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Ajé & Àjé

Gender and Female Power in Yorùbáland

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the Master of Arts
in African Studies

by

Sarah Jenise Mathews

2014

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Ajé & Àjé

Gender and Female Power in Yorùbáland

by

Sarah Jenise Mathews

Master of Arts in African Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Andrew H. Apter, Chair

Yorùbá culture of present-day Southwest Nigeria and Southeast Republic of Benin, has received much attention from academics over time. In part, this is due to the culturally ingrained female power that has existed and persisted over time in Yorùbáland. However, some scholars have argued against the gender structure generally accepted by scholars to be grounded in Yorùbáland. In particular, Oyeronke Oyewumi made a compelling, yet controversial argument in her book *The Invention of Women: Making An African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997). Oyewumi asserts that scholars have imposed their Western bias in their research on the Yorùbá based on their own understanding of gender roles throughout history.

Although Oyewumi makes many valid arguments in her volume, this study will expose weaknesses in her claim in regards to important gender distinctions that have existed in Yorùbáland over time, and in particular female power in the marketplace. By examining two Yorùbá concepts of female power, the deity Ajé and the concept of àjé, the culturally ingrained importance of female power will be made clear and contribute to the vast scholarship on related subjects.

The goddess *Ajé*, as a deity of the marketplace, has received little attention in scholarship on the Yorùbá pantheon, yet she provides an example of the importance of womanhood in Yorùbá culture. The concept of *àjé*, on the other hand, is much better studied concept of female power in Yorùbáland. *Àjé* represents female power throughout many facets of Yorùbá life, including economic, domestic, religious, as well as political spheres. These expressions of culturally grounded female power within Yorùbáland are exemplary of the dynamic gender structure in Yorùbá culture. Contrary to what Oyewumi asserts, and contrary to many early Western feminists' accounts, Yorùbá women have been able to harness female power to their advantage throughout Yorùbáland over time.

The thesis of Sarah Jenise Mathews is approved.

Allen F. Roberts

Ghislaine Lydon

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University of California, Los Angeles

2014

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GLOSSARY OF KEY YORUBA TERMS

Ajé:	Female Yoruba deity of the marketplace
Àjé:	Special power held by (some) Yoruba women believed to be more powerful than all other Yoruba deities. It can be used for negative and for positive purposes. It also represents, as a noun, the women who hold this power, also known as <i>àwon iyá wa</i> .
Àse:	(<i>A-shay</i>) The Yoruba concept of energy and power that causes change/ creates
Aso:	(<i>a-sho</i>) Cloth/fabric
Àwon iyá wa:	see àjé
Bàbálojà:	The bàbá (father) of any given marketplace who works with the iyálojà and the chairman, who resolves issues within the marketplace
Gèlèdè:	Festival held in the marketplace to appease àwon iyá wa
Igbá:	Calabash
Ìyálojà:	Female chief to the king responsible for all matters in the city/town related to women
Ìyálojà:	The màamá (mother) of any given marketplace. She handles issues for all women vendors in the market
Oba:	Yoruba ruler of a town or city
Ojà:	A market
Olojà:	A market vendor/trader
Olójó:	Annual festival held in Ife to renew the king for another year. During this festival they pay homage to the deity Ogun and to one of the market deities, Ajé.
Oríki:	A Yorùbá praise song, usually a way in which to praise a person or deity
Òrìsà:	(<i>o-ri-sha</i>) Deity

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Translations of words or phrases from Yorùbá to English are based upon my knowledge of the Yorùbá language as acquired at the University of Florida and the University of Ìbàdàn in Ìbàdàn, Nigeria in 2013 through a Boren Fellowship. It is through the teaching skills, patience, and encouragement of my wonderful Yorùbá language instructors (Kehinde Sanuth, Adefemi, Olabode, Tolulope, Clement, and Sista Debbi) that this study has budded and been enriched. My experience in Ìbàdàn where I interacted with many wonderful people who taught me about the culture, language, and history of the Yorùbá, has not only enriched me as a person, but also aided in my understanding of the Yorùbá culture and Yorùbá way. In turn, refining my ability to read and analyze the literature related to this study. I am forever thankful to all of those who opened their hearts and homes to teach me what it means to be *omo Yorùbá*. *E se oo, mí ò le kò eleyiì lai gbogbo yín*. (Thank you all, I could not write this without you.)

Introduction

The sun beats down on you like a warm, suffocating blanket as the dust fills your lungs, the smell of the *pepe* (chili pepper) in the hot sun tickles your sinuses, and you take in the sounds of women shouting and haggling over prices. Market vendors, or *olajà*, call out, competing for your business as you weave through the aisles of neatly stacked towers of produce and foodstuff. You don't need to buy anything from this section of the market today, so you respond "*Ajé óò wa..*" If we attempt to translate this phrase, we realize that *Ajé* is a female deity. The literal translation of this phrase is "*Ajé will come.*"¹ Understood as a kind of prayer saying wealth or profit will come to them, despite your kind refusal to purchase their product. *Ajé* is a female deity; she is a deity of the marketplace, of wealth, *olà*, yet Yorùbá scholars have not given her much attention, as will be discussed in sections below. Who is this *Ajé* and how does she play into discussions of Yorùbá gender ideology? Is she related in any way to the better-known Yorùbá concept of *àjé*, often loosely defined as "witch" (see below)? How do these two concepts play into the Yorùbá marketplace, as a perceived female space within Yorùbáland (Falola, 1991: 112, 114)? Are these concepts of *Ajé* and *àjé* in support of Yorùbá gender claims set forth by Oyeronke Oyewumi or do they weaken her claim of a genderless Yorùbá culture prior to British overrule?

Oyeronke Oyewumi has made an astoundingly provocative claim in *The Invention of Women*, in which she asserts "There were no women in Yorùbá society until recently. There were, of course, *obìnrin*. *Obìnrin* are anafemales². Their anatomy, just like that of *okùnrin* (anamales), did not privilege them to any social positions and similarly did not jeopardize their

¹ As explained to me by my Yorùbá language instructors at the University of Ibàdàn in 2013.

² This is Oyewumi's term for biological female, the "ana" referring to "anatomical". Hence, "anafemale" meaning "anatomical female" and "anamale" referring to "anatomical male". See Oyewumi *The Invention of Women*, pp 33-34.

access" (1997: 78). Further, she makes arguments that hold true in many of the examples she provides. For instance, the Yorùbá language lacks gendered pronouns and gendered names, potentially causing misinterpretation of historical facts, such as whether or not a ruler, or *oba*, was a man or woman (*ibid.*: 86-91). Her claim that gender is not biologically determined, but rather, is culturally determined is widely accepted among scholars and holds true to the following argument (*ibid.*: 8, Amadiume 1987, Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). She also makes an important distinction between the different senses cultures use to perceive the world around them.

She makes a compelling argument that "Western culture" predominantly uses its visual senses to explain the world around it. She asserts that this restricts the West to the physical world, only able to direct its attention forward, without the ability to bend or distort its perception (without the aid of a mirror) (*ibid.*: 14). On the contrary, the Yorùbá privilege a "multiplicity of senses anchored by hearing." (*ibid.*). This is evident in the language. Yorùbá is a tonal language and therefore, correct pronunciation is vital. If a word is pronounced incorrectly, using incorrect intonations, it may end up meaning something far from what was intended. For example, the word meaning "to be born", or give birth, is *bí*. If pronounced incorrectly, with a low tone, *bì*, it now means "to vomit", clearly a vast difference. These cultural differences regarding perspectives, she asserts, negatively affect the ability of the Western-educated scholars to accurately view/understand Yorùbá culture, specifically in regards to the existence, or lack of, gender (*ibid.*: 11-27). Although she makes a valid argument, I do not agree that this precludes Western-educated scholars from understanding cultures vastly different from their own.

