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**THE FACTOR OF GENDER  
IN THE YORUBA TRANSNATIONAL  
RELIGIOUS WORLD**

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## **The factor of gender in the Yoruba transnational religious world\***

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I will try to stitch together, today, three different scholarly discourses on Yoruba gender ideas, and the analysis of two historical waves of transnationalization of Yoruba religion distant in time and circumstances. I will refer these three models to what I understand as the gender factor in the expansion of Yoruba cosmology. The analysis of nationally situated scholarly discourses will occupy the first part of the paper, where I will attempt to show that, quite independently, three authors, myself among them, have placed complex gender issues at the center of the discussion of Yoruba world-view. Reviewing briefly their writings, I will also try to unveil how the position (ethnic and national) from which scholars produce their academic models affects their formulations. In the second part of the paper, I will try to review briefly my ideas about how the complexities of Yoruba gender construction have been central in the process of diffusion of Yoruba religion and its social context from Africa to the New World initially and, later, from Brazil to new countries, where they did not have a presence, like Argentina and Uruguay.

### **1. Three anthropologists on the gender issue in the Yoruba religious world.**

I address, here, three models for Yoruba gender ideas, as expressed in religious themes and practices. I make reference to the models of interpretation published by Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) and Lorand Matory (1994) about the Yoruba of Nigeria, which appeared by the University of Minnesota Press, and to my own for the Yoruba religion in Brazil (1986; republished in 1989, 1995 and 2000 in Portuguese, and in 1997 in English). For the sake of clarity of the exposition, I will start by the last to appear published and finish with my own work.

Oyeronke published her book *The Invention of Women. Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* in 1997. At the time she was assistant professor of the University of California at Santa Barbara. Despite the date of her publication, she did not quote Matory's work on similar topic from his book of 1994, but she referred to his doctoral dissertation, presented in 1991. Also, despite been working within the same field, she only quotes him in only two paragraphs, not exceeding the extension of one page.

For Oyeronke: "the assumption that a gender system existed in Oyo society prior to Western colonization is yet another case of Western dominance in the documentation and

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interpretation of the world” (op.cit.: 32) In her view, colonialism introduced the vocabulary and practices of gender in Yorubaland, and Western scholarship -as well as Western feminism- misread the existence of gender there: ... “the usual gloss of the Yoruba categories *obinrin* and *okunrin* as ‘female/woman’ and ‘male/man’, respectively, is a mistranslation.... these categories are neither binarily opposed nor hierarchical ....(Ibidem: 32-33). This is so, in Oyeronke’s interpretation, because, as she argues:

1) “there is no conception here of an original human type against which the other variety had to be measured. *Eniyan* is the non-gender-specific word for humans” (different from (fe)male or (wo)man) (p. 33)

2) *Obinrin* is not ranked in relation to *okunrin* (both sharing the same neutral root “rin”)

3) They only apply to adults. Children are all *omode*. Male and female animals are named *ako* and *abo*. Plants are *abo* when they give children.

“Thus - she says in page 33 -, in this study, the basic terms *okunrin* and *obinrin* are best translated as referring to the anatomic male and anatomic female, respectively; they refer only to physiologically marked differences and do not have hierarchical connotations....” She also speaks of “ana-sex”: anamales and anafemales (p. 34): “to underscore the fact that in the Yoruba world-sense it is possible to acknowledge these physiological distinctions without inherently projecting a hierarchy of the two social categories”. “Unlike ‘male’ o ‘female’ in the West, the categories of *obinrin* and *okunrin* are primarily categories of anatomy, suggesting no underlying assumptions about the personalities or psychologies deriving from such. Because they are not elaborated in relation and opposition to each other, *they are not sexually dimorphic* (my emphasis) and therefore are not gendered. In Old Oyo, they did not connote social ranking; nor did they express masculinity or femininity, because those categories did not exist in Yoruba life or thought.”

