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Lucumi and the Children of Cotton: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Mapping of a Black Atlantic Politics of Religion

Akissi M. Britton

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LUCUMÍ AND THE CHILDREN OF COTTON: GENDER, RACE, AND ETHNICITY IN THE MAPPING OF A BLACK ATLANTIC POLITICS OF RELIGION

by

AKISSI BRITTON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016
Lucumi and the Children of Cotton:
Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the
Mapping of a Black Atlantic Politics of
Religion

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Akissi Britton

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate
Faculty in Anthropology to satisfy the dissertation
requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Lucumí and the Children of Cotton: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Mapping of a Black Atlantic Politics of Religion

by

Akissi Britton

Adviser: Professor Donald Robotham

In this dissertation I have examined claims to religious authenticity, purity, legitimacy and authority through the lens of a Black and African American Orisa community in Brooklyn, New York. Through these claims, made both internally and to a broader Orisa community within the United States and throughout different locales in the Black Atlantic, I have articulated how they are more often than not linked to very non-religious aspects of social life. Members of this community, and the broader Orisa Atlantic of which they are a part, do not practice this tradition in a social, cultural, or political vacuum. In fact, the very basis for the formation of this community lies in its response to the unrelenting racial and gender oppression they’ve experienced. As such the very way they have interpreted, internalized, and re-inscribed their religious practice is dictated by their worldview as an oppressed yet resilient and revolutionary people. Their religious self-identification within this context has encountered responses by other practitioners whose own worldviews have been shaped by the social, political, economic, and cultural realities of their own locales; realities that I highlight in this dissertation as well. As members of this Black and African American Lucumí community engage in various dialogues with Cuban and Cuban American Lucumí practitioners, as well as with Brazilian and Nigerian
devotees of Orisa tradition, what becomes apparent is a Black Atlantic politics of religion that is
defined as much by issues of gender, racial, and ethnic/national struggles as it is by the dictates
of purely religious doctrine. As both a priestly and ethnographic witness of these dialogues I
have outlined throughout this dissertation the distinct ways these broader issues come to impact
not only religious practice but diasporic relationships based on a shared, if at times highly
contested, sacred tradition.
For my grandmother Susie Ann Britton (ibaye): your champ did it Grandma!

For my grandfather, Charles Britton (ibaye): in death, as in life, your love and support is immeasurable

For Dr. Jerry G. Watts (ibaye): this “semi-intelligent Negress” Ph.D. is about to be unleashed on the world!

I miss you all terribly. Light, peace, and progress to your spirits
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INTRODUCTION

THE HOUSE ON MACON STREET

The brick and brownstone house on Macon Street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn is an historic site. While it may not be part of the official landmark buildings list of the neighborhood, for the 200 plus members of this microcosm of the broader Black and African American community of Lucumí practitioners this modest house in Bed-Stuy serves as an important node of a movement that had begun in the late 1950s. The current owner of the house on Macon Street is known to the community as Mama/Iya Stephanie. To many of her godchildren she is referred to lovingly as Madrina or Godmother. Mama Steph serves as one half of what used to be the dynamic duo Lloyd and Steph. Yes, they sound like superheroes and for many they are. One informant said to me “Steph and Lloyd were like Orisa to me when I was young,” referring to the Yoruba deities on which the Lucumí tradition is based. But that is a story for another time. The two serve as the matriarch and patriarch of the combined houses of Oke Sande and Olosunmi. In Lucumí tradition worshippers are organized into a family model in which one person serves as the godparent (Iya or Baba using Yoruba terminology) to any number of ritual descendants known as godchildren. This family with the ritual head is called a house (“ile” in Yoruba terms). A house/ile is autonomously run by the ritual head figure.

The four-story home on Macon Street housed two separate iles—that of Olosunmi (Baba Lloyd) and that of Oke Sande (Mama Stephanie). Each had their own godchildren who came to them for spiritual and religious guidance. Of course as a once husband and wife team they would assist each other with the various ceremonies each of them performed, but each was a
separate house. However on January 27, 1979 with the initiation of M’Taminika Beatty the two houses became ritually combined when Mama Stephanie served as iyalorisa (mother of Orisa/godparent) and Baba Lloyd’s goddaughter Oseye Mchawi served ojubgbona (first witness/second godparent). At this point the two houses came to be known as the combined houses of Oke Sande and Olosunmi (later known as Ile Ase, Inc.) It is described as the largest Black/African American\(^1\) house of Lucumí priests in the United States.

The brick and brownstone house on Macon Street is indeed historic. During an annual Ifa\(^2\) festival organized by a local group of Ifa practitioners, the procession of drummers, Egungun\(^3\) dancers, and revelers stops at the house to sing, play drums and dance in honor of its inhabitants for being revered elders and pioneers of the community. Countless artists, activists, and pioneers stepped through these doors to receive spiritual counsel from Baba Lloyd and Mama Stephanie. The home also served as the site in which Stephanie would employ what many have called guerilla tactics in order to obtain the ritual information that would be used to help build not only a strong ile but a strong community as well. The house on Macon Street served as a site of resistance against much of the anti-Black/African American discrimination Mama Stephanie, Baba Lloyd, and many of their generation experienced when they first came to the religion during the turbulent 1970s. It was on Macon Street where Mama Stephanie’s Cuban godfather would discuss Merindilogun, the divination system most used by Lucumi practitioners and the philosophical basis of the practice.

\(^1\) I use the term Black/African American to acknowledge that many members of this community are not American born. Many members are from different Caribbean nations, such as Trinidad and Jamaica. Using only African American would silence the different histories and experiences of these different groups who see themselves as part of the same racialized community in the United States and thus share in the Black liberation philosophy that infuses much of their practice and engagement.

\(^2\) Ifa is the divination system and religious practice based on the orisa Orunmila.

\(^3\) Ancestral masquerade
The walls of this house witnessed Mama Stephanie and her godsister Ayo eavesdrop in the room adjoining the parlor floor living room in which their godfather Cheo was holding court with Lloyd, furiously taking notes in turn so as not to miss any information he was sharing. The kitchen on the ground floor, which has undergone multiple renovations over the past 40-plus years, could tell you how Mama Stephanie enlisted the help of her godsister Ayo for not only note-taking but for ensuring that Cheo’s ibaye meal of steak, onions, and fried plantains was prepared and ready for him without fail. How gaining this knowledge allowed her, Baba Lloyd, and other members of the burgeoning community to gain the deep ritual knowledge needed to function as an autonomous Lucumí community. The modest house on Macon Street was indeed a site of resistance, rebellion, and liberation.

Its façade doesn’t stand out much from the other houses on the block, unlike the shingled houses across the tree-lined street which look somewhat out of place on the brownstoned block typical of this Brooklyn neighborhood. What did make the house stand out were the scores of brown-skinned people donned in all-white outfits milling about on the stoop and in front of the house during the warmer months as ceremonies were taking place inside. Women in their white skirts or dresses and head ties; men in white or light-colored pants or jeans and white baseball caps, fedoras, bandanas, or Nigerian style fila hats; children as young as infants and as old as eighteen in different modes of dress looking either excited to see their god-siblings or bored for being dragged to yet another “ocha function” where they are told to “hurry up and wait.” The living room on the parlor floor would contain these same children and teens while the adults

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4 Ibaye is a Yoruba word used to acknowledge that the person you’re speaking of has passed. It is a sign of respect and honor to the ancestral spirit of said person.
were downstairs tending to the business of *Making the Gods in New York.* Every now and then these kids would make enough noise to pierce the soundscape of singing, praying, drumming, dancing, talking and laughing that was taking place downstairs, prompting an adult to run upstairs to quiet the raucous youngsters. And to remind them which soundscape needed to take precedence. The huge mirror which was part of the living room’s mantelpiece would reflect the changing face and constituency of this group of youngsters. With names like Mandisa, Italo ibaye, Zuwena, Kemba, Oba, Fabayo, Jonathan, Ellison, Frankie, Ayodele, Olugbade, Maesha, Soladja, Sauda, Ia, Ayinde, Kiani…and Akissi. The mirror watched as one by one these children left the fun of the living room to be part of the activities downstairs. For those who didn’t make it downstairs as children the brick and brownstone house on Macon Street eventually saw them make it downstairs as adults.

As you walk down the narrow staircase to get to the ground floor you feel the energy shift. The smells are different. Herbal mixed with the odor of chickens and other farm animals, and the scent of different foods being cooked for any number of ceremonies happening. The tight staircase fed into a narrow hallway that guided you to either the ground level front door, the door to the igbodu to your right, or the kitchen further down the hall opposite the front door. No matter how tiny that hallway it was always filled with tons of coats crowded on the coatrack on the wall during the colder months with a bunch of boxes and crates under them holding the different birds and animals offering their lives for the sake of practitioners on the other side of the wall. That narrow hallway also offered those taking part in the ceremony a place for a very brief respite from the activities underway in the kitchen or in the igbodu. If you walk toward the

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5 Curry, Mary Cuthrell 1997. *Making the Gods in New York: The Yoruba Religion in the African American Community.* New York: Routledge. Mary Curry ibaye was part of the combined houses of Oke Sande and Olosunmi. This book is the product of her dissertation research conducted in the house as a PhD student in the Sociology department at CUNY Graduate Center.