Aside from the tonality of language and the importance of hearing in Yorùbá culture, Oyewumi makes the following important argument:

For the Yorùbá, and indeed many other African societies, it is about 'a particular presence in the world- a world conceived of as a whole in which all things are linked together .' It concerns the many worlds human beings inhabit; it does not privilege the physical world over the metaphysical (*ibid.*: 14).

These distinctions between the "West" and Yorùbá culture are important in regards to conducting research. In order to avoid simply looking at other cultures through a Western lens, complete with all its biases, scholars must recognize these differences. However, Oyewumi does not address, in-depth, the metaphysical world in Yorùbá culture. She recognizes the importance of this world yet does not approach what is vital to the metaphysical world from a Yorùbá perspective, the essence of womanhood and the importance of this womanhood, specifically as related to motherhood and fertility. She over generalizes the "privileged senses" used within different cultures and therefore ignores the fact that most sociological or anthropological Western-educated scholars are taught to compensate for those differences while conducting their research. The ability of Western-educated scholars to overcome these differences is evident in many Western-educated scholars who have focused their research on the meta-physical realm of Yorùbá culture, such as Margaret and Henry Drewal (1990), Andrew Apter (1991, 1992, 1993), Babatunde Lawal (1996), and Jacob K. Olupona (2000, 2011).

Oyewumi over emphasizes her point in such a way that, if taken at face value, dismisses many of the vital roles female power has played within Yorùbáland throughout history. As much of the literature on Yorùbá ritual and socio-economic activities has shown, there exists a clear distinction between man and woman, or male and female, in Yorùbá culture. In fact, as she

attempts to discredit what many Yorùbá scholars have claimed, namely that women run the marketplace and most of the trade throughout Yorùbáland (McKintosh 2009, Falola 1991), she ignores some of the most vibrant examples of female power. Two concepts, Ajé and àjé, demonstrate this strong female power present in Yorùbá marketplaces and throughout Yorùbá society and culture over time.

The change in economic activities within Yorùbáland over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries affected the gender construct of Yorùbáland in ways that both support and challenge Oyewumi's thesis. Some gendered aspects of Yorùbá culture which provided women an avenue to power have been diminished since the nineteenth century and after British over rule. Yet, other aspects of female power, such as *àjé*, have maintained their importance throughout Yorùbá society. This study will explore two concepts in Yorùbá culture that demonstrate distinctively female models of power and agency in the marketplace over time. By these examples I will attempt to show the flaws in Oyewumi's argument through a reflection on how female roles are culturally grounded within Yorùbá society.

This study will examine the concepts of Ajé and *àjé* in relation to gender in Yorùbáland. These institutions include the importance of reproduction and the power that is derived from women's economic agency. They are found within the economic, political, domestic, and ritual spheres of Yorùbáland. To deny that a category of women was culturally grounded in Yorùbáland would be to discount the power and agency women held within their society. Arguing that the Yorùbá culture completely lacked gender distinctions silences the importance of female power, such as in relation to social reproduction and transformation prior to the changes of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

My goal is to highlight certain gender aspects of Yorùbáland in a way that focuses on the power held by women prior to the encroachment of Western politics and cultures not only to counter Oyewumi's argument but to illuminate the power Yorùbá women held, in contrast to universal oppression of women as some Western feminists may impose on cultures such as the Yorùbá. It was not the influence of the West that led to some of the amazing demonstrations held by Yorùbá women of the twentieth century, such as the Egba women's protests led by Ransome Funmilayo Kuti during the middle of the century (See McIntosh, 2009: 232- 234). Even the protests held by women today can be seen as a thriving aspect of female power, strength, and importance in the Yorùbá culture that has persisted through much turmoil and change over time. It represents female power, based on politics of the body, that has long-existed in Yorùbáland.

Methodology and Terminology

Before moving forward, there are methodological caveats that need to be addressed. It is important to note that although the Yorùbá people are often referred to as one homogenous group, they are in fact a heterogeneous group made up of many different sub-groups. Different territories within Yorùbáland, such as Egba, Ekiti, Ijesaland, etc., define these sub-groups. The Yorùbá people are made up of various different groups of people with varying beliefs, social structures, and even dialects. Although they do share a standard Yorùbá language, some groups, such as the Ijesa people or Ekiti people, speak different Yorùbá dialects.³ Due to lack of delineation within available sources however, in the context of this study, I will use the general

³ As I studied the Yorùbá language I learned some of these differences. For example, "*je mi sí*" in the Ekiti dialect is equivalent to the standard Yorùbá "*fi mí silè*", both meaning "leave me alone". Although some dialects can be difficult for all Yorùbá people to understand, most Yorùbá people who speak a specific dialect also speak and understand standard Yorùbá.

term "Yorùbá" without always delineating a sub-group. I will refer to specific sub-groups, such as Egba, when such information is available in the sources.

I would also like to note the methodological difficulty in translating not only one language to another language but also one culture to another culture. This obstacle is quite evident in my current research topic and crucial to the issues at hand. The inability of some concepts or words to be directly translated or understood from one group of people to another is sometimes overlooked and quite difficult. As noted by Partha Chatterjee (one of the leading figures of the Subaltern Studies movement) in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*:

You can translate a word by another word, but behind the word are an idea, the thing which the word denotes, and this idea you cannot translate, if it does not exist among the people in whose language you are translating...[sic] (1993: 61).

This has become vehemently clear in my research of the Yorùbá culture, specifically in regards to the concept of *àjé*. I find that the difference in translations that exist, some focusing on a more negative concept of "witch" and some focusing on a more holistic understanding of the concept, are due to the lack of a similar concept in the English language. Where possible I will use English translations of Yorùbá terms but will use only Yorùbá terms for concepts not easily translated in English, such as *àjé*. A glossary appears in the first pages of this thesis featuring detailed translations.

Before moving forward, it is important to further explore the various definitions used to describe *àjé*. Although many well-respected Yorùbá scholars have translated *àjé* in English to mean "witch" or "witchcraft", I prefer to translate it with different terms. Within Western discourse, witch tends to hold a negative connotation related to women who wield magical

powers used to inflict harm or bad luck on others. As noted by many scholars, including Margaret Drewal (1992: 177-78), Oyeronke Olajubu (2003: 120-22), and Teresa Washington (2005: 13-14), Yorùbá *àjé* vary from the European or Western English idea of witch or witchcraft. Henry and Margaret Drewal explain that although *àjé* may be considered a derogatory term to the Yorùbá, they are often referred to as *iyá mí* (my mother) or *àwon iyá wa* (our mothers) "in recognition of their positive dimension as protective progenitors, healers...and guardians of morality, social order, and the just apportionment of power, wealth, and prestige" (Drewal and Drewal, 1990: 9). However, I do not intend to ignore the nefarious aspect of *àjé* that does, in fact, exist. However, it is clear the Yorùbá sense of *àjé* is not a direct synonym to the commonly held understanding of witch or witchcraft in Western discourse, which is rarely thought to be related to good intentions and benevolent power.

As previously mentioned, Yorùbá is a tonal language. Therefore, a word that may appear the same when written in English may have multiple meanings depending on the tone, or how you pronounce it. For this reason, it is vital that I use the proper Yorùbá spelling for *àjé*, female power loosely translated as "witch" or "female sorcerer", and *Ajé*, a female deity. This is integral to this study for obvious reasons of not confusing the two.

Although this study is focused on women and female power specifically related to the marketplace, it is not suggesting by way of omission that men do not have a presence as traders in the marketplace. Rather, this study focuses on women due to their prominence in the marketplace and the gender association of the two concepts *àjé* and *Ajé*. This study does not intend to suggest, as Oyewumi accuses some scholars of doing, that these women are bound to the marketplace as a result of their biological sex or that women do not or did not engage in other economic activities (Oyewumi, 1997: 17). It is not within the interest of this thesis to argue the

reason behind their involvement in trade. This thesis is simply interested in whether or not a specific female power is culturally grounded within the Yorùbá marketplace, as to argue that female power, based on politics of the body, existed before the arrival of Western cultures and to what extent they remain after Western intrusions.