Oyeronke defends the absolute absence of a gender symbolic structure in Yoruba traditional (pre-colonial) society. She has as the reference a very standard definition of gender *not* as “a property of an individual or a body in and of itself by itself” but as “a construction of two categories in hierarchical relation to each other [...] embedded in institutions” that, as such , orients expectations and orders all social processes(p.39). And states that such particular kind of ideological cell was absent among the pre-colonial Yoruba.

As regards the deities of the pantheon, Oyeronke speaks of three levels. At the first level is “Oludumare” (God – the Supreme Being) did not have a gender identity, and it is doubtful that she (or he) was perceived as a human being before the advent of Christianity and Islam in Yorubaland” (p.140). Sources are quoted to show how post-christianization scholars depicted Olodumare with masculine attributes and called the deity “He”, using the masculine third person. But Oyeronke gives no evidence of sources from which she could speak of this deity as anthropomorphic *but* not gendered or not anthropomorphic at all. A supreme god not anthropomorphic would be quite a rarity though.

At the second level, according to the author, there are the *orisas*, of whom it is said: “though there were *anamale* and *anafemale* (meaning anatomically male and anatomically female) *orisa*, as in other institutions, this distinction was inconsequential; therefore, it is best described as a distinction without difference”. The author here supports her assertion by mentioning that some *orisas* of different anatomical sex shared some qualities (the “wrath”, she says, of Sango and Oya), or that some change their sex from one locality to another.

This, in fact, also happens in the New World, where personality identify deities and gender divides personalities despite the similarities that may be present; and where gender changes with locality or time too. Sango is syncretized under the images of Santa Barbara in Cuba

and of Saint John in Brazil; Oya (Iansa) is said to have been male in the mythical past and turned female after becoming Sango's partner (see Segato 1995 a) Logunede, in Bahia, is half year male and half year female. But this, I believe, can be better understood as a permanent encoded *commentary* on gender, a speech on gender, and a political discourse phrased in gender terms.

Reading Oyeronke, one is led to wonder why, if anatomy means nothing socially among the Yoruba, the orisas, mythical entities, deities, free from human constraints, *do have* a sexualized anatomy and behavior. How can be that such ideal anatomy, pure signifier, means nothing at all for human affairs? One is left to wonder why do the orisas have a gendered body?

At the third level, then, she places the cult of the ancestors, "both male and female, venerated by members of each lineage and acknowledged yearly in the Egungun masquerade" ... the priesthood of various gods was open to both males and females [...] Yoruba religion, just like Yoruba civic life, did not articulate gender as a category [...] The roles of the orisa, priests and ancestors were not gender dependent. (op.cit.: 140).

For Oyeronke, the dominant idiom in society is the idiom of *seniority*. What matters really is whether the person is a child, an adult or an elder: *omo* means child, offspring (p.40-1); only lately, after nineteenth century, "*omokunrin* (boy) and *omobinrin* (girl) that have gained currency today indicate anasex for children" (p.41). They show that what is privileged socially is the youth of the child, not its anatomy. By the same token, when calling someone *Iya* (mother) or *baba* (father), or *obinrin* (woman) or *okunrin* (man), the important thing is that they are been identified as adults, in age of reproduction. "the most important attribute these categories indicate is not gender; rather, it is expectations that persons of a certain age should have had children".

*Iya* (mother) or *baba* (father) "are not just categories of parenthood ... They are also categories of adulthood, since they are also used to refer to older people in general. More importantly, they are not binarily opposed and are not constructed in relation to each other" (p.41)

Therefore, clearly, for Oyeronke: **seniority prevails over gender and can introduce inversions in the order of gender when looked from Western gender frame**; for example, an older or religiously invested *obinrin* can be regarded as a father by a *okunrin*. Oyeronke quotes from Johnson, talking about the relationship between the Oyo ruler and the *obinrin* official of the palace, who commands the worship to the spirits of the departed kings: "the king looks upon her as his father, and addresses her as such [...] He kneels in saluting her, and she also returns the salutation, kneeling, never reclining on her elbow as is the custom of the women in saluting their superiors. The king kneels for no one else but her, and postrates before the god Sango, and before those possessed with the deity, calling them 'father' " (p.37-8). As I will show, later, **a structure strikingly similar to this can be found in the Sango cult of Recife, Brasil; however, my interpretation results from a different model**. In fact, in Brazil as well a priestess can be regarded as a "father" and a wife can be said to be more virile than a husband; also, the saluting, that is, the ritual greeting called "odobale," is removed from anatomy in an even more radical way, since in the African *dobale* (op.cit.: 36) the form of the bow performed depends upon the sex of the person who greets and, in Brazil, it depends upon the sex of his or her orisa.

