passed me. My view was soon obstructed by eager iPad-wielding spectators.*

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<sup>134</sup> Robert Farris Thompson observes that one Yoruba man called such forceful gestures as the women made in this moment “*making the shoulders, with forcefully marked activations*” (1974: 9).



Figure 13. Reenacting Ewe migration in the Hogbetsotso festival. Anloga, Ghana 2015.

*Moving from the dances of the women, I refocused on a troupe of young dancers wearing red t-shirts identifying them as the Mizorablewu cultural troupe from Anlo-Afiadenyigba. From a low crouch with their knees bent until their heels lifted from the ground, they dug alternating feet back into the dirt as they slid them along the ground behind their bodies. The dancers rolled their shoulders forward over bent arms that they spread out before them as their legs pushed back as if they were simultaneously clearing a path before themselves with their elbows and propelling themselves forward with their outstretched legs. My muscles twitched in sympathy as I recalled the connection between the drawing back of the dancer's arms and the partial lunges of their outstretched legs. When learning the dance, I had felt like a marionette with tangled strings as I tried to coordinate the aggressive movements meant to simulate Ewe warriors routing their enemies.*

These dances performed by hunter associations, amateur cultural troupes, and the girls of the Association Deconu honor Adela and hearken back to specific perspectives on who has agency, what counts as important knowledge, and the modalities of relations with land, animals, and environmental phenomena. Inducted Vodun priestesses and performers often claimed that, according to oral record, the dance movements for *agbadza* and *gadzo* (also called *kine*)—both performed at festivals and in adoration of the hunter Vodun Adela—were given to Ewe hunters or militia (*adrafo*). When these men went out into the bush to do their daily work as hunters, animals who could communicate with people performed these dances for them. Mamissi Sofivi described the origin of *gadzo*, or *kine*, as the dance is called in Tsévié, by telling how the hunters watched monkeys dancing in the forest and then performed the dance to retell the story of what they had seen. The hunters then adapted such movements for use in warfare and hunting to intimidate their enemies and to commemorate victories. Hunting associations and festival

performers continue to use these dances to celebrate victories in funerals and at the festivals (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015).<sup>135</sup>

### **War Dances as Animal Ontologies:**

As I traveled to gather accounts of festival dances and the reasons for the pride that performers took in dances for hunters in particular, narratives of animals began to arise as an important focus of discussion. At times, these narratives seemed far from the context of the movements that I observed at festival. When explored further, many of the stories about encounters with animals elucidated ways Ewe oral histories validate and convey relationships with animals and the land. Accounts linking Ewe people to the bush and to specific animals formalize an ontological framework that prioritizes performance as a way of knowing and a tool of understanding communities in relation to environments and cultural practices that are characteristic of a specific group. The many collaborators who recounted histories of receiving aid and learning dances from animals demonstrated the importance of understanding birds and beasts as persons with whom intersubjective relationships are possible and desirable.

Dzifomor presents his version of migration narratives in magical realist terms that express an ontological stance through which he depicts the abilities of his ancestors to adapt the landscape to their needs. To tell me about the importance of Ayiza, Dela Dzifomor described the journey taken by his ancestors to leave their homeland in Notsié Togo where they had suffered

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<sup>135</sup> “The kine dance is a dance of the hunters as well. Once the hunters were in the forest and found a group of monkeys dancing around another monkey who had died. They were dancing around him in a circle. They were playing the skins of other animals. The hunters watched the whole dance and when they arrived back to the village they performed the dance to retell the story of what they had seen. Now we perform kine in funerals and at the festivals [because originally the festivals were a time a place when we could all gather to celebrate the lives of everyone who had passed during the year]. We perform kine in memory of the dead. All who are dead...we dance kine as a homage to all those who have died. We perform kine at the festivals to commemorate the dead” (Mamissi Sofivi Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015).

under the uncompromising policies of King Agorkoli I. When

leaving AGBOGBO [homeland] the hunters took the lead because of the difficulty of traveling the bush. There are many people even now with names that in Ewe mean crocodile, panther, lion, or bird. These people, these hunters, could transform into animals to warn the animals [they encountered] to flee before the group of hunters arrived. The elephant men would warn the elephants to run, while the panther hunters would do the same for the hunters, the bird-people would fly on ahead to warn the group [of travelers about the] danger ahead, while the crocodile-people would help the travelers to cross rivers and lakes by carrying them across like a canoe (Dzifomor, Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015).

Dzifomor describes people who could turn into animals to warn other animals, to provide safe passage, and to act as messengers. In Vodun worldviews, the physical world is conceptualized such that ritual practices appropriate the tools of traditionalism and modernity for strategic contemporary purposes (Quayson 2009: 161). Narratives like Dzifomor's resist closure and defy rigid interpretation. They require opening and re-opening and must be revised through performance and repetition. The oral history not only describes relationships between people and animals but also illustrates how the people who became the founders of Tsévié interacted with the landscape to arrive at their eventual destination. Animal tales of this kind draw on the co-existence of many possible meanings for a word or phrase within oral discourse "to establish the essential porousness of what might be taken as reality" (Quayson 2009: 175). Such narratives extend the real and help to multiply the possible applications of Ewe orality and ways that these discourses continue to shape identities.

Through performances of such narratives, committees use festivals like Ayiza as sites of education that focus on the figure of the hunter in Ewe culture. The dances performed to honor the Ewe hunter (Ade/Adela) and thunder (Hebieso) Vodunwo form important aspects of Ewe identities since they help to keep oral histories of migration alive in the minds of young people. Every year at historical festivals, Ewe people in Ghana and Togo tell how they arrived in towns

like Vogan and Tsévié in Togo and Ho, Anloga and Dzodze in Ghana. There are many variations of these stories since tellers adapted them to fit the particular towns in which they are recounted. In most versions, the hunters lead the migration efforts since fleeing groups could not carry enough food with them for the long journey and the hunters scouted ahead to provide sustenance for the others (Dzifomor, Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015). In many versions of the story, deities like Hebieso and *Mama Dagbe* (a water spirit now known to many as Mami Wata), and the priests and priestesses who served them, helped the people escape (Mikado Personal Communication Jul 14, 2013). Performers and audiences participate in festival narratives through dances that reenact aspects of the stories. Many describe the movements of the Husago dance, discussed in my previous chapter, as the steps through which Ewe people escaped backward from the city of Notsié (Ahiator 2014: 40). Ewe people remember their past as migrants through enactments and performances that reflect and produce oral histories. Experiencing Ewe festivals encompasses seeing, feeling, and tasting representations of the past. Festival experiences continue the construction of Ewe ethnicities by layering narrative, spectacle, and kinesthetic experience.

### **Claiming, Cultivating, and Cleansing Eweland:**

Ewe communities use cultural performances and migration narratives to promote agricultural development and lay claim to ancestral lands. Festival presentations promote development and unity through narratives emphasizing the local distinctiveness of each town where the festival is held, giving each town an identity and role within Ewe histories and politics. In Dzodze, my Ewe language instructor claimed that the name of the town was related to the historical event of crossing a body of water to reach the land that became the town. Once the

water was crossed on a large tree trunk, each of the voyagers had to jump from the branch to land in the area of Dzodze, flying through the air to land safely. As a consequence, the town was named *dzo*, “to fly” and *dze*, “to land” to commemorate this accomplishment and their decision to remain in the place where they had landed rather than continuing on in search of another homeland (Mikado Personal Communication Jul 14, 2013). Though he told me this story in passing, I have heard many such narratives during festivals and as the inspiration for naming the festivals themselves in ways that connect them directly back to the migration saga.