The changes in socio-political and socio-economic spheres caused, in part, by the arrival of Europeans transformed gender relations within Yorùbáland. This gender balance, as noted by most Yorùbá scholars, including Oyewumi, became a gender imbalance. If gender did not exist, this imbalance would have been more difficult to achieve. If, as Oyewumi asserts, gender was non-existent, if the category "women" did not exist in pre-contact Yorùbáland, it would have been much more difficult to cause the major gender shift in Yorùbá society that was so negatively felt by women. As we examine àjé and Ajé in depth below, it will become evident that gender did, in fact, exist in Yorùbáland prior to European contact. This is only made more poignant by the fact that women in Yorùbá society became, what Gayatri Spivak would call "doubly in shadow" (Spivak, 2010: 258). They not only felt the same oppression and intrusion as the Yorùbá men experienced, as general members of Yorùbá society being overthrown by Europeans, but also as Yorùbá women, experiencing a major shift in gender ideologies that attempted to strip them of much of their agency and power.

Current Literature

As briefly mentioned above, there has been significant attention in the literature focused on gender in Yorùbáland. Some scholars, such as Oyeronke Olajubu, have offered rebuttals to Oyeronke Oyewumi's thought-provoking work. Olajubu highlights similar concerns this study will consider, including gender structure within the Yorùbá ritual sphere through oral traditions. Of particular importance here is Olajubu's emphasis on the importance of the duality inherent in

Yorùbá society. As Marjorie McIntosh emphasizes, Yorùbá beliefs strive for a balance or harmony of pairings in the world; such as, male and female, good and evil, land and water (McIntosh, 2009: 4). Olajubu focuses on the gender balance evident in the creation myth. She emphasizes that if Oduduwa⁴ (culture hero, deity, and founder of the sacred city of Ilé-Ifè) was in fact female, as many versions of the creation story recount, then the woman created the Earth in its physical form and man, the deity Orisanla, created humans (Olajubu, 2004: 49, Olupona, 2011: 39). This exemplifies the Yorùbá emphasis of duality of forces in the world, including those of gender. However, Olajubu does not address either Ajé or *àjé* in depth. It is my intention to provide further information on these two concepts in hopes to illuminate the importance of gender in Yorùbá society from within the context of Yorùbá ideologies.

The literature on *àjé*, also referred to as *àwon iyá wa*, is vast. For this reason, it is surprising Oyewumi completely omitted it from her claims. On the other hand, despite the deity Ajé's important role in the economic sphere throughout parts of Yorùbáland, scholars have paid little attention to her. The scenario in reference to Ajé described in the first paragraph occurs on a daily basis throughout Yorùbá marketplaces, yet few scholars have mentioned her or her historical importance⁵. Olatunde Lawuyi and Jacob Olupona have made a great contribution to the study of this deity in their article "Making Sense of the Aje Festival: Wealth, Politics, and the Status of Women Among the Ondo of Southwestern Nigeria" (1987). However, Lawuyi and Olupona maintain the Western male-centric perspectives that Oyewumi warns against. Bernard

⁴ As Olajubu (2004: 9) and Olupona (2011: 67) assert, there have been different accounts recorded in regards to the gender of Oduduwa. Oduduwa is often believed to have been male but there are accounts in Eastern Yorùbáland that provide evidence to the contrary.

⁵ I personally learned this response using the term Ajé while studying the Yorùbá language at the University of Ibadan in the Fall of 2013. It was used on a daily basis by market goers as a culturally appropriate way of saying "no, thank you" when a trader attempted to solicit goods they did not want or need. I was told it was considered quite rude to simply say "No, thank you" and every "Ajé óò wa" was received enthusiastically and with great surprise that an Oyinbo, or foreigner, knew the response.

Belasco has also contributed a great deal to the study of Ajé in his book *The Entrepreneur As Culture Hero*. Rather than focusing on contemporary Ajé festivals, as Lawuyi and Olupona do, he examines the origins of the deity Ajé and her relation to the economic sphere. However, his study is not focused on Ajé alone, but rather on whether or not Yorùbáland was pre-adapted to capitalism prior to the arrival of the Europeans.

This study will use secondary sources available to position Ajé within the discussion of Yorùbá gender ideologies and to provide a comprehensive understanding of this deity based on the literature available and my own observations while in Yorùbáland in the Fall of 2013.

Yorùbá Women in Trade and The Marketplace

Yoruba women, in particular, have been noted for their economic agency throughout history. While Yorùbá men have been noted for working on the farms, the women have been working in the markets and engaging in trade activities (Johnson, 2012: 117, Falola, 1991: 112-115, Sudarkasa, 1973: 28). Although some scholars, such as Oyeronke Oyewumi, have argued that no gendered labor division existed in Yorùbáland prior to the imposition of the Europeans, much evidence suggests otherwise. However, scholars such as Niara Sudarkasa, suggest that women have always been involved in trade and the marketplace. Hodder (1962:110) and Pedler (1955) argue that Yorùbá women became involved in trade and markets in the nineteenth century due to reasons of increasing insecurity. Since women were immune from attacks, Hodder and Pedler argue, they could travel more easily from town to town to engage in trading goods. However, Niara Sudarkasa has argued that women's involvement in trade, in fact, pre-dated the times of insecurity felt throughout the nineteenth century (Sudarkasa, 1973: 25-37). She asserts that women have "been involved in the distribution of goods for as long as the Yorùbá have lived in urban areas" (*ibid.*: 26). Even today, Yorùbá marketplaces are predominantly occupied with

women *olojà*, or market vendors. Men *olojà* are quite common in the marketplace as well but the dominance of women is undeniable.

I am not suggesting women have been relegated to simply working in the marketplace to suggest they were somehow oppressed, as Oyewumi accuses scholars of treating the matter, but rather it is evidence of the strong power of women within the Yorùbá culture. My interest in the marketplace lies in the importance it plays within Yorùbá society. Not simply for its obvious economic importance, but as Belasco asserts "markets are the vehicle by which women could hoard goods, withdrawing them from social circulation and inviting disapproval and even witchcraft accusations" (Belasco, 1980: 95). Jacob K. Olupona also points out that the marketplace, a public sphere, is:

feared by African indigenous rulers both because it is not controlled exclusively by men and because it is the arena where the most biting criticisms of the state are made in the gossip of the market women and the open conversations that go on as people meet and conduct business (2011: 133).

He also asserts what has been observed by many Yorùbá scholars, that the marketplace is a crossroads between the living and the spirits (*ibid.*: 133). As will be discussed in depth below, within the marketplace we find so much more than female power in economic transactions, we find evidence of female power in cosmology and the socio-political stability through reproduction.

Lillian Trager, Niara Sudarkasa, Toyin Falola, Bernard Belasco, and Samuel Johnson, to name a few, have noted female power and dominance in trade and in the Yorùbá marketplace. As discussed by Lillian Trager, Niara Sudarkasa, and Toyin Falola, women have been the main economic actors in Yorùbá trade. Although men maintain a presence in the marketplace,

particularly with certain commodities, such as meat (See Cohen's study on the Hausa traders in Yorùbáland), women have been noted as being responsible for control of the majority of commodities within the marketplace, including: foodstuffs, cloth, household items, and various other items, such as beads. Although Oyewumi would argue that these scholars are trained within a Western educational construct and therefore impose their Western gender ideologies onto the Yorùbá culture, she fails to acknowledge the obvious truth that more Yorùbá women work in the marketplace than do men. She argues that professions were adopted through lineages ties, citing an example of a woman who became a hunter because her father was a hunter (Oyewumi, 1997: 69- 70). Although this may be true, again, she ignores the fact that the marketplace is run by mostly women. If we examine the Yorùbá language to find evidence of this, we find the terms *iyálojà* and *iyáloḍé*. These two terms include the word for mother, *iyá*, and are both, in fact, positions within the Yorùbá socio-political structure that are held by women.