For Oyeronke: the challenge that the Yoruba conception presents is a social world based on social relations, not the body. It shows that it is possible to acknowledge the distinct reproductive roles for *obinrin* and *okunrin* without using them to create social ranking. In the Yoruba cultural logic, biology is limited to issues like pregnancy that directly concern reproduction... I have called this a distinction without social difference" (p. 36). "The terms *obinrin* and *okunrin* merely indicate the physiological differences between the two anatomies as they have to do with procreation and intercourse ... they do not refer to gender categories that

connote social privileges and disadvantages. Also, **they do not express sexual dimorphism** because the distinction they indicate is specific to issues of reproduction” (p. 34-35). “A superior is a superior regardless of body-type”. “Ori has no gender”. (p.38). We see here expressed an unusual meaning of dimorphism, but I am quoting – does she by the way imply that there are more than two morphological elements intervening (participating) in procreation?

Alternatively, what I suspect is that, detached from the body, gender names remain as an idiom of social relationships of some kind and organize at least some realms of interaction. But, for the author we are quoting, only reproductive roles remain, glued to, collapsed onto, conflated to the body. Just to anticipate my own argument, this seems to come very close to the pivotal role for the division of ritual labor that members of the Nago (Yoruba) Sango cult in Brazil attribute to anatomy. It is ritual (not copulation) that reproduces the African – Yoruba – religious lineage in Brazil, and the distribution of ritual gender roles is the only sphere of life that follows the guidelines of sexual dimorphism, that is, anatomical features. However, evidently, is the symbolic aspect of that dimorphism, and not its biological dimension, what counts – since we are here in the realm of religious and philosophical reproduction of a spiritual, not biological or even racial Africa. Only when seen from this broader perspective given by the New World can we reach the hardcore of what was already at stake there and, also, understand the amount of conventional, uncritical thinking that is present in Oyeronke’s thesis.

If, on the one side, African reproduction and continuity is processed through anatomically distributed ritual roles in Brazil, this, on the other side, contrasts with all the other spheres of religious, social, psychic, affective and sexual life. Just to give an example, even reproduction, child upbringing and domestic organization are conceived, in the environment of Afro-Brazilian cults, as detached from biology. Here, the family – and domestic – unit of the cult, the so-called “family of saint,” operative for all matters of life, is not based on shared biological substance but on initiation, while sexual orientation and personality are freed from biological constraints. **I could go on endlessly giving examples of a gender milieu where the Africa described by Oyeronke can be recognized vividly, but where gender terms – and, from a Western point of view, a subverted gender map – can be also recognized.**

Moreover, Oyeronke incurs in a number of contradictions. One of them, for example, when, while denying any gender connotation of the words *oko* and *aya*, she traces the equivalence of this terms with positions in the household. She says: “ the translation of *aya* as “wife” and *oko* as “husband” imposes gender and sexual constructions that are not part of the Yoruba conception (p.44)”. To then add: “*oko* and *aya* [are] owner/insider and non owner/outsider in relation to the *ilé* as a physical space and symbol of lineage. This insider-outsider relationship *was ranked* (my emphasis) with the insider being the privileged senior”- so, clearly and undeniably, gender terms are associated with status here. In a household, all the older members of the house, male and female, were *oko* to her, though she only had a marital sexual relation with her conjugal partner. It is also referred that when this latter died, only younger anamales of the house could claim sexual rights to her, “since this was a heterosexual world”, and when a *oko*-anafemale claimed inheritance rights to the widow, the sexual access was passed on to one of her anamale children. **Significantly, Oyeronke lets us know, also, that while men or women can be *oko* to other men and other women, anamales cannot be *aya* (wives) of either anamales or anafemales. They can only be *aya* to the orisas they worship and receive in possession, this meaning that anatomical males do not cross the gender frontier downwards in the social field. Definitely, among the pre-colonial Yoruba, male anatomy was linked to a condition of status and prestige that did not combine with a wifely social role, except under the command of supernatural entity. It surprises one that a point of such importance with all its**