In Tsévié, narratives of local distinctiveness continually intertwine the names of the town and the festival. Residents of Tsévié often begin discussions of the Ayiza festival by telling how their ancestors first arrived in the area with very little food since they could grow no crops as they moved from place to place, fleeing the wrath of Agorkoli I. Since their children were starving, they suspended their travels to cultivate a bean crop. Those who became the founders of Tsévié pleaded with the others to wait for the beans to produce (Daniel, Personal Communication Aug 18, 2017). To embed this narrative within the meanings and purposes of the festival, organizers named the celebrations after the bean harvest. Through such efforts, communities continue to encode migration histories within the names of towns and festivals. Festival organizers also emphasize the local distinctiveness of towns like Tsévié and Dzodze as marketing campaigns for the festivals and for local agricultural development.

Festival participants encourage agricultural production by recognizing the importance of increasing agricultural production and improving local farming techniques. The Ayiza festival has already helped garner support for infrastructural development by leading to the creation of a committee for development through culture and social advances to show people in Tsévié how they can work towards facilitating economic growth in the area (Daniel, Personal



Communication Aug 18, 2015). The festival committee encourages agricultural success, by linking local advancements to triumphant pasts intended to correlate the cultural with the agricultural. They present Ewe cultural wealth as inclusive of foodways and agricultural production as well as spectacle and adornment. Performers employ dance movements and attire to promote local agriculture by embracing synecdoche, performing wearing plants and seeds to represent entire crops and future fecundity. Performers embody these links between the land and culture in Dzodze's palm festival as dancers flex their backs and arms in the motions of *agbadza* while balancing potted palm plants on their heads. Similarly, a young girl I saw wearing *adjifo*<sup>136</sup> sported a necklace, thick bands of waist beads and bracelets all constructed from bright orange-red palm nuts. In carrying palm plants on their heads and using palm nuts as jewelry, festival performances write solicitations for bounty and fruitfulness upon the bodies of women.

Different towns promote the bounty of the land through a variety of strategies. At Adjinkuza in Vogan, Togo, local officials recognize and award individual farmers for quality crops and cultivation techniques. At Dzodze's palm festival, a room was set aside for sampling products like palm wine and palm oil. These narratives presented through dance and ritual often espouse aspirations for agricultural bounty rather than relating to current states of development. At Ayiza, for example, despite including a time for bean-tasting as a ceremony of sharing and abundance and hosting a bean harvest festival, the fields of Tsévié produces no bean crop. The twist of a town importing beans from elsewhere to celebrate their bean harvest seemed lost on Daniel as he lamented that, "unfortunately, our fields do not really produce beans anymore. We have been trying to produce beans and we have not had success, even with other species of bean" (Personal Communication Aug 18, 2015). Through efforts at agricultural development,

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<sup>136</sup> *Adjifo* is the name of a style of dress that indicates that the child is a virgin chosen by the Vodun *Adjifo*, see chapter three.

committee planners seek to support local commercial endeavors and engender economic prosperity by linking narratives of Ewe success to understandings of local agricultural production. Though the economic and agricultural realities do not often match the aspirational presentations of bounty that performers weave into histories of Ewe survival, local leaders promote such narratives to encourage local entrepreneurs. Through events portraying local surplus, performers enact desirable alternate realities to displace narratives of defeat and dissension.

### **Walking in the Festival: Reconciliation Ceremony (Anloga, Ghana)**

In Anloga, Ghana leaders perform political reconciliation through a cleansing ritual. Rather than allowing discord and strife to take root in their communities, the Anlo Ewe people of they region mediate and arbitrate political conflicts through ritual. Many techniques of seeking social accord and physical healing during the festival take the form of multisensory embodied performances. In Anloga, Ghana, the *Hogbetsotso* festival symbolizes Ewe unity and serves as a narrative of Ewe identity (Wicker and Opoku 2007). In preparation for the festival, the chiefs of the Anlo Ewe subgroup gather for a reconciliation ceremony, called Nugbuidodo, held the day before the festival's culmination in a grand durbar procession.

*Dressed in a pagne, a cloth wrapped in the local style, I walked carefully, mindful of the scarf holding up the long length of cloth wrapped close to my body. Upon arriving at the house of the war chief, her guide, a young man who teaches Ewe language at a local primary school, shed his shirt and wrapped a long length of cloth over his trousers to gain admittance into the sacred space of the chief's compound. During the prayers taking place in the home of the chief, an elderly priest wearing a white cloth around his waist poured libations of palm wine and palm*

*oil. At the close of the prayers, a procession of chiefs and attendants moved from the house of the war chief to march through the town, marking specific sacred sites along their journey. I directed my steps to the reconciliation ground. Entering the quiet reconciliation grounds, I removed my shoes and snapped a few photos of a Vodun, wrapped in white cloth and topped with an overturned calabash. My companion informed me that I must remain silent during the ceremony because of the power of speech within this place cordoned off by a low white wall. He then told me that Nyigbla, the Vodun located in the center of the reconciliation grounds, is a war Vodun who maintains peace and order in the entire town of Anloga.<sup>137</sup> As others began to arrive, a few priests recognized me from my foray into the sacred grove where I had seen the men pacify the vandalized Vodun. One of the priests reminded me not to cross my legs during the ceremony because it might bring bad spirits. As I sat in the shade of large a canopy, others arrived. The procession of officials from the home of the chief announced their presence through song and drumming as they poured into the space singing, clapping, and drumming as they circle Nyigbla, the Vodun who once united all Anlos from Anloga and whose ritual events in Anloga have now been primarily limited to the time of the Hogbe festival.<sup>138</sup>*

*Whenever an important chief arrived he was greeted with ululations. As the chiefs aired their grievances from the previous year, a mixture of water and medicinal herbs was created by priests. I jumped in surprise upon first hearing the ululations of the crier who announced the elders and the chiefs when they arrived. Still startled by the high pitched bird sound the crier made, I asked my neighbors about the sound and its purpose. I was told that this sound indicated the coming of important elders and that the point of it was to honor their entrance into the space.*

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<sup>137</sup> Nyigbla also legitimates Anlo paramount chieftaincy (Vencatachalam 2015: 39).

<sup>138</sup> Greene 2002: 125-127

*The gesture of that accompanied the crier's shout of "OO, Ouyikiloo, ooo, oo, oyikiloo!" was a bending over at the waist, from which position she swung her arms strongly right and left before standing back upright and waiting to perform the same gestures and accompanying cries to distinguish another important personage.*

*As the clan chiefs spoke of disappointments and offenses suffered over the previous year, two priests mixed water and medicinal herbs. As priests and chiefs speak out about conflicts that had arisen between them, I was informed that the negative thoughts and deeds would soak into the herbal mixture that two of the priests were kneading with their hands. The two men preparing the mixture sat upon the ground on either side of a large pile of plants. Whenever the leaders spoke out, the men turned the herbs over in a large metal pan. Once the herbs were mixed, a powerful medicine for washing and cleansing was created. The medicine is meant to expunge evil spirits and prevent people from thinking and performing evil against anyone who washes with it. My companion asserted that the mixed herbs would take away evil spirits and prevent people from thinking and performing evil against anyone who washes with it. I rose with the other observers as the chiefs washed their faces and feet. Each of them retained some of the mixture in a clay pot representing their clan in order to renew the washing when needed.*

