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Mamalawo? The Controversy Over Women Practicing Ifa Divination

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Abstract

As the tradition of Ifa divination has gained increasing popularity and membership around the world, the previously male-dominated composition of its priesthood has become challenged. This article traces the origins of women who have sought the highest levels of Ifa initiation—primarily in Cuba and the US—engages the various arguments, concerns, and appeals to authority of the numerous players. Much of the debate hinges around ritual practice associated with the mysterious oriṣa Odu, and consequently the article addresses the relevant mythology and rituals associated with her in an Ifa context. It also places the male-oriented nature of Ifa within the larger context of Yoruba gender norms, contrasting Yoruba notions of gender with modern values of gender equality. Thus, it seeks to explain why male Ifa priests from West Africa have been eager and willing to initiate women. In addition, the article demonstrates that—contrary to many popular claims—several women have become Ifa diviners in West Africa, but that the important ways that gender is understood in a variety of different contexts, its ramifications for initiation rituals, and the rapidly growing number of female initiates in diaspora, will likely change the dynamics of the tradition going forward.

KEY WORDS: Ifa, Divination, Gender, Cuba, USA, West Africa

Introduction

The Yoruba tradition of Ifa divination has become arguably the most popular and recognizable indigenous African religious tradition in contemporary times, given that more has been written on Yoruba religious traditions than on any other African society and that Ifa is generally understood to be the most central aspect of traditional Yoruba religion. Ifa divination has become so prominent in fact, that some have begun to refer to traditional Yoruba religion as "Ifa-Oriṣa" religion,[1] highlighting its great importance amidst a staggeringly large number of indigenous Yoruba religious traditions. Practitioners of Ifa can be found in various places in the Americas – such as Cuba,

[1] This is fairly prevalent in common discourse in the US in particular, and can sometimes be found in academic work as well. For example see Funlayo E. Wood, "Cyber Spirits, Digital Ghosts," *CrossCurrents* 65, no. 4 (2015): 448-56.; and Ọlọmọ, Aina, "Ṣango beyond Male and Female" in *Ṣango: In Africa and the African Diaspora*, eds Joel E. Tishken, Toyin Falọla, and Akintunde Akinyẹmi (Indiana University Press, 2009), 311-21.

Brazil, or Trinidad – largely as a result of the Atlantic slave trade, but practitioners can currently be found on practically all continents.

After having studied Ifa with a high priest, Chief Ifarinwale Ogundiran the Araba of Modakẹkẹ, in Nigeria, every time I give a presentation on the tradition in the US, someone always asks if there are any female diviners because the name for Ifa priests – *babalawo* – means "father of secrets" in Yoruba and the tradition is usually presented as overtly male-centric. Over the past few decades many women – mostly but not exclusively in the United States – have sought to gain initiation into the tradition of Ifa and also to be trained to perform Ifa divination itself, causing a heated debate amongst practitioners across the Black Atlantic. Many have argued that initiation into Ifa must be limited to men, and others argue that even if women are initiated it is taboo for them to perform divination. Currently, many women have in fact been initiated and perform divination, but this has certainly not quieted the lively debate on the matter. While the debate clearly has important implications with respect to issues of gender, it is also intimately tied up in notions of power and authority as well as modernity and the proper adaptation of tradition.

As I myself am not a practitioner of Ifa, I do not intend to suggest a "correct" answer, but rather to clarify and offer some insight on the traditions practitioners refer to and draw upon and how these interpretations shape the practice of Ifa in a global context. Although no one has of yet placed all of the players from the US, Cuba, and Nigeria in a global context in scholarly work, doing so with close attention paid to Yoruba gender norms is fruitful in a number of ways. First, there is a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding in all three locations regarding the precise gendered taboos and ritual restrictions in the Nigerian Ifa tradition from both contemporary and historical perspectives, and much of the most prominent academic work on the matter can also be misleading. Clearly identifying the historical and contemporary norms through the lenses of Yoruba gender norms and Ifa mythology provides a deeper understanding of their nature, function, and why traditions may take different forms in Cuba and Nigeria today. Furthermore, taking a global perspective on the practice of Ifa demonstrates the potential issues that arise when indigenous traditions emerge from a specific cultural-religious context and gain global followings. This is particularly true with respect to American initiates and diviners who have received surprisingly little scholarly attention despite constituting one of the most fascinating and rapidly growing developments within the broader global oriṣa community.

Current Debate

Ifa has always been a central aspect of traditional Yoruba society,[2] but the tradition has enjoyed even more popularity in contemporary times as more academic works have been published on it than any other Yoruba religious tradition,[3] it has become quite common

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[2] Bascom describes the babalawo and Ifa as "a focal point in the traditional Yoruba religion" and Abimbola identifies Ifa as "undoubtedly the most important of the numerous divinities of the Yoruba people." William Russell Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Indiana University Press, 1991), 12; Abimbola, Wande. *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá* (UNESCO, 1975), 2.

[3] Some of the most prominent include: E. M Lijadu, *Ifa: Imọlẹ Rẹ Ti Iṣe Ipilẹ Isin Ni Ilẹ Yoruba* (Omolayo Standard Press of Nigeria, 1898); E. M. Lijadu, *Ọrûnmila!* (Omolayo Standard Press of Nigeria, 1908); Bascom, *Ifa Divination,* Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems*; Wande Abimbola, *Ifá Divination Poetry* (Nok Publishers, 1977); Wande Abimbola, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus* (Oxford University Press, 1996);

for babalawo to train foreigners, and as evidenced by the multiple prominent Ifa organizations, Ifa enjoys a profile that no other Yoruba deity or orișa can claim.[4] The babalawo with whom I studied Ifa has worked with a significant number of Americans, initiated at least one woman into Ifa in Nigeria, and worked with several other orișa devotees in the US and Brazil, and famous Ifa priests such as Wande Abimbọla, his son Kọla Abimbọla, and Yẹmi Ẹlẹbuibọn have developed truly international followings and constituencies. Given the importance of Ifa in traditional Yoruba religion, the high profile of Ifa priests, and the abundance of academic literature and online materials on Ifa, those who already practice traditional African religions or are interested in becoming involved in their practice often turn to Ifa. Although Ifa has traditionally been viewed as a predominantly male-oriented tradition, it has rather unsurprisingly attracted very sincere and passionate interest from female orișa worshippers over the past few decades. In fact, as one Ifa and Ọșun (orișa of fertility and wealth) devotee has remarked, initiation into the secrets and traditions of Ifa has come to be perceived as the most prestigious of spiritual positions women have sought out, particularly in the diaspora.[5]

Given the new cultural context for this exciting new enthusiasm for the Ifa tradition, it has had significant implications for how the tradition is interpreted and re-interpreted, particularly with respect to gender norms. This has generated a spirited discourse often centered around the cultural values of inclusion and equality on one hand and gender complementarity and ritual taboos on the other, although these values do not determine any particular stance as those on opposing sides often make recourse to the same values, and those on the same side may arrive at their stances from different angles. The debate specifically revolves around whether or not women should be initiated into the tradition of Ifa at all and if they should be allowed to perform Ifa divination. On all sides of the debate, frequent recourse is made to Yoruba tradition in opposition to more recent and modern "deviations". The complexity of this debate is a clear indication of the number of stakeholders involved and also that, as Stefania Capone has put it, "it constitutes the most controversial aspect [of the tradition] among orisha practitioners in the Americas."[6] While conducting research in Brazil amongst Candomblé practitioners, I have heard many traditional authorities speak out against younger female practitioners who seek Ifa initiation or males who are open to the idea of women doing so. Many women in the United States have asked me and Chief Ifarinwale Ogundiran for opinions on the issue, but nowhere has this debate been more clear and contentious than within the Cuban tradition of orișa/oricha worship, Santería.

Wande Abimbola and Ivor L. Miller, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yoruba Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora* (Aim Books, 2003); Afolabi A.Epega and Philip John Neimark, *The Sacred Ifa Oracle*. (Athelia Henrietta Press, 1999); Elizabeth M. McClelland, *The Cult of Ifá among the Yoruba*. (Ethnographica, 1982); and Jacob K.Olupona and Rowland Abiodun, *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance* (Indiana University Press, 2016).

[4] The relatively recently founded Ifa Heritage Institute is the only institute of higher education founded on the principles of indigenous African religious traditions http://www.ifaheritage.org/, the Ifa University in Washington DC takes a global perspective to the entire orișa complex not only Ifa < https://ifa.university/ >, and there is also Phillip Neimark's Ifa Foundation in Florida < http://www.ifafoundation.org/ >.

[5] Olaoshun Victoria Alakesin, "Iyanifa:Cultural Implications, the Myth, the Reality," in *Iyanifa: Woman of Wisdom*, ed. Ayele Kumari (Ayele Kumari, 2014), 96.

[6] Stefania Capone, "Le Pai-De-Santo Et Le Babalawo," in *La Religion Des Orisha : Un Champ Social Transnational En Pleine Recomposition*, ed. K. Argyriadis and Stefania Capone (Hermann Editions, 2011), 54.

The Cuban Ifa Crisis

Although some women had been quietly initiated into Ifa earlier, the national debate about the position of women in Ifa was sparked in 2004 when the temple Ifa Iranlowo initiated a group of women. Aisha Beliso-De Jesus has written a more detailed explanation of the various aspects of this debate,[7] so a brief summary will suffice here. Many Cuban practitioners protested this "feminist" violation of the tradition, accused the *babalao* (Cuban spelling of the Yoruba *babalawo*) of crimes against Ifa, and sought their exclusion from for the global orisa community. Cuban priests who resorted to Nigerian traditions—identified as African style as opposed to Cuban style—in turn protested colonial Cuban misogyny and pointed to more open-minded Yoruba babalawo who took no issue with initiating women. However, Cuban style priests argued that Cuba rather than Nigeria should be considered the authoritative tradition because it was better preserved in Cuba than in the homeland.[8]

Belisio-De Jesus frames this debate as "primarily a contest over Cuban versus Nigerian global diasporic authority rather than over female initiations," and while this is undoubtedly of central importance the issue, it is hard to imagine why any of the women involved would risk moving outside traditional authority structures unless they firmly believed the issue of female initiation was worth the heavy price. Following my discussions with women who seek initiation and priesthood in Ifa as well as authority figures who strongly oppose the practice, I find it difficult to separate claims of authority from the specific stances each model of authority takes on this particular issue, particularly for the women seeking initiation themselves. As Matory argues, religious symbols, norms, and practices often serve as a reservoir from which people can and do draw to create and recreate their traditions in new contexts,[9] and in this debate practitioners have drawn on different aspects of their traditions and at times tried to redefine what should be within the accepted range of possibilities. Still, one perspective shared by all Cubans was that the American Ifa tradition is an "abject location of modern perversity" because of its feminist bent and perceived disregard for traditional taboos.[10]

American Iyanifa

The experience of American oriṣa practitioners is of critical importance here because not only did it provide a backdrop for the Cuban debate, but American women perhaps more than any others have expressed a strong desire to get initiated into Ifa, to study sacred Ifa oral texts, and to practice Ifa divination. Americans first were introduced to oriṣa traditions through Cuban Santeros in the 1970s, but because many African Americans sought a "pure" form of African religion without any traces of European colonialism and Christianity, they were not satisfied with some aspects of Cuban practice. More pertinently here, many African American women were frustrated with the sexist

[7] Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, "Contentious Diasporas: Gender, Sexuality, and Heteronationalisms in the Cuban Iyanifa Debate," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 4 (2015): 817-40.

[8] ibid, 817-28. In 2006, another passionate debate was launched at a global meeting in Venezuela when a female Ifa initiate was told by Cuban babalaos "there is no such thing as a woman Ifa priest," while Nigerian babalawo advocated for the acceptability of women within their number. M. Ajisebo McElwaine Abimbola, "The Role of Women in the Ifa Priesthood," in *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, eds. Jacob K. Olupona and Rowland O. Abiodun (Indiana University Press, 2016), 247.

[9] J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomble* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 115-148.

[10] Beliso-De Jesús,. "Contentious Diasporas", 834-5.

features of Western society and religion and sought in Yoruba traditions "alternative sources of women's empowerment, leadership, and authority."[11] Indeed Yoruba traditions offered many such outlets, and African American women have quickly become prominent leaders in the American orișa tradition.[12]

White Americans also have shown a keen interest in Ifa, and this is perhaps best demonstrated by Phillip Neimark (Oluwo Fagbamila) and his wife Vassa Neimark (Iyalawo[13] Olufadeke) who established the Ifa Foundation of North America and Ifa College and also initiated the first female Iyanifa (a female title in the Ifa tradition) in the United States.[14] Many such practitioners who wanted to initiate women into Ifa or wanted to be initiated if they were women themselves, were not provided that option through the Cuban tradition. Eventually many practitioners learned that priests in Nigeria and Benin were open to initiating anyone, and this caused many women and men to travel to West Africa for initiation and study and to rely on African traditions as the authoritative model for their ritual practice.[15] However, many African American women faced a great deal of discrimination for seeking initiation and for speaking out on the issue. This debate came to the fore in the 1990s, and some were accused of lying for claiming that women could be initiated,[16] and another made a Cuban babalao scream when he learned that she had been initiated into Ifa.[17] Matters did change, however, and despite the fact that American practitioners resorted to African traditions to allow women to get initiated into Ifa, there are now more Iyanifa recorded in the US than in Nigeria![18]

Many Iyanifa have also begun to practice Ifa divination as well, adding yet another step of ritual complexity to the issue. Women in Oyotunji Village organized to gain the right to use the divining instruments of Ifa and practice divination on their own, and "at Oyotunji, one now finds women in the priesthood freely using what were designated traditional male-divination tools to assist them in their readings for clients, directly subverting certain gender configurations in other global Yoruba communities."[19] It is not only American women who have begun to perform Ifa divination, with the debate spreading to many areas in the Yoruba religious diaspora, but women's rights to perform Ifa divination strangely has not become much of an issue in Yorubaland itself, prompting many to identify the new movement as untraditional and having more to do with modern feminism and values of gender equality than adherence to Yoruba religious and gender practices.

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[11] Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism*. (University of New Mexico Press, 2014), 324.

[12] Ibid.

[13] This neologism will be addressed in full later.

[14] Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions,* 287. More information about the Ifa Foundation can be found at ifafoundation.org, and they are also cited as having initiated "the first openly gay babalawo." The issue of sexuality is yet another contentious issue within the tradition, but outside the scope of this article.

[15] Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions,* 186-7.

[16] Ayele Kumari, "Tracing the Path of the Iyanifa" in *Iyanifa: Woman of Wisdom*, ed. by Ayele Kumari (Ayele Kumari, 2014), 5.

[17] Iyanifa Oyegbade has rather movingly described just how much resistance and marginalization she experienced in Oyotunji village (an African American community in South Carolina dedicated to the practice of traditional Yoruba life and religion) as a result of her own initiation and opinions about what options should be open to women within Ifa. Ifafunke Osunbunmi Alake Oyegbade, "Breaking the Glass Ceiling: A Pioneering Iyanifa in the United States," in *Iyanifa: Woman of Wisdom* (Ayele Kumari, 2014), 291-2, 292-7.

[18] Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions*, 187.

[19] Ibid.

Because the practice of many American women *performing* Ifa divination has subverted gender norms in the tradition, several American practitioners have coined the term *iyalawo* in addition to the more traditional *iyanifa*.[20] *Iyalawo* in Yoruba would mean "mother of secrets" and clearly and consciously replaces the male-gendered term *baba* or "father" in *babalawo* with *iya* or "mother." I have never heard this term in Yorubaland, and to the best of my knowledge it is a neologism that has never been in use there. Kumari defines *Iyalawo* as the "female equivalent" of *babalawo*,[21] which is significant because the more traditional Yoruba term *iyanifa* is simply the *counterpart* of the male Ifa priest, demonstrating a subtle difference in orientation toward gender roles and norms.

Dominant Discourse

While the general positions of different players in this complicated web of the Trans-Atlantic and globalizing Ifa tradition may be clear at this point,[22] it is worth clarifying what the specifics of each stance are and how these approaches are substantiated. To begin, many if not most Ifa and other oriṣa priests in diaspora (excluding the US), led primarily but not exclusively by Cubans, firmly reject women's initiation and involvement in Ifa divination. This primarily revolves around the fact that the mysterious and dangerous female oriṣa Odu is considered an essential part of the Ifa initiation process in Santería, and given the fact that it is strictly taboo for women to see or come in contact with Odu, there is no way for women to be initiated into Ifa. This stance is based on an interpretation of an Ifa verse found within the Odu (chapter not the oriṣa Odu) Irẹtẹ-Gbe.[23] Furthermore, in the Cuban tradition, one must be initiated *before* studying the sacred Ifa corpus as both it and the oriṣa Odu are closely guarded secrets.[24]

Although Nigerian babalawo have expressed their openness to female initiates, many Cubans maintain that this is a modern corruption of the tradition that has been better preserved in the diaspora than it was in the homeland. This is a fascinating assertion, and one that would be seemingly difficult to prove or disprove. As Matory has argued, since the 19th century Yoruba religious communities around the Black Atlantic have often relied heavily on ethnographic literature on oriṣa traditions for authority in the absence of any written scriptures.[25] This is significant because practically all of the early literature on Yoruba tradition, customs, and religion states in no uncertain terms that women are not Ifa priests. Perhaps the first comprehensive work on Yoruba religion, Rev. James Johnson's *Yoruba Heathenism*, features Ifa quite prominently, but states that women are only involved in the tradition through their male relatives or husbands.[26] The Baptist missionary T. J. Bowen noted that "the worship of Ifa is a mystery into which none but men are initiated",[27] and others such as J. Olumide Lucas and Clarke only speak directly

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[20] For example Ayele Kumari refers to herself as an Iyalawo as does Vassa Neimark.

[21] Kumari, *Iyanifa*, 391.

[22] Namely that Cuban-style practitioners are not in favor of women becoming initiated or practicing divination, that American practitioners are in favor of both, and that West African and African-style practitioners are at the very least supportive of women being initiated.

[23] Beliso-de Jesus presents a full recounting of the myth contained within this verse as well as interpretations in "Contentious Diasporas", 825-6.

[24] Ibid.

[25] *Black Atlantic Religion*, 62-4.

[26] James Johnson, *Yoruba Heathenism* (J. Townsend & Sons, 1899), 31.

[27] T. J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849 to 1856* (Frank Cass & Co., 1968), 37.

about men when they mention gender at all.[28] Although conducting his research later in the 1950s and 60s, William Bascom's works *Ifa Divination* and *Sixteen Cowries* are classics and amongst the most authoritative works on Yoruba divination. In both works Bascom states that "women are told to care for the palm nuts of their father but can never become babalawo"[29] and that "only men can practice Ifa."[30] Similarly, Oyesakin states that "women are relegated to the background in the practice of the cult…because women are… barred from knowing its secrets" and that "there are no women Ifa priests among the Yoruba people.[31] This is all very much in keeping with Peel's astute observation that in pre-colonial Yorubaland, "the main generalization is that there was a clear gender distinction in religious practice: the oriṣa mainly engaging the attention of women, and Ifa of men" and that none of the Ifa priests/diviners who appeared in the extensive CMS journals was ever a woman.[32] In short, when the prominent literature of the late 19th to mid 20th century addressed the issue of gender in Ifa, it was quite clear that contemporary and pre-colonial Yoruba society did not have a place for female Ifa priests or diviners, and this may likely have had an effect on how invested diaspora practitioners and ritual specialists came to understand their sacred past and ritual present.

At the same time, some academic literature, particularly in more recent times, does suggest a strong involvement of female powers and forces within the tradition of Ifa. Many have noted how women played an instrumental role in the establishment of the tradition.[33] More recently, Abimbọla has argued that "Ọṣun has much more to do with the origins of Ifa divination than the babalawo… are ready to admit" as she was the original possessor of the bag of wisdom (*apo iwa*) from which the tradition of Ifa divination almost certainly arose.[34] Olajubu has also recorded an Ifa verse from the Odu

[28] Jonathan Olumide Lucas, *The Religion of the Yorubas: Being an Account of the Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Yoruba Peoples of Southern Nigeria, Especially in Relation to the Religion of Ancient Egypt* (Lagos CMS Bookshop, 1948), 72; William Henry Clarke, *Travels and Explorations in Yorubaland 1854-1858* (University of Ibadan Press, 1972), 279-80.

[29] *Ifa Divination*, 81.

[30] William Russell Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World* (Indiana University Press, 1993), 3.

[31] Although he rather interestingly does remark that there was a white American woman *learning* Ifa at the time he was writing. Adefioye Oyesakin, "The Image of Women in Ifa Literary Corpus." *Nigeria,* 141 (1982): 16.

[32] This is significant because European missionaries would likely have taken note of such an event that would have challenged their own gender norms and expectations for the most respected priestly office and form of divination. Peel does recognize that some CMS papers describe women gaining access to some of Ifa's power through marriage into an Ifa lineage, which is a likely a reference to the position of *Apẹtẹbi* or women who are born or marry into Ifa lineages and support the tradition by cooking, cleaning, and participating in worship. J. D. Y. Peel, "Gender In Yoruba Religious Change" *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32, no. 2 (2002): 147, 147-51.

[33] This is either through a woman named Oriṣabi who helped to collect the primordial palm nuts and carry them to Ọrunmila or through the female oriṣa Odu teaching her husband Ọrunmila the secrets of divination and giving him the power to do so.

The first myth was first recorded by Baudin, and likely later copied by Ellis. Noël Baudin, *Fétichisme Et Féticheurs* (Séminaire Des Missions Africaines, 1884), 34-5. A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba-speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa, Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language, Etc* (Curzon Press, 1974), 58-9; Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gẹlẹdẹ: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Indiana Univ. Press, 2000), 9; Pierre Verger, *Artigos* (Corrupio Ed., 1992), 29-31.

[34]. Wande Abimbola, "The Bag of Wisdom: Ọṣun and the Origins of the Ifa Divination," in *Osun across the Waters*, ed. Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford, (Indiana University Press, 2001), 141, 146-50. He also makes an interesting connection between Ọṣun and the camwood powder *iyerosun* that is used by babalawo in divination because it is her sacred color, yellow. Ibid, 149.

Eji Ogbe which speaks about the first iyanifa who was Ọrunmila's daughter.[35] Given that the sacred oral literature of Ifa is understood to cover every aspect of life, it should also be little surprise that some of the chapters of the corpus are specifically gendered female and address clearly feminine aspects of life.[36]

Even from a more historical rather than mythological perspective, the male orientation of Ifa did not at all negate the role of women in the tradition. In fact, Law records that the Ifa tradition was brought to the Ọyọ Empire before the 17th century by a woman called Aruigba (calabash carrier) the mother of the king.[37] Subsequently in the court of the Alaafin (king of the Ọyọ Empire), the position of Iya Mole was created for a woman who was at the head of the Ifa tradition in the palace.[38] As mentioned before, Abimbọla and Onifade have also noted the existence of iyanifas within Ifa in contemporary Yorubaland, although they are relatively few in number.[39] Clearly the power of Ifa, like that of most aspects of Yoruba culture, is closely linked to the feminine, and there is a clear precedent for at least a certain degree of women's involvement in the tradition.

Although Nigerian and West African babalawos are commonly understood as more open-minded than their Cuban counterparts, not all agree that women should be initiated or perform divination. One very knowledgeable babalawo and late Araba (high priest of Ifa) in the Yoruba city of Ẹdẹ told me that he did not encourage his daughters to become too involved in the study of Ifa. When I asked him why, he responded that it would cause chaos during the very crucial training period. Because the novices are usually young men, introducing a girl would likely cause conflict if two or more of them showed an interest in her at the same time not to mention the fact that the training is so rigorous that they cannot afford any additional distractions. Because babalawo have such strong spiritual power, introducing conflict between them could be disastrous, and he "does not want anyone to place his daughters in harm's way." By the same token, this male attention, wanted or unwanted, would also detract from the girl's ability to learn the sacred verses, rituals, and pharmacopeia necessary to become a full priest.[40] In addition, arguments are made both by some in Nigeria and within Santería that it is taboo for women to touch the divining instruments, whether the sacred palm nuts (*ikin*), divining chain (*ọpẹlẹ*), or divining board (*ọpọn*).[41]

Another common argument is drawn from the general Yoruba emphasis on gender complementarity and suggests that male forms of divination are specifically for men to practice, but there are female forms of divination that are more appropriate for women. The more common form of cowrie shell divination (*Ẹẹrindinlogun* in Yoruba) is well

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[35] Olajubu, Oyeronke. *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (State University of New York Press, 2003), 115-7.

[36] Abimbola, "The Role of Women", 256.

[37] Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire C. 1600 - C. 1836: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 44.

[38] Although it is unclear whether or not she herself performed divination. Biodun Adediran and Olukoya Ogen, "Women, Rituals, and Politics of Precolonial Yorubaland," in *Shaping Our Struggles: Nigerian Women in History, Culture and Social Change*, ed. Obioma Nnaemeka and Chima J. Korieh, (Africa World Press, 2011), 150.

[39] *Ifa Will Mend Our Broken World*, 62; Onifade, "Women in Ifa", 1.

[40] However, it is interesting to note that the Araba did not state that women were incapable of studying and becoming Ifa priests, rather that it would simply cause complications that make it impractical. Chief Ṣangodokun Alamu Onifade. Interview by author. March 31, 2017.

[41] Onifade, "Women in Ifa", 1; Abimbola, "The Role of Women", 256-7.

established as being owned by Ọṣun, the quintessential female oriṣa, and completely open to women, although even men are allowed to practice this form of divination as well.[42] The sacred history and ritual practice of *Ẹẹrindinlogun* is quite fascinating in this regard because it almost mirrors that of Ifa from a gender perspective. It is generally believed that Ọṣun received the power and knowledge of *Ẹẹrindinlogun* from a man (her husband Ọrunmila), and the tradition is clearly gendered female as those who practice it, even when they are men, are understood to be "wives" of Ọṣun.[43] The gendered nature of both forms of divination is quite reminiscent of the Chinese yin-yang symbol in that Ifa and Ẹẹrindinlogun are clearly associated with one gender, but contain a central aspect that is intimately linked to the other half of the whole (both in terms of positions in the tradition and also the ultimate source of their ritual power). This argument of male and female modes of divination clearly has some merit and congruence in Yoruba tradition, but it also cuts both ways.

Gender Trouble

Traditional Yoruba notions of gender relations certainly add another level of complexity to this already thorny issue, because on the one hand the Yoruba tradition of Ifa has been appealed to as more open, equitable, and inclusive by those who are in favor of women's initiation and practice of Ifa divination.[44] On the other hand gender equality has not traditionally constituted a major value in these traditions, and specifically gendered spheres of activity are often quite well defined in Yoruba society. Much in the same way that Ifa divination is itself based on a series of binaries,[45] one of the hallmarks of traditional Yoruba society and cosmology is its system of cooperating rather than conflicting binaries, which "explains the Yoruba preference for complementary gender and power relations."[46] Consequently, "all facets of the peoples' cosmic experiences manifest the principle of gender complementarity, and this has a profound bearing on the role of women in society."[47] It is not my intention here to provide an apologetic for the Yoruba ideal of gender balance and complementarity as the lived reality did and does not ensure fair and proper treatment for women in all circumstances. Furthermore, while many African American women were attracted to Yoruba traditions because they did provide areas for them to exercise more authority and leadership, they often experienced these complementary gender norms "and their rhetorical uses [as] subtle forms of sexism that strategically [cloaked] authority in discourses of the 'traditional.'"[48] The experience

[42] For more information see Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries*; and David Ogungbile, "Ẹẹrindinlogun: Seeing Eyes and Sacred Shells and Stones," in *Ọ̀sun across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*, ed. Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford (Indiana University Press, 2001), 189-212.

[43] Abimbola, "Bag of Wisdom," 141-3; Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere,* 87-8.

[44] Ayele Kumari, "Tracing the Path of the Iyanifa," 2-16; and one item of the Ifa Foundation's statement of worldview is that "men and women are equal and walk the same road to empowerment < http://www.ifafoundation.org/world-view > and stresses "inclusion" with respect to female diviners. < http://www.ifafoundation.org/women-ifa/ >

[45] Each divinatory sign in Ifa is composed of a series of 8 binary sets of lines with a right-hand side (male) and a left-hand side (female). Furthermore additional inquiry is carried out through the use of binary possibilities such as the client holding a cowrie shell in one hand (indicating yes) and a bone (indicating no) in the other with two casts of the divining chain revealing which hand should be opened. For more information on the binary structure of Ifa divination and its practice see Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 29-31, 40-59.

[46] Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere,* 127.

[47] Ibid, 23.

[48] Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions,* 324.

of women who had to travel to West Africa to seek initiation in Ifa is certainly an excellent example of this dynamic. The Yoruba ideal has its own complications, and matters became even thornier when transposed into new cultural settings, particularly as another more subtle aspect of Yoruba gender norms is often overlooked.

Although traditional Yoruba society contains clearly "delineated roles for the female as well as for the male… these were context bound and not rigid," allowing for a significant degree of fluidity.[49] In fact, a person's gender was not always the most important factor in determining appropriate behavior, and the generally expected roles could at times be traversed with appropriate justification.[50] Yoruba conceptions of gendered spaces and behavior are moderated by other characteristics such as seniority, wealth, knowledge, social status, descent and lineage identity, etc.[51] As a result of this important confluence of factors that contribute to gender norms, "it is difficult to find areas of social life from which either men or women were completely barred in Yoruba society."[52] Hence, although uncommon, it was not improper or unheard of for women to operate in definitively male spheres such as hunting or war or even hold titles in the explicitly male masquerade traditions of Egungun and Oro.[53] The Yoruba tradition of sacred kingship is also quite famous, and although the overwhelming majority of ọba (Yoruba kings) have been male, a considerable number of female ọba have been documented as well.[54] In some parts of Yorubaland when a king dies, a female regent is appointed before the installation of the new king as well, but the position of regent is usually gendered male despite a female occupying it.[55]Despite the fact that Yoruba gender norms have often been quite clear and explicit they are always balanced by the sense of gender complementarity which ensures at least some place for the opposite gender.

The central importance of gender complementarity also causes the articulation of gender norms to be largely relational and contingent upon the other half of the larger whole. Peel draws attention to this dynamic with relation to the oriṣa themselves as cosmic powers whose gender was of secondary importance and to a certain degree determined by context.[56] Oduduwa (the cosmic ancestor of the Yoruba people and famous Ifẹ divinity) and Ṣango (royal oriṣa of lightning) are some of the most iconic

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[49] Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 23.

[50] Ibid, 9; Olademo, *Gender in Yoruba Oral* Traditions, 50.

[51] Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere,* 8.

[52] Ibid, 23.

[53] Given corporate conceptions of identity, women can even play the role of "husband" to other women who married into their paternal lineage, although these "female husbands" did not need to exhibit traditionally male-patterned behavior in these roles. Ibid, 8, 22; Olademo, *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions*, 56. Female chieftaincy in Oro is particularly informative as women are not allowed to see the Oro masquerade at all and usually stay inside when it comes out into the town. Henry John Drewal, "Art and the Perception of Women in Yorùbá Culture" *Cahiers D'études Africaines* 4th ser. 17, no. 68 (1977): 547.

[54] In Ondo mythistory, a daughter of Oduduwa named Pupupu founded the kingdom and is credited with the subsequent long legacy of women's important involvement in Ondo politics despite the fact that most chieftaincy titles including the kingship are now held by men. An ancient monarch named Sungbo in what is now Ijẹbuland is also described as a woman, there may also have been two female kings in the Ọyọ kingdom, and three in Akure with one ruling as recently as the 19th century! Olupona, *Kingship, Religion, and Rituals,* 24-6; Adediran & Ogen, "Women, Rituals, and Politics", 152-3, 157; A. R. I. Doi, "A Muslim-Christian-Traditional Saint in Yorubaland," *Practical Anthropology* 17, no. 6 (November 1970): 261-68; P. C. Lloyd, "Sungbo's Eredo," *Odu* 7 (1959): 15-22

[55] For example, she inherits the wives of the previous king and serves as their "husband" and wears male clothing. Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious* Sphere, 90-2.

[56] "Gender in Yoruba", 139; Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious* Sphere, 26.

Yoruba deities, and although they are widely considered to be male, there is abundant evidence that in various places and times, both have been or are worshipped as a woman in some contexts, and this is true of other deities such as Olokun (orișa of the ocean) and Oșumare (orișa of rainbows and snakes).[57] Oduduwa and Șango were still understood as the same deities in all contexts, but their gender could at time be fluid. This gender fluidity in the Yoruba cosmos caused Peel to remark that "one would be hard put to insist that any deity's gender was unalterably fixed."[58]

At this point it is clear that in both Yoruba society and cosmology it is almost impossible to make any absolute statements with respect to gender restrictions despite the fact that complementary gender norms are themselves quite clear. The fact of the matter is that orișa traditions are open to a great deal of diversity because of their context-specific nature. Thus, Șango and Oduduwa may be male in some places, and female in others, and these norms may shift over time as the context changes. This is due in no small part to the fact that orișa traditions are not dogmatic, allowing for the same tradition to be articulated and re-articulated in multiple ways without causing crisis. To return quickly to Ifa, when speaking with babalawo about various aspects of the tradition, they always refer back to their sacred texts, but are aware of the fact that they do not know all of the sacred verses of Ifa, that the recitation of the same verse may be different in different places, and that at times there are even different interpretations of the same verse. As a result, they often say, "this is how it works here" or "only Ifa knows what it is like somewhere else."[59] With these perspectives on Yoruba gender norms and orișa traditions in mind, it will now be much easier to understand precisely how the issue of gender and women's levels of involvement factor into the tradition of Ifa.

Nigerian Perspective

Given the above reflections on the ubiquitous nature of female power within even the most male-centric of Yoruba institutions, it is little surprise that there are quite a few examples of not only female initiates but diviners in West Africa, although this has gone largely unnoticed by most scholarship and practitioners. To begin, in the related tradition of *Fa* in Bénin the deity is also at times understood to be female,[60] and based on information gathered in the 1930s, Maupoil's *La Géomancie à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves* records four Yoruba female diviners, one of whom was brought by the Dahomean king Glele specifically to divine for him.[61] McClelland also recorded an instance of a woman who had undergone a certain level of initiation who performed divination,[62] and between

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[57] Mark Schiltz, "Yoruba Thunder Deities and Sovereignty: Ara versus Șango," in *Șango: In Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. by Joel E. Tishken, Toyin Falọla, and Akintunde Akinyẹmi (Indiana University Press, 2009), 78-108; , J. D. Y.Peel *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. (Indiana University Press, 2003), 112.

[58] "Gender in Yoruba", 140.

[59] This is again why I have opted not to take a normative approach to what is proper or "traditional" but instead prefer to analyze the history and internal dynamics that lead to each ritual model.

[60] Elizabeth Allo Isichei, *The Religious Traditions of Africa: A History* (Praeger, 2004), 272-3.

[61] Maupoil also notes that Fa is "theoretically reserved for men", and it is interesting to observe that at least one if not more of these women were highly mobile in their practice of Ifa just as men traditionally are. Bernard Maupoil, *La Géomancie À L'Ancienne Côte Des Esclaves*. (Institut D'Ethnologie, 1988), 153.

[62] Significantly, McClelland also notes that there was a limit to how far into the mysteries of Ifa this woman was able to go, and also the shock her presence as a woman among babalawo evoked. McClelland, *The Ifa Cult,* 88.

1990-91 Omari-Tunkara observed two women in Nigeria who "practiced Ifa divination professionally."[63]

Karin Barber provides perhaps the best and most complete account of a female Ifa initiate and diviner, Fakẹmide—mother of one of Barber's chief interlocutors, a renowned babalawo,[64] and the only female diviner in the history of their town, Okuku. Fakẹmide's grandfather (a high priest of Ifa) had no sons or grandsons who could carry on his legacy, and Barber implies that this may be why Fakẹmide stepped into the role. She was well-known for her impressive gift for the recitation of Ifa verses, traveled widely to gain more knowledge of Ifa, took full part in the diviners' association, performed before the king, and trained students of her own. What is perhaps every bit as noteworthy as this truly exceptional woman is Barber's remark that "no-one ever suggested that there was anything odd about [her successful professional practice of Ifa]. Men and women alike asserted that no code was transgressed by her actions and that no disapproval was directed at her."[65] It is also worth quoting in full the perspective of a male former babalawo on Fakẹmide:

> She learnt Ifa. If a woman goes to school she becomes an educated person; if she learns Ifa, she becomes a *babalawo*. Her father was a babalawo, so was her husband, so she picked it up little by little from them. There was never a time when the association of babalawo said she had no right to participate in their activities. She would go to the cult and participate in meetings just like the others. They would ask her about a certain verse of Ifa: if she answered correctly, they would accept that she was a babalawo. The verses she learnt were the same as those of the other babalawo. Once she learnt them, she was a babalawo. Then she also had the right to examine other people on their knowledge, just as they had examined her. Both men and women would come as clients to consult her.[66]

In keeping with this perspective of a former babalawo, several contemporary babalawo in Yorubaland agree that there is no reason why a woman could not be both an initiate and a diviner. When I asked Chief Ifarinwale Ogundiran for his stance on the matter, he was a bit confused and responded, "You know that Ifarọnkẹ [his daughter] has been taught Ifa and she makes money off of it too." Given his ready acceptance of women into the ranks of the Ifa divination and priesthood I asked him why there are so few women doing so in Nigeria today.[67] He responded that even men struggle to become fully-trained babalawo because the intensive training requires total dedication for oftentimes over a decade. "Usually" he said, "training begins when a child is young, and by the time a girl would finish studying, she would have gotten married and maybe had

[63] Mikelle Smith Omari-Tunkara, *Manipulating the Sacred: Yoruba Art, Ritual, and Resistance in Brazilian Candomble* (Wayne State University Press, 2005), 39.

[64] I have used the term *babalawo* here because that is the term used by Barber and her respondents. Although Iyanifa is the term generally used to refer to a woman who is an Ifa initiate and practitioner, the term may not be used universally and again women are sometimes understood to fill male roles such as that of a "husband" as well.

[65] Karin Barber, *I Could Speak until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women, and the Past in a Yoruba Town* (Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute, London, 1991), 289.

[66] Ibid.

[67] The Araba of Ẹdẹ, Chief Ṣangodokun Onifade, also agreed that women can perform divination despite the fact that he did not encourage his daughters to do so. His response to the rarity of female diviners was the complications and potential conflict that could arise during the training process. Interview by author March 31st, 2017.

children."[68] Reflecting on the perhaps remarkable openness of Yoruba babalawo to women's participation in the tradition and more fluid gender norms, Barber remarked that "there are few situations in which women are told they *cannot* pursue a certain course because they are women… despite the disadvantages that weigh down an ambitious woman, if she decides to do something, it is accepted that she can do so."[69]

However, this perspective is balanced at the same time by certain ritual restrictions that are much more rigid and firmly rooted in biological sex rather than gender. First and foremost are the restrictions around ritual activity when a woman is on her period. This restriction is not at all unique to Ifa as women are generally prohibited from touching any orișa or their instruments at that time, and this is perhaps the original source of the opinion that women could *never* touch the implements of Ifa. Some have argued that these restrictions were put in place because the Yoruba often understand menstruation to be a spiritual contaminant. Adogame and Olademo have noted how the touch of a menstruating woman reduces or nullifies the power of traditional charms and medicines,[70] and this is also why female kings and caretakers could not wear a ritually empowered cloak during this time.[71] The belief that menstrual blood depletes așẹ (spiritual power, authority, and force)[72] lies behind the general taboo of menstruating women entering orișa shrines in general,[73] proving that this dynamic is not unique at all to Ifa despite its general patriarchal nature. However, menstrual blood is not merely understood as a negative, polluting substance, for as Olajubu notes, "it is regarded as a vehicle of power, because embedded in it is potential life. It should therefore be kept away from any other source, as a clash of 'powers' may give explosive results."[74] Therefore, contact with spiritually charged and living objects such as Ifa and Ifa divination tools should be prevented at all costs not because of the negative nature of menstrual blood, but rather because of its power that may clash with these objects to devastating effect.

The danger associated with the clash of potent powers is surely related to the taboo of women observing the orișa Odu,[75] which is a crucial element of the highest stages of initiation in the Ifa tradition. Odu is perhaps one of the most mysterious of all of the orișa and is only present within the tradition of Ifa. Only a very few select babalawo actually posses Odu, and even those who do will do not speak in great detail about her and cannot show her to anyone else. There are several myths about the sacred history of

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[68] Ogundiran, Ifarinwale. Interview by author. February 10, 2017. Abimbọla also stressed this point by pointing out that "women can also be members of the cult and can be initiated as priestesses of Ifa but in most cases, there are very few women who can undergo the long years of training demanded… This is primarily due to the demands of marital and parental life on women." Abimbọla, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa*, 8. Onifade shares this opinion, adding that because women achieve maturity earlier than men do, this leaves even less time for them to potentially devote to the study of Ifa, resulting in the rarity of Iyanifa in Nigeria. Onifade, "Women in Ifa", 1.

[69] *I Could Speak*, 288.

[70] In fact, Olademo cites this as a major factor in why there are so few women hunters in traditional Yoruba society as hunters rely heavily on their traditional charms in their long spells outside of town and social life. Olademo, *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions,* 101; Afeosemime U. Adogame, *Celestial Church of Christ: The Politics of Cultural Identity in a West African PropheticCcharismatic Movement* (Lang, 1999), 128.

[71] Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere,* 91.

[72] Drewal, "Art and the Perception of Women", 550.

[73] Emanuel Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (Wazobia, 1994), 139.

[74] *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 92.

[75] This Odu is not to be confused with the name for the chapters of the Ifa oral corpus which are called by the same name.

Odu,[76] but the uniting thread amongst them all is that she was a ritually powerful wife of Orunmila who made him promise never to allow either anyone else, any women, or at least any of his other wives to see her. Babalawo in Nigeria are in agreement that if a woman were to look at Odu she would either go blind, lose the ability to have children, or both.[77] However, improper contact or even proximity to Odu amongst *men* can lead to blindness and even death as well![78] The frightening female potency of the oriṣa Odu is behind both its efficacy and inaccessibility for most men and for all women who also possess the power of life and death within their very nature. As a result, this final level of initiation is not open to women in West Africa and is also why Cuban babalaos refuse to allow women to undergo their form of initiation, which involves Odu. In West Africa, however, women are still able to become *ẹlẹgan* or those who become initiated without seeing Odu.[79] The fact of the matter is that although Ifa in West Africa may be more open to women's participation and priesthood, there are nevertheless a few serious restrictions based on biology and spiritual ontology.

The restrictions around access to Odu as a powerful female spiritual force within an overtly male-centric tradition demonstrates the way many Yoruba institutions assume a yin-yang-like form. Although there are some babalawo who are not inclined toward initiating women into Ifa in Yorubaland, the male gendered nature of Ifa does not preclude women from becoming involved and even initiated to a certain level. Furthermore there is a significant—if not abundant—amount of historical evidence of Yoruba women becoming initiated and practicing Ifa divination professionally just like men, demonstrating that female initiation is not merely a modern innovation or deviation from tradition. Still, the strong Yoruba sense of gender complementarity does insist on some differences between male and female involvement in the tradition primarily with respect to when divination tools and sacred objects can be handled as well as who can see and possess the potent female power of Odu. Because Odu is not a central aspect of certain levels of initiation in Ifa in West Africa unlike in Cuba, the only real barriers to women's entry is the long time it takes to learn and practice Ifa. Some Yoruba babalawo are aware and open to the fact that with modern life and changing expectations in gender norms, some women, particularly in different cultural contexts, may have the freedom to study and practice Ifa in ways previously accessible almost exclusively to men and thus may become increasingly involved in the tradition.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is not to suggest a correct or orthodox stance on the position of women within the tradition of Ifa in a global perspective, but rather to examine the claims and dynamics of the various facets and players in the lively debate, address common misconceptions, and analyze the origins and functions of the relevant rituals

[76] Abimbola, *Ifa Will Mend*, 86-7; Verger, *Artigos,* 29-31; Drewal *Gelede*, 9; Maupoil does not record full myths but does include comments and perspectives of some priests on the matter. *La Géomancie*, 87-9.

[77] Women can perform a special sacrifice when undergoing initiation, which allows them to see Odu without going blind. This, however, results in the loss of the ability to bear children, likely because of the clash with Odu's incredible creative power which robs the woman of her similar power and renders her much like a man who is unable to reproduce, restoring a type of gender complementarity between Odu and the Ifa devotee. Ogundiran, Ifarinwale. Interview by author. May, 28 2018.

[78] Maupoil, *La Géomancie,* 87-9.

[79] Johnson, *Yoruba Heathenism,* 31; Bascom, *Ifa Divination,* 81 although it seems as though some aspects of Bascom's observed hierarchy may have changed since he conducted his research in the 50s and 60s.

and gender norms. Within the Cuban Ifa tradition the initiation of several women into Ifa in 2004 created a very contentious situation as well as a schism that divided practitioners into "Cuban" and "African-style" Ifa. The claims on authority are not as straightforward as simply relying on norms in the spiritual homeland, and from the Cuban perspective on Ifa, "the older (pre-slave-trade rule) may be that no woman is permitted to be a Babalawo and in this the practitioners in the West may be more traditional" than the West Africans.[80] However, despite the fact that most of the prominent and earlier academic work on the subject strongly suggests that only men practiced Ifa, some women have clearly been both initiates and diviners. However, Yoruba religious traditions are so diverse that the specific traditions of Ifa brought to Cuba from specific locations in Yorubaland may in fact not have been open to these practices. Additionally, as oriṣa traditions are so prone to change and adaptation, perhaps the inclusion of Odu in all initiations was an important adaptation to protect and perpetuate the tradition in a colonial context, which would have made female initiation impossible.

Although many Cuban practitioners (male and female) were split on this issue, all agreed that Americans had brought their own cultural orientations and background into the tradition as they had initially learned it from Cubans. Indeed some African American women had begun pushing for initiation and the right to perform Ifa divination even *before* the issue boiled over in Cuba. Despite a significant amount of initial resistance and through contact with West Africans, iyanifas have become quite common in American oriṣa communities and certainly more common than in Yorubaland itself. A new term of *iyalawo* (mother of secrets) has been coined and put to use largely if not exclusively by American practitioners in a push to make Ifa more inclusive as the number of women who were trained in the art of Ifa divination has increased over recent years.

Despite the fact that American women found a greater opportunity for spiritual instruction, formation, practice, and expression within the West African-based Ifa tradition, I find this largely to be a result of Yoruba conceptions of more fluid and complementary Yoruba gender norms not notions of equality. The founder of Ifa, Ọrunmila, is practically always understood to be male, and the training of Ifa priests is clearly structured for young men rather than young women. Still, Ifa mythology and rituals with the oriṣa Odu suggest that the feminine does have an important role to play in the metaphysical foundations of the power and efficacy of the tradition and that women are to be afforded a place in its practice. However, the importance of the dangerously powerful feminine power contained within the oriṣa Odu also precludes women from undergoing the highest level of initiation, and their possession of similar potent power prevents them from being able to handle sacred Ifa objects when they are menstruating. At least this is true within the tradition in Yorubaland as it has traditionally been practiced. In this sense, West African Ifa is perhaps more open than its counterpart in Cuba, but it is neither based on a modern ideal of equality nor is it entirely inclusive and concerned with making itself totally open to all different kinds of people.

At this point, I would like to be careful not to link the dynamics of this debate to common narratives of progress and liberation from patriarchy and male hegemony to a more equitable and inclusive future or configuration of previous traditions. As Olajubu has stated, "notions of equality and parity could be at best misleading in the Yoruba

[80] Mary Cuthrell Curry, *Making the Gods in New York: The Yoruba Religion in the African American Community* (Garland Publishing, 1997), 52.

context."[81] Although the increasing number of women getting initiated into Ifa and performing Ifa divination in diaspora is undoubtedly linked to contemporary conceptions of gender equality and inclusion, as evidenced by many women being attracted to Ifa following frustration with their experiences of sexism in other religious communities, the tradition does not present a perfectly "inclusive" foil to the gendered exclusion of many contemporary religious groups. Furthermore, Cuban and West African practitioners on either side of the debate do not understand their stances to be "progressive" or transcending outdated gender norms, but rather articulate them as maintaining an important traditional model.[82] Cuban Iyanifa Niurka actively resists being labeled "feminist", "democratic", "liberal", or "modern" and emphasized her adherence to traditional gender norms.[83] West African Ifa priests who are open to women's initiation and divination understand it not as moving the tradition forward, but rather as women in some contemporary settings being more able to take advantage of options that have always existed for them, and the priests are quite insistent on maintaining the gendered terms and norms that have always been a part of the tradition. Many American practitioners view the matter in the same way, but there are certainly others who bring notions of gender equality rather than complementarity into the tradition of Ifa, and this could lead to even further debate in the future.

The Cuban tradition of Ifa has clearly been deeply important and positively influential for centuries. Whether or not the Cuban practice of including Odu in all initiations and allowing the study of the sacred texts only after that point is a product of misogynistic colonial and modern governmental influence, as some have claimed,[84] is more traditional, or is some other form of adaptation is a matter that is very much up for debate. In its current form, however, it does seem impossible for women to become initiated and to practice Ifa divination within their tradition. This leaves women within these communities with the choice of abandoning further involvement in Ifa or moving outside the Cuban tradition and aligning themselves more with West African models. The latter has clearly been the choice of most American women, and given the rise in the "Africanization" of global oriṣa traditions and the prominent role played by babalawo in this movement,[85] it seems likely that a larger rift will continue to form with two parallel traditions of Ifa. This has already been the case as African-style Ifa priests can be found in Cuba and also in places like Brazil, but what will be most interesting in the future is what kind of effect the influx of women of various different cultural backgrounds primarily in the diaspora may have on the tradition of Ifa as it becomes increasingly global. Perhaps only Ọrunmila and Odu in their infinite wisdom can know that!

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[81] *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 10.

[82] Although there is not enough room to fully delve into the issue of what constitutes the "traditional" within global Ifa communities, it is understood and employed here as the imagined original Yoruba model that has not been influenced by "outside" or "foreign" factors. Hence every argument that refers to "tradition" depicts the factors it opposes as a more recent and foreign influence such as modern feminism or colonial misogyny.

[83] It is worth noting that in Cuba the last three terms also have connotations for sexuality in addition to a general political or cultural disposition. Belisio-De Jesus, "Contentious Diasporas", 832.

[84] ibid, 824; Abimbola, "The Role of Women", 246, 257.

[85] Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 115-148; Stefania Capone, "The Pae-de-santo and the Babalawo" in *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, eds. Jacob K. Olupona and Rowland O. Abiodun(Indiana University Press, 2016), 223-45; Beliso-De Jesús, "Contentious Diasporas."

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