**consequences passes thoroughly unnoticed by the author. This, I believe, ends by putting a serious limitation to efficacy of her model.**

However, what is of great relevance here is the effect of the author to introduce us into the complexities of Yoruba gender and kin terms, giving us a hint of the malleability that, I believe, will play a crucial role in the relocation of the cosmology and associated practices in the New World, particularly in Brazil and, later, in the recent wave of expansion southwards, into the new national territories of Argentina and Uruguay.

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Lorand Matory published his book *Sex and the Empire that is no more* in 1994, and at the time of the publication he was assistant professor of anthropology and Afro-American Studies at Harvard University. His text also testifies for the existence of a complex gender construction in the traditional Oyo Yoruba world. He will try to express those complexities, which take gender schemes of Yoruba cosmology and religious practices almost to a condition of ineffability, formulating a model based on the idea of transvestitism. However, Matory states that “the women remains the paradigmatic image of married wifeliness not only in the *orisa* religions but across the Yoruba religious spectrum” (Matory 1994: 108).

In Matory’s model, what he calls “sartorial iconography” and diacritical (idiosyncratic) ritual and work gestures mark what is womanly - women dressing or statuary/engraving/figures of women “kneeling to offer service and sacrifice, carry head loads, and/or tie a baby to their back”. (Ibidem: 108). However, still, a link with biological determinations is established through women, by which: “Women’s marital and reproductive status directly affects their standing in every local religious organization. Menstruation compromises the participation of women of childbearing age” (p.107-108). Transvestitism is, for Matory, the main “ironic” idiom of gender structures in Yoruba society, which allows, for example, for people of same sex entering in a social relationship as *oko* and *obinrin* (with or without sexual implications). Still, the paradigmatic standing of the female body and its anatomic, postural or sartorial attributes as signifier of a feminine relational position (though a male body can enter into that position as well) reveals the existence of a gendered map for orientation.

While, for Matory, this map seems to be non-verbal or nominated by means of lexical categories but preferentially visual, scripted with icons, gestures and visual marks, Oyeronke denies the importance of visuality among the Yoruba and states the dominance of the audible. She affirms, besides, as I said, that no words exist in Yoruba language for masculine and feminine as opposed positions or personalities (p. 34) and that there only exist words for the relational positions of wife and husband (*oko* and *obinrin*), **In Oyeronke’s model one is left wondering about the *raison d’être* of verbal categories, statuary, carvings and genderized costume, if neither of them is meant to mean. In Matory’s model we are entitled to interrogate why the generalized practices of transvestitism if gender social hierarchies are left untouched.**

Both authors, however, seem to agree about the existence of a Yoruba model where gender follows a radically different scheme than in the West. But, while in Oyeronke’s text there is a belligerency and the premise of the collision of mutually untranslatable civilizations, one of them defeated and colonized - remaining only as a sophisticated and pure civilizational anti-paradigme-, in Matory there is a lesson to bring back home, as I will try to show.

**It seems to me that the discourse I have presented so far, Oyeronke’s discourse, has**

**its own hybridity introduced in her enunciation by her privileged interlocutor: the West. By stating an Africa free from gender hierarchy – and she is clear about this –, she is upholding a pre-colonial Africa, and has the introduction of genderized social and cosmological relations as the index of a Westernized Africa. Matory’s text, to which I will succinctly refer now, has also a shadow interlocutor. While Oyeronke is an antagonist, Matory is a reformist. It seems to me that he is bringing home the idea of transvestitism and gender centrality to the polis, to his fellows, to his country. As I will try to show, in his ethnography, he speaks on behalf of a stable gender structure that can remain as an organizing principle of society despite the fact that its *dramatis personae* change skins, cross-dress. His is a stable, not menacing, though transformative gender relational cell.**