The gestures of the Nugbuidodo cleanse and protect Anlo chieftaincy from attack and purify leaders from things that have occurred in the past year so that the town can be released from any bitterness and evil that may have occurred. The ceremony reconciles the many clans and chiefs of Anlo Ewe people in the Volta Region of Ghana who settled in the region after escaping from Agorkoli I in the Togolese city of Notsié. The Nugbuidodo ritual is meant to heal "any rifts between individuals, families, and clans that might hinder the existence of good relations within the polity" (Greene 2002: 128). The reconciliation ceremony and other

conciliatory ceremonies held at other festivals bring healing by allowing a space for criticism and the expression of complaints and dissension that are then washed away through prescribed gestures.<sup>139</sup>

### **Healing Vodunwo in Festival Performances:**

Rituals like Nugbuidodo represent the types of renewal and recuperation that Ewe communities seek through festival performances. Communities also use performances honoring healing Vodunwo as demonstrations of local cultural richness through dance and masquerade and symbols of protection against calamity and misfortune. Spirits like *Alaga*, *Zagbeto*, and *Sakpata* all manifest as full body masks performed in many Ewe festivals to ward off evil. The largest of these raffia-shrouded figures boasted two horns projecting from its head and a sacrificed chicken hanging limply from its side. Only one amongst the *Alaga* was completely concealed, the others wore masks and were sparsely wreathed in plant fibers that obscured some parts of their bodies. The *Alaga* protect the city and frighten away evil during the festival, working as night watchmen to reclaim Ewe territories from undesirable spirits. One participant in *Agbogboza* warned that “When the *Alaga*, the local name for *Zagbeto*, come out one should be afraid of them and stay in the house” but also emphasized that “If you are in pain in the community they will heal you. If the plant fibers fall off of the *Alaga*, there are some people who will pick it up to heal themselves” (Personal Communication Nov 23, 2015). Troupes of this kind move in ways meant to execute healing and renewal sought by performers, leaders, and onlookers alike. Such demonstrations of power, secrecy and might by *Zagbeto* also took place in

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<sup>139</sup> A delegation of priests and chiefs from Anloga travels to Notsié annually during *Agbogboza*, the festival held in Notsié, to apologize for the historical rifts between the descendants of the King Agorkoli I—who has become the villain of all Anlo versions of their histories of escape and migration—and the Anlo Ewe people who fled the city after inciting the king’s wrath.

the Asogli Yam festival in Ho, Ghana. The Zagbeto moved like a dancing haystack, juddering and shifting and then gliding along the ground without bouncing or changing levels, as silently as a ghost. When asked about the origins of Zagbeto, the leader of the Aflao-based Vodun Zagbeto group claimed that the knowledge came from the Fon and the Yoruba in Bénin.<sup>140</sup> Even as festivals pursue harmony and prosperity for Ewe polities and specific towns, they often incorporate knowledge and performances from other ethnic groups as they demonstrate the ways that Ewe culture incorporates and adapts knowledge from other ethnic groups as important sources of power.

### **Walking in the Festival: Agbogboza (Notsié, Togo)**

*The embodied practices through which polities represent reconciliation and protection include performances at festival durbars, public pageants of chiefs and religious officials in support of a designated polity. In the durbar of the chiefs at the homeland festival in Notsié, Togo I braved the crush of a pressing crowd as I pushed toward the dancers. Trying to gain a better view, I noticed a group of dancers lying prone upon the ground. As I drew near, I recognized them as Kokusi or Sakpatesi, another example of efforts to secure healing for Ewe polities.<sup>141</sup> Arriving too late to catch the Kokusi demonstrating their prowess through dance, I still approached.<sup>142</sup> They wore grass skirts and lay collapsed upon the grass at the edge of the*

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<sup>140</sup> In *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power* (1996), Suzanne Blier writes about the crossovers between artistic practices of Ewe and Fon people.

<sup>141</sup> Personal Communication Nov 23, 2015

<sup>142</sup> Kokusi serve the Vodun Koku, whom practitioners associate with Sakpata, ruler of the earth who brings healing as the Vodun of smallpox and AIDS (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2015). Kokusi sometimes perform by cutting themselves, and, according to festival participants, healing on the spot without a trace of a scar since Kokou heals them (Personal Communication Nov 23, 2015).

*festival grounds, sprawled near the onlookers as other performances took center stage. Their faces and bare chests were dusted with bright yellow powder. Their heads hang uselessly as if too heavy for their bodies. Some still clasp leafy branchlets from trees. As I leaned just a little closer to them to take another photo, a man from the crowd warned that I should “draw back” since Kokusi were dangerous and might hurt me.*



Figure 14. Kokusi dancers resting on the sidelines after performing. Notsié, Togo, 2015.

Displays like the presence of the Kokusi at Agbogboza and the Zagbeto inspire fear in many local Ewe spectators. Festival performances may also serve as medicine, as in the case of the fibers taken from the mask of the Alaga and the herb-infused water concocted during the Reconciliation Ceremony. Through such practices, Ewe communities promote and present indigenous resources for protecting and revitalizing their communities. Presentations of the strength and victory of Ewe people also include performances that incorporating dances forms

from other ethnic groups, portraying interethnic exchanges and cultural borrowing as important aspects of Ewe identities.

### **Incorporating Ethnic “Others”:**

In the context of cultural festivals, Ewe people claim the land through cultivation and ritual interventions, in addition to traversing the national borders that divide them. Though festivals often accentuate local particularities, they also encourage Ewe people to reinforce relations and affiliations with other Ewe-speakers, regardless of national identity. These public and nationally authorized narratives of return and triumph promote development and unity by building upon a past in which Ewe communities present themselves as a dispersed group that borrowed from neighboring ethnic groups during different stages of migration. In state-funded festivals, information flows across borders and ethnic divisions to converge in performances that present narratives of collective Ewe identities. These festivals are sites of return and triumph and portray an expansive and integrative vision of Ewe identity that incorporates and adapts many performance styles from neighboring ethnic groups. Ghana and Togo trouble notions of transnationalism since they are separate nations yet possess highly permeable borders. Since Lomé, Togo’s capital, has a free port, many Ghanaians cross into Togo to make purchases at competitive prices and to buy in bulk in order to sell in Ghana at a competitive price. Ewe people pass easily across the border to participate in rituals all over the region, using Ewe language as a means of evading differing colonial languages that would otherwise become obstructive.

### **Walking in the Festival: Border Crossing (Aflao-Lomé, Ghana-Togo)**

*I descended from my taxi and plodded toward the Togo/Ghana border dividing Lomé,*



*Togo from Aflao, Ghana. I planned to find a taxi heading to Ho, Ghana for the yam festival once I reached the Ghana side of the border. After fending off the offers of motorcycle and taxi drivers determined to convey me to Accra, I entered a small room where officials sat behind glass looking bored. When I finally approached one, the woman directed me to the man at the other end. I interrupted the man' who quickly sent me back to the first woman. As I filled out an immigration form. One officer asked, "Are you Togolese?" "American," I responded. "But are your parents Togolese?" he insisted. "No, Liberian." "But is your father Togolese?" the officer added, hopefully. "Both of my parents are Liberians..." The conversation continued circularly in this manner until I completed my form, received the appropriate stamps in her passport and crossed to the next office. Once there, I noticed five Togolese Ewe chiefs, bedecked in full regalia, enduring the same process. "Where are you going?" the officers asked them. "To the festival in Ho," they replied in French-accented English. As I completed my second immigration form of the day—to enter Ghana—I stole a glance as the chiefs left the office, heading toward the festival.*

Such crossings represent an essential part of participation of in many Ewe festivals. Performance groups and delegations of chiefs from places like Notsié and Tsévié in Togo cross in full regalia to attend important festivals in Ghana. The Togolese cultural troupe *Amlima* (based in Lomé) performs in many festivals in Ghana as well as Togo. *Amlima* members performed Gelede masks in three of the Ewe festivals I documented (two in Togo and one in Ghana). Though danced by Ewe performers within a festival celebrating Ewe identities and histories, the culturally Yoruba Gelede masks, which are usually produced in Nigeria or Bénin,

were a focal point of many of the festivities.<sup>143</sup> When asked why Yoruba masks like Gelede might play a part in Ewe festivals, Mamissi Sofivi Dansso reasoned that “Most of the people who are in Notsié were slaves purchased in Nigeria so when they arrived in Notsié they also brought their own gods with them. That is how many traditions from Nigeria have come amongst Ewe people” (Personal Communication Nov 22, 2017). Her assertion illustrates how performances from other ethnic groups inspire spectators to speculate on historical connections between themselves and their non-Ewe neighbors, extending Ewe migration narratives to fit present circumstances.

