

CHAPTER 6

African Rituals

Laura S. Grillo

The Place of Ritual in African Religions

"Ritual" is as abstract and reified a notion as "religion," and neither concept enjoys consensual definition. However focusing on what ritual *does*, rather than what it *is*, allows for greater appreciation of African ritual as the powerful and effective mode of religious expression that it is. African religions are pragmatic in focus and share the view that humans must vigilantly maintain harmonious relationships in both worldly and divine realms in order to prosper. Ritual is the means to negotiate a responsible relationship in the human community, with the ancestors, spirits, divinities, and cosmos. African rituals are reflexive strategies seeking practical ends: they establish identity, elicit revelation, access divinity to foster empowerment, and effect transformation.

Praxis in Space

The academic study of religion in western scholarship has made text its pre-eminent focus: sacred scripture and philology, mythic narrative and literary analysis, and philosophy articulated in discursive treatises. From this fundamental logocentrism, scholars defined "religion" in terms of orthodox propositions to which adherents subscribe. But the oral traditions of Africa are not orthodoxies, grounded in right expressions of belief, but rather orthopraxes, grounded in right action, especially ritual action.

African religions are not inscribed in canonical texts but lived in embodied experience. Convictions about the nature of divinity, the shape of the cosmos, and the situation of the person in it are conveyed through traditional practices and transmitted in ritual. Until relatively recently, however, ritual was peripheral to religious studies. Ronald Grimes dates the term "ritual studies" to 1977 when a Ritual Studies Consultation was inaugurated at the American Academy of Religions (AAR) annual meeting

(Grimes, 1995:xxv). Early studies of ritual were relegated to anthropologists who were prepared to encounter ritual directly in the field. The seemingly disparate practices were often cataloged as part of the "closed system" of so-called "primitive" traditions, those without sacred texts, mistakenly considered devoid of philosophy, and supposedly without soteriological import (Schwartz et al., 1975). Ironically such views were even maintained by early African interpreters of African religions, such as John Mbiti who asserted, "African religions must admit a defeat . . . they do not offer for mankind at large a way of 'escape,' a message of redemption . . . a rescue from the monster of death" (Mbiti, 1969:96-7).

Another distinguishing feature of the three "Abrahamic" faiths that eclipsed the importance of ritual and excluded African traditions from the purview of religious studies is the preoccupation with *time*. While the "religions of the book" chronicle human history as the locus of God's will, African traditions instead privilege *space* as the medium of divine revelation. The natural world itself is the milieu where sacred and profane meet and work in constant concert.

An important example of the primacy of space is divination, a ritual pivot on which many African religious systems hinge. Whether it is reading signs and omens such as the pattern of a bird's flight, or interpreting the random cast of cowrie shells, kola nuts, stones, or bones, divination seeks revelation and divine guidance in the spatial dimension. Diviners interpret seemingly random physical arrangements as messages from the spiritual realm.

Perhaps the most renowned form of African divination is *Ifa*, a tradition of the Yoruba of Nigeria. *Ifa* is classified as "wisdom divination," a learned technique independent of the diviner's charisms. *Ifa* diviners, called *Babalawo*, "Father of Secrets," are highly trained ritual specialists. They interpret the visual patterns created by the random cast of kola nuts. This set of 256 possible signs, called *Odu*, or "signatures of *Ifa*," comprises *Ifa*'s canon, fixing in concrete visual form a catalogue of the normative. While the verses associated with the signs are numberless and open to innovation, *Ifa*'s set of *Odu* is closed and unchanging, a *visual canon* (Grillo, 2008). The divinatory signs, encoding fundamental principles, ideals and norms of culture, blur the distinction between "texts" and "objects."

False Dichotomies: Thought/Action, Myth/Ritual, Text/Objects

Most fundamentally, ritual is an *act*. Artificially distinguished from and subordinated to thought, ritual acts are often associated with mindless, rote, conditioned action, or assumed to recapitulate the timeless conventions of "tradition." Such a sharply drawn dichotomy between thought and action can lead to a parallel but equally mistaken split of ritual from myth. African religious expression, however, defies this artificial divide.

While it is sometimes the case that ritual performances re-enact myth or sacred history, this is not ritual's primary purpose. In fact, in African religions, concrete material forms (art and iconography) and the movement of objects and bodies in space (ritual action) transmit sophisticated ideas with considerable power, even without the embellishment of accompanying story or explication. Ritual and the associated plastic

arts are eloquent expressions in their own right and convey critical religious ideas with emotive force and dramatic effect. Moreover, the spectacular, performative and participatory nature of ritual creates experiences that instill them through bodily ways of knowing. The "visible, present, living substance" of the body brings immediacy and commitment to otherwise abstract religious ideas (Rappaport, 1999:146). The body, its actions, gestures and experiences mediate religious reflection.