**Ethnographers, as scholars in general, never cease to be politically oriented, oriented by interests and values, conveying a message to peers, bringing arguments home.**

Matory shows us a world where transvestitism always leads to a hierarchical, genderized, asymmetric arrangement. “both male wives and female husbands are central actors in the Oyo-Yoruba Kingdom and village”, he says (p.XII); “...all women are husbands to somebody and simultaneously wives to multiple others” (p. 2); male travestism in Oyo-Yoruba is *not* only an idiom of domination and *not* only the evidence of the independence of gender categories from biological sex but a practice that “transforms existing gender categories” (p. 3). But the fact is that, in Matory’s model, the practice of transvestitism transforms gender categories in the narrow sense of universalizing their hierarchical structure in the social field, projecting them well beyond the field of gender roles and sexuality. In this sense, Matory takes from Marilyn Strathern the idea (formulated for Pacific societies) that “sexual/gender inequality is the irreducible “idiom” in which even inequality between persons of the same sex and gender is understood (p.176-177).

At the core of Matory’s model we find the idea of humans “mounted” by gods in possession. Rather simplistic bedrock indeed for such a complex system of thought as the one he deals with. He says: “the vocabulary and dress code of the possession religions.... Illuminates the structure of that relationship. Recent initiates of Yemoja, Osun, Obatala and Sango ... are known specifically as “brides of the god”. They wear women clothes or attributes. And the god is said to mount those he possesses” (p 7). The god is invoked as “husband” and “lord” by the devotees. “The concept of ‘mounting’ (*gigun*) likens the priest (*elegun*) to a royal charger (*esin*) and to a royal wife (*ayaba*) making the possessed priest the most dramatic and visually evocative image of a past sexual political order (p.135). Also pots and calabashes are icons of that hierarchical orderliness in patrilineal marriage.

Hierarchy is not the superiority of one biological sex to another but asymmetry as expressed by the relationship of genders in marriage. “Upon marriage, a woman *becomes a wife* (*iyawo*) not only to the man she marries (*okogidi*) but to all of that man’s male and female agnates and to the women who married him and his agnates before her arrival. Conversely, not only the man she married but all his agnates are classified as her husbands (*oko*)” (p. 105). In one word, wife and bride, in this social language, mean junior, subordinate. This typical organization is noted by Oyeronke too, as I showed, but while she interprets it as the absence of gender, Matory understands it as the generalization of gender terms in the social hierarchical field.

Gender and sexuality become an idiom of the hierarchical transitions characteristic of traditional Yoruba society. Perhaps, the most clear expression of this arrangement is provided by the fact that, when the senior male (*elegun*) possession priest receives the orisa in possession, he does it as its bride, “mounted” by the god as a sexual metaphor; and, at the same time, it is believed by many that Sango’s mount, that is, the priest in state of possession, can himself “mount”, that is, perform sexual intercourse with a woman in the audience (p. 170). So, what I

want to highlight here is the fact that the same social actor is described as subordinated in one relationship and empowered in the other, female to one partner, male to the other. **This language of circulation of gender positioning was pointed by me for Brazil too on the basis of different ethnographical materials. The idea persists. But its impact and destination here is not as much to organize social relationships and institute a hierarchy using the gender idiom but to undermine patriarchy, to laugh at it, to ironize it,** not only in a discursive sense but also in an actual, literal sense. The application of gender terms leads to subvert their habitual use. The possibilities of Yoruba “ironic” (for Matory) gender system are taken to their utter radicality in Brazil.