Ìyáloḍé is a female chieftaincy position that has been documented in the earliest written accounts on the Yorùbá people. The *Ìyáloḍé* served as an “intermediary between the leading male chiefs and the town’s women” (McIntosh, 2009: 222) and was considered the highest-ranking female chieftaincy (*ibid.*: 137). However, this chieftaincy position has lost much of its power and influence in Yorùbá societies since the nineteenth century. The examples given in the section on *àjé*, specifically, *Ìyáloḍé* Tinubu and *Ìyáloḍé* Efunsetan, are examples of the power and influence the position once held. According to most people whom I spoke with during my visit to Ìbàdàn in 2013 regarding that matter, the *Ìyáloḍé* in Ìbàdàn, and many Yorùbá societies, do not possess as much power and influence as their predecessors. There are speculations that this is due to the power and influence held by women such as Tinubu and Efunsetan, that their "abuse" of power led to the decline in importance of the role. However, the imposition of the

British government, dominated by male power, would also be culprit of this decline in female power. As politics and government changed, so did the gender balance.

Ìyálojà is the head of any particular marketplace. Although it is uncertain when this role or term came about, either pre-nineteenth century or post, it is an example of women in power in the Yorùbá socio-economic sphere and lends credibility to the many assertions that women dominated trade and the marketplace throughout Yorùbáland, historically and presently. Today's marketplace is structured slightly different than those of pre-independent Yorùbáland. As explained to me by multiple *aso*, or cloth, traders in the Ìbàdàn market of *Gbági*, the markets of today consist of not only an *ìyálojà* but also a *bàbàlojà* and chairman⁶. As described by a third generation *olojà* of textiles for the past seventeen to eighteen years, the *bàbàlojà* handles issues with all vendors in the market, the *ìyálojà*, on the other hand, still works only with women's issues in the marketplace, and the chairman, junior in rank to the two previously mentioned, also works with issues from all the vendors. However, the chairman and the *bàbàlojà* must discuss issues with the *ìyálojà* before they escalate them to the palace. Any issues that cannot be resolved among the three of them are brought to the *ìyáloḍé* and from there to the *oba*, or ruler, of the city. Although the presence of men in the market is clear, particularly today with the role of the *bàbàlojà*, it is obvious that the women leaders still maintain an important role within the market.

As previously mentioned, the marketplace in Yorùbáland is more than what it may seem to an outsider. Aside from the obvious importance of trading goods, the market is also a threshold, where the paths of spirits and the living cross. This is relevant to our discussion in

⁶ The chairman can be either a man or woman. The position was currently filled by a man at *ojà Gbági* when I visited multiple times from September through December 2013. It was believed by my informants that this position, along with *babalaja* position was created during/after British colonization.

relation to gender for many reasons. This is where the *àjé* are believed to meet in secret at night, (discussed in depth below) where the *àjé* are appeased during certain festivals which take place in the market, and where the female deity, Ajé, is venerated and believed to inhabit, along with the trickster deity, Eshu, or Legba (Drewal and Drewal, 1990: 10).

Female dominance is also evident in the two concepts we will discuss further, Ajé and *àjé*. Both concepts also play out within the marketplace, further demonstrating the female dominance within the marketplace. However, contact with Europeans did stimulate change over time regarding the deity Ajé. As we will discuss further, Ajé's role has been diminished within the Yorùbá pantheon, reported in only a few select festivals. However, *awon iyá wa* still exist in Yorùbáland and maintain their female power. These are concepts of the Yorùbá culture that Oyewumi has failed to address and weaken her claim that the concept of women or gender did not exist in pre-contact Yorùbáland.

Ajé

*There is no god like Ajé.
Ajé involves struggle
Ajé makes you a rich man
Ajé makes you wealthy (Belasco, 1980: 147)*

The above *oriki*, or praise song, asserts the power and veneration of the Yorùbá deity Ajé. There are many *òrìsà* within Yorùbá religious beliefs. The most common being Shango, Ogun, Yemoja, Oya, Eshu, and Oshun. However, there is a multitude of *òrìsà* throughout Yorùbáland. One of the lesser known is Ajé. As previously mentioned, Ajé is a female deity who has represented wealth, trade, and money (*ibid.*: 86- 93). She is associated with the cowry shell, the form of currency used in pre-colonial West Africa (*ibid.*: 59). Her importance is evidence of the female power that existed before the encroachment of Western cultures and of the culturally grounded gender institutions in Yorùbáland.

In this section I will examine Ajé in the historical literature as well as her relation to wealth, gender, and the marketplace. By examining the deity Ajé, we are better able to understand the importance of female power within Yorùbá society, in contrast to Oyewumi's assertion that gender did not exist prior to the encroachment of the Europeans. The importance of the Ajé festivals in parts of Yorùbáland, as documented by Lawuyi and Olupona exhibit the importance of this female deity not only within the certain towns' economic sphere in relation to their market success but also in the political sphere in relation to the success of the ruler. However, before we explore the importance of the deity within ritual contexts, we must first discover her birth into the Yorùbá pantheon.

History of Ajé

Though a less known Yorùbá *òrìsà*, there are various stories surrounding the origin of Ajé. Bernard Belasco asserts that the Ajé deity was in fact adopted from the Egun or Popo people, West of Yorùbáland (*ibid.*: 89- 94). However, Toyin Falola and Akanmu Adebayo offer an explanation centered on Ajé's relation to cowry shells. They explain that the Yorùbá people needed a form of exchange at the first market in Ondo, therefore they consulted the almighty Olodumare (supreme God/creator) asking what they should do. Olodumare responded by telling them to make a ritual sacrifice and to go see Ajé. Two women and a vulture embarked on the journey to meet Ajé. When they arrived, the two women stayed back in fear and only the vulture approached Ajé to discuss the issue at hand. Ajé gave the vulture cowry shells as a mode of economic exchange. The vulture swallowed the cowries so as to not lose them. When it reunited with the women, it regurgitated the cowry shells for the two women, and this is how the cowry became the method of exchange in Yorùbá markets, provided by the goddess Ajé via the vulture (Falola and Adebayo, 2000: 42).

The importance of the vulture in the above explanation must not be overlooked. Scholars of Yorùbá culture have often associated various birds, black birds and red parrot feathers, with *àwon iyá wa (àjé)* (Prince, 1961: 796, Apter, 1991: 222, Lawal, 1996: 32). Perhaps the vulture represents *àwon iyá wa*, the in-between/liaison between deity and human (see below for further discussion of *àjé* as the liaison between the deities and humans). The vulture is regurgitating the cowry as if giving birth to the currency for the first Yorùbá market. This interpretation of the above cowry shell explanation relates to a verse in one of the *oríkì*, or praise song, of *Ajé* cited by Belasco:

Se bi iwo Aje lo bi omo Aje l'ode Oshogbo

Kerekere ma yo mo mi

Se bi iwo Aje, l'opase fun emi omo Aje pe:

Bi mo ba sise m'arowo

Bi nko se ise m'ar'owo

Kerekere ma yo mo mi

It is you Aje who gave birth to wealth out in the open at Oshogbo

Earnestly, earnestly come to me

It is you Aje who commanded me, the son of Aje

"That when I labor, I shall make money"

"And though I do not labor, I shall make money"

Therefore, I implore you to smile upon me (1980: 140-142).