Through performances from ethnic groups including Fon, Mina, Ewe, and Yoruba, Ewe people remember their past as migrants who exchanged with many different groups. These performances of interethnic exchange through Yoruba masquerade, Fon *adjogbo* dance, and the presentation of the full-body masks of the Vodun *Zagbeto* from Bénin demonstrate influences that Ewe people have gained from neighboring groups through migration. Such borrowed traditional forms provide “a platform for dancers to represent their own transnational positions as they inform specific, local contexts” (O’Shea 2007: 163). Performances, including processions of Ewe chiefs from different nation-states united in the regalia of chieftaincy and in celebration of their common heritage, show that national boundaries do not reflect Ewe perceptions of the scope of their cultural identity. Through such integrations, Ewe people formalize and strengthen bonds between those on either side of the border and construct identities that overlap boundaries

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<sup>143</sup> Henry Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal argue that such spectacle is the manifestation of an otherworldly reality. They further define spectacle as a transitory, efficacious, worldly manifestation of the spirit world. Gelede performances serve as a form of sacrifice that pays homage to women so that the community can partake of their secrets and otherworldly power. Drewal and Drewal also show how devotees nurture spirits in exchange for blessings and protection (1990: 6). Also see Babatunde Lawal's *The Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture* (1996) for more about Gelede masquerade.

placed upon them by colonial legacies. Festival organizers consciously draw performers and attendees from Ghana, Togo, Bénin, and the Black Atlantic, using traditional choreographies to reach into the world and engaged the junctures between cultural representation and the politics of global exchange.<sup>144</sup>



Figure 15. Zagbeto at the Asogli Yam Festival. Ho, Ghana, 2015.

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<sup>144</sup> Daniel, Personal Communication Aug 23, 2017

### **Framing Minor Transnationalism:**

As I have already noted, by using the language of exodus and return, Ewe festival organizers clearly position Ewe people as a regional diaspora. In so doing, they frame Ewe identities in terms of what Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih have called “minor transnationalism” (2005: 5). Minor transnationalism allows for people from small nations, like Ghana and Togo, to identify and form connections that do not depend on larger nations as meeting places or instigators. Unlike globalization, minor transnational movements involve conceiving the space of the transnational “as a space of exchange and participation” (ibid) in processes of hybridization in which cultures are produced and performed without mediation by dominant, centralized cultures or nation-states (ibid).

Ewe people use minor transnational creative exchanges that foster a certain degree of regional hybridization and delimitation of their ethnic identities (by including “others” and telling interlocking narratives at events in different towns in Eweland) as tactics for “maintain[ing] identifications outside of the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference” (Clifford 306).<sup>145</sup> Many Ewe people describe their cultural distinctiveness as directly related to their narratives of dispersal from Notsié and to the cultural capital of their dance and musical forms. Community members like Dzifomor argue that Ewe people attract the tourism that propels local economic growth through displays of cultural distinctiveness (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015). Using festival forms, Ewe performers and community organizers formulate Ewe appeal and distinctiveness based on their status as a group of “dwelling,

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<sup>145</sup> In *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau juxtaposes the abstract concepts of the *strategy* and the *tactic*. The intentional visibility of the *strategy* and its division of space allows for the practice of panopticism, in which foreign Others can be observed and scrutinized in the interest of controlling them (de Certeau 1984: 36). The *strategy* delimits its proper place, while *tactic* is forced to “pull tricks” and seize opportunities (de Certeau 1984: 37). Festivals combine many different divisions of space and concepts of time in ways that “pull tricks” through which communities can claim multiple identities at once.

maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home” (Clifford 1994: 304). As a result, Ewe festivals are often called Hogbe, or homeland, festival in reference to the “time/space bending” assertion that all of the peoples who now call themselves Ewe had ancestors who fled from Notsié (while the festival in Notsié itself is named for the great wall said to have contained all of these people). Such narratives are diasporic in scope and form, as individuals claim identities with cultural affinities, kinship structures, and political affiliations in addition to national identities.<sup>146</sup> Part of the work of Ewe festivals is to articulate (and, perhaps, even to call into being) “both roots and routes...to construct...alternative public spheres, forms of community consciousness[,] and solidarity” (Clifford 1994: 304). This solidarity not only facilitates communication between members of and performers from the groups and subgroups who identify themselves as Ewe, but they also serve as performed counter-narratives to realist codes of past and present economic decline in Eweland and the nations in which Ewe people reside.

Though scholars have studied the Pan-African Arts and Theater Festival (PANAFEST) as a model performance of diaspora in Elmina, Ghana, I suggest that studies of Ewe festivals might reveal regional diasporas in conversation with continued West African migrations and transnationalism. I modify Jemima Pierre’s statements about the role of the Ghanaian State in hosting Pan-African festivals and events, like Elmina’s PANAFEST. Ewe performers and local organizers participate in a similar kind of tactical craftsmanship when they host Ewe festivals to

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<sup>146</sup> In *Smugglers, Secessionists, and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana Togo Frontier*, Paul Nugent expresses his initial surprise that Ghanaian Ewe people on the borderlands closer to Lomé than to Accra “identified strenuously with something called Ghana” (2002:7). On the other hand, D. E. K. Amenumey writes about the political and cultural identifications formed through the Ewe unifications movements that had two surges in popularity just after first World War I and then World War II. Amenumey also argues that the Ewe Presbyterian Church helped to nurture concepts of Ewe unity (1989: 22-29). In her unpublished master’s thesis, Djifa Kothor argues that unification movements and efforts to establish Ewe unity through socio-economic development continue in the Ewe diaspora in the United States (2012: 39-44).

draw upon their “position in the global political economy, [their] own histor[ies], and diaspora linkages to begin mapping new or alternative geographies of transnational...belonging” (2013: 127). These performances fuel continued migrations in multiple directions, dancing the nation in its complex multivalence, performing Ewe identities, and staging Ewe histories as ways of configuring Ewe futures. In the next sections of the chapter, I consider how Ewe festivals counterbalance histories of economic decline and propose possibilities for Ewe futures through aesthetic choices that promote diasporic movements and continued migrations.

### **Counterbalancing Narratives of Economic Decline:**

Through the pomp and spectacle of the durbar, a festival form meant to display royal wealth and power, Ewe people perform alternatives to economic decline and rising national debt in their respective republics. Since national independence, in 1957 for Ghana and in 1960 for Togo, the citizens of both nations have faced a number of political and economic challenges. Historian Emmanuel Akyeampong contextualizes West African diasporas through a discussion of the economic causes of dispersal. In “Africans in the Diaspora: The Diaspora and Africa,” he reminds readers that

The exigencies of global capitalism have sucked Africans into a global labor market for the past five centuries: from the slave-worked plantations of the New world...to the African soldiers who fought in both world wars and worked in factories in France after the Second World War; to the contemporary brain-drain of African professionals and academicians to the West (2000: 186).