Embodiment, Rhetoric, Performance, and Dynamics

The Body and Bodily Knowing in African Ritual

Because of the primacy of space, the body bears particular significance in African ritual both as the subject of practice and also the object towards which much of that action is directed. The body is permanently marked in initiatory ordeals such as scarification or circumcision. Bodies made thus distinct bear emblems of cultural identity and a visible insignia of the religious ideology that organizes both society and the individual moral life. Among the Yoruba the head is considered the seat of destiny and it receives particular attention during initiatory rituals when it is shaved, washed, smeared with kaolin clay. "Medicines" are introduced through small cuts in the scalp to invest the devotee with qualities, protection, or powers.

But the body is not just a *tabula rasa* or fixed, material entity upon which culture is inscribed. It is also itself a cultural phenomenon, resonating with the rich associations of the surrounding "life-world" (Devisch, 1993:1). Referring to Yaka culture (DR Congo), anthropologist René Devisch contends that ritual does not impose meaning but discloses and activates it; apprehension of meaning is sensuous and bodily. Ritual is an "organization of the sensorium" (1993:48). It orchestrates "tactile, olfactory, oral, sexual and interactional experiences . . . related to life-giving or life-promoting acts and exchange" (1993:133).

Thus, ritual is not just "symbolic." It transforms practitioners, by eliciting direct bodily ways of knowing. As anthropologist Paul Stoller asserts, "The human body is not principally a text; rather, the sentient body is culturally consumed by a world filled with forces, smells, textures, sights, sounds and tastes . . ." (Stoller, 1995:7).

Through its multi-sensorial appeal, ritual arouses the senses, and also awakens affect—feelings and sensibilities—that lends to the assertions of religions an authority that can only be mediated through direct experience. "The symbols [of ritual] . . . are not only a set of cognitive classifications for ordering the . . . universe. They are also, and perhaps as importantly, a set of evocative devices for rousing, channeling, and domesticating powerful emotions" (Turner, 1969:42–3). Rituals in turn "recapture some of the charged values" of bodily experience and make them available for investment in performance (Fernandez, 1991:330).

Ritual enables participants *literally* to make *sense* of themselves and the world. Through its appeal to the *senses* and the *sensational* nature of the experience that it elicits, ritual reveals alternate realities and new modes of being.

Body, Medicine, and Healing Rituals

Medicine and religion are often deeply connected systems. Illness may be an inevitable fact of life, but its possible causes and cures are the subjects of competing cultural interpretations. In African religions, rituals of affliction and healing figure prominently. Because cosmic order and social harmony converge in bodily health, the occasion of illness is all the more alarming, for it is symptomatic of dis-ease in a more remote, invisible, yet inextricably related realm. Much ritual promoting healing focuses on fecundity. Gynecological illness and reproductive failure is not only a predicament for the patient, but a crisis for the community, since African religions aim at its renovation, not other-worldly salvation.

Isoma is one such curative ritual performed by the Ndembu of Zambia and documented by Victor Turner in his classic work *The Ritual Process*. In Ndembu language, "ritual" also means "obligation" and refers to the obligation to venerate the ancestor, especially in situations in which this neglect has "caught" a person in affliction or misfortune. "*Isoma*" means "to slip out of place or fastening," a reference to miscarriage and also to forgetting one's matrilineal kin, considered the protectors of fecundity (1969:15). The rites are said to "cause them to remember" their primary allegiance to the ancestors and the moral injunctions they inaugurated (1969:13). Medicines have symbolic properties: one is derived from the *mulendi* tree with a slippery surface, referring to pregnancies that have "slipped out" prematurely. The metaphor also has therapeutic value, suggesting the medicine lets the patient "slip out" of her condition of being "tied up" with infertility. The imagery of *Isoma* represents an example of ritual as "the play of tropes" (Fernandez, 1986). "What is made sensorily perceptible, in the form of a symbol, is thereby made accessible to the purposive action of society, operating through its religious specialists" (Turner, 1969:25).

The vitalizing resonance between a woman's body and the cosmos is similarly played out in the *khita* healing cult among the Yaka (Devisch, 1993:xx). It aims to heal women's reproductive ailments by activating the "primal womb" to which every woman is connected. This therapeutic ritual "focuses on the initiate's life-bearing capacity in concert with the same capacity in the cosmos" (Devisch, 1993:213).

Ritual Masks and Masquerades as Embodied Rhetoric

An important example of the embodiment of religious thought in ritual is the mask and masquerades, a form of expression for which Africa is renowned. Many masks depict primordial beings, culture heroes, mythical ancestors and divinities whose significant precedents are re-enacted in performances. However, African masquerades do not generally recapitulate myths. Moreover many masks are not anthropomorphic figures at all, but complex superstructures representing the cosmic order or dynamics (Pernet, 1992). Their forms are predicated on cosmological ideas—such as the primacy of women's blood as the source of embodied existence. An example is the *sirige* mask of the Dogon of Mali whose elongated zigzag design indicates the interwoven nature of the world, while its back and forth and swinging movements depict night and day and

the spiraling that set creation in motion. The masks' raffia skirts are dyed red to represent the blood of the perforated hymen and menses; Dogon consider these fibers to be the locus of potent and hence dangerous power.