The female powers of fertility and reproduction serve an important role in this *oríkì* and in an explanation of economic history in Yorùbáland. These two examples speak to the historically grounded importance of body politics and female power within Yorùbá society. In the first example, the female deity gave cowries to a vulture, which can be related to *àjé*, and then the vulture (or *àjé*) regurgitated them. As the *oríkì* states, *Ajé* gave birth to wealth in the open, a clear reference to womanhood and fertility. These events require that *Ajé* be a female deity. Due to certain reproductive abilities women possess, she was able to provide the required means for the market economy to expand by way of a common currency. These explanations

could not exist in the same form if Ajé had been a man. Illustrating the importance of gender in relation to female power throughout Yorùbáland and specifically in relation to trade and the marketplace.

However, the commodification of Ajé intensified in the littoral zones in the seventeenth century as the Portuguese demand for enslaved people increased and the quantity of cowrie shells increased with large imports from the Europeans flooding the markets (Belasco, 1980: 92-94). Her commodification is evidence of the impact European contact, increased trade in general, had on female power. In this sense, the example of Ajé reinforces Oyewumi's claim that European culture created a new gender balance in Yorùbáland, however, as I have noted, it diminished the previous strong female orientation within the market economy, stripping the deity down to a simple representation of currency. Although Ajé seems to have lost her importance in the Yorùbá pantheon, as will be discussed below, some parts of Yorùbáland continue to incorporate her economic and marketplace importance in their annual festivals.

Ajé as Represented in Yorùbá Economic and Political Spheres

Few scholars have explored Ajé festivals, but two important studies are those of Jacob K. Olupona and Olatunde Bayo Lawuyi. Olupona, in particular, has focused heavily to on the Ajé festivals. As will be discussed further, these annual festivals exhibit the power of Ajé throughout parts of Yorùbáland and reinforce my argument that female power was vital throughout Yorùbáland prior to the arrival of Western concepts of gender. As Lawuyi and Olupona assert:

The Aje festival is a celebration of wealth and fertility. It also enhances the role of women in lineage maintenance. Women help create the lineage through their fertility, and they ensure there are sufficient economic resources to maintain it. Women's control of Aje is tantamount to the

acquisition of economic power through which factions can be mobilized rather loosely in order to demonstrate a "solidarity of the dispossessed" (1987: 97).

The emphasis on her importance to wealth and fertility, and thus on the survival of the lineage, expresses the significance of women's existence in Yorùbá culture. Symbols of wealth and fertility are evident in the documented Ajé festivals. As noted by Olupona, the Ajé festivals in Ondó and Ilé-Ifè are performed by women and men to pay homage to the deity. He notes that the female chiefs, or *Lobun*⁷, in Ondó, are responsible for the "ritual purification of the new market and to pay homage to Ajé...Ajé, therefore, symbolizes female power and authority over all the city's commerce, fertility, and reproduction" (Olupona, 2000: 123). During this ritual, "each female chief prepares and dresses up her assemblage of Ajé for public veneration in an open space in front of the palace" (*ibid.*: 123). Placing their offerings to Ajé in a public space coincides with the *oriki* previously mentioned that states that Ajé gave birth to wealth publicly at Oshogbo. This process can be seen as a ceremonial rebirth of the market and the city's economic success. Yet again, symbolizing the importance of female power in Yorùbáland. Even more interesting are the details of these shrines and how they relate to female fertility and reproduction.

Olupona notes that the Ajé shrine is movable and consists of the "Igbá Ajé, a big clean bowl, usually of brass" (2000: 123). Although his observations were of brass bowls, the word *igbá* in the Yorùbá language means calabash. This coincides with the observation made by Andrew Apter in Yorùbá Yemoja festivals, the ritual calabash, "filled with *àse* the power to influence the future...also contains the 'future' as a symbol of the womb, as that which perpetuates lineages, dynasties, and towns" (Apter, 1991:220). This *igbá Yemoja* is similar to

⁷ Note that the Lobun in this region is similar to Ìyálode in other regions of Yorùbáland previously mentioned.

that of *igbá Ajé* in many ways. Apter's assertion that the calabash contains representations of lineage, can also be applied to the relation of Ajé as the deity of fertility. Considering fertility is vital to the reproduction of lineages and dynasties, the *àse* held in the *igbá Ajé* likely represents the same concept. The importance of the womb in regards to fertility and lineage is represented in the proverb, or *owe "omi ló d̀̀ǹ̀ǹ̀, agb̀̀ è ò f̀̀"* which translates to "the water has left/spilled, but the womb did not break". I was taught this proverb during a discussion about pregnancy and miscarriages. This was also observed by Apter during a prayer for the Yemoja festival in which a priestess prayed for the safe handling and delivery of the calabash. In "The Blood of Mothers: Women, Money, and Markets In Yoruba-Atlantic Perspective", Apter emphasizes the power of women through their reproductive blood, noting its positive and negative energy:

...positive in the capacity to mix with male sperm and create new life; negative in the menses, understood as 'bad blood' ejected by the womb because it cannot create new life, and feared by men precisely because it can neutralize their most powerful medicines through physical contact (2013: 73).

The emphasis on female fertility, the power of their blood and ritual water, *omi*, in Yorùbá rituals and the lineage is undeniable and a glaring gap in Oyewumi's argument. The Ajé festival is yet another example of culturally grounded female power within Yorùbáland, specifically located within the marketplace.

Another Ajé festival documented by Olupona in "Yorùbà Goddesses and Sovereignty in Southwestern Nigeria" is the annual festival in Ilé-Ifè known as *Olójó*. This ceremony "renews the Ooni's kingship. On this day, Ògun (god of war and iron) and Ajé are renewed" (Olupona, 2000: 124). After paying homage to Ògun, the festival proceeds to the marketplace, or *ojà*, where, as previously mentioned, the shrine of Ajé is erected. The Ife king honors the deity "as

recognition of her importance in the economy of his kingdom" (*ibid.*). He must pay homage to this market deity in order to ensure economic prosperity throughout the coming year. We see here that Ajé was not, is not, only recognized by the leading females of the town, but of the leading male figure as well. This represents her importance in the balance of Yorùbá social and political life. Considering Olupona observed these festivals in 1990, it is apparent that Belasco's assertion of her reduction to a mere symbol of commodity is not quite accurate. Although the presence of these festivals is not well known or well documented throughout the twentieth century or this current century, they appear to have existed at least up until the late twentieth century in at least two instances. This study cannot attempt to explore whether or not Ajé festivals continue to this day. However, it would be interesting research for future scholars to explore. The question of change in Yorùbá women's roles and importance or agency within their society over time is one that has not only been an interest of mine but also currently debated in Yorùbáland today.⁸

Although it is evident that Ajé continues to maintain her importance in parts of Yorùbáland through at least the end of the twentieth century, there is evidence that her importance has declined. It is no coincidence that the decline in the importance of Ajé, as noted by Belasco in regards to the Yorùbá rituals, was contemporary to that of the imposition of the Europeans. As previously discussed, the changes in socio-political and socio-economic spheres caused by the arrival of Europeans also caused a change in the gender balance within Yorùbáland. This gender balance, as noted by most Yorùbá scholars, became a gender imbalance. If gender did not exist, this imbalance would have been more difficult to achieve. If,

⁸ I experienced this while presenting a paper at the University of Ìbàdàn regarding change in Yorùbá women's roles over time. My presentation sparked a debate between not only men and women but between different women who held different views regarding women's agency over their own lives pre-European contact and post-independence.

as Oyewumi asserts, gender was non-existent, if the category "women" did not exist in pre-contact Yorùbáland, it would have been much more difficult to cause the major shift in the importance of Ajé and her eventual near disappearance in the scholarship. In fact, if the category "women" did not exist, neither would have Ajé. To deny that "women" existed in pre-contact Yorùbáland is to deny females of their importance and power in Yorùbá society at that time.