In addition, he marks the start of the economic travails of post-independence governments as the fall in commodity prices for tropical products from the late 1950s Akyeampong 2000: 2003-204. This hurdle set the larger context of economic decline since it left “strapped [West African] governments... unable to deliver on the promises made at independence” (ibid). Political

conflicts also continued patterns of scarcity. In Ghana, for instance, President J.J Rawlings, at the head of the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC), took the nation over in a military coup in December 1981 after what Akyeampong describes as “bungling civilian governments and inept regimes” ended with an earlier coup by the military in 1979 (ibid: 205). By 1983 the UN Food and Agriculture Organization reported widespread hunger in the nation and the PNDC government invited the World Bank to intervene in the hopes of putting the economy “on the road to recovery” (2000: 205; Boahen 1989; Rimmer 1992; Frimpong-Ansah 1992).

Though Ghana now boasts a booming tourism industry and a steadily growing economy—which has developed from one of the least successful among African nations in 1983—the steady migration of Ghanaians to many different parts of the globe in search of education and gainful employment continues (Eberhardt and Teal 2010: 33). In Togo, national poverty has been fueled by continued political unrest and many still have vivid memories of the ways that “the economy suffered deeply during the political turmoil of 1991-1994” caused by violent opposition of Ewe people to Kabre President Eyadéma Gnassingbé’s regime when “development money fled, expatriates returned to Europe, [and] shops were closed for months” (Piot 1999: 47-48). Even now, many of my Togolese friends complain that they have trouble getting to work and keeping their businesses open due to demonstrations against President Faure that continue to increase in frequency and intensity. These narratives of the economic shifts and uncertainties of the 70s, 80s, and 90s form a contextual and historical backdrop for the focus of cultural festivals on economic development.

In contrast to histories of financial deprivation, Ewe people use the form of the durbar to display wealth and the political might of Ewe chiefs. By returning to historical narratives of triumph, festivals like Agbogboza in Notsié exemplify what Joseph Roach calls “public

enactments of forgetting, [practiced]....to blur the obvious discontinuities, misalliances, and ruptures” (1996: 3). The form of the durbar, in particular, has a history of displaying wealth and authority. In *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria*, anthropologist Andrew Apter shows that the genealogy of the durbar includes British colonial and pre-colonial West African antecedents. Apter examines the wider implications and genealogy of the grand durbar at Nigeria’s 1977 black world’s fair called FESTAC, which took place in the context of extreme wealth due to a boost in the country’s economy from an oil boom (2005). Durbar celebrations in Ewe festivals reverse the incorporation of traditional polities into colonial empires by integrating non-Ewe ethnic choreographies and international performers into the fabric of Ewe expansion and cultural might.

The durbar was invented by the British with specific political objectives in mind for use in Victorian India and then in West Africa (Apter 2005: 168). British colonial durbar events naturalized indirect rule in choreographed spectacles honoring governors, district officers, and British royalty. Durbar events were a key expression of Indirect Rule since they codified customs into administrative schedules and categories (Apter 2005: 188).<sup>147</sup> Yet, according to Apter, precolonial Nigerian ceremonies associated with “durbar” were also active sites of political negotiation and mediation during which local and regional identities and authority relations were and are reshaped and remade (2005: 179). The organizers of the Agbogbo festival in Notsié make use of the durbar form to promote economic development through depictions of dispersal and reintegration. By including a Ghanaian Ewe chief from Germany in the processional performances of the Togolese festival Agbogboza in 2015, festival organizers displayed royal

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<sup>147</sup> The first British Viceroy of Nigeria, Lord Frederick Lugard imitated the receptions held for Native Princes by British viceroys in India and held the first durbar for the chiefs of Northern Nigeria in Zaria in 1911. This later became a regular practice of the imperialist administrators of Nigeria (Haruna 1977: 18).



authority, illustrate minor transnational movements between Ghana and Togo, and integrate German identities into Ewe cultural representation. Through the performer sometimes (incorrectly) identified as the Chief of the German Ewes, the organizers of the Agbogbo festival extend their reach into the Black Atlantic as a means of drawing wealth and drawing upon images of success and luxury to bolster local economies.

***Walking in the Festival: Agbogboza (Notsié, Togo)***

*I had positioned myself within the performance space because the crowds under the shelters had obscured my view of the processions and dancers. As the speeches began, I joined a group of journalists and photographers moving around the performance space to capture images. As I approached the dancers of the Amlima ballet troupe, a few of the Gelede masqueraders sat stiffly in plastic chairs, the bright yellow faces of the masks joining the bold impression made by the play of different patterns, sequins, and symbols across the textiles of the masker's attire. The faces of the performers were covered by white lace attached to the rim of their masks. As they rose to perform, the bulkiness of their accoutrements protected even their feet from the glances of the spectators and photographers who gathered around them. I questioned the presence of Gelede maskers in Agbogboza since the masks are known to come from Nigeria and Bénin and Yoruba people typically perform them. I wondered why such masks would be included in an Ewe festival, thinking back to Sofivi's statement about Ewe people coming from Nigeria as enslaved people, and Ewe migration histories that trace the movements of Ewe people from Ketu in Nigeria due to Yoruba expansion before arriving in Notsié.<sup>148</sup> As the*

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<sup>148</sup> Ketu is known as the home of Gelede masquerade performances. For full studies of Gelede see Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal's *Gelede: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba* and Babatunde Lawal's *The Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Cultures*.

*maskers and other dancers swayed to their places, I turned away, crossing paths with a wandering performer. I avoided the middle-aged woman dressed in a blue and white striped cloth tied in traditional fashion. The woman's hair stood out in stiff points, wrapped in strips of white cloth. This performer wandered around the festival grounds, she spoke and sang to onlookers and broke into the arm movements of the agbadza dance when she heard the distinctive rhythm ring out from one of the many cultural troupes performing around the festival grounds. I recognized this performer as a representative of the migration epic and took note of her padded buttocks padded with an antiquated undergarment, a cushion called the atsibla meant to connect to the waist beads that many West African women and children still wear in contemporary times. Ewe women historically tied the atsibla on their backs to help with carrying children.<sup>149</sup> Through her presence, sauntering through the festival, this other wanderer comfortably represented the modes of dress of her grandmothers while she charted her path through the festival. Pivoting away from the other woman, I stopped short upon seeing a chief wearing a large gold crown. Afro-futurist images of African American musician Janelle Monáe on the cover of her album *Metropolis* and the elaborately architectural hair sculptures in the drawings of the African American artist Robert Pruitt sprang to mind as I neared the chief's front row seat amongst the spectators...*

The presence of the Ghanaian development chief, Togbe Ngoryifia Céphas Kosi Bansah, in a Togolese festival exemplifies the transnationalism and transcultural exchanges of the festival. Another festival performer described this illustrious personage as the chief of Ewe people in Germany (“le chef des Ewes en Allemagne”).<sup>150</sup> Though his post as development chief

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<sup>149</sup> This article of underclothing is also called atufu or atibla and is mostly used in contemporary times to remind people of past fashions (Geurts 1998: 101-102).

<sup>150</sup> Personal Communication Nov 23, 2015

is an honorary position gained in 1987 through nomination (Gbi traditional council 2015), Bansah formed part of the procession of chiefs at the durbar of the Agbogbo Festival in Notsié, Togo, a town touted as the homeland of all Ewe people and credited as the beginning point of all Ewe migration. He was recognized in 1995 as a superior and spiritual chief of the Ewe people due to his hard work as a development chief who lives abroad in Germany.<sup>151</sup> In the Agbogbo festival in 2015, the development chief wore an imposing golden crown and was flanked by two German women, his wife and her mother.