Masks' formal, esthetic qualities convey fundamental values—such as “coolness,” representing mastery and containment of power. This is the case for the mask of the *Sande* secret society, a transnational and exclusively female masking tradition. Its sacred mask, *Sowei*, communicates the ideals of womanhood and female power through iconography. This helmet-style mask completely encompasses the head, and its smooth distended forehead is reminiscent of a swollen pregnant belly, the original “mask.” Its “cool,” stylized face with downcast eyes and small tight-lipped mouth, alludes to the power of discernment and discretion demanded of cultivated women. *Sowei*'s iconography also explicitly reveals both women and masks to have divine origin. The best pieces are supposedly sculpted by spirits in the underwater abode where “miracles of delicacy are the norm” (Boone, 1986:161). Among the mask's most striking features are the coils of flesh at the neck, representing the concentric rings of water formed as the original mask emerged. Neck coils are an ideal of female beauty and function like a halo in Christian art, signifying that women are human in form but divine in essence (Boone, 1986:170).

In African religions, revelation is made to be experienced. The invisible nature of divinity and the abstract quality of power must literally be *seen* to be believed. Towards this end, African masquerades function like mythology and other poetic forms: As British anthropologist Mary Douglas put it, rituals “enrich meaning [and] . . . call attention to other levels of existence” (Douglas, 1966:40). They point to a more significant realm and put participants into direct, unmediated contact with the “really real.” Masks' energetic activation in ritual performance arouses energy, accesses passion, and engages the spectator in song, dance, spectacle, and drama, causing the imagination to flicker with association. Masking's dynamic medium vividly appeals to its spectators to embrace the worldview that it depicts.

A Paradoxical Course

The rhetoric of ritual follows a paradoxical course; rather than offering forthright explanation, it proceeds by indirect means. For example, clients come to diviners with pressing need for guidance. But, rather than offering explicit answers, divination responds with an enigmatic image, a conjunction of symbols physically cast into new combination. The sign conveys bundles of meaning simultaneously—like visual poems (Grillo, 2008). Such ritual experiences reflect what James Fernandez calls “edification by puzzlement” (1980). They cause participants to enter the world of the imagination more deeply, to reflect on canonical images and experiences, and to draw from them insight about the human predicament. As Victor Turner asserted, “by indirections we seek out directions” (Turner, 1983:236). Rather than relating a story or offering explanation, ritual provides direct experience, “thick with sensory meaning” to awakens reflexive consciousness (Grimes, 1982:545).

Altars: Embodying the Immaterial

Sites of ritual communication with gods, ancestors, and spirits, altars are purposefully constructed to bring their presence into palpable focus. *Altars* may also be seen as visual poems referring to mythology about the gods through iconography. The symbolic coherence among objects on an altar unmistakably identify it with a particular deity, making it a potent place of revelation. Among the Yoruba, *altars* are referred to as the "face of the gods" (Thompson, 1993).

The "primacy of assemblage" is characteristic of African aesthetics (Blier, 1995). Characteristic foods, flags, colors associated with particular *orisha*, or deities, are clustered on the altar to invoke the divinity's presence. An altar for *Shango*, god of thunder, would capture the flashing qualities of lightning and reflect his boldness and spirit of righteous vengeance; his colors are red and white and his characteristic double-headed axe must always appear. An altar for *Oshun* conveys the gentleness and sensuality of this water goddess. Honey colors and offerings like pineapple represent the sweet water of the river, her natural domain.

In Kongo civilizations of Central Africa, the locus of an altar may be permanent or fleeting, natural or constructed, but each is considered "a 'turning point,' the cross-roads, the threshold to another world" (Thompson, 1995:50). The *nganga*, a ritual healer, can become a living altar through possession trance; the "ecstatic trembling of the shoulders, called *mayembo*, is our best measure of where to look for 'altars' among Bakongo . . . When the *nganga* trembles . . . he becomes an altar" (Thompson, 1993:48). Another form of altar is the tomb where ancestors are entreated through ritual offerings, libation and incantation. Tying flashing objects like mirrors, plates, or glass, to branches fixed in the ground at gravesites captures spirits so their energy can be channeled towards the living. Kongo cosmograms (*dikenga*, "the turning") are cross-in-a-circle patterns representing the circling of the soul through intersecting worlds of living and dead. Cosmograms drawn on tombs invoke God and the ancestors. Their inscription is itself ritual and includes singing and circling this "point" of convergence.

Performance: Activating Energies

While artifacts (like altars) and other symbols are part of the basic apparatus of ritual, they are important only insofar as they evoke gesture, since what is essential to the ritual process is its dynamic quality. Ritual is performative, designed as spectacle as well as participatory engagement. Ritual is the means to activate the energies of the gods, spirits, or ancestors, and unleash their transformative power.