6 Lucumi/Yoruba term for sacred room in which ritual ceremonies take place.
back of the house you’d reach the kitchen. Filled with people, for the most part women, in their “working whites,” those white clothes they don’t mind getting stained with any number of sacred fluids, from blood, omiero (herbal mixture prepared through a ceremony called Osain), to palm oil, honey and the many other stains one can imagine from working in a ceremonial kitchen. Those working the kitchen would be organized into different stations. One station would contain the chicken pluckers. Often donned in white head-wraps or gelés, white skirts, and sometimes aprons made from large black trash bags, the women at these stations went about the business of quickly plucking every feather and hair off the birds that had just been sacrificed coming out of the igbodu with lightning speed. The birds and other animals were delivered to them often by men in blood-stained jeans and white shirts, yelling out “Oshun hen coming through” or “Elegba goat!” to alert the ladies so they can keep track and keep organized. “Who has Elegba birds?” “Who has Obatala goat?” the women running the kitchen would ask. All in a perfectly orchestrated chaotic order that seemed to work. Another station included one or two women “cutting aches,” targeting those parts of the birds that would be prepared and offered to the Orisa to complete the ebo.7 And yet another station would have women hunched over large basins of goat and chicken meat to clean so as to be ready for whoever was preparing the food for the feast the following throne day.8

Every now and then you would hear someone, or a few someones, yell “Knives down!” as the people in the igbodu reached certain parts of the ceremony which required metal objects belonging to Ogun9 to stop working. All who were holding knives, including the men

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7 Offering/sacrifice
8 The throne day, also known as the “middle day,” was the day after the initiation celebration where the new initiate, known as the iyawo (bride of the orisa) would be presented to the community among singing, dancing, and, hopefully, people falling into possession with their respective orisa.
9 The Yoruba deity of iron
butchering the four legged animals that had just been sacrificed, or the women in the kitchen “cutting aches”—removing those parts of the feathered animals that were to be cooked and served to the orisa to complete the offering—or those shucking coconuts to form pieces of obi used as a simple form of divination in the ceremony, or those who were prepping other food items necessary for the ebo (offering/sacrifice), would pause what they were doing for the brief minute or two while those in “the room” completed that part of the ceremony.

The kitchen in the house on Macon Street hummed with the sounds of knives cutting, water running, questions and commands being called out, the scorching sound of water hitting fire when just-sacrificed birds were held by the feet and dunked into a large pot of boiling water to make removing the feathers easier. The kitchen hummed with sacred songs being sung; hushed tones sharing news, gossip, and jokes the way friends and family do when they’re working together for the benefit of a few and for all. As people worked feverishly, exhaustively, yet lovingly in the kitchen they followed the lead of women who had “come up in the movement” and who approached ocha work with the same diligence and devotion as they did with nation-building in Black Nationalist organizations like The East with its accompanying school Uhuru Sasa Shule that educated many of the children hanging out upstairs, waiting impatiently for the long night to be over. These children would eventually fall asleep on couches and rugs, draped over each other like fleece throws thrown over feet for added warmth and comfort. Instructions, directions, and lessons were meted out, often with hatchet in hand used to cut down meat into easily manageable pieces. The women leading this kitchen were/are fierce, loving, protective and very much about their business. The organization with which they keep the kitchen running, all while little hands and big mouths came hunting for food to nibble on, is astounding.
As you make your way through the kitchen and into the ocha room (igbodu) the energy perceptibly shifts. With a sheet serving as a gateway between the sacred center and the semi-sacred kitchen, the ocha room feels at least 20 degrees hotter. The ocha room was actually two adjacent rooms before a mid-2000s renovation transformed the space into a modern suburban kitchen and a spacious front room. Countless initiations, readings, bembes (drumming ceremonies), receiving of various orisa, ocha birthdays (annual celebrations of initiations) have taken place here. During an extensive initiation ceremony the room comes alive with the energy being channeled. The ocha room in the house on Macon Street hosted hundreds of Black, Latino, and White practitioners who put racial and ethnic differences aside to share in a religious and spiritual experience. The Oba-Oriate (the master of ceremony who leads the rituals) stands in the center of the room conducting his orchestra of divine artists and instruments. Whether Black/African American or Latino, youngish (in their 30s) or older (60s), short, tall, slim or robust, the oriate commands the respect and reverence of all in the room who came to work the ocha. All under the watchful eye of Mama Steph to make sure the Oba and everyone else was doing their work properly. And work it was. In the room you did not find people sitting and listening passively to a sermon. No, Macon Street’s ocha room, like all ocha rooms, was abuzz with people squatting on low benches hunched over basins filled with herbs, water, and other ingredients singing their prayers and transforming mundane elements into sacred conduits. Or standing over the Iyawo (new initiate) at many different moments, one by one, deep in prayer while laying on hands to transition her from the death of her old life into the birth of her new one. One in which a crown is bestowed upon her for life.

As the Iyawo sits uncomfortably for hours with her eyes closed, hands on her lap with palms up, she hears so much going on around her and tries to make sense of what’s being done.
Or she may be thinking of her journey to that point. A journey to what many practitioners call “the most expensive haircut you’ll ever get,” alluding to the fact that the Iyawo’s head is shaved bald during initiation. As she sits there while people pray, sing, and work to transform her life, she may think of all the steps that brought her to that point. For many who came before her their journey may have been marked by a gradual awakening to a spiritual orientation with a political consciousness that held Africa at its center. Some came for the status the crown bestowed. Others came for the lifetime spiritual guidance it offered. All found more than what they originally sought. So many things run through the Iyawo’s mind. Or nothing at all. For many it is an out-of-body experience. Especially given the physical toll of sitting for hours on what can be akin to a tree stump. Whatever runs through the Iyawo’s mind what she does realize is that she now has a community who will support her physically and spiritually throughout her life.

The brick and brownstone house on Macon Street has seen more than its share of religious ceremonies. But more than that, it has served as an integral piece in the foundation for the building of a community of Black/African American, Latino, and even some White practitioners whose orientation toward Lucumí tradition has been grounded in a philosophy of Black liberation. And although not every member of the house holds the same political outlook, Black liberation infuses much of how the house, and the larger community of which it is a part, orients its religious engagement.

**STATEMENT OF RESEARCH AND BACKGROUND**

This project examines the gender and racial politics of an African American Orisa-worshipping community in New York City and how the members of this community engaged
other Orisa practitioners throughout the Africa Diaspora. Specifically it focuses on the centrality of gender and race to the issues of authenticity and authority in debates between different denominations of Orisa communities in the United States and throughout the Black Atlantic world. By focusing ethnographically on debates that arise within and between different communities of practitioners of the Cuban Lucumí tradition and those of the Nigerian Ifa-Orisa system in New York City, I specify how religious practices are shaped by the broader gender and racial dynamics within North American and a global Black Atlantic politics today.

As such it contributes to anthropological knowledge by examining the politics and ritual techniques of a contemporary repositioning of Nigeria, over Cuba, as the locus of religious authority within the Afro-North American Orisa community in New York City. New York’s Orisa religion draws largely on traditions and practices from Cuba and Nigeria, which share a religious connection due to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade (Brandon 1997). I am thus keenly interested in the sorts of alliances and schisms exemplified in 2010 when a group of “officials” of the Afro-Cuban Lucumi religion issued an accord that stated the following:

Although the rituals and consecrations practiced in Lukumí Religion and in the so-called Traditional Yoruba Religion share ethnic, cultural, and geographical origins, our practices differ considerably. Therefore, we consider both religious systems to have specific, intrinsic and particular rites, protocols, and consecrations that respond to the specific needs of their devotees but are incompatible.... As such each tradition should be considered an autonomous tradition and should remain within the parameters of its own cult and doctrine…ensuring that our rituals are not confused and/or mixed.10

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10 “Accord of the Oba Oriatés of South Florida: Ratified June 9, 2010” circulated via email to various listservs dedicated to Orisa worship in the United States.
The re-initiation of practitioners from the Lucumi priesthood into the “Traditional Yoruba Religion” priesthood prompted this very public and relatively official break. This response is but one most recent permutation of longstanding tensions within the larger Orisa community in the United States. Followers of Cuban Lucumi/Santería have historically dominated the practice of U.S.-based Orisa religion. Over the past twenty years the increasing presence of followers of the Nigerian Ifa-Orisa denomination has ushered in new contestations over religious authenticity and authority between a “homeland” (Nigeria) and its Diasporas (Cuba and the U.S.). Specifically this presence challenges the primacy of Cuban Lucumi religious forms by repositioning Nigeria as the reigning source of authority about how proper religious practice gets defined in North America. Leading the charge of this “return to Africa” are Black American men seeking initiation into the male-dominated Ifa priesthood, which is the ranking divination system of the Orisa tradition. This shift underscores my interest in the gendered implications of the religious practices of a group whose ideas of authenticity and authority are increasingly split between two ideas of “home”: Nigeria and Cuba. Through an exploration of the tensions that exist between followers of Lucumi and those of Ifa-Orisa, this project asks how gender, race and national/ethnic identity inform diasporic religious interaction. Why and how is a re-Africanization of Orisa practice via Nigerian ritual forms taking precedence over existing Cuban Lucumi forms? What are the gendered dimensions of power at work in contestations over authenticity and authority? This dissertation examines the complexities of gender, race/ethnic identity and religious authority and their engagement with Diaspora, the Black Atlantic, and issues of power.

Lucumi/Santería is the Cuban denomination of traditional Orisa worship that originated with the Yoruba of what is present day south-west Nigeria. Enslaved Yoruba brought the
religion to the shores of Cuba in the nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1940s, practitioners of Lucumí emigrated from Cuba to the U.S. The 1959 initiation of the first Black American into the Lucumí priesthood began a movement of non-Cuban Blacks who deliberately converted to the religion during the Black Power decades of the 1960’s and 1970s. Afro-North Americans had branched out to different parts of a diaspora to embrace an Africanity that many believed had long been stripped of U.S. Blacks. In Cuba they found an “African” religion that provided a spiritual and religious base to support a burgeoning militant Black identity. These explorations unsettled a Cuban religious community not previously identified within racial terms thus generating tensions between long-time Cuban practitioners and the Black American newcomers. The gender politics inherent to the Black Nationalist ideology of the group, namely patriarchal notions of proper daily and ritual comportment, also caused subtle fissures that would manifest in interesting ways some fifty years later and which thus lie at the core of this dissertation.