Figure 16. Togbe Ngoryifia Céphas Bansah, his wife, and his mother-in-law. Notsié, Togo, 2015.

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<sup>151</sup> He has supplied hospitals in Hohoe with German volunteer doctors, repaired an unstable bridge in the region, and sent water pumps to supply clean water through cooperation with farmers in Ludwigshafen, where he resides with his family (<https://www.charitylabel.com/de/projektetails/index.html?PNR=165&CHARITYLABELSID=f44fc11491fd1f451e413f9fc71ccc98>)

*The Ngoryifia of Hohoe sat upon a carved wooden throne wearing an extravagantly tall and architectural gold crown between his German wife Gabrielle and her mother, who also wear golden crowns. I scrutinized the gold crown covering his head like a medieval helmet. Four narrow gold promontories set at the front, back and both sides of the crown projected upward from this golden cap. The crown extended nearly a foot until joining an opulent gold band studded with the adinkra symbol called "Name Ne Ohene," meaning "God is King," a sign meant to praise the majesty and supremacy of God. The development chief's attire also included two ornate gold vambraces and rings in the shape of a crocodile and porcupine in addition to a necklace with a pendulously thick gold triangle across his chest like an armor plate. His slippers bore golden crocodiles and his feet rested on a white stool. Looking up from my camera, I swept out of the path of an oncoming adrafo company, or hunter's association, still bobbing my head and body to see around them as they ushered in another chief held aloft on a palanquin, I backed toward my companions, checking my images as the festival performers continued to circulate and cross the festival grounds.*

Through the durbar form, previously colonized Ewe people assert their own presence and significance in the land of the colonizer. By representing the extension of Ewe sovereignty into Germany, the first European power to colonize and Christianize Ewe people, the Ewe delegation from Germany demonstrate the continued workings and performances of Ewe diasporas through performance. Bansah's attire and his participation in the festival also demonstrate "the power...to reach out beyond...formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which [these objects] emerged and for which [they] may be taken by the viewer to stand" (Greenblatt 1991: 42). Through this ability to symbolize or

“stand for” cultural forces, the German Ewe development chief presents possibilities for understanding the types of internationalism through which Ewe people redefine their ethnic identities.

### **Chief at Large:**

This chief’s adornments and his international biography provide a pathway into an examination of the futurist projections of the festival form. Ewe exodus festivals reveal as much about Ewe desires for the future as their conceptions of the past. This German, Ewe, Ghanaian chief represents a deterritorialized signifier of Ewe sovereignty, no longer contained within the borders of any one nation but drawing together influences from multiple nations to fit his personal needs (Appadurai 1996). That Bansah performs his duties as chief from Ludwigshafen, Germany via Skype, using technology to maintain ties in Ghana and Togo from a continent away and illustrates the insufficiency of the system of the nation-state to regulate or account for increasingly transnational flows of information, communities, and individuals.<sup>152</sup> Bansah is what Arjun Appadurai might call a chief “at large,” since his paths across diasporic public spheres confound the salience of the nation-state as the arbiter of social change (Appadurai 1996: 4). His participation in Notsié’s Agbogbo festival illustrates the significance of migration and mass media in creating a sense of Ewe culture as simultaneously deterritorialized through technology and re-territorialized through festival (Appadurai 1996: 10, 29).

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<sup>152</sup> Unfortunately, many of the English publications about Bansah are riddled with errors due the reporters’ incomplete and often incorrect understanding of Ewe chieftaincy. I reference some of these sources despite these difficulties because of the important mediascapes, imaginative landscapes, and interpretive meaning-making that they represent (Steinbuch 2016; Appadurai 1996: 10, 22, 44). Nonetheless, Bansah is not a king and has no inherited title (Gbi traditional counsel).

Bansah's performance of pageantry and display integrates him amongst the other chiefs of Ewe people and reunites his narratives with collective narratives of migration, substantiating the intent of the festival to produce international development while also reinterpreting the meaning and conditions of both transnational and international migrations. Rather than framing a narrative of Ewe people fleeing from tyranny or violence, Bansah represents many in the widening Ewe diaspora who leave their hometowns, regions, or nations in search of economic prosperity and educational opportunities. Bansah's presence, especially with his wife and mother-in-law bedecked in royal regalia, asserts that Ewe people have extended their reach and settlement into Europe. Bansah's presence, however contentious due to his representation as a legitimate chief and even a king of Hohoe, also shows how festivals participate in the proliferation of Ewe culture through new media and internet sources. However imperfectly, these festivals provocatively integrate these narratives into tapestries of Ewe histories, fulfilling desires for the festivals to continue to display the riches of Ewe culture and "to show new aspects of our culture every year" (Personal Communication Aug 23, 2017). This Ewe chief who maintains a website in German<sup>153</sup> and works as a mechanic by day in Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Germany, further complicates the meaning and the purpose of Ewe exodus festivals. His website targets Germans seeking more knowledge about Ghana in an effort to gain more support for development projects in the Volta Region. Bansah's international mobility—and the minor transnationalism that occurs as performers and participants cross national borders to attend Ewe festivals—de-centers the West since, by repurposing Ewe artistic forms and images in various locations around the globe, performers challenge the preeminence of the West and disrupt the logic of hegemonic control over images, histories, and cultural production (Appadurai 1996). By

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<sup>153</sup> Cephah Bansah's website: <http://koenig-bansah.de/?volk/problematik>

de-territorializing and re-territorializing Ewe chieftdom, festival organizers, performers, and Ewe communities defy histories of privation by remaking possible futures as they revise and figuratively revisit the past. The resonance of Bansah's attire and presence leads to speculations on the nature of Ewe and West African projection of representations of past practices and ideologies into the future and to slippery discussions of the future-looking visions suggested within the festival form.

### **Anticipating Ewe Futures:**

Festival dances and the format in which they are presented rally a variety of narratives meant to produce new repertoires grafted upon the old. Though Ewe festivals do not explicitly engage with the alienation that characterizes Afro-futurist thought, in "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," Eshun Kodwo argues that the importance of writing the future lies in making certain futures more possible than others. He shows that Afro-futurism extends the work of counter-memory so that black communities can draw power from the futures that they endorse. Through counter-memories, communities ethically assemble histories to create what Kodwo calls "counter-futures" (2003: 289). Though the deposition of Kwame Nkrumah represented for many the failure of the planned utopias of African socialism (ibid), West Africans continue to project aspirations for the future through reimagined pasts. Within exodus festivals, Ewe communities do not propose to live in a static and triumphant past but turn the shifting pasts forged through remembered performances and practices into tools for inhabiting fruitful futures loosely tethered to the nation, even as they are anchored by cultural practice. Dela Dzifomor claimed that part of the significance of both the festival form and the training of young festival performers is that "our culture must endure for our future generations...It is up to us to see if this thing doesn't

work, or this other thing doesn't work. We have to change it" (Personal Communication Aug 10, 2012). By engaging with future-looking narratives, and constructing "landscape[s] of collective aspirations" (Appadurai 1996: 31), Ewe communities extend the work of countermemory into the future. Through these new narratives, community leaders traditionalize, or normalize, social and physical mobility that is also enacted through performances that integrate narratives of the past into proposals for the future. These influences unite past and present so that communities consider each when developing solutions to future problems. Through combining different temporalities, communities understand environmental problems, disputes, privileges, and disadvantages inherited from previous generations. Through strategic curation of space, Ewe festival participants and organizers remap histories to overwrite narratives of civil conflict by exhibiting social order.