Multi-sensorial and Polysemic Performances

Masquerades, for example, bring sculpture and textile into exciting dynamic conjunction with the performative arts of dance, music and theatre. Masking vividly illustrates

ritual's multi-sensorial, polysemic, nature. An African mask is not a static emblem, not just the covering of face or head, nor the costume of the wearer or the dance. All these elements operate in dynamic conjunction.

Moreover, together they convey many layers of meaning simultaneously. For example, the Dogon *Satimbe* mask whose superstructure is a woman with upraised arms bears different meanings, depending on the level of the viewer's initiation; it can represent the female ancestor who discovered the first "mask," its fibres red with powerful menstrual blood; *Yasigi*, the twin and intended mate of the rebellious primordial being, Ogo, who tore away from God's womb and forever searches for her; *Yasigine*, the sole woman initiated into the masking society. The mask's various symbolic allusions cannot be articulated efficiently in discursive form, but are effectively captured and economically conveyed in ritual performance.

Ritual Activation of Power Objects

Art and artifacts are primary means through which African religious ideas are communicated and transmitted. Sculpture, masks, divinatory iconography and paraphernalia, priestly accoutrements, as well as a protective charms and amulets all "represent, channel or transform spiritual energies or beings" (Hackett, 1996:3). Not only do such art forms convey meaning and evoke an aesthetic experience, they also have efficacy. Some power objects (such as charms, amulets, statuettes, stools, or even medicines) are not mere epiphenomena of ritual; they are perceived to have agency as "spirit-embodying and spirit-directing" forces themselves (Thompson, 1983:117).

An important example is the figurine used in Vodun traditions in Benin and Togo, designated by the Fon term *bocio*, literally meaning "empowered (*bo*) cadaver (*cio*)" (Blier, 1995:2). These figures intentionally display what art historian Suzanne Blier calls "counteraesthetics," lacking the formal qualities of Fon beauty—"youthful grace, surface polish, a sense of finish or exacting anatomical detail" (1995:30). Instead they are striking in their ugliness, evoking shock and fear, which boosts their potency. Raffia cords and binding are prominent features of *bocio*. This wrapping alludes to binding of powerful energies to be harnessed and directed towards the protection of the object's owner, and also to coercive strength and tenacity. The objects are further activated through "assemblage," the addition of medicines or accessories layered on the figurine. (Hackett, 1996:46). They are further energized with saliva (through incantation or spitting), heat (applying fire, pepper, alcohol), knotting/twisting, and sacrificial offering (Blier, 1995:74). These actions relate to senses beyond sight, namely hearing, touch, and taste, emphasizing the animated power of the activated object.

Kongolese statuettes (*nkisi konde*) are similarly activated, pierced with nails and metal shards to trigger the forces they embody and the medicines they contain. Their menacing stance, with raised arm or protruding tongue, reflects their purpose, to punish or inflict harm (Hackett, 1996:50). The *nkisi* is also considered a "medicine of God," that can serve to heal or protect (Thompson, 1995:50).

Possession Trance: The Gods in Ritual Action

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the body as the locus of ritual experience and expression is possession trance, a widespread phenomenon in African religions. Indigenous explication of possession trance grants agency to spirits and divinities who displace the persona of the devotee to become an embodied presence in the living community.

The phenomenon is commonly referred to in local idioms as "mounting," bearing both connotations of riding a horse and sexual possession, for the spirit is said to mount the head and ride the devotee, and the two are fused into one being. In the Vodou (Vodun) traditions of Benin and Togo the possessed are called "horsemen" of the gods. Possession is "a mode of knowing in which knower and known conjoin" (Grimes, 1982:548).

Possession trance is not indicative of evil, but is beneficent and ritually invoked. It is spectacle and revelation. Devotees recognize archetypal gestures and behaviors as indications of the presence of particular spirits and divinities among them. Therefore, the trance is subject to the constraints of cultural convention and constituted by formalism. Performances must be competently executed to be persuasive, yet paradoxically "authentic" possession trance precludes the performer as self-conscious agent directing the ritual action. Anthropologist Paul Stoller resolves this epistemological dilemma by suggesting that the bodily practice of possession reflects habituated cultural memory. Culturally appropriate postures, gestures, expressions and movements are literally incorporated in the performer and constitute "the embodied substrate of performance" (Stoller, 1995:29). In Songhay spirit possession in the Republic of Niger, the bodily senses attract disembodied entities: "spirits must be enticed to their social bodies through music (sound), praise-poetry (sound), specific perfumes (smell), and dance (movement)" (Stoller, 1995:22).

Possession in turn confers special embodied knowledge. During the *Dipri* festival among the Abidji of Côte d'Ivoire, participants who surrender to the spirit of the river stab themselves at the peak of the possession trance and are able to be instantaneously healed; consequently they acquire healing powers. Adepts perform extraordinary feats such as cutting off one's own tongue and restoring it unharmed (Grillo, forthcoming). Thus possession is an exercise in empowerment in which "possessed becomes possessor" (Schmoll in Stoller, 1995:25).