Just to give a few examples, the pantheon of the cult presents the appearance of a formally arranged family group at first sight. However, as soon as we scratch the surface we find a father – Orisanla (Obatala) - a patriarch, who, despite his ultimately revengeful personality, is not the acting authority among the orisas. He is slow, negligent and weak. A mother – Iemoja – who, despite her polite and meek countenance, is false and treacherous “like the sea”, they say, “since you see the surface and never the depths” (echoes of an encoded memory of the middle passage may be heard here). A mother who does not bring up her own children, leaving them to be cared for by a foster mother – Osum. A goddess of fertility who is not the child-bearer but the caretaker. A father - Orisanla - who brings up very lovingly a daughter – Osum – who was born from the infidelity of the mother – Iemoja. A wife - Iansa (Oya) - who is said to be the more “virile” than her husband – Sango. A hard-working first-born son of the dynasty – Ogum - whose throne is usurped by his self-indulgent and cunning younger brother – Sango - with the lenience of the mother – Iemoja. At least two episodes of homosexual seduction among deities are narrated. Not mentioning here the social practices and way of life that rely on this mythology. **In sum, invoked and alluded in ordinary conversation, an endless series of inversions transforms this apparently conventional mythology in an ironic discourse about Brazilian society, where not merely biology is removed from its usual pivotal place in ideology but also patriarchy and hierarchy are undermined. The patriarchal foundations of a privatized “domestic” state are also questioned. A fundamental doubt about gender structures is inoculated into the whole political system** (see Segato 1995 a e b)

In Yorubaland, according to Matory, the gender regime and vocabulary is used to create a social regime marked by hierarchical relative positions that transverse the whole range of relationships from gods to commoners. How does this affect gender and sexuality?. The book does not say. **The destination of the whole grammar and its icons is to keep hierarchy in place, to sustain it. Despite what the author says, we find a gendered system which, though detaching gender from biological sex, does not disrupts or undermines the gender regime but enshrines it as the paradigm of all (hierarchical) relationships.**

Gender exists through predicates, and those predicates are sociological, relational. The feminine, as Matory leads us to understand for the world he describes, is bridely, and the masculine is not manly but husbandly. Gender, once again, is a position in relation and not a biological essence (p. 164). But a fix, heterosexual power and prestige matrix prevails in this gender “technical” (as Matory calls it), highly self-conscious, artificial order. Distribution of rights and duties and the code of etiquette is marked by gender. Mobile, relational positions are contained within a fix institutional paradigm. “Beyond affirming or undermining existing gender categories, this sacred cross-dressing finances transformations of gender that make it the densest of all local emblems of power (*ase*) and subjectivity” (p.175). Here, the act of “mounting” sets the scene of asymmetry (sexually, ritually and, as an allegory, socially). “Gender, then, is the idiom of relations between gods and priests, riders and horses, parents and children, seniors and

juniors, kings and plebes” (p. 177). So, “as a source of metaphoric predications on political hierarchy, economic privilege and personal health, gender ceases to be gender as we know it” (p. 177-8). And the author wonders: “Does cross-dressing affirm or undermine hegemonic gender roles? What boundaries does the cross dresser cross?” (p. 202).

I would say that he himself gives the evidences for the answer: no boundary is crossed. The fixed positions man/woman are substituted by the relational, mobile positions husband/wife at the core of the system. **The husband/wife structure transverses the system organizing it hierarchically. Husband/wife turns into a permanent metaphor of the religious polis.** So, “sartorial and cephalic travestism” practiced in Oyo Yoruba, is not seen by Matory as a “ritual inversion intent on manifesting the power of disorder [...] Nor does it appear to undermine gendered power inequalities” (p.211). Therefore, clearly, **Matory speaks of the conservation of an order by means of a secondary symbolization of that order and transvestitism is taken then to the center of the institutional order, as a structuring force in it. This in the precise sense that, in Matory’s own words, “transvestitism is not a marginal phenomenon. It is a central one, once codified and disseminated by an imperial state and now answering to the deepest aspirations of hundreds of thousands of Nigerians, Beninois and, as we shall see, Brazilians”** (p. 215).

While Oyeronke tells the West that gender did not use to exist among the pre-colonial Yoruba, claiming for herself, with this, the difference of her own world and her own difference, this, I believe, is the news brought home by Matory: that transvestitism and the transposition of fix gender schemes into different skins is as efficacious an idiom of social organization as a gender tailored by biology. This is so because, as stated in Matory’s model, what counts is the logic of the gender matrix, not the anatomies that embody it.