Àjé

"Kàkà kó sà̀n lára àjé ó nbi omo obinrin jó eye wá nyí lu eye"

- "Instead of the *àjé* changing for the better, she continues to have more daughters producing more and more 'birds'" (Lawal, 1996: 34)

The Yorùbá proverb above expresses the power of women as seen through *àjé*. Unlike many Western cultures throughout history, Yorùbá women have always been noted for their agency and access to power. As previously discussed, Yorùbá women have held positions of power within Yorùbá religion, politics, and the economy. This is in part due to their possession of *àjé*.

Àjé has been described by Margaret Drewal in *Yoruba Ritual*, as "the concentration of vital force in women, their *àse*, their power to bring things into existence, to make things happen, create extraordinary potential that can manifest itself in both *positive and negative* ways" (1992: 177, my italics). *Àjé* is understood to represent not only the power, but also the women who possess the power. As previously mentioned, these women have often been translated in English to "witches" and the practice of *àjé* as "witchcraft". In this section the power of the Yorùbá women as channeled through the role, reputation, and performance of *àjé* will be examined. This will build on the argument that the category women did exist historically in Yorùbáland and that female power is culturally grounded in Yorùbá culture.

The resistance of *àjé* to major changes caused by the introduction of European politics, customs, and education speaks to the strength of the importance of women in Yorùbá society throughout history. As I will examine, *àjé* has been incorporated throughout the domestic domain, economic sphere, political sphere, and religious realm within Yorùbáland. Similar to *Ajé*, *àjé* are recognized by both men and women as powerful women entities in need of veneration or homage. By exploring the different platforms within Yorùbá society *àjé* has manifested I hope to highlight the duality of good and evil this concept represents and how it has provided Yorùbá women with power in their society. This will, yet again, emphasize the gaps present in Oyewumi's argument.

History of Àjé

In Yorùbá history, the creator of the Yorùbá people, Olódùmarè, created three *òrìsà*, deities. Two of these *òrìsà* were male and one was female. He granted the two male *òrìsà* special powers. The female, Odùdùwà, asked Olódùmarè what her special power was going to be. Olódùmarè handed her a closed *igbá*, calabash, in the shape of the Earth and told her that it contained a special *àse* (Lawal, 1996: 31). As previously mentioned, in Yorùbá culture, *àse* is the ability for a person to make something happen, ritual power (Apter, 1992: 243). When asked what she would do this power, Odùdùwà responded by saying she would use it to punish anyone who insulted her, but she would not hesitate to also use it to benefit those who supported her. This power is called *àjé* (Lawal, 1996: 31). There are different versions of this story of how women came to possess *àjé*. The story retold above is one popular in an Ifa divination verse.

As noted by Babatunde Lawal in *The Gèlédé Spectacle* and Raymond Prince in "The Yoruba Image of the Witch", another Ifa divination verse asserts that it was Eshu, the well-known Yorùbá trickster deity, who provided the *àjé* powers to the women (Lawal, 1996: 31-32,

Prince, 1961: 795- 796). According to Prince, "women went to the malevolent trickster god Eshu to ask for the power of witchcraft" (*ibid.*: 795). Eshu gave them the power but instructed them to visit Orunmila, the god of fate, before they could take the power. Orunmila made them swear to uphold certain materials and signs in order to provide men with the ability to protect themselves against the power of the *àjé* . In order for this agreement to take effect, the women were instructed by Orunmila to visit Olorun, the almighty god, to take their oath (*ibid.*: 795). Although the date or origin of the Ifa verses related to this story are not known, it is likely they originated within Yorùbá society prior to the European intrusion. As discussed by Wande Abimbola in *Yoruba Oral Tradition: Poetry in Music, Dance and Drama* "Ifá divination poems are conceived by the Yorùbá as historical poems containing the knowledge and wisdom of the past. " (Abimbola 1975: 83). Clearly asserting the long historical importance and function of Ifá verses within Yorùbáland and therefore contributing to the possibility that these verses and beliefs related to *àjé*, and therefore Yorùbá women as a group, are not a creation of European influence yet another issue not addressed by Oyewumi. If these Ifá verses refer to women, their power, and men protecting themselves from that power, how can Oyewumi's argument about the non-existence of "women" and "men" in Yorùbáland hold true?

It has also been documented that the *àjé* have power over all the deities. They serve as in-betweens among the creator, Olódùmarè and the deities; no deity is more powerful than the *àjé* (McIntosh, 2009: 194, Lawal, 1996: 32, Drewal and Drewal, 1990: 9). As previously mentioned, the women sent to Ajé to retrieve a form of currency for the Ondo market were afraid to approach her themselves and a vulture went to see Ajé while they stayed behind. If, as earlier proposed, the vulture somehow represents *àjé*, the scenario would be an example of *àjé* acting as the intermediary between deity and human. Considering this all-encompassing power, it is

difficult for Oyewumi's argument that women did not exist prior to European encroachment. It is clear that the *àjé* hold a special place within society, which is related to their womanhood.

It is widely believed that all women, especially elderly women, or those who have passed through menopause, possess *àjé*. These older women, in particular, are said to possess the power due to their retention of blood (Drewal and Drewal, 1990: 75). As Apter discussed (see above), this blood can neutralize the most powerful powers of men (Apter, 2013: 73). Again, reinforcing the role of female power culturally grounded within Yorùbáland. Those that actively practice its power meet in secret groups, via the soul in the form of a bird, cat, or bat (Lawal, 1996: 33, Olajubu, 2004: 121, Drewal, 1990: 75). In *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, Oyeronke Olajubu describes the initiation experience of a former *àjé*:

She was instructed that her left leg was *ese awo* (leg of secret), and on it a cut was made to drain the blood into one of the small native pots. Each member then tasted the blood. Incisions were made on her head and eyelids to make her tough, hard hearted, and able to kill as often as is required...a live bird, which she had to swallow at her initiation (2003: 121-22).

This anecdote gives us a small insight into the secret societies of *àjé* that still exist in Yorùbáland. A collective of women using their *àjé* to effect change. Although we may never know all of what occurs in these secret groups, or who exactly is part of them, we do know how *àjé* is treated in the public realm throughout different aspects of Yorùbá life.

Àjé in Different Aspects of Yorùbá Life

Due to their overall power and influence over the deities and daily life, *àjé* occupy many roles within Yorùbá society. They are connected to the domestic life of Yorùbá people through their power of fertility (Apter, 1993: 113-114, Olajubu, 2003: 121-22). They also appear in the

economic sphere of Yorùbá life in relation to successful market women (Drewal, 1990:74, Washington, 2005: 52-53, McIntosh, 2009: 135-137). They have been attributed to involving themselves in politics, using their influence to affect the balance of power (McIntosh, 2009: 135-137, Washington, 2005: 53-54). As briefly discussed above, the *àwon iyá wa* are very active in the Yorùbá religious sphere as well. As more powerful than all the deities and said to be the second in power next to the gender-less Olódùmarè (Drewal, 1990: 9, 74). The all-encompassing power and influence of *àjé* is evident in the vast arenas it is active in within Yorùbá society.

Domestic Life

Just as there is debate over the inherent nature of *àjé*, whether good or evil, there is also debate over the role it/they play in fertility. In *Black Kings & Critics: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yoruba Society*, Andrew Apter argues that the *àjé* are responsible for infertility, that the word "àjé (witch) denotes the woman who consumes life and blocks the flow of reproductive fluids." (Apter, 1992: 113). In this sense, Apter asserts, they are involved in miscarriage and affect the menstrual flow of women, therefore "the *inverse* of fertility and successful delivery" (*ibid.*: 113). *Àwon iyá wa* are also known for their positive impact on fertility (Washington, 2005: 14). If they represent fertility, they must also be able to represent infertility given their ability to possess both positive and negative power, as discussed above. This focus on fertility is an important aspect of the specific gender role women have played within Yorùbáland and is in stark contrast to the argument presented by Oyewumi. If we accept Oyewumi's argument that so much of Yorùbá life is based on the lineage, e.g. profession, land, etc., it only supports the importance placed on women and their fertility. A lineage is reliant upon the fertility of women

and therefore supports the claim that gender was an important aspect of Yorùbá society prior to the involvement of the West.