Through participant observation at various religious ceremonies, religious celebrations, fellowship meetings, and volunteering in a rites of passage program for youth members of this community I observed how members of this community used religion as an idiom through which to express a racial and gendered politics of Black nationalism and create connections with communities throughout the Black Atlantic, specifically Cuba, Brazil, Nigeria, and here in the United States. I found that conceptions of Black masculinity and femininity were constructed in direct relationship to historical struggles against racism and gender oppression in the African American community in the U.S. These racial and gender politics converged with the racial and gender politics of Orisa worship to create specific challenges to and opportunities for constructing broader community ties with other Orisa practitioners in the African Diaspora. The centrality of a gendered politics of authenticity and authority is evident insofar as practitioners
throughout the Orisa diaspora rely on these ideas to include some and exclude others in this loosely defined community.

The present study turns on the fine-tuned ethnography of a specifically gendered community informed by a constant negotiation between the religious, racial, and historical authority of conceptions of “Nigeria” and “Cuba.” It will contribute significantly to the anthropology of religion, Atlantic/diaspora, race, and gender studies because it challenges the current overemphasis on the Black Christian Church that dominates the study of Black religiosity in the United States. This engagement, while useful, fails to address how non-Christian Black religious experiences construct a cultural politics that posits the Caribbean and Africa as competing poles for authority, purity, resistance, and historical continuity. And this is a specifically gendered contest. This project speaks to the role of a transnational politics of gender and ritual in the construction of cultural and political identities (Matory 2005; Oyewùmí 1997). Thus it engages a Black religiosities that is simultaneously local and global and reflective of a Black Atlantic and diasporic dialogue. An examination of this Afro-North American Orisa community and its literal and figurative treks through diaspora illuminates the transnational dimensions of how this group, like many Blacks in the U.S., articulated their response to U.S. racial and gender oppression. I focus on sentiment, gender, individual ethnography and participant observation to elaborate the politics of global connection in the modern Black Atlantic. The Orisa community’s existence speaks to the interdependent roles of politics and religion that come to define the Black experience in the United States.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The present study is the product of a preoccupation with difference by scholars of the African Diaspora as of late. This preoccupation with difference served as a counter-balance to
the over emphasis on/privileging of commonalities over difference. In fact the focus of my study, African American Orisa practitioners had taken hold long before I decided to approach the study of these communities through the lens of difference. But that story will come a little later. For now I’d like to focus on why I chose to approach my subjects through the lens of navigating difference in the creation of community. The following will be a bit autobiographical while also narrating a “social history” (Hucks 2012, 49) of this project.

I am a product of the Black Power movement. This means that my approach to the study of Black folks here and there (Drake 1987) has always been through the lens of Black liberation and organizing around issues of racial injustice. Implicit in this analytical and theoretical approach is the idea of solidarity, of different groups coming together to fight for a common cause; emphasis on coming together. Throughout my life the tenets of Black Nationalist and Black freedom struggles rang true and resonated deeply. Growing up the principles of the Black Power movement, specifically the critical questioning of those authoritative powers that characterized Blackness and Black people as the unworthy, devalued Other. Like most Black kids growing up in urban centers across the US in the eighties and nineties I witnessed and experienced the resurgence of Black liberation consciousness that manifested in late 80s and early 90s hip hop, sidewalk book tables and the call of orators on imagined soapboxes lining the streets of Harlem, Greenwich Village, and of course my beloved Brooklyn, “reminding” passers-by that we are “Africans who live in America.” This collective memory of our “true” selves as being African resonated with me on many levels, not least of which is because I grew up in a religious community that practiced an “African” religion: Lucumí. My family’s and religious community’s gods were “African,” the language we prayed in was “African,” and the drum rhythms, songs and dances we performed were all “African.” And though at the time my idea of
what it meant to be “African” was somewhat naïve, I was clear that my Blackness was tied to more than what was contained within the borders of the United States.

This idea of a Black internationalism, what I have come to understand throughout my teen years through today as the African Diaspora, flows throughout the activities and philosophy of the focus of this study: a Black/African American community of Lucumí devotees in Brooklyn, New York, who’ve navigated the often turbulent waters of diaspora through their religious engagement. This engagement is more than mere religious however. Unlike European ideas of religion which cordons it off from other aspects of life, like politics and social/cultural production, African and African diasporic concepts of religion and the sacred infuse every aspect of life. This is especially true with Lucumí practice among non-Cuban Blacks in the United States. Lucumí (or Santería) is the Cuban denomination of traditional Orisa worship that originated amongst the Yoruba of what is present day south-west Nigeria. The religion was brought to the shores of Cuba with enslaved Yoruba in the 18th century. It then made its way to the United States with Cuban immigrants during different periods throughout the 20th century beginning in the 1940s. The religion remained a Cuban stronghold until the 1960s. The practice of the Orisa tradition amongst Afro North Americans was the result of a deliberate conversion of non-Cuban Blacks during the Black Power/Black Nationalist movements of the 1960’s and 70s. In 1959 the initiation of the first African American into the Lucumi priesthood challenged long held notions of who the religion belonged to, who had the right to practice it, and who were the rightful keepers of the tradition. The initiate, Walter King—who later changed his name to Oba Oseijiman Adefunmi—became known as one of the founders of a movement of Black American Yoruba religion practitioners in the United States. Many adopted this religion in an effort to have a spiritual and religious base that was consistent with the discourses of resistance, rebellion
and liberation; ideas that resonated deeply during a turbulent time. These discourses were heavily influenced by an embrace of Blackness that was rooted in a search for an Africanity that many believed had long been stripped of Blacks in the U.S. Spurred on by the political and cultural “awakening” of the times, these African Americans branched out to different parts of a diaspora they had recently embraced to lay claim to an identity lost centuries ago. The racial politics underlying these explorations forced an intervention into a Cuban religious community that had not previously identified itself within racial terms. This incited tensions between long-time Cuban practitioners and the Black American newcomers. Through these struggles African Americans eventually developed an autonomous community of Lucumi Orisa worshippers that is grounded in a religious politic informed by a constant negotiation between Nigeria and Cuba.

While the individual members of this community may hold different political positions their collective political story is a critique of the society in which they live. This society, with its Judeo-Christian, white supremacist values, has prompted individual practitioners to opt out of an aspect of American Christian life that has left them cold and disenchanted. This larger society has shown that it places little value on the lives of its Black constituency in multiple ways and as such expunges the very basis that this community lives their lives. This basis is one grounded in an African and African diasporic philosophy that challenges much of the premise of American modernity. But this community also embraces aspects of this modernity for indeed it is very much part of their collective and individual make-up. The practice of the Orisa religious tradition both resists and critiques much of the foundational premise of an oppositional society that has never placed much value in African and Diasporic forms of thinking. Rather than reject its premises outright, however, members of this community actively engage in reconceptualizing the world in which they live and do not attempt to take themselves out of it. But this dissertation
is not about the political statement being made to the outside world. This dissertation seeks to highlight how a community of African American Orisa practitioners have navigated the contested terrain of diaspora through religion and what the outcomes of those struggles can tell us about the politics of Black Atlantic Religion. This dissertation will illustrate how the very act of continuing their religious practice is itself one of the latest entries in a political story that has been told by different diasporic groups through the course of the past five centuries. The present study details their chapter, their struggles, their journey, and what these tell us about the embattled nature of diasporic relationships that don’t always manifest as relations of affinity, or of kin folks long lost. It will examine the process of diasporization, the navigation of differences to share in a cultural practice and the power struggles that are inherent to this process.

The practice of Orisa religion in the United States has been historically dominated by those who identify with Cuban Lucumí/Santería, followed by those who adhere to the Nigerian system, and, to a lesser extent, those who practice the tradition as it developed in Brazil and Trinidad. For the purpose of this project I focus on the relationship between the Cuban and Nigerian forms of the religion and the debates within and between these groups around authenticity and authority. While Nigerian practitioners have been present in the U.S. since at least the 1960s, over the past twenty years there has been a growth of ethnic Yoruba practitioners and their followers in this country. This increasing presence has fueled longstanding debates about authentic and legitimate religious praxis of Orisa tradition. Specifically it challenges the primacy of Cuban Lucumi religious forms and repositions Nigeria as the reigning authority on how proper religious practice gets defined in North America.

In this dissertation I aim to tell the story of a community of African American Orisa practitioners in New York City and how their experiences practicing an African Traditional
Religion (ATR) serve as signposts to a larger international arena within which their cultural, political, and religious identities are forged. These identities often get subsumed or erased entirely in discussions of Black religiosity in the United States. As such we lose sight of just how much the political and cultural identities of Blacks in the US are shaped just as much by Black internationalism as by the racial, gender, class, and cultural politics of the United States. Through their experiences, practices, and their own articulation of what these mean, we can come to understand the contentious politics of diaspora and Black Atlantic/African Diasporic religions.

This project examines the politics of authenticity to illustrate the very process of diaspora, specifically the navigation and negotiation of difference in creating diasporic communities. I analyze the multiple ways the concept of authenticity gets mobilized within and between different diasporic groups that challenge various attempts at asserting authoritative power and/or legitimacy within this global religious community. This analysis also illuminates the local, national, and transnational dimensions of a diasporic religious practice through which practitioners have forged strong relationships of solidarity while simultaneously creating the very foundation on which deep divisions have emerged and proliferated. I explore both sides of this diasporic process by examining a group of African American Orisa practitioners in Brooklyn because their history and contemporary experiences clearly illustrate how authenticity, authority and legitimacy shape not only their practice but the relationships they’ve forged based on this practice. Specifically I delve into the broader issues of gender, race and national identity in contestations over the power to define proper religious practice and how this impacts how diasporans engage each other and how diasporic religious spaces get constructed.
Given this focus this dissertation is not about religion, per se, but about the relationships between individuals and groups in the construction of what I am calling a Black Atlantic politics of religion which is as much about the secular as it is the sacred. This Black Atlantic religious politic constructs a diasporic space (the United States in this instance) in which the various local social, cultural, and political contexts of the multiple areas of the African Diaspora converge. In these spaces members of the different areas, in this case namely those from the United States, Cuba, Brazil, and Nigeria, engage each other carrying the socio-cultural baggage of their respective homelands as they share in religious practices and identities. As such I discuss how certain religious concepts and practices become imbued with issues of gender, race, and national identity as the religion of Orisa worship has slowly evolved into a global phenomenon (Olupona and Rey 2008; Cohen 2009). The globalization of Orisa worship has brought religious communities that used to be more insular—practicing within the dictates of the religion’s development within specific local contexts such as Cuba, Nigeria, and Brazil—increasingly into a more transnational space. Meaning the practices of each denomination of the religion are increasingly influencing the practices of the others. As members of the different Orisa worship denominations come together in the religious space they also carry with them the gendered and racialized dynamics of their respective nations. These distinctive racial and gender paradigms converge to create diasporic spaces in which the competing ideologies bear out contested claims of power to define the meaning and contours of proper religious practice.