## **2. The gender component in the diffusion of Yoruba world-view.**

The complex gender sustem working at the religious polis among traditional Yoruba was one of the pillars, I believe, of the solid expansion of Yoruba religion and cosmology in Brazil, and from Brazil to other countries. Whatever was or is in Africa the precise organization of the system the authors quoted tried to describe, it is evident to me that an extraordinary work of preservation took place in the New World. Not merely the elementary idea of “mounting” that natives use to indicate possession was preserved, but the intricacies of gender management are clearly there. It is moving to realize that preservation is not restricted exclusively to formal, liturgical, ritualistic aspects of the Yoruba tradition in the New World, but to the almost ineffable, obscure aspects of gender construction and gender based sociability pointed unequivocally by both authors quoted.

I referred to this, in my writings, as the *Afro-Brazilian codex* (see, for example, Segato 1998), to emphasize the redundancy, the significative repetition of some motifs denoting a set code at work and giving access to a secret, deeper layer, a hidden transcript, a encoded inscription clearly present in discourse. Indeed, it was for me very moving to find these two books, published some years after my first essay on the topic appeared.

Much has been said about the reasons why the Yoruba civilization dominated other African cultures that arrived to the New World. Two aspects are usually pointed as crucial: 1. The massive arrival of a Yoruba contingent after intercontinental trade was over, and 2. the solid power institutions of the empire in Africa. From what I have seen of the African religious environments in Brazil and, lately, during the last twenty years, about the recent southern

expansion to the River Plate basin (see Segato 1991 and 1996), I think I can add a third and fundamental factor to those reasons, that is, the malleability of the gender system and, with it, the flexibility and anti-essentialism of family arrangements.

For the first wave, I would say, briefly, since I have written on it at length, that a non-essentialist use of gender and family terms found a fertile terrain in the Brazilian colonial environment. This was so because constituted couples and their offspring could not have stability as a family group and were dispersed, demographic ratios between males and females were highly inadequate, and marriage between slaves was not enforced but hindered (Segato 1986). Therefore, a terminology for gender and the family that could be freed for conflation with anatomical signifiers or fix relationships was ideal for this setting. Moreover, in this new environment, the whole system came to affect sexuality too and did not merely operate as an idiom for the social order, as described by the authors quoted.

In the second wave, Afro-Brazilian religions of a Yoruba base (like the Batuque of Porto Alegre and the well-known Candomblé of Bahia) expanded to Argentina and Uruguay. In these countries, as my interpretation goes, they provided a demarcation of a space of difference and symbolic inscription for groups without free expression or visibility within the country. Among those minorities, clearly, though not exclusively, the homosexual one, traditionally asphyxiated in Hispanic countries, and left without room for self-representation and recognition.

The Yoruba world restored itself in Brazil around the cult of the orisas as the ideal embodiment of personality types. Personality was the notion that remained when the local and lineage constraints for worshiping particular orisas were lost due to slave trade. Marriage and the paradigmatic couple *oko/obin* that Matory describes was also lost, and the line of descendance was transposed into a ritually consecrated non-biological family. Genealogy flew through *mother or father of saint* to *children of saint*, that is, by initiation into the membership of the cult. *Iyawo*, for example, which means “wife” and, therefore, “wife of the orisa” when referred to a priest in Yorubaland, becomes understood, in Brazilian native translation, as “child”. The orisas remained divided by gender, what turned, more clearly than ever, into a classification of personalities as masculine and feminine. Personality, in this model, is gendered and the ideal, paradigmatic anatomy of the orisas signifies a difference in this sense. **However, androgyny and transits were ever present, embodied in some orisas:** *Logunedé*, in Bahia, is said to be six months male and six months female, and *Oya* is said to have been male in the past and become female presently, though still exhibiting a rather virile personality. A continuum is traced along the range of orisas/personalities, resulting that some female saints are said to be more virile than others and the same for female. Regarding some particular trait of character, a female saint can be “more virile” or “more masculine” than a masculine saint.