Another aspect of the domestic life that àjé inhabit is that of the control of men. According to Marjorie McIntosh, in *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change*, women in the nineteenth-century were often accused of poisoning their husbands or causing harm to them through their àjé (2009: 194). They are also said to cause impotency in men and "debilitating diseases" (Drewal 1990: 74, Drewal 1992: 178). Clearly àwon iyá wa possess the power to inflict harm in order to control men in domestic situations, but also have the ability to inflict the opposite if they so choose.

Economic Life

Yorùbá women, as previously mentioned, are well known for their economic agency, mainly drawn from their dominant role in the marketplace. Women continue to be the driving force in Yorùbá marketplaces, as I observed during a visit to Ìbàdàn, Nigeria in the Fall of 2013. Not only is the marketplace still run by women, women are still becoming wealthy within the marketplace. They derive not only money, but also political power from within the marketplace. As witnessed during my visit in 2013, Yorùbá women of the marketplace will wield their ability to open and close entire markets to protest or have their opinions heard by the local politicians.

Yorùbá women throughout history have excelled in trade within the marketplace. One glaring example that cannot be overlooked is that of Madam Tinubu from the nineteenth century, 1805- 1887 (McIntosh, 2009: 137). Madam Tinubu was a savvy trader of ammunition, weapons, tobacco, enslaved people, and salt (*ibid.*: 135). She became so wealthy and commanded so much of the trade in and out of Lagos that the returnee men from abroad and European traders began to dislike her. They gave her the nickname "The Terror of Lagos" (*ibid.*: 136) and forced her from

the city. She quickly re-established herself North of Lagos in Abeokuta, maintaining her wealth and prestige and becoming the *Ìyálóde* of all the Egba (a sub-group of Yorùbá people) (*ibid.*: 137). A known critic and adversary of the encroaching British power made her popular among the local kings in Oyo and has been called "the first woman to play a part in resistance to British rule." (*ibid.*). It has been suggested, by Teresa Washington (2005: 52) and others that the power Madam Tinubu possessed and wealth she acquired was due to her possession of *àjé*. It is said that women who amass wealth and goods through trade are *àjé*, that they are hoarding goods and using their powers to do so (Belasco, 1980: 102- 103). This hoarding was done "...to block the flow of productive resources" (Apter 1993: 118). This explains the fear of men in relation to the case of Madam Tinubu and their eventual expulsion of her. Yet again, reinforcing the strength of female power and the significance of body politics in Yorùbá culture.

However, *àjé* could work *against* a woman's economic agency. As Karin Barber has noted in *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow*, "Big Women" in the Okuku region of Yorùbáland were unable to express their wealth to gain a reputation in the same manner the "Big Men" did, by buying land, marrying wives, and having many children (1991: 235). She explains that if a woman were to flaunt her wealth the same way a man did, she would surely be accused of witchcraft (*ibid.*: 235). This reveals the negative discourse surrounding the *àjé* power attributed to women and explains the reactions we see with Madam Tinubu and, as we will examine in the following section, with Efunsetan Aniwura.

At times, negative reactions toward "witchcraft" became rampant and deadly. In the mid-twentieth century, a surge of wealthy men from the Southern Gold Coast travelled Eastward into South West Nigeria with the goal of hunting "witches" (Apter 1993:113, McIntosh, 2009: 209). They entered parts of Western Yorùbáland seeking to rid the communities of witches. Once they

were proven to be "witches", or confessed as such, they were beaten and, on occasion, killed (McIntosh, 2009: 209, Apter, 1993: 114). This leads me to wonder if this was a result of Western influence on West Africa. Did the Western ideology of what defines a "witch" and how to deal with a suspected "witch" influence these actions? If traditional Yorùbá beliefs held that *àjé* possessed as much, if not more, power as the *òrìsà*, why did men suddenly feel they needed to eradicate them? Apter offers a compelling theory to answer this question in his article "Atinga Revisited" (1993). He argues that the Atinga witch-hunt was driven by a sudden rise in the cocoa economy. He asserts "the cocoa economy intensified structural contradictions that were already articulated by the logic of witchcraft" (1993: 113). The strain placed on existing contradictions, explains the tensions of co-wives and the competing nature of the Yorùbá traders, mainly women, and their husbands (*ibid.*: 118). As noted by Belasco, trade wealth among women often lead to accusations of witchcraft, or *àjé*, this coincides with Apter's claim that the Atinga witch-hunt was in direct relation to a growth in the local cocoa economy (Belasco, 1980: 102). Apter also notes that "[I]f cocoa production stimulated greater commerce and trade, it pitted men against women, literate youth against elders...Atinga attacked the female body as icon and agent of commodity value; of false representation, of unbridled circulation, and of hidden accumulation" (1993: 122-123). In essence, the Atinga witch-hunt is a microcosmic example of the female power within Yorùbáland prior to European commercial inroads, which was negatively affected by the Europeans. This leads me to posit the opposite of Oyewumi's claim. The threat of successful women traders in a growing economy is evidence that the category women, and female power based on body politics, did in fact exist with great power and influence in Yorùbáland prior to European involvement.

However, I am not suggesting *àwon iyá wa* do not remain in Yorùbáland today. In fact, people still do not publicly speak of *àjé* in fear of repercussions. In fact, the resilience of *àwon iyá wa* to persist despite the attempt at their downfall in the face of changing economic and cultural norms, speaks to the strength at which the Yorùbá women held a significant and powerful role within their society. Rather than a society where men and women were not seen as different or opposites in any way, I would suggest that although their roles within Yorùbá society were vastly different than their European contemporaries, they still existed. Rather than blurring the lines of female/male or woman/man, the Yorùbá female power should be highlighted and further explored.

Political Life

Efunsetan Aniwura, a contemporary of Madam Tinubu, was also a very successful and powerful female trader in the nineteenth century. However, she is commonly known for being Ìbàdàn's second *Ìyàlóde*. Similar to Madam Tinubu, she expressed her opposition to political leaders (McIntosh, 2009: 137-39). When she opposed the reigning king of Ìbàdàn, he wanted to have her ousted due to her strong political power and influence (Washington, 2005: 52). To this day, stories of her relentless violence toward her enslaved workers, unjust treatment of other traders, and accusations of "witchcraft" persist. These accusations are evident in Akinwumi Isola's film "Efunsetan Aniwura" in which she is portrayed as malicious and irrational. Many people would attribute her success to her possessing *àjé*, however, some choose to focus on the positive aspect of this as it brought her success (*ibid.*: 53) and others focus on it, as Dr. Isola did, as a negative, wicked power.

Àjé is also related to the Yorùbá political sphere in relation to some ritual practices. An example of this is the annual Yemoja ritual. This ritual is a metaphorical practice that represents

the death and rebirth of a king. As I will discuss below, *àjé* is used in this ritual that prepares the king to rule for another year, similar to that mentioned above in the *Ajé* festivals.