Ritual Dynamics: Movement of Bodies in Space

In his seminal and still classic work, *The Rites of Passage* (1908), Arnold van Gennep offered insights into ritual as both a social and ontological transition. Giving special attention to the logic of movements in space, van Gennep noticed that ritual actors change location in order to designate change in social identity, and concluded that the critical distinguishing feature of a rite of passage is an actual territorial passage. Ritual participants are first spatially separated from society, and after undergoing symbolic ordeal in a liminal space, cross an actual threshold to re-emerge as new persons and

reintegrate. Thus rites of passage literally move participants through "planes of classification" (Turner, 1969:41).

Initiation is the classic example. Among Chokwe and related peoples of central Africa (Angola, DR Congo, Zambia) initiation requires a period of seclusion lasting up to more than a year for boys and four months for girls. The spatial separation marks neophytes' symbolic death. During this period they are socially unclassifiable, neither children nor adults, suspended in a liminal condition "betwixt and between," until they are ritually "reborn" and returned to society as cultivated adults (Jordán, 1999).

The installation of a new king involves a similar dynamic. The process for making a Yoruba Ondo king (*Oba*) begins with a "symbolic death and rebirth represented by his [three-month] seclusion and reappearance," immediately followed by a pilgrimage to the Ondo's place of origin for an essential rite of blessing and protection (Olupona, 1991:62). His return inaugurates his kingship.

Van Gennep's clear analysis of the pronounced significance of spatial transition made a critical contribution to understanding how ritual "works." Movement enables participants to experience the sacred not as a fixed point or an ultimate reality, but as that which is categorically distinct and socially (and therefore physically) "set apart."

This is true of ritual itself. Ritual doesn't merely point to what is sacred nor does it simply impose a new social state. Rather, it causes the participant to struggle through an ontological change. Ritual is always "contingent, provisional, and defined by difference" (Bell, 1992:91). Far from mindless repetition, African ritual engages participants in a reflexive process that calls for attention and evokes response.

Ritual Reflexivity, Agency, and Ethics

Expanding on van Gennep's ideas, Victor Turner underscored that the central, liminal experience "mak[es] neophytes vividly and rapidly aware of the 'factors of their culture'," he qualified liminality itself as a "stage of reflection" (Turner, 1967:108). Ritual as pedagogy teaches "neophytes *how to think with some degree of abstraction* about their cultural milieu and gives them ultimate standards of reference" (Turner, 1967:108—emphasis mine).

Chokwe male initiation (*mukanda*) employs masked performances that "'bring to life' concepts of ancestral influence" (Jordán, 1999:34). Further initiation into the secret masking association, *mungonge*, subjects initiates to "physically trying and psychologically challenging conditions to prove their courage and moral fortitude" (Jordán, 1999:34). What is most essential to initiation is the "slow transformation of the individual, as a progressive passage from exteriority to interiority. It allows the human being to gain consciousness of his humanity" (Zahan, 1979:54). This inward passage forges self-conscious awareness.

Reflexivity is integral to the ritual experience. Not only are ritual participants capable of reflection on the action in which they are deeply engaged, they self-consciously negotiate and revise ritual traditions as they engage in them. Moreover they are aware of how ritual actions shape them. Therefore the "reflexive monitoring of performance by the performers" is a critical ingredient of all varieties of African rituals (Drewal, M.T.,

1988:27). For example, contrary to persistent Western ideas about the nature of ritual masking, wearing a mask is neither a chaotic nor cathartic experience, but involves a self-consciously controlled performance, a sign of reflexivity (Pernet, 1992).

Only to the extent that ritual actors evince reflexivity can they be considered to be agents, not mere actors mechanically rehearsing prescribed routine in unchanging ways. Agency implies causal influence as well as conscious and deliberate action toward a desired end.

This end is always pragmatic. "Rituals are deeds" (Grimes, 1982:545). Efficacy is a common refrain, among theorists and practitioners alike. Ritual "works" insofar as it effects transformation. So critical is transformation to the process and outcome of ritual performance that Richard Schechner coined for it the term "transformance" (Schechner, 1977:71 quoted by Grimes, 1982:543). Initiation makes a boy into a man, a girl into a woman; divination is a strategy for coping with crisis, suggesting concrete possibilities for action; sacrifice forges contracts by which adherents live and thrive. Ritual effects real physical change, social transitions as well as psychological and spiritual transformation. As Walter Burkert says, ritual "can only fulfill its communicatory function if it avails itself of a pragmatism that is unquestionably real" (Burkert, 1983:42).

However, "participants probably experience the failure of ritual as often as they do the success of it" (Grimes, 1996:284). Grimes claims that within the "closed system" of ritual, participants will more often than not "blame themselves before impugning the rite and will criticize some part of it before challenging the whole of it" (1996:291). This is because agency is not attributed exclusively to individual ritual actors; rituals themselves are accorded agency. Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994) take the extreme position that "'ritual commitment' . . . consists precisely in abandoning agency altogether," trusting it to ritual instead (Sax, 2008:478). African divination is a key ritual where this strong claim can be contested (Grillo, 2009).