Public festival performances, including the procession of the chiefs and dances for the hunter Vodun Adela, emplace Ewe people so that they can imagine alternatives and improvements to local and transnational networks. Ewe people orient themselves through localized narratives of African histories to find a place for themselves within multiple national histories and in reaction to current narratives of financial decline and the realities of continued dispersal and emigration. Though these performances have not yet entered the realm of Afro-futurist or science fiction aesthetics, the transnationalism of Bansah reflects the physical and digital dimensions of Ewe diasporas extending across and looping back into Eweland. This digitized Ewe transnationalism, in conjunction with the desires of festival committees to fuse traditional chieftaincy with advanced agricultural technologies, hints that a new Ewe futurism may be on the horizon, and if so, that the festivals may be a site of such innovation. In a discussion with Daniel about Ayiza, he admitted that the committee has made attempts to import



genetically engineered beans from Nigeria to fulfill the triumphant scenarios encompassed within the narratives of Tsévié's bean harvest festival (Personal Communication Aug 18, 2015). Such exchanges demonstrate the pan-Africanist and technological ambitions nestled within state-authorized narratives that draw tourists, educate young people, and serve to facilitate the machinery of chieftaincy and national cultural initiatives. Diaspora scholar Yogita Goyal reminds us that "to imagine a community...characterized by both national and transnational concerns, Black Atlantic texts constitute an eclectic genre, where the realist narrative of the nation is interrupted by the romance of the diaspora" (Goyal 2010: 9). Ewe festivals are only one example of the ways that West African festival genres of storytelling and performance epitomize the conflicting discourses of romance (pageantry and narratives of an idealized return to origins) on the one hand, and the practical demands of sustaining a nation (including agricultural production and economic solvency) on the other. Exodus festivals allow for a rereading of the role and adaptability of choreographic practices that orchestrate and realign individual bodies as they reform and redirect conflicting political and religious bodies, assembling the parts into threads that form polyvocal bodies of historical knowledge.

### **Conclusion:**

Festivals representing Ewe people illustrate dispersal and return as models of future expansion for Ewe people, enacted and rehearsed through dances of healing, ceremonies of reconciliation, border crossings, ethnic exchanges, and royal processions. Traditional dances and regalia in motion represent the operation and continued adaptations of Ewe communities spread across three nations and clustered around the borders between Ghana and Togo. Though Ewe community members in towns like Tsévié, Vogon, and Notsié in Togo and Ho, Dzodze, and

Anloga in Ghana use art to reaffirm and reinvent their ethnic identity and to subvert and intervene in the realist codes of communal narratives of wealth, success, and health. Processions of chiefs in regalia and the dances of groups like Amlima show that national boundaries do not contain Ewe people. Even the performance of the Zagbeto, who present a Vodun that was passed to them from practitioners in Bénin, show that the national borders placed upon Ewe identities are not only permeable but can be suspended within the space of the festival to assert a continuous history that remaps Eweland. Besides the transnational mobility of practitioners who move between Ghana and Togo to attend Ewe festivals and rituals held by family members, Ewe festival participants also engage in long-distance exchanges of images and information through increasing access to various forms of technology, including internet access. Eweland does not end in Togo or Ghana but extends to Bénin, Nigeria, and even Germany through performance idioms that persist through intermixing, exchange, and assemblage. Attention to such efforts to stage narratives of regional and international Ewe diasporas demonstrate the mechanisms and illustrate the sutures through which strategically assembled ethnic groups continue to reimagine themselves through performances designed to unite groups across geopolitical boundaries.

## **Conclusion:**

### ***Borderlands, Performances, and Religious Frameworks in Eweland***

*At certain times we must remind the Vodunwo that we are thinking of them.... sometimes they ask for food and we give it to them.... We celebrate to show them that those whom they have possessed think of them. Each Vodun has its dance and their drum. At a given time, when they ask us to, we will dance for them. If they do not wish it, we will not do it.*

~ Mamissi Sofivi Dansso<sup>154</sup>

*African art and dance partially are defined as social acts of filiation, extending human consciousness into the past...Evidence of this is found in the widespread belief in reincarnation in West and Central Africa, a belief which dissolves the primacy of time.*

~ Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion*<sup>155</sup>

*The display—activated by drum rhythm, horn blasts and song, made expressive by gesture and dance—captivates, entertains and dazzles; all townspeople, commoner and chief, old and young, are swept into its aura, caught by its majesty. But its multiple meanings are by no means lost. The social order is manifest in the dress and behavior of all participants, whether onlookers or actors.*

~ Herbert M. Cole, “The Art of Festival in Ghana”<sup>156</sup>

Ewe performances occurring in forest clearings, home courtyards, and on public festival grounds do not merely perpetuate narratives of the past, they produce histories in the moment and participate in the elaboration of Ewe identities. Marginalized performers use traditional choreographies as modalities of history-making, accumulating symbols of specialized knowledge to simultaneously reproduce and arbitrate divisive knowledge through bodily disciplines. Communities layer these present realities onto histories of regional migrations. Through the ongoing debates within ritual proceedings, communities formalize the interrelationships through which they engage with ancestors, nature spirits, enslaved spirits, neighbors, elders, and peers, as they morally evaluate individuals and their families. Additionally, in Mama Tchamba rituals,

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<sup>154</sup> Dansso, Personal Communication August 4, 2013

<sup>155</sup> Thompson 1974: 28

<sup>156</sup> Cole 1975: 20

stylized walking and “disturbances” caused by unpredictable dancing spirits facilitate memories of journeys undertaken in search of economic opportunities. Through the transformations possible within festival and ritual performances, communities evaluate their own indebtedness to ancestors and outsiders and their desires for wealth and social harmony.

Mami Wata practitioners look to the Atlantic and beyond in search of affluence associated with long histories of maritime commerce. Through relationships with “witch-killing” Vodunwo like Atigeli, they assess the paths through which wealth is gained and decry selfish consumption (Rush 1999). They also promote collective gain by pleasing Mami Wata spirits with the luxuries of the sort that they hope she will give them in return. Those “wives of Mami” who devote themselves to the spirits also demonstrate that objects derive meaning through relationships. Owners of chromolithographs care for them, analyze them, and recognize them as “photographs,” even as they adorn themselves to match these images to convey allegiance to foreign Vodunwo (H. J. Drewal 1988, 1996, 2008; Rush 1999, 2013; Pinney 2004). Furthermore, the Vodun altars at which many practitioners perform devotional practices reflect associative biographies and genealogies revealed only through knowledge of the previous lives of objects, like twin figures (venavi) or Tchambagan (Peek 2011; Rush 2013: 116-119). Practitioners also rearrange altars as they “dance” various objects, further demonstrating the “unfinished” in Vodun aesthetics (Rush 2013). In such ways, performers use multiple techniques to display, wear, and dance objects of veneration.

Through attention to three broad themes—ritual, identity, and history-making—I have examined how performers produce potential, connect shifting landscapes, and practice intersubjectivity. By applying choreographic analysis to indigenous dance forms, we can now see how Ewe people live their narratives through movement vocabularies, choreographic syntax, and

stylized interpersonal exchanges that operate within and philosophically transcend given spatial constraints. Ewe performers dance in the here and now in ways that they describe as being in conversation with the past and with a growing list of landscapes. Ritual practitioners present complex relationships of kinship and opposition. Foreigners visiting from oceans and rivers, and an “India” imagined from the landscapes and symbols shown in chromolithographs, to “arrest” (*freiner*) disorder and confusion (Sofivi, Personal Communication Nov 29, 2017).<sup>157</sup> Ewe Vodun practitioners experience conflicting emotions of fear and elation as beautiful bought people and other spirits—who sometimes resemble mermaids, rainbow serpents, crocodiles, and three-headed men—“arrive” to dance amongst them, scolding and advising their “wives” and uninitiated onlookers (A. F. Roberts 2009: 127; Rosenthal 1999).