Ethnographic analysis of African American Lucumí practitioners in Brooklyn provides a lens through which to understand how this Black Atlantic politics of religion and authenticity plays out in a local, national, and transnational religious arena. As devotees who are relatively new to the game—the initiation of the first African American into the Cuban Lucumí priesthood
occurred fifty six years ago in 1959\textsuperscript{11}—the African American experience with Orisa worship by way of Cuba through a Black nationalist ideology of tapping into the cultural roots of Africa offers a useful lens through which to witness the contentious process of diaspora. Given the racial politics of the group’s origins and initial development, their internationalist desire to make meaningful and lasting connections with their contemporary counterparts throughout the Black Atlantic, most specifically in Nigeria, Cuba and Brazil, and their adherence to a ritual orthodoxy grounded in Cuban religious/social/cultural/ and political history, this group’s literal and figurative sojourns lay bare the contentious process of diaspora. This process is equally, if not more, defined by difference and antagonism as it is of embracing kinfolks long lost. In this dissertation I uncover the multiple ways in which race and gender specifically intersect with religious ideas (and ideals) to construct a Black Atlantic politics of religion and religious authenticity and authority that sets the stage for certain practices and beliefs to unfold. I examine how ideas around gender and racial/ethnic identity shaped not only Black American practice but also the context in which they engaged Cuban and Cuban-American, Nigerian, and Brazilian devotees who had different experiences with and ideas around racial identity and gender.

THEORIZING THE BLACK ATLANTIC

In the United States the uneasy relationship of religion and politics, their supposed separation, is belied by the fact that religion is so closely intertwined in the political ruminations of this country. Religion, it seems, tells a story of a people’s moral and ethical values and their governance must (in their minds) show allegiance to those values. But what happens when the very act of religious practices tell a political story that is always in motion? Always in

\textsuperscript{11} See Hucks 2012
contestation by some group? What can we gain from reading politics into a religious practice? These are the questions I ask as I explore the religious practices of a group of Afro-North American Orisa worshippers in Brooklyn. By politics and the political I am referring to contestations over power that have shaped the contours of African American Orisa worship. In this context power can be defined as the ability and authority to determine who is allowed to practice this religion; who is allowed to alter it; and who can claim the authority vested within its divine secrets. To extend the concepts and terminology of the Orisa community to incorporate the theoretical foundation I am attempting to lay, power can defined as àse—concealed divine power of command and transformation.¹² In common parlance, àse is said to be “the power to make things happen.” When referring to the political then, I am referring to how the Black/African American Orisa community use and have used their àse, their “power to make things happen,” and how others have engaged, challenged and questioned that power.

With this in mind my dissertation is an ethnographic exploration into the power struggles that have shaped Black/African American Orisa worship and some of the outcomes of those struggles. I seek to tease out the political statements that this community make through their practice, specifically how they have responded to challenges to that practice. Through a detailed reading of their history, ritual practices, and engagements with Orisa practitioners throughout the diaspora, I attempt to answer the questions who is this political statement being made to and who is this political statement being made about? This dissertation is not about a community thumbing its collective nose at an oppressive society. It is about the political struggles and statements that are directed to an internal community that consists of members throughout the African Diaspora. It is about a community asserting its inclusion and validation

within a larger society of African and Diasporic contemporaries. It is about the politics embedded within their religious practice that demands not only inclusion but respect of their political and cultural selves as being valid citizens in a religious empire whose seat of authority itself is in constant motion and contestation. The religious practices of this community highlight the inherent political nature of a spiritual practice that has evolved into a global religion.

I situate this dissertation within the theoretical fields of Black Atlantic and African Diasporic studies. The distinctions between the African Diaspora and the Black Atlantic are definitional, methodological, and theoretical. Simply defined, diaspora refers to “the dispersal of a people from its original homeland” (Butler 2001, 189). The African Diaspora, then, has often been used to refer to those Africans and their descendants dispersed to the western hemisphere as a function of the transatlantic slave trade, although it has also been extended to cover dispersal to other lands influenced by processes at play in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds (Alpers 2001, 1). According to Shepperson (1982) and Edwards (2001) the term came to wider usage during the 1950s and 1960s by “writers and thinkers who were concerned with the status and prospects of persons of African descent around the world as well as at home” (Shepperson 1982, 46). Although the term came to wide usage at this time the idea of the African Diaspora had been present in the writings of Black thinkers and those who concerned their intellectual endeavors with “the New World Negro” for much longer (Shepperson 1982; see also Scott 1991). In essence—yes, a problematic term given the current discussion—the African Diaspora as a term represented Black internationalism (Edwards 2001, 51). Historian George Shepperson sought, according to Edwards, “an expanded notion of black international work [that could] account for such unavoidable dynamics of difference, rather than either assuming a universally applicable definition of ‘Pan-African’ or presupposing an exceptionalist version of New World
‘Pan-African’ activity” (ibid). Shepperson was also attuned to the ability of the concept to lose its analytical utility if it was confined to the study of the dispersion of African people solely within the confines of slavery and capitalist imperialism in the West (see Alpers 2001, 5). While recognizing the importance of a comparative study of “all levels of slavery” (Shepperson 1982, 49), he argued that a myopic focus on enforced dispersal would be diaspora’s failure.14

One of the key points in Shepperson’s elucidation of African diaspora as a useful analytic framework is his insistence on attention to the important differences that exist between African and African-descended populations; this difference is exactly what my dissertation holds at the center of its analysis. Within African Diasporic scholarship however, especially as regards African American communities in the West, commonalities and unity were often privileged over difference, often in the service of a political project that sought to counter racist declarations that Africans and their descendants had “no consequential past and therefore a people with no distinctive contribution to Civilization, no Culture in the Arnoldian sense” (Scott 1991, 271).15

Patterson and Kelley (2000) argued that while this goal was laudable, the overemphasis on

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13 Shepperson’s articulation of the diaspora concept was as an intervention on Pan-Africanism, which, according to him, suffered from a presumption of unity that did not account for the important differences in play on the African continent. Due to the “indiscriminate references to ‘Pan-Africanism’ in terms of any consideration of racial organization or black internationalism” Shepperson opined that the term was losing its usefulness for African historiography. He distinguished between Pan-Africanism, referring specifically to the Pan-African congresses, and pan-Africanism (little p) as a group of movements and covered “both the aesthetic [and cultural] evocations and political institutions” (see Edwards 2001, 50). Shepperson also argued that within the broad ideological diversity which encompassed Pan-Africanism (both usages) “Africa itself emerges as a concept only historically, mainly though external evocations of ‘continental unity,’ and calls for return.” (ibid)

14 Shepperson discusses the importance of recognizing how Jews have always made a distinction between dispersal (tehpuzztol) and exile (galut). “In the Jewish tradition, galut implies forced dispersion; diaspora has always included some element of voluntary exile. Without such a realization, the expression African diaspora may be doomed to the study of enforced dispersal only—to slavery. Certainly, slave studies always must form a major part of the historical examination of the African diaspora, but not the only part. Excessive concentration on the western rather than the eastern direction of the African diaspora may be responsible for the concealment of the voluntary element in the dispersal, even in the slave days” (Shepperson 1982, 51).

15 In his discussion David Scott (1991, 270–278) uses this point of the political imperative of American anthropology to highlight how scholars such as Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits and others tasked themselves with uncovering the African origins of the New World Negro, which led to another controversial issue within African Diaspora studies: that of origins versus creolization. I will tend to this debate in a later section.
continuities and commonalities “often led to serious shortcomings in scholarship” (18) by papering over significant differences that existed within and between diasporic groups. This scholarship also failed “to take into account the similar historical conditions in which African people labored and created/recreated culture” (ibid). By ignoring the processes that subsumed the differences which defined diasporic groups, the project of reclaiming this presumed shared past was too focused on finding and verifying the roots and origins of African diasporic, particularly African American, culture. For in this vein of African Diasporic scholarship and cultural identification the question of the place of Africa became central. But this Africa was a remembered “Africa”, one that could describe and explain the “essence” of a cultural identity16, one that had to be re-membered and reconstituted in a way that ignored the vast differences that actually existed. In his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall argued that instead of a unified idea of Africa that united Black (in this case Caribbean and Black British) people it was “the uprooting of slavery and transportation and insertion into the plantation economy (as well as the symbolic economy) of the Western world that ‘unified’ these people across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past” (Hall 1990, 227). In understanding cultural identity in a diasporic context Hall advocated for attention to the politics of identity construction being “a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin’” (Hall 1990, 26).