Agency within Divination

At the heart of African religious tradition, divination is unique in its focus on personal agency. Unlike most rituals, either fixed by liturgical calendar or mandated by the community, divination is instigated by the individual. While there may be occasions of public divination, such as a trial for witchcraft, these instances are rare. More typically, a troubled individual seeks the services of the diviner to attend to personal concerns. As a private and voluntary affair, divination involves deliberate and strategic action, not a rote enactment. The consulter is an agent, self-aware and willfully imposing choice (including the choice of diviner), not just an unconscious actor rehearsing a pre-scripted routine.

Anthropologist Michael Jackson underscores agency in divination, identifying it first and foremost as a "ritual means of making a choice" (1989:63). Diagnosing a client's problem or affliction in terms of spiritual malady, the diviner's aim is to determine what sacrifice will appease the entities responsible, rectify the situation, and alleviate suffering. Working among the Kuranko in Sierra Leone, Jackson notes that the diviner "defines his task as one of 'seeing a sacrifice'" (1989:59). This culminating prescription

for sacrifice enables the client to take decisive action in an otherwise ambiguous situation and move from a state of "inertia to purposeful activity" (1989:60). However, the client alone decides whether to perform the sacrifice.

Divination offers a foundation for ethics, for only agents can intentionally exercise the free will and conscious choice necessary to advance "the good."

Sacrifice as Ethical Engagement

Sacrifice can take many forms in African religions: private altar offerings, alms, adherence to the privations of dietary injunctions, or subjection to the ordeals of initiation. However, blood sacrifice is the archetypal model. In African religions, blood sacrifice shows life's dependence on death and establishes the reciprocal bond between spiritual and mortal realms.

A central tenet of Vodou is the concept of *hun*, the vital force active in God, heart, blood, drums and bellows alike. "Like the circulation of blood and the beating of the heart (which is simulated in the drum and bellows), *hun* is seen to be essential to human life and vitality" (Blier, 1995:82). In Vodou, blood sacrifice is therefore a focal point for many rituals, from the activation of altars to ceremonies recalling to life initiates ritually considered "dead" (Blier, 1995).

In African religions the life force released through blood sacrifice "feeds" the gods and the "living dead" (ancestors) even as it channels their animating energy to the human community. A devotee must not forsake the ritual duties that sustain this relationship, for divinities and ancestors, while supportive, are also demanding and can trouble a negligent supplicant by causing illness or chronic misfortune (Grillo, 1999). In this way the ancestors, especially, are referred to as the "guardians of the moral order." Reciprocity, at the heart of sacrificial exchange, sustains this order, making sacrifice an essentially ethical act.

Sacrifice, often a mute enactment, is an eloquent rhetorical device and powerful act, self-consciously wrought, to elicit "the good" for oneself in concert with community and divinity.

Gender and Power

If African ritual is overly characterized as conservative, it is also predominantly represented as an enclave of male activity that serves to reinforce male privilege and power. It is true that, given the disproportionate generative power of women—their ability to bring forth life—African traditions symbolically restore a balance between domains of production and reproduction by excluding women from certain creative enterprises, notably ironworking and carving. However, in West Africa especially women exercise considerable power that ritual features in high relief. Much African ritual confers women's innate power upon other authorities.

In West Africa both the rituals of male initiation and the investiture of kings make strong symbolic associations between the male subjects and woman, inculcating and making them embody traits of femininity. In the nineteenth century state of Ségou (in

present day Mali), a king would wear female attire, comport himself with humility characteristic of ideal womanhood, and was referred to as "woman-king." In an extreme instance of gender conflation, a future Traoré king of the Bambara was actually castrated. Physically divesting him of maleness enabled him to acquire female virtues and bear the sexual duality necessary to exercise the power of this office (Adler, 2007:81–4). The institution of the "woman-king" endured until at least 1958 when such persons served in more modest capacities as judges and mediators, while still wielding strong moral authority (Adler, 2007:83).

Female moral authority and power is a critical underpinning of contemporary kingship among the Ondo Yoruba of Nigeria. The king traces his mythic descent from *Pupupu*, the female ancestor who was "accorded the rank of a Yoruba king" (Olupona, 1991:26). Women still command both spiritual power and political influence. "The paramount female chief is *Lobun*, the most revered title in Ondo and also referred to as *Oba Obinrin* (woman king)" (1991:47).