Devotees attract, delight, and respond to spirits using choreographed “in-body” (M. T. Drewal 1992: 7) movements that they practice and refine to prepare their bodies to respond to demands of spirits.<sup>158</sup> At events for Mama Tchamba, groups negotiate contemporary debates through which they position the “North” as an essential starting point for domestic and transatlantic narratives of enslavement. By collapsing borders between themselves and Vodun spirits, they create alternatives to realities of economic scarcity and social disorder by making connections among places, objects, and persons that might seem unrelated to the untrained observer (M. N. Roberts 2000: 63-64).

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<sup>157</sup> Mamissi Sofivi spoke with me about Tchamba spirits “arresting” disorder to help people in a recent phone conversation (Personal Communication Nov 29, 2017). Pierre argued more than once that Mami Wata comes from India and that sacred practices in India are the same as those in Aného (Personal Communication Nov 11, 2015). Dana Rush discusses ways Vodun practitioners in Bénin imagine India as synonymous with the sea (2013: 90).

<sup>158</sup> Dela Dzifomor argued that performers “must dance...in a specific way because if [they] perform the dances improperly [they] will be punished” (Personal Communication Aug 20, 2015).

In this study, training also emerges as an important element of local choreographies and efforts to educate young women in the town of Tsévié, Togo. The leaders and founders of the Association Deconu maintain rhetorical distinctions between “deconu” (“tradition”) and “Vodun.” In so doing, they navigate the kinds of tensions among language, meaning, and practice that Vodun practitioners in Ghana’s Volta Region have encountered in relation to practices of ritual temple servitude (Akyeampong 2001b: 3; Madison 2010: 38, 62-63). Yet, despite such concerns and rhetorical incongruities, elders seek to form young women into reputable community members through Vodun ritual choreographies. By teaching through indigenous expressive arts, the Association Deconu inverts what Robert Farris Thompson calls the “double admonition” of African dance critics that performers should “improve [their] character to improve [their] art” (1974: 1), as they teach Ewe girls to improve their art in order to develop and display superior moral character.

Large-scale festivals not only solidify and exhibit the political alliances of chiefs, they also project visions of Ewe futures by portraying a manageable incorporative social order. Though Ewe communities, like many indigenous groups around the world, tell origin narratives that convey relationships with ancestral lands and animals, their ethnic identities seem more connected to journeys across landscapes than to rootedness within them.<sup>159</sup> By performing gadzo and agbadza, dance idioms formerly used to celebrate military victories, as declarations of cultural distinctiveness, Ewe people promote the types of referential adaptations of past practices that Margaret Thompson Drewal calls “repetition with revision” (M. T. Drewal 1992: 4). In such repeating revisions, performers signal differences from past experiences and past performances (ibid: 7). As festival planning committees promote technologies meant to restore financial

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<sup>159</sup> Amenumey 1986; Wicker and Opoku 2007: 1-5; Nugent 2003: 7

success to their regions, performers demonstrate the agricultural and cultural wealth of the nation, at times even “dancing” yams and palm nuts. Performers construct transcendent tactical geographies in festivals and rituals. Through portrayals of unfixed borders and by bridging distances and discrepancies, Ewe communities use spectral geographies to defy and redefine space and time as they display the “restless” and “recombinant” processes of diaspora in open-air cultural festivals and small-scale Vodun rituals (Roberts and Roberts 2016: 55, 83; Gilroy 1993: 31).

Questions and opportunities have presented themselves during the course of my doctoral research that provide a sense of what next steps might be in ongoing research in West African performance arts. An exploration of how religious and cultural concerns shift as one moves westward, along the coast through Ghana to Côte d’Ivoire and on to Liberia and Sierra Leone, might provide insight into how residents navigate their own borderlands and global trade histories through performances, narrative, and indigenous religious frameworks. Further study of religious and performance idioms in West Africa might open new possibilities of inquiry into how contentions displaced from political discourse by civil conflict and authoritarian regimes might make their way into choreographic representations. Through techniques like “signifying” (Gates 1989) and performing veiled jokes and insults in powder-keg nations like Togo and stable and growing economies like Ghana, as well as in post-conflict nations like Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire, performers assert different genres of protest and critique (Thompson 1974: 2; Avorgbedor 2005: 206). An investigation of current relations between Ewe Vodun practitioners and northern groups would also be an important contribution to scholarship on Vodun. Moreover, scholarship privileging indigenous dance criticism, as advocated by Robert Farris Thompson, may help Africanist scholars better understand how Vodun communities align

themselves with, syncretize, and/or reject Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity and the histories of such connections and contestations.

Furthermore, as they interact with tourists from the transatlantic diaspora, how do West African groups like Ewe, Ga, Akan, Baule, Krou, Mende, and others process external narratives of diasporas—regional and transoceanic—through indigenous frameworks? Since we know that notions of the transatlantic diaspora help to constitute nationalist ideologies, as in the cases of both Marcus Garvey and Frantz Fanon (Goyal 2010: 4-6, 17-18), we might learn more about how concepts of nationalism are shifting in communities along the West African coast in response to exchanges prompted by heritage and Vodun tourism (Jeychandran 2013; Rush 2000). I hope that my investigations of choreographic practices amongst Ewe communities will usefully contribute to such future studies by asserting the importance of investigating how people move as well as what they say.

***Envoi:***

During my most recent trip to Ghana in summer 2017, my Ghanaian friends discouraged me from staying in Togo. Protestors were flooding the streets of Lomé to demand the resignation of their president. Faure Gnassingbé has held power since the death of his father, who had been president for thirty-eight years. Many Togolese have grown weary of what they describe as the “Gnassingbé Dynasty” (“Togo Protests” 2017). My friends in Ghana worried that the instability caused by the political conflict might turn to violence. They also feared that, as an obvious *yefu*, or foreigner, I might be targeted. I still visited Togo, mystifying the Togolese and Ghanaian immigration officers in Aflao/Lomé and Segbe by crossing the border between Ghana and Togo six times in three days to honor my friends’ request that I return to the Volta region each night



after spending the day in Togo. My mentor Mamissi Sofivi had endured severe sickness that led her to a new home outside of Accra, Ghana, and I was not able to meet with her. My research assistant Richard assured me that her daughter has taken up her ritual duties in her absence and that the girls continue to dance. He also complained that, due to the protests and the president's nervousness concerning spreading sympathy for the opposition party, internet access had been restricted and phone lines were unpredictable. "I suppose," he laughed "that this is just a part of political life" (Personal Communication Sept 5, 2017).

In such a tense political atmosphere, performers continue to assert non-national identities, communicating with voyaging spirits through whose worship they reach into the stories and landscapes of far-off places, moving to make wholes out of historical fragments, and forging alternative futures by fusing present and past. Ewe performers navigate the connective threads among place, memory, history, and identity in ways that reject final conclusions. Through such performances they leave room for accumulation and adaptation and recognize the "eternal potential" (Rush 1999) of an ontology realized through Vodun. In short, Ewe people continue to translate the borders and discrepancies amongst themselves, choosing when to assert difference and when to perform connection. Through studies of how, and not just why, they do so, we may discover that Ewe and other "spirited" choreographies position the crux between oneself and a stranger, between homeland and frontier, as performances already in process.

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