Religious Life

As previously mentioned, *àjé* is related to Yorùbá religious beliefs on different levels. First, *àjé*, the concept of power possessed by women, is part of the cosmological Yorùbá creation story. Women who possess this power, also referred to as *àjé*, or *àwon iyá wa*, among others, are just as powerful as, if not more powerful than, all the Yorùbá *òrìsà*. Because of this power, *àjé* play a role in various Yorùbá festivals. As Apter examined, *àjé* can be seen at the festival for the most senior female deity Yemoja (Apter 111-16, Olajubu 17). *Gèlèdédé* is another Yorùbá festival related to *àjé* that has been the interest of scholars such as Henry and Margaret Drewal as well as Babatunde Lawal. The importance of *àwon iyá wa* in these festivals is an example of the importance of women in Yorùbá society. To assert that these festivals did not exist in this manner prior to European impact would be to credit the Europeans with dismantling and changing more of the culture than occurred. The Yorùbá culture is one of resilience, to suggest that these festivals did not exist to the extent they did in the nineteenth century to present, with importance placed on gender and a balance of power, is to strip the culture of its strong ability to persist and resist complete change.

Yemoja is the female deity of rivers and streams said to be responsible for influencing fertility of women and of agriculture (McIntosh, 2009: 192, Apter, 1992: 112). Apter examined *àjé* in a Yemoja festival in the Ayede village in the Ekiti, Eastern, region of Yorùbáland. *Àjé* have been associated with the color red, which is said to bring suffering (Drewal 1992: 178). He observed that a red parrot feather was placed in the ritual Yemoja calabash to represent "witchcraft" (Apter, 1992: 113). According to him, "Yemoja's calabash....[Is] a delicate womb, it

contains witchcraft and fertility; as a female crown, it deposes and regenerates the king..." (*ibid.*: 114). In this ritual, *àjé* is represented for its potential toward malevolence however it is coupled with the power of the female deity, Yemoja, to bring about fertility, or re-create the king. As the king absorbs the power of Yemoja's calabash during the ritual, he is essentially re-born and renewed for another year of ruling the throne (McIntosh, 2009: 195-96).

Another ritual in which the power of *àjé* is recognized is *Gèlèdè*. The *Gèlèdè* festival is a performance ritual which is known for its reverence and appeasing of *àwon ìyá wa* in Yorùbáland. The festival most often takes place in the marketplaces located in western and coastal Yorùbáland (Drewal and Drewal, 1990: xvii, 74). It is a symbol of the reverence for women, motherhood, and an attempt to appease them for their power. As the Drewals note, "the fundamental purpose of *Gèlèdè* spectacle is to pay tribute to and therefore derive benefit from female mystical power." (*ibid.*: 7). As previously discussed, women rule the marketplace and possess *àse*, energy and power that causes change. Therefore, they must be venerated for their power in their space, just as a deity is offered gifts in their respective location of existence/importance. It is no surprise then that the *Gèlèdè* spectacle takes place in the marketplace. As Margaret and Henry Drewal explain:

The marketplace is thus a most appropriate setting for a ritual that seeks to gather all segments of the society in order to pay homage to the special power of women and to partake of their influence.

The market is a transient place, at once the domain of women and the worldly domain of spirits, the place where they enter "the world" to mingle freely with mortals. (1990: 10)

Thus, the marketplace, like *àjé*, is a liminal space. Situated between the spirits, the deities, and the people, "the market is a microcosm of the world, for the Yorùbá concept of *aiye* implies the phenomenal world that any number of spirits, by assuming human or animal form, can penetrate" (Drewal and Drewal, 1990: 11). As is expressed in the Yorùbá proverb *Àiyé l'ojà, ojà l'àyé*, which translates to *The world is a market, the market is the world.*⁹ If we recall the cosmological history of *àjé* and how Odùdùwà received this power, we can see the closed calabash containing the special *àse* as representative of the earth, or the world, and therefore of the market, the liminal space between the creator, the deities, and the people. If, as Oyewumi argues, the marketplace was not gender-oriented, why would the *Gèlèdè* festival, a festival in which the main purpose is to appease *àwon iyá wa*, take place specifically in the open marketplace?

The power of *àjé* within the Yorùbá religious sphere has been translated in both negative and positive aspects, both feared and venerated. This strengthens the argument that *àjé* is considered both positive and negative, benevolent and malevolent.

Conclusion

Despite the ardent efforts of Oyeronke Oyewumi to dispel the existence of gender in Yorùbáland prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the arguments and information provided above undermine her overall argument. It is quite evident that women were not only seen as a distinct category separate from men but that they possessed a great power and influence within the society based on their womanhood.

Oyewumi makes many valid arguments, yet she does not address the importance of the power of women, distinct from men, as apparent in the examples of *Ajé* and *àjé*. As has been

⁹ This is a Yorùbá proverb I learned while studying the Yorùbá language at the University of Ìbàdàn in the Fall of 2013

discussed, Ajé, a female deity, held an important role as deity of wealth and fertility. Her existence in Ifá verses in relation to cowry shells and her importance in the marketplace are representative of her integral role within Yorùbá society prior to the imposition of the Europeans. The calabash, or *igbá Ajé*, as described by Olupona, can be seen as representative of the female womb and therefore fertility. It is impossible, then, to assert that "women" or gender did not exist in Yorùbá society. To do so would strip Yorùbá women of the power and influence they possessed prior to the Europeans. By stripping them of their significant power and influence within Yorùbá society, would dismiss the damage that has been felt by Yorùbá women within their society over the past centuries.

However, I am not suggesting, as previously mentioned, that Yorùbá women lost all their power and influence throughout their societies since the nineteenth century. As discussed above, *àwon iyá wa* are believed to continue to exist and practice today. Exhibiting the strong resilience of the Yorùbá women's power and influence despite the vast changes following the imposition of the Europeans. This resilience also speaks to the existence of the power of women, as a separate category than men, in pre-contact Yorùbáland.

There is little evidence that women gained agency, power, or influence post-European contact. Scholars such as Kristin Mann (1985 and 1991), have looked at the effects of colonial changes felt by women within Yorùbáland from an economic and domestic perspective. Although there are examples of women, such as Tinubu and Efunsetan mentioned above, who benefited, in part, by the increase in trade, Mann argues that women lost their economic power and independence as a direct effect of change in religion, government, and economy (1985, 1991). However, she does not explore *àwon iyá wa*, who represent a powerful position that continued to maintain throughout the changes that occurred during the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries. This resilient female power can be viewed as a female power that has been culturally grounded within Yorùbáland over time.

An interesting question that arises out of this study is the similarities between Ajé and àjé. Do these two concepts share a similar history of origin? The above creation stories told of both would suggest not, however there are clear similarities. For example, in ritual settings or festivals, they both require a calabash, or *igbá*, of some kind, they are both related to wealth and fertility, and clearly, both involve the veneration of women. The relationship between these two deities leads me to ask another, broader research question; what are the similarities among all Yorùbá female deities and rituals that pay homage to women in Yorùbáland? What are the implications of these similarities? Are they significant? As previously mentioned, not only is there an overlap between the festivals related to Ajé and the calabash of àjé, but overlaps with the festivals of Yemoja in the Ekiti regions of Yorùbáland exist as well. Clearly highlighting shared aspects of female power throughout Yorùbáland. All of which speak to the strong female power inherent within Yorùbá culture.

In addition to questions about female power, this study also provides information that leads to research questions regarding the relationship between market deities, in particular the relationship between Eshu and Ajé. As Eshu is the better known Yorùbá market deity, what relationship might exist between Ajé and Eshu? Considering the gender ambiguity/flexibility of Eshu, how does that relate to the strong female power discussed above? As previously mentioned, Falola and Johnson, among others, note that women made up the majority of traders in Yorùbáland (Falola, 1991: 112- 115, Johnson, 2012: 117). What are the direct relationships between the predominance of female traders and the gender of market deities?

This study has explored two separate concepts of female power in Yorùbáland that represent the importance of women, womanhood, and the existence of gender distinction within Yorùbáland throughout time. *Ajé* and *àjé* are emblematic of the many gender-related concepts that exist, and have existed in Yorùbáland and therefore.

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