Twinship, Sexual Ambiguity, and Power

A widespread African ideal is the complementarity between men and women, and the powerful unity of male and female qualities. Male/female twins are ideal and figure widely in myth and ritual as progenitors of humanity. The cosmogonic myth of the Dogon of Mali, for example, relates that the primordial beings were eight sets of androgynous twins eventually paired into couples. Mawu-Lisa, the Fon creator god is simultaneously male and female; and the Yoruba represent the "living dead," the ancestors who are guardians of the moral order, as twin statuettes (*ere ibeji*). Yoruba twin memorial figures representing deceased children (*ibedji*) receive nurturing ritual attention. "They may be washed, oiled, rubbed with various substances . . . adorned with jewelry, clothes . . . and amulets. Many of these figures develop a fine patina with constant use" (Hackett, 1996:41). Human twins are considered to have the powers of the *orisha*; while they herald wealth, they may bring misfortune if not properly honored (Hackett, 1996:178). The Senufo of Côte d'Ivoire reflect similar views, deeming twins to have closer affiliation with spirits than humans (Hackett, 1996:123).

Doubleness, being powerful, is also perceived as dangerous. Feared as well as revered, it must be ritually managed. Viewing twinship as aberration and threat to the natural order, the Igbo of Nigeria traditionally left twins to die in the bush; their birth incurs pollution removed by purification rites, *Ikpú alu*, involving dragging a sacrificial victim over persons and places in contact with the pollution (Ikenga-Metuh, 1985:5). In some African traditions, such as the Dogon, in order to maximize fecundity and ensure reproduction, all remnants of androgyny inherent in the body must be excised. Circumcision and clitoridectomy are performed to make male and female sexually distinct.

Ritual Classification of Gender: Female Genital Mutilation

Clitoridectomy is still a common rite of female initiation in some regions of Africa. This surgical removal of the clitoris and parts of the labia minora is far more radical and

dangerous than male circumcision, yet both widespread practices of genital modification are understood to be important means by which gender is culturally defined. Such is the case within the Sande secret society among the Mende of Sierra Leone. Even while the Sande mask reveres inherent female power, Sande's indispensable initiatory act is clitoridectomy.

Infibulation, the most radical form of female genital cutting, involves excising the external genitalia including the labia majora and suturing the vulva. Performed mostly in the Horn of Africa, it is understood to constrain female sexual desire and preserve chastity. Among the Hofriyati of northern Sudan, infibulation is intended to fashion women into "living vessels" of the culture's moral values, making their bodies pure, clean, smooth, and enclosed (Boddy, 1989:16). Moreover, girls "actively achieve their gender identities through the directed experience of [the] trauma" of the ritual operations (Boddy, 1989:58).

From the perspective of those who condone it, the painful ordeal establishes strong female ties in patriarchal and virilocal societies, where women must rely on mutual support. Opponents, including The World Health Organization (WHO), label the practices as female genital mutilation (FGM). Recognizing the extreme physical injury, dangerous, and painful health ramifications, and immense psychological trauma caused by these procedures, the WHO considers FGM a violation of human rights. In the last twenty years, international campaigns to eliminate FGM resulted in official bans in eighteen African countries (*Economist*, 2010).

Personhood, Witchcraft, and Ritual

In traditional Africa, the person is constituted by a material body, a soul or "shade," and also a spiritual "double," the vital force. In some societies, the presence of an additional psychic or spiritual substance constitutes the unnatural essence of a witch. In others, "the witch is an incomplete being, the only who possesses no *dya* (double). The witch . . . in search for his double, struggles to capture that of his victims" (Thomas and Luneu, 1980:80, translation mine). Witches kill, particularly kin, by feeding on the vital force. Lacking the natural doubleness essential to personhood, the witch is the antithesis of the person, and subverts the moral order.

Witchcraft is deeply embedded in African traditional systems of belief and practice and remains formidably ensconced in daily consciousness even in the contemporary urban situation. It is conceived to be a very real, prevalent and menacing force. The perceived need for protection from witchcraft is a decidedly compelling factor in seeking refuge in traditional rituals such as divination and its prescriptions for purification, sacrifice, protective amulets, and herbal remedies.

Because witchcraft is a key construct in African moral systems, early functionalists viewed belief in these malevolent forces as an explanatory framework for brutal misfortune, especially unaccountable death; it was a socially pragmatic means to promote the vigilant preservation of customs and mores. In former times in Dida and Bété societies of Côte d'Ivoire, a suspected witch was subjected to trials by ordeal, made to take

poison whose effect would prove guilt or innocence. Today accusations are tried in the judicial system that punishes witchcraft with imprisonment.

Classic anthropology tended to oppose witches, as agents of evil, with diviners, healers and priests, as forces for good. Witches operate in the shadows of night, invisible and anonymous to the community, to attack and kill; their opponents are known and esteemed, their practices are overt and serve community. However, indigenous terms suggest the emic notion that all engage the same occult power. Only the choice to use it for beneficial or malevolent ends is determinative. The Yoruba *Gelede* festival, a lavish masquerade that venerates the "Great Mothers," exemplifies this fearsome ambiguity. These elderly women are revered as progenitors but also considered witches. Yet "no one would address a woman suspected of possessing such a power as *aje* ['witch'] not just out of fear but because such women also work positive wonders" (Drewal and Drewal, 1983:9). The two masks of the Great Mother both reflect her doubleness: the bearded woman (*iyanla*) or Bird of the Night (*Eye Oro*). The bearded woman, the epitome of sexual ambiguity, represents extraordinary spiritual power that cannot be contained within the domain of a single gender. The bird represents witches' nocturnal transformation and also suggests the witch, like nature, can be both generous and cruel. Its red beak is stained with blood, which contains *ase*, power or life force. *Gelede*'s purpose is to honor the Mothers' power and press it into the service of the wellbeing of society.