The profession of priesthood presents the closest organization to Oyeronke’s description. Though it contemplates **gender ritual roles** that neatly follow the anatomical divide, it does not present any differentiation or specificity as regards social roles. Again, in Brazil, similarly to Oyeronke’s and Matory’s description, the house, the *agbo ile*, the *ile*, the “terreiro” or cult-house where a *family of saint* dwell and perform its rituals is the socio-political religious unit. But, as I said, the family is clearly formed on the basis of ritual ties consecrated by initiation and periodical renovation of this vow. The language of biological descendance is removed. In this organization, **the priest or priestess is the sole leader of the unit, but his or her office’s rights and duties are not specified according to gender**, that is to say: the social role of a father of

saints or a mother of saints is exactly the same. By the same token, and differently than ritual roles, social roles are never gender roles despite their gendered names: a son and a daughter of saints, a brother and a sister have no specific privileges or obligations following the gender divide.

Seniority of age (biological), as it was in Africa according to the authors we are quoting, becomes seniority as a member of the cult, age as an initiate. Finally, the anti-essentialism and the androgyny present in the whole system has an impact on sexual practices as well, since it frees sexuality from the ideology of anatomical constraints, present in Yorubaland for both authors.

From what I said, a four layers scheme can be recognized in the gender system found in Brazil: ritual roles, social roles, personality and sexual orientation follow independent rules and are not tied together by a straight-jacket as in the West. Their interplay designs mobility and open roads to androgyny. The overall gender of a person, that is, of a *child of orisa* is the outcome of a transitional situation in the complex intersection of those layers. Gender circulation is inscribed once and again in the codex.

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### **Fields, Ethnographers and Their Shadow Interlocutors.**

While writing on the Yoruba and formulating their models, Oyeronke Oyewumi and Lorand Matory are both in dialogue with their Anglo-Saxon academic audiences, one of them as a mighty irreducible antagonist, the other as a reformist. One in want of her old world back, the other struggling to introduce the fragments, the spoils, of the old empire “that is no more” in the new empire, always anxious for self-completing annexations. Like them, to a certain degree I do hide myself behind my “data”, practicing ventriloquism with the native in order to deliver my message, which is, I believe, not entirely removed from theirs.

Why Oyeronke is so emphatic in her want of denying gender – in her view, a Western category - among the pre-colonial Yoruba? Probably because her main partner in discourse is still the West, to whom she puts her demand of recognition for her difference. Why Lorand Matory ‘s argument emphasizes so much transvestitism, disciplining to the most whatever amount of divergences the Yoruba world may contain in relation to Western morality and gender structure, by means of translating it back to a tight heterosexual matrix, to a dimorphic hierarchical map? It seems to me that the author’s underlying issue is for rights within the set standards of morality to which the subject yields; the struggle of a good citizen wanting for room just to fit in. One brings her exemplary field for recognition; the other, as an argument for admission.

My discourse does not lack an addressee either, or perhaps more than one. On the one hand, I tell those who contend in the political arena set by state institutional idioms that the African descendents in Brazil have an encoded, cryptic way to criticize and disrupt the patriarchal foundation of Brazilian institutions. Once, a prestigious member of the tradition told me: ours is never a frontal, ostensive politics. In other words, theirs is, indeed, an unsettling double voiced commentary: while they uphold a formal family in the pantheon, they subvert it with stories and the current practice of the cult and its social ambiance. In their ironic commentary, the patriarchal and hierarchic appearance of the mythical pantheon reaches its reversal. Moreover, I also keep a dialogue with American scholars, who more than often believe that struggling for recognition

or admission of their own difference within a system is just enough, losing sight of the pitfalls of the system itself.

**If Oyeronke Oyewumi is the post-colonial antagonist, a nativist, someone who asserts her Old World as pure Other, Lorand Matory brings home the idea of a society where transvestitism, an apparently moral heresy for the West, can work in favor of power, order and hierarchical institutions. I myself speak on behalf of a tradition that runs besides and under the hegemonic voice of Brazilian patriarchal Catholic State and institutions as a counter-discourse, a deconstructing, undermining, humorous, ironic, uncomfortable permanent presence.**

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