Emphasizing diasporic identity as a politics of position, thereby situating diaspora as both a condition and process embedded within broader global processes, was reiterated by Patterson and Kelley (2000). As a condition Patterson and Kelley argued that “diasporic identities are socially and historically constituted, reconstituted and reproduced” (2000a, 19) thereby requiring

16 See (Hall 1990)
scholars to be especially attentive to the ways in which this constitution, reconstitution and reproduction happens. As such, the teleology of origins and returns proved to be a very limiting framework with which to understand this complex process. However emphasis on origins and roots defined much of African Diasporic, specifically African American, scholarship in the twentieth century. On the face of it the current study is clearly an African Diasporic one. It focuses on the descendants of enslaved Africans here in the United States, in Brazil, in the Caribbean specifically Cuba, and with continental Africans as well. It also centers its gaze on that quintessential topic of African cultural survivals and transformations, specifically through the lens of religion, that have come to define African Diasporic studies a la Herskovits (1941), Mintz and Price (1976), and countless others. Yet this project ventures into slightly different waters by tending to the vital processes Patterson and Kelley outlined. I accomplish this task via the Atlantic Studies model.

The Black Atlantic approach critiques the origins framework of Diasporic scholarship which relegates Africa to a distant past, a source of Diasporic cultural retentions (Matory 2006a, 157) which focused on the outward flow of Africans and the cultural forms they carried with them, a focus which Shepperson warned against (Shepperson 1982, 49). In fact the Black Atlantic approach centers the processes which make the construction of diasporic cultures, again specifically African American diasporic cultural re-productions possible in its analysis (Matory 2006a, ibid). Matory critiques Herskovits’s focus on psychological and unconscious leanings of enslaved Africans and their descendants over their agency, which Matory saw as problematic (159). He asks: “[a]re antecedent and intergenerational ‘dispositions’ or the desire to hold on to the past (now trendily called ‘cultural resistance’) sufficient explanations for the genealogy of African American cultures?” (ibid); though Matory seems skeptical that the harsh criticisms of
Herskovits are entirely correct (160). The Black Atlantic approach to African Diasporic studies is a dialogic one which concerns itself with “an insistence on viewing processes of multiparty interaction in the creation and transformation through history of determined material social relationships and myriad symbolic media” (Yelvington 2006, 4). In using this approach scholars of this framework view “Afro-Atlantic peoples [not as only] victims but also [as] major agents of these seismic shifts, during and long after the transatlantic slave trade” (Matory 2006a, 165). As such, at its core the Black Atlantic studies model emphasizes these larger historical, economic, political, and cultural processes at work throughout the Atlantic world that bring the different littorals surrounding said ocean into an interconnected, if highly heterogeneous, dynamic, and not always cohesive, geographical unit. This interconnectedness is marked by the dialogue metaphor with which scholars pay special attention to the exchange, and indeed the power inequities often embedded within these exchanges, that more accurately define the process of African Diasporic cultural creation. Within these exchanges Africa is no longer relegated to a passive source, origin, or root located in a distant past but is instead an active participant in the ongoing exchanges that transform both African American and African cultures (Matory 2006a, 167).

The Black Atlantic dialogic model critiques both the origins/roots and creolization frameworks which has defined much of African Diasporic scholarship in the twentieth century (Matory 2006a, 157–164). In addition to a critique of the problematic relegation of Africa to a distant past, Matory also targets Herskovits’s metaphors of “survivals,” “retentions,” and

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17 In fact Matory critiques the memory framework altogether, which he argues “Invoked casually, the comparison of collective cultural practices to the recording practices of an individual mind suggests a certain passivity, involuntariness, absence of strategy, and political guilelessness and neutrality that seems quite foreign to the processes that have, in fact, shaped African and African American cultures over time” (Matory 2006a, 164).

18 I will elaborate on this point below because it is central to my project of examining the exchanges between Black/African American, Cuban/Cuban-American, Brazilian, and Nigerian Orisa devotees.
“preservations” to highlight continuities between African American and African cultures. Not only did these metaphors conceptualize culture as being bounded and discrete assemblages of practices and forms, it also represented Africans and their descendants as passive actors in the process of cultural transformation. Coupled with this passive retention metaphor was the trope of “memory,” promoted by Roger Bastide who greatly influenced Mintz and Price’s creolization model, in which African cultural forms lay dormant in “deep-seated cultural orientations” and “preservations” (Matory 2006, 159; 161). This, too, Matory argues, ignored the agentive capacity of enslaved Africans. It would be helpful to quote Matory at length in his critique for it is useful in highlighting why I choose the Black Atlantic dialogic metaphor to frame my analysis:

Yet there are ways in which the reproduction of images or the teaching of techniques in society are not self-evidently forms of ‘preservation’; they are as likely to be forms of appropriation, quoting, mockery, propagandistic nostalgia and so forth. The selective and strategic interpretation and invocation of the past are not the same as the ‘preservation,’ ‘retention,’ or ‘memory’ thereof. Bastide’s conception of ‘collective memory’ focuses on what ‘memories’ are structurally possible or conditioned by the circumstances, rather than on social actors’ choice of possible practices and images to reproduce or the purposes and motives behind those specific reproductions. Indeed, the ‘memory’ metaphor seems semantically inconsistent with such agency. (Matory 2006, 161–162; original emphasis)

Matory continues in his takedown of the memory metaphor by positing that it makes “a figurative person of the collective rememberer” which elides the heterogeneity of social actors; a flaw that is present in both the “survivals” and the “creolization” camps (2006a, 164). Again, heterogeneity, i.e. difference, comes into play and is important for scholars of this model. For my purposes in this dissertation the utility of this approach cannot be overstated

While the conception of the Black Atlantic owes a great debt to its conceptual and theoretical elaboration by Paul Gilroy in his seminal text *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and*
Double Consciousness (1993)\textsuperscript{19}, the dialogic approach of Black Atlantic studies, as elaborated by Yelvington (2006) and Matory (2006), that guides this dissertation both applauds Gilroy’s project while attending to some of the weaknesses of his elaboration. What is most useful in Gilroy’s development of a Black Atlantic framework is his focus on the inherent transnationalism of Black cultural production, particularly for him in the geographic nexus of the U.K., the U.S., and the Caribbean. He avidly denounced the nation as the primary lens through which to understand this production of Black political culture. Gilroy “locates the black Atlantic world in a webbed network between the local and global [which] challenges the coherence of all narrow nationalist perspectives” (Gilroy 1993, 29). He centers ships and mobility to the construction of Black internationalism rather than the fixedness of bounded nations, both national and ideological. Throughout The Black Atlantic Gilroy vociferously assails the idea of an ethnically homogenous idea of culture and ethnic absolutism inherent to the concept of the nation, whether in the guise of a territorial nation or the cultural nationalism of Black folks (ibid, chapter 1). Gilroy, too, troubles an “uninterrupted ‘memory’ of Africa posited by Bastide and many Herskovitsians in the genesis of the Anglophone black Atlantic culture” (Matory 2006a, 166). Gilroy’s project of rescuing Black Atlantic culture from the confines of the nation and centering the inherent transnationalism of its production and reproduction is critically important.

However, the limits of Gilroy’s elaboration become evident in his curious silencing of continental Africans in this transnational construction of Black culture.\textsuperscript{20} And this is where the

\textsuperscript{19} The term black Atlantic was first used by Robert Farris Thompson in Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy (1983). Part of Matory’s critique of Gilroy is that Gilroy borrowed the term from Thompson but failed to cite him as well as “the entire descriptive literature on the apparently ‘continuous’ forms of cultural reproduction that have invited designation as memory, retention, survival, syncretism, and so forth” (Matory 2006a, 167).

\textsuperscript{20} Matory opines “I disagree with Gilroy’s ironic exclusion of African’s participation in this cross-territorial phenomenon and his premise that the changing experiences, cultural conventions, and cultural vocabularies that make up African diaspora cultural history began—temporally and conceptually—at the moment blacks encountered the ideas of the European Enlightenment.” (Matory 2006a, 167). Matory goes on to state that it is because Gilroy is focused on the activities and writings of highly educated
dialogic approach of Black Atlantic studies proves most useful for my dissertation. The dialogues that are taking place between Black/African American, Cuban/Cuban-American, Brazilian and continental Nigerians are crucial in understanding contemporary Orisa practice. Continental Africans and Africa, here specifically the Yoruba of Nigeria, have been ever-present in how Blacks in the West have shaped and transformed Orisa practice throughout history. As Matory states, the transformations of Orisa culture have happened coevally both in the “New World” as well as on the continent “rather than [imagining] present-day Africa as the past of the black Americas” (2006a, 186). In fact Matory urges us to view the ways in which “the African diaspora has at times played a critical role in the making of its own alleged African ‘base line’” (Matory 1999, 74). Using the dialogic approach this study takes this seriously as well as how continental Africans have responded.

This matter of difference has become central to the current intellectual interest in the African Diaspora. Scholars have begun to critique earlier intellectual works that privileged commonalities and sameness to the detriment of taking seriously the “intracommunal differentiation” (Gilroy 1995) that defined the Black diaspora. While acknowledging that this tendency was in support of a larger political project that fought against colonialism and imperialism, scholars argue that this focus limits the theoretical and analytical virtues of the diasporic concept (see Patterson and Kelley 2000). By emphasizing the unity and solidarity supposedly inherent in these connections, the process of navigating and translating difference often gets lost. Difference, it seems, matters a lot, possibly even more at times than similarities. But why does difference matter so much? More specifically, why is a focus on difference so

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Diasporic elite that he fails to take into account the “intimate dialogue that unites [the] cultural spheres” of the everyday practices of the “everyman” (168).
critical at this juncture? We are currently in an era that privileges blurring borders and boundaries that work to constrain the fluidity of identities, subjectivities and experiences. It is an era of multivocality. This is an intellectual moment that challenges hegemonic narratives that silence the majority of human experiences. Difference, it seems, finds its home here. However, this moment is also at times characterized by a depoliticizing tendency that obliterates collective social engagement due to its emphasis on the individual and the separation of differences from their structural and hierarchical bases (Collins 1998). What is imperative to an acknowledgement of difference is the recognition of structures of power that define difference and locate those who are considered different within a subordinate position within the social hierarchy. This recognition of the structures of power embedded within difference is what scholars who critique the commonalities approach to the study of the African Diaspora are arguing for.

While scholars of the African Diaspora have always tackled the issue of difference, it has often been to interrogate the difference between African Diasporic populations and the larger Western societies within which they were embedded and how that difference impacts their engagement with these societies. How diasporans are viewed by the larger society has as much to do with how they engage each other as anything else. However, my concern here is to highlight how these engagements impact internal relationships and communities beyond dealing with the external gaze. The internal self-gaze is equally important and can shed light on the process of making and unmaking diaspora that many diaspora scholars concern themselves with. It also makes their agency central to the process of cultural development as well as to the transnational political discourses they create and engage in. The present study focuses on these internal navigations of difference in the context of cultural institutions created by members of the African
Diaspora. My examination of an African American Lucumi community in Brooklyn explores how members of this community navigate the issue of difference within the larger global Orisa community, its impact on the internal dynamics of the Orisa community, and how this all highlights the process of diasporization.

In placing these processes at the center of my analysis I use the idea of the Orisa Atlantic to highlight the development of global Orisa religion in the context of the transatlantic slave trade; slavery, both plantation and urban; abolition; colonialism and post-colonialism; nation-building; the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (and their post-conditionalities); and the neoliberal era. Like in the Atlantic framework, these processes are specific to Orisa tradition in so far as, while they are part of larger processes that connect to global processes like other oceanic regions and global developments for the Atlantic approach, these processes shaped the Atlantic (and Orisa) world in very specific ways. In speaking of the ethnogenesis of Yoruba identity Peter Cohen remarks that “[w]hat is remarkable about this process of ethnogenesis is that it took place simultaneously in a number of locales around the Atlantic, employing a number of distinct ethnonyms to refer to similar claims of origin…emerged as meaningful categories in conditions of enslavement, exile—and, in some cases, of mutual contact” (Cohen 2009, 206).

The construction of a Yoruba ethnic identity, and the practices and institutions that came to mark this identity, are what I identify as the Orisa Atlantic. Cohen picks up on a process that Matory identifies as the coevalness of transformation taking part amongst both continental and Diasporic Africans and how origins are not the best way to highlight these developments. Again, centering processes over specific verifiable (or unverifiable) forms, Cohen points to the similar conditions of Atlantic political, cultural, economic, and historical processes which enable these transformations. The concept of the Orisa Atlantic which I utilize in this dissertation is marked
and defined by these similar processes and the different responses, strategies, and articulations to them by Orisa practitioners on the continent and in the West.

To reiterate, I have framed this study within the context of the Black Atlantic because I find the idea of dialogues quite useful. The Black Atlantic allows me to theoretically and conceptually make these dialogues the center of my study. I find that this framework provides a way for me to productively interrogate the inherent dialogic processes that bring diverse groups of people into a singular community defined as the African Diaspora, or in this case the Orisa Atlantic. By framing U.S. Black/African American Orisa practitioners’ navigation of diasporic differences within the metaphor of dialogues I highlight [the] ways in which the mutual gaze between Africans and African Americans, multi-directional travel and migration between the two hemispheres, the movement of publications, commerce, and so forth, have shaped African and African American cultures in tandem, over time, and at the same time. [The dialogic approach] highlights the ways in which cultural artifacts, images, and practices do not simply ‘survive’ or endure through ‘memory’: rather, they are interpreted and reproduced for diverse contemporary purposes by actors with culturally diverse repertoires, diverse interests, and diverse degrees of power to assert them. As in a literal dialogue, such interpretations and reproduction can also be silenced, articulated obliquely, paraphrased, exaggerated, or quoted mockingly. (Matory 2000, 37; emphasis added)

As Black/African American Orisa practitioners in the United States have come into contact with practitioners from Cuba, Brazil, and Nigeria they have had to continuously engage the different cultural baggage of not only religious practice but also the gendered, racialized, ethnically-identified, social, economic, and political processes that have shaped the religious practices of each of these locales both within these nations as well as within the diasporic space of the United States. As such the dialogues that take place, the exchange of ideas and cultural forms within different regimes of power, highlight how this navigation can lead to both consensus and rupture. And as in a literal dialogue, the different interlocutors are situated differently at different times and in
different places. This makes for intense debates over meaning, authenticity, authority, and, ultimately, the power to determine these things; hence my terming of a Black Atlantic, or better yet an Orisa Atlantic, politics of religion that I detail in this dissertation.

Much of the theorizing and critical inquiry in scholarship on the African Diaspora has engaged the concepts of origins, purity, authenticity, and, of course, “Africa.” Dominant lines of inquiry in the African diasporic framework typically argue that either 1) African human and cultural contributions exist in a distant past that are no longer relevant to contemporary dynamics of Blacks in the West (Campt 2006; Gilroy 1993; Pinho 2010), or that 2) African origins and the experiences of slavery, colonialism, and ongoing discrimination link Black people around the world genetically, culturally and politically (Drake 1982; Sheriff 2001; Walker 2001). The difference between these two schools of thought is that there has been a paradigmatic shift in African Diasporic scholarship from a focus on roots to a privileging of routes in the creation of diasporic cultures, identities, and communities (Brown 1998; Clarke 2004; Gilroy 1993). This shift marks a moment where Africa is being decentered in understanding diasporic connections, along with a de-privileging of the points of commonality over difference and disjuncture. Key to this analysis is an understanding that diaspora is a mode of relationships rather than mere points on a socially constructed map (Brown 1998; 2006). Yet these relationships are not given and should not be taken for granted. “Neither the fact of blackness nor shared experiences under racism nor the historical process of their dispersal makes for community or even common identity” (Patterson and Kelley 2000b, 19). As Stuart Hall and countless others after him have argued, diaspora is in the constant process of being made and remade (and unmade) by its constituent groups (Stuart Hall 1990; T. Campt 2002; Paul Gilroy 1993; Patterson and Kelley 2000b).
So what makes for diaspora? Or better yet, what makes for community? Because indeed isn’t that what we mean when we operationalize the term diaspora? Are we not considering on some level the multitude of diverse people sharing in something that can be said to be a community? What is it that this group shares? For the community that I study, and the larger community which they are a part of, that shared something is a religious philosophy, idea, and/or orientation. I don’t say practices because these practices are exactly what come into constant dispute, debate, or discussion. But these disputes and debates highlight the processes that make clear how these people are imagined, and imagine themselves, as part of a larger unit called the Orisa community. Within the field of diasporic studies scholars have argued for (Safran 1991; Tololyan 1996) and against (Brah 1996; Brubaker 2005; Clifford 1994) seeing diaspora as an inevitable formation of dispersed people. Those who critique the idea that the formation of diaspora occurs at the moment of migration argue for an analysis which emphasizes the processes inherent in that construction. Rather than assume immediate cohesiveness and commonality between the constituent members of any diaspora these scholars advocate instead for an approach that highlights the politics, practices, relationships, and/or consciousness that are deployed to cohere the group or better explain members’ interactions with each other (Brubaker 2005; Clifford 1994; Sokefeld 2006; Thomas and Campt 2006; Vertovec 1997).

I examine the relationship these particular diasporans have with each other in what Brah has labeled the diasporic space (1996). It is this diasporic space that this project problematizes. Rather than relying solely on the diasporic tropes of home, belonging, dislocation, and a sense of loss, I extend the analysis to explore how groups are constructed vis-à-vis one another “…which retain[s] a critical bearing on understanding contemporary diasporic formations and their inter-relationships” (ibid). In this case relationships between Black/African Americans,
Cubans/Cuban Americans, Brazilians and Nigerians prove very useful in understanding the process of diasporization. For Orisa practitioners there is no one “home” that all adherents wish to return to. Rather than a place called “home” the corralling figure is proper religious practice. How this proper practice is determined, and by whom, is what comes into contestation by the different groups. This dissertation posits that the reasons behind these struggles lie as much with gender, ethnic/national identity, and variant histories with race, slavery, and colonialism, as it does with purely religious content.

I use the Black Atlantic approach to African Diasporic studies because it theoretically and methodologically highlights the dialogic nature of diaspora (Matory 2006; Yelvington 2006; Palmié 2007). This model intervenes on a prevalent assumption in a particular vein of scholarship on the African Diaspora that relegates the contribution of Africa to the cultural and political institutions of Blacks in the West in a distant past. In dealing with the “Africa question” as a defining characteristic of the African Diaspora, specifically within the vein of the Herskovits/Frazier paradigm around the question of African cultural, political, and institutional contributions to the Americas, the question of African contributions tends to privilege an outward focus, literally following the flow of enslaved Africans during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade away from the continent. While we have obviously come a long way in the anthropological endeavor beyond uncovering or determining the source of “African” cultural forms and innovation on this side of the Atlantic, discussions around the contributions of Africa often remain within the context of source/origins versus creation of creolized/hybridized cultures. The Black Atlantic approach incorporates Gilroy’s focus on mobility and transnationalism as well as placing emphasis on the continuous process of engagement between continental Africans and African descendant populations in the West (Matory 1999, 2005, and
This approach challenges the origins/baseline model of theorizing and analyzing Africa’s relationship to its diaspora by highlighting the “movement, interaction, contestation, emergence, and innovation, in both large and small frames” of African diasporic populations and cultures on both sides of the Atlantic (Yelvington 2006, 30). Not only does it restore agency to diasporic actors (Matory 1999), it also accounts for why the issue of origins remains a relevant site of inquiry for understanding the role of religion and culture in African Diasporic studies through and beyond the context of authenticity. Furthermore, this model allows me to lay bare the processes by which the cultural/religious space of Orisa worship amongst Afro-North Americans can be seen as a political space through which we can view the workings of diaspora.

“IT AIN’T WHERE YOU’RE FROM IT’S WHERE YOU’RE AT!”: ON WHY ORIGINS STILL MATTER IN THE POLITICS OF AUTHENTICITY IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

As origins and authenticity go, these issues have been central to the paradigmatic study of African Diasporic religions and culture. As has been explored in the history of African American studies, determining the source of African American culture predominated the study of African descended peoples in the Americas for much of the twentieth century. Starting with the father of African American studies within anthropology, Melville J. Herskovits, deducing the influence of Africa on African American cultural forms has taken the form of determining the different African sources of particular African American cultural forms. Countless numbers of studies have taken a “verificationist approach” (Scott 1991) to illustrate the Africanity of Black culture in the Americas. As part of an anti-racist project which placed the birth of African American culture beyond the days of slavery into the antiquity of African civilization,
Herskovits, his intellectual descendants, and many of his forbearers—such as Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. Du Bois (Apter 2002)—sought to provide African Americans with the evidence needed to assert an authentic African past that was worthy of inclusion in the long history of mankind.\(^{21}\) Herskovits took his cue from his mentor Franz Boas who had established a new theoretical and methodological approach to the study of world cultures which viewed any cultural development within the context of a people’s own history. Boas’ cultural relativist approach inspired Herskovits to analyze African American culture on its own terms and within the context of African society, capture, and enslavement in the New World.

The issue of origins, then, has long taken prominence in African American studies. Yet this prominence has come under siege. Now seen as taboo amongst critiques of creolization and hybridity debates, origins have been deemed uninteresting or irrelevant in the current theorization and analysis of African Diasporic cultures (Yelvington 2001, 12). While the issues of origins—and by extension the issue of authenticity that is dependent upon the idea of origins—has fallen out of favor within the academy they remain relevant and salient for many of the communities that scholars of diaspora study. The present study takes seriously origins and authenticity. However, it is not concerned with verifying or refuting claims of continuities/survivals versus hybridity and creolization. Instead it focuses its gaze on the role that debates around origins and authenticity have on the internal dynamics of African diasporic communities. In other words, what do claims to origins and authenticity do for those who mobilize them? How do claims of authentic cultural (in this case religious) practice and/or challenges to these claims impact the relationships between diaporans? What can we read into

\(^{21}\) According to Scott’s historicity of the development of this kind of verificationist approach, identifying an authentic African past was part of a larger political project geared toward answering the “Negro Question” of whether or not Blacks in the United States were suitable candidates “for full social and moral citizenship in the American body politic.” (Scott 1991:270)
these contestations? More specifically, what are the issues of power that are embedded within these debates and how do they elucidate the contested nature of diaspora itself?

Scholars have turned their gaze to “more interesting” inquiries and have even questioned why this obsession with authenticity and origins (Jacqueline Nassy Brown 2005) still rears its ugly head. To be fair, as mentioned above the issues of origins and authenticity have predominated African American studies for a large portion of the twentieth century, perhaps to the negligence of attending to other important issues. Coupled with the critique of the privileging of commonalities over difference, the attack on privileging origins marks a turn in which fields of activity of African diasporic subjects scholars direct their gaze. Specifically, scholars have begun to productively explore the issue of difference and diversity within diaspora and how diasporans navigate these differences to produce relations of affinity and/or antagonism (Brown, tk date). We see in a number of studies (citations of such studies here) just how these differences complicate the workings of diaspora, namely in how diasporans view themselves and each other in relationship to a purported whole that is conceived of as “diaspora.” Given the current trends in African Diasporic scholarship, a focus on origins and authenticity would appear to be taking an intellectual step backwards. But I would argue that we can continue to have productive conversations of diaspora through issues of origins and authenticity if we view them in the context of political communities and not merely through the vein of “culture talk.”

As political communities, Black/African American, Cuban/Cuban American, Nigerian/Nigerian American and even Brazilian Orisa practitioners are all situated differently within the larger fraternity of Orisa worshippers in the Black Atlantic. These differences in positionality are infused through and through with the highly politicized categories of gender, racial and ethnic identity, as well as the politics of nation and transnationalism within which
these assemblages are embedded. As such the cultural dialogues that take place within and between these groups deserve scholarly attention; for they highlight the contested process of diasporans navigating difference as they engage each other within the diasporic space of the Orisa Atlantic. By examining the contours of these engagements and dialogues this dissertation will lay bare the Black Atlantic politics of religions which define this particular process of making, unmaking, and remaking the diaspora.

METHODODOLOGY

This dissertation is based on 36 months of ethnographic fieldwork based in Brooklyn, New York, specifically the neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant that took place between 2009 and 2012. Bed-Stuy is known to many Black/African American Lucumí practitioners as New Yoruba-land. Although Harlem is the birthplace of the non-Cuban Black Lucumí community Bedford-Stuyvesant emerged as a center of Black Orisa practice during the 1970s and 1980s. By the 1960s the neighborhood had been established as “the center of the largest single black community in the USA” made possible in part by Brooklyn’s semi-skilled industrial jobs that “paid relatively well and sustained sizeable numbers of black homeowners” (Warf 1990, 84–85). The higher opportunities for homeownership proved to be invaluable. For although both Harlem and Bed-Stuy are known for their grand churches, these churches were not options for the many ritual ceremonies that are central to the Lucumí faith. Since Lucumí “temples” exist entirely in the homes of its practitioners, homeownership allowed the burgeoning Black and African American community with the communal space to perform the necessary rites and rituals of the faith.

Bedford-Stuyvesant also became a center of worship due to its rich history of Black political Nationalist and cultural nationalist environment that fueled many practitioners to seek
out the African-inspired (Ochoa 2010) faith. Members of Ile Ase, Inc., the combined houses of Olosunmi (Baba Lloyd) and Oke Sande (Mama Stephanie), in particular had strong ties with the Black Nationalist organization The East founded by Jitu Weusi. The organization was formed after the Oceanhill-Brownsville struggle to create community controlled public schools and held at its core ideals of African-centered education, culture and philosophy in the service of nationalist institution building (Konadu 2009). Many devotees started with The East and the independent school it founded and operated, Uhuru Sasa Shule, whether as teachers, volunteers, or as students when they were children. The East also created the International African Arts Festival which celebrated its 44th anniversary in 2015. Though they were not members Mama Stephanie and Baba Lloyd were themselves very active in Black Nationalist activism during the era. They established ties with the organization when two East members asked Baba Lloyd to perform the naming ceremony for their newborn baby girl in the early 1970s. Both Lloyd and Stephanie’s political orientation plus the involvement of East members who would eventually become their godchildren provided the strong Black liberation philosophy and praxis upon which Ile Ase is founded. However Lloyd and Stephanie’s house on Macon Street was/is not the only Black ocha house in the neighborhood. Many of the community’s earlier generations had/have homes in Bedford-Stuyvesant. As such there is a large network of homes that have provided the space the community needed to grow since the 1970s. As such, much of my fieldwork was conducted in brownstones throughout this historic neighborhood as well as the adjacent neighborhood of Bushwick.

My ethnographic fieldwork consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews, collecting life histories as well as attending ceremonies and non-ceremonial activities held throughout Bed-Stuy. Since I was initiated into the ritual lineage of this community at the age of
eight years old, in the house on Macon Street, I was able to take part in many ritual ceremonies that would be prohibited to non-initiates. As a priest I was also able to take part in a four-month long divination class, also closed to non-initiates. Through participant-observation in these ceremonies and class I was able to uncover how the ritual register contained the history and values of the Yoruba, the Yoruba descendants of Cuba, and this community (Apter n.d.; Clarke 2004; Turner 1968). This method also provided the ritual context for the gendered dimensions of power that define the interaction between practitioners and ritual specialists. I also participated in countless non-ritual activities including anniversaries of initiations, fellowship meetings hosted by Ijo Orisa Yoruba Church, classes on different rituals and aspects of the religion, spiritual meetings known as misas, events hosted by various religious community organizations, as well as served as a mentor in a community youth mentoring organization. By participating in these activities I was able to observe interactions between practitioners from both the Cuban Lucumí and Nigerian Ifa-Orisa traditions. While these devotees may not share the ritual space they often share a social space which allowed me to document how they articulated a shared history of oppression and resistance that compelled their quest for “African” culture.

In 2009 and 2012 I travelled with members of the group to Brazil on their annual heritage tour. This allowed me to witness how the community actively creates community with Orisa practitioners throughout the Black Atlantic. The trip in 2012 marked the 25th anniversary of the excursion. I was asked to participate in a panel discussion entitled “Dancing Between Two

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22 Ijo Orisa Yoruba Church is a non-ritual based organization that holds twice monthly meetings focused on both Lucumí and Nigerian Ifa-Orisa topics related to Orisa worship. These meetings are held in the Harlem State Office building on 125th Street in Harlem and is open to practitioners (initiated and non-initiated) and non-practitioners alike.

23 Misas are spiritual meetings where practitioners engage the spirits of the dead they believe surround them. Though not part of Yoruba religious cosmology, the concept of spirits aligns well with the Yoruba concept of Egun (ancestors). Misas are part of the system known as Espiritism which was founded by the Frenchman Alan Kardec in the nineteenth century which spread to many parts of Latin America and Cuba in the late nineteenth century and became syncretized into Lucumí practice.
“Worlds: Rituals of Remembrance and Resistance in the Modern World” that was hosted by the Yoruba Society of Brooklyn, Inc. (YSB) who organizes the annual heritage tour of Brazil. The organization, founded by an elder Black American priestess in the New York City African American Orisa community, travels to Brazil every year during the month of August. During this 25th anniversary excursion the itinerary included a concert performance of African American singers of Orisa music, a panel discussion on the politics of memory in the African Diaspora, and finally a Lucumi-style drumming ceremony in honor of the Orisa Osun/Oxum that was held in the terreiro Ile Axe Iya Nasso Oka (Terreiro Casa Branca). For many members of the group of African American travelers this trip was historic. Not only was it the 25th anniversary, it was also the first time they were able to share their vision and practice of Orisa tradition with their contemporaries in Brazil. By participating in this excursion I was able to witness how different diasporic groups engage each other through religious and cultural exchange.

Lastly, an important component of my fieldwork as mining the digital data found in online forums such as Facebook, email listervs, websites (eleda.org, rootsandrooted.org), and online radio programs (Omo Ouduwa Radio and H2O Network on blogtalkradio.com). The anonymity of the internet allows people to say things they are otherwise uncomfortable saying. These online sites help create and maintain communities in ways that challenge traditional paths to religious fellowship. Mining these types of digital data allowed me to document this changing landscape, especially those moments where the divisions between Cuban Lucumí and Nigerian Ifa-Orisa practice are most stark. These sites, especially the two groups dedicated to different aspects of Orisa worship I followed on the social networking site Facebook, are places where practitioners and those interested in Orisa culture come to ask for, share, and debate information and issues. Participation in these sites allowed me to observe the contours of the debates that are
raging in the global Orisa community. With practitioners from all of the different denominations of Orisa worship (Lucumí, Ifa-Orisa, and Candomble, as well as other related practices such as Trinidad Orisa and Haitian Vodoun) engaging in this exchange, the issues of authenticity and authority became even more salient within a global context.
CHAPTER ONE

THE POLITICS OF AUTHENTICITY IN A CONTEMPORARY TRANSNATIONAL ORISA COMMUNITY

On June 19, 2010 members of an African American Orisa community based in Brooklyn, New York gathered to honor one of the patriarchs of the community, Baba Lloyd. As part of their religious obligation the ritual descendants of Baba Lloyd held a sacred drumming ceremony, known as Anya24, for the Orisa Yemonja to which he had been ordained some 37 years before. He had been living in Nigeria for more than 20 years, so this occasion was particularly festive since his visits to the States were few and far between. On this early summer Saturday afternoon in a community room located on Lafayette Avenue in the Clinton Hill neighborhood of Brooklyn, folks from as far as Atlanta, Virginia, Philadelphia, and Nigeria came together to take part in the four hour-long festivities. Most were dressed in the all-white or mostly-white attire that is most commonly associated with Lucumí practitioners, with few exceptions. The style of clothing was an eclectic mix of simple white dresses or blouse and skirt combinations worn by the women, pants and tops worn by the men to the more elaborately African-styled clothing of bubas and lapas for the women and dabas and dashikis worn by the men. Those in attendance ranged in natal age from infants to those well into their 80s, and in ritual initiation ages from Iyawos (newly initiated) to upwards of 40 years. Young and old gathered together to sing, dance, and pray in honor of the Orisa and to celebrate this African American pioneer.

24 Anya is a specific type of drumming ceremony that is called “fundamental,” which uses consecrated bata drums that are played by drummers who have been initiated into the secret society of Anya.
The community room was spacious enough for the more than 100 guests yet the heat generated by the drums, dancing, and the spiritual energy led folks to stand casually outside to catch the early summer breeze. The small playground outside of the community room provided seating for those who needed to take a break from the celebration or who wanted to catch up with friends and family they hadn’t seen in some time. Most in attendance were priests, or initiates from the various African American and/or Latino Lucumí houses in New York City. Those from farther away, like Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Virginia were mostly direct ritual descendants of Baba Lloyd, meaning he either initiated them or one of his many godchildren initiated them. As one of the early generations of African American converts to the Cuban denomination of Orisa practice who were initiated during the Black Power decades of the late sixties and early seventies, this particular celebration was marked by that history with the hiring of the first African American anya drumming group.

As I stood enjoying the music and talking to fellow practitioners my godmother grabbed my hand and told me she wanted to introduce me to a few people who would be helpful for my research. Standing close to the entrance of the community room were two Nigerian Orisa priests. I had noticed the two men earlier because it seemed that they were not really interested in what was taking place during the ceremony. They were standing on the outskirts of all of the activity and on first glance appeared to be bored. I had assumed they were Nigerian because of the way they were dressed (each had on “traditional” Yoruba clothing) and because I had heard one of them speaking in Yoruba. Mama Stephanie, my godmother, introduced me to Chief Dayo Ologundudu who is a priest of the Orisa Orunmila who is known to practitioners worldwide as the father of the Ifa divination system which contains the history and philosophy of the Yoruba
and their descendants in the West. Chief Dayo has had religious and familial ties with this Brooklyn-based Orisa community, and others throughout the African Diaspora, for over 30 years and at the time had recently published a book entitled *The Cradle of Yoruba Culture* (2008). Chief Dayo had one of his students selling the book along with CDs, DVDs and other Yoruba cultural items outside of the ceremony, which in itself was odd. The other was a Nigerian priest of the Orisa Obatala, understood to be the father of all Orisa and who is known for wisdom, calmness, and justice. She especially wanted me to talk to him since we were both priests of Obatala. The three of us walked outside so that the drums didn’t drown out our conversation and I told them that I was interested in the different debates between practitioners of the various Orisa traditions that existed in the African Diaspora. The Obatala priest began discussing how the information that we had here was very limited compared to what existed in Nigeria. Both he and Chief Dayo talked about the vast knowledge of Orisa tradition that has been lost in the diaspora. As they began flipping through Chief Dayo’s book they began talking in a combination of Yoruba and English about the intricate details of Orisa worship and Yoruba tradition that did not make it into diaspora. The Obatala priest showed me a page that had a picture of a religious implement related to our patron Orisa. He stated how integral this implement was to the worship of Obatala and how those of us in diaspora had no clue. At that moment Chief Dayo seemed to remember that I was standing there and stated that despite the differences there were many more commonalities that tied the practice of Orisa tradition on the continent to the diaspora in very meaningful ways. His statement, I later realized, came verbatim from the blurb on the back cover of his book.

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25 In 2008 the Ifa divination system was included amongst the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Intangible Cultural Heritage List.
As Chief Dayo and his Nigerian comrade continued their discussion in Yoruba, I took that as my cue that our conversation was over for the time being. Although at the end of our conversation the Chief attempted to show that there was more unity between the Diaspora and her homeland, the previous ten minute discussion alluded to the fact that there was something else going on. My sneaking suspicions were confirmed just moments later when I began talking with Chief Dayo’s apprentice who was manning the table of literature, cd’s, and other Yoruba cultural items for sale outside of the ceremony. He appeared to be in his late thirties to early forties and he mentioned that he had been studying with Chief Dayo for a few years but that he had originally been ordained within a prominent Cuban lineage to the Orisa Ogun. Ogun is the Yoruba deity of iron and war. Chief Dayo’s student then began talking about how going to Nigeria to become initiated in Ifa and working with Chief Dayo had made him connect to Orisa and the philosophical and theological underpinnings of this traditional Yoruba practice in a way that his initiation in the Cuban variant of Orisa religion, Lucumí, had not. He couched it in terms of efficiency, speaking to a common understanding between some practitioners that the religion, as it developed in the “New World”, is a watered-down version of what is practiced in Nigeria. “Here,” he said alluding to both the United States in general and the practice of Lucumí in particular, “people are always having to work their Orisa to get anything done.” I do one ebo and I’m done.” He was referring to the idea of efficacy and efficiency with which the different practices, Cuban Lucumí and Nigerian Ifa Orisa, brought about change in the life of an adherent. The practice of the Orisa tradition involves more than mere belief and prayer. Integral to one’s faith is a system of practice, actions, and constant evocation and devotion to supernatural forces.

26 “Working one’s Orisa” means divining and providing particular offerings to the Orisa to gain their assistance with a particular issue in a devotee’s life.
27 Ebo means offering or sacrifice.
that keep adherents connected to their divinely inspired destiny. Faith is labor intensive, both for the individual and for the community within which individuals function. What this young man was alluding to is that the Orisa tradition as developed in Cuba requires a bit more labor than was necessary because it was disconnected in some way from the original source of efficient power. For him and many others who think like him, the “watered-down” version produces “watered-down” results and as such requires practitioners to work more than necessary.

Interestingly enough within that same week I received an email that came through a listserv of Orisa practitioners in New York that mentioned an accord agreed to by a group of Lucumí officials in Miami. According to the “Ocha grapevine” and the website associated with the accord, these Miami Oba Oriates²⁸ convened on June 2, 2010 and agreed to a number of stipulations in response to an incident where practitioners of Traditional Yoruba Religion (TYR) re-ordained practitioners who had been formerly ordained in the Lucumí faith. According to the authors of the accord:

The council convened to analyze and debate the recent incidents that have occurred with practitioners of the so-called Traditional Yoruba Religion residing in the South Florida region, and the conflicts and discrepancies in theology and ritual practice that have arisen between both religious systems.

As such, this council came to order as an independent entity that is not affiliated to any institution, and the following resolutions were ratified. These resolves explicitly convey the individual and unanimous sentiment of the religious body of priests and devotees that represent and preserve the religious heritage and legacy of the Lukumí religion in its traditional Cuban form. The Oba Oriatés convened and ratified the following:

… II. As Lukumí priests, we maintain and uphold a religious legacy that for more than two centuries has responded and continues to answer to the fundamental religious needs of its devotees. We do not need to modify, rectify, justify, modernize, nor abandon the theological principles and religious wisdom bequeathed to us by our Lukumí ancestors and the founders of our religious tradition in Cuba, a devotion that we have since disseminated throughout the Diaspora. We emphasize that our rituals, ceremonies and protocols are

²⁸ An Oba Oriaté is “director and master of ceremonies, consecrations and worship” of the Lucumí faith. (See Accord of the Oba Oriate of South Florida)
executed according to the teachings of our ancestors, wisdom that we do not have the need, nor the intention, to abandon or alter to adopt or accommodate the criteria, exigencies or impositions upon our Lukumí traditions, nor the coercive mechanisms of reformative traditions foreign to our Lukumí customs and ignorant of our history, values, principles and heritage in the Americas and the Lukumí Diaspora.