With its radical opposition of good and evil, fundamentalist forms of Christianity foster belief in witchcraft as their satanic counterpart. Fear of witchcraft has proved a powerful evangelizing force. In the last decade the evangelical Christian churches and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal conducting anti-witchcraft vigils have thrived; congregations rapidly multiplied and grew to astonishing proportions. Taking seriously speculation about the occult power behind money and ambivalence about wealth, the Pentecostal Church gained popularity by emphasizing the attainment of prosperity through Godly means (Moore and Saunders, 2001:16).

Far from a reflection of primitive or pre-logical thinking, as presented by early theorists such as Lévy-Bruhl, the notion of witchcraft is "dynamic and engaged with the world and is, for this reason eminently modern" (Moore and Sanders, 2001:10). Contemporary anthropologists read the phenomenon as an integral feature of modernity and the postcolonial situation. Jean and John Comaroff (1993) view the resilience of witchcraft beliefs and increasing recourse to them as local responses to the pressures of imperialism and capitalism. Peter Geschiere ascribes their resurgence in Cameroon to the destabilizing impact of globalization; among the Maka of Cameroon it was "hardly possible to talk about power without referring to the *djembe* (sorcery/witchcraft)" (Geschiere, 1997:2). Discourse about power relations in politics are permeated by reference to witchcraft, since both are ambiguous forces.

Innovation and Adaptation: Ritual and History

Ritual acts are often erroneously held to be invariable, and African ritual in particular is made synonymous with ancient practices, fossilized and unchanged by history. Yet

just as history is often ritualized in commemorative ceremonies and rites reassert social charters, ritualization also reshapes history. Performance-dependent rituals, like divination and curing rites, with less certain outcomes than status-marking ceremonies are inherently less stable. As they proliferate and compete, they are enmeshed in the historical change that they reflect (Barnes, 1990:264). Performance theorist Richard Schechner underscores "the startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become—for better or for worse—what they ordinarily are not," through ritual (Schechner, 1995:1, cited in Brady, 1999:243).

Even when it draws on indigenous legacy, "traditional" ritual is not static. One striking example is *Mami Wata*. The association of bodies of water with goddesses is ubiquitous along the Gulf of Guinea, but *Mami Wata* is a relatively new instantiation. She is an African water goddess in the composite image of an "Indian" snake-charmer (based on a nineteenth-century chromolithograph circulated as publicity for a German carnival performance and imported to the African Coast by merchants), and a mermaid (featured as figurehead on the bows of European ships). Her shrines extend across Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria. She is a "wholly modern spirit embodying hybridity . . . and constant innovation", the product of global communication and exchange (Drewal, 2008:9).

Especially when taken outside their traditional, "authorized" contexts, "traditional" rituals still bear persuasive power and can moreover "make history" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993:xviii). Globalization and rapid technological change have not rendered religion irrelevant anywhere in the world, including Africa. African ritual continues to draw on and revitalize traditions in response to new historical realities.

Traditional ritual appeals to female genital power in Côte d'Ivoire is one example. As the source of life, woman has the power to launch fearsome curses as well as elicit the strongest of ethical mandates. When a village is endangered by an epidemic or other calamity, the Abidji perform *Sokroyibé*, a nocturnal rite in which women deploy their genital power to neutralize witchcraft and call down protection. Female elders strip naked and cross the village, pounding the ground with old pestles, singing and cursing witches. To entrap them and their spells, they sprinkle the village with water in which they've bathed their genitals (Grillo, forthcoming). In Côte d'Ivoire, as elsewhere in West Africa, women are aware of their genital power and "actually use this power, or the threat of it, in desperate political situations" (Stevens, 2006:595). In December 1949 approximately 2,000 Ivoirian women made the now much-celebrated thirty-mile march from Abidjan to a prison in Grand Bassam to demonstrate against French colonial administrators' incarceration of political leaders. The women stripped naked, danced using gestures that the French deemed obscene, and sang until they were forcibly dispersed. More recently, at the outbreak of civil war in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002, Nanan Kolia Tano, a 65-year-old female Baule chief, organized the *Adjanou* dance, a ritual appeal to female genital power. Women elders danced naked for seven days until rebel soldiers stormed the village, kidnapped and killed them. Only Nanan Kolia Tano escaped (Djinko, 2003). The continuity of ritual coupled with its application in novel situations shows it to be far from a relic, but a self-conscious strategy that comments on and effects the contemporary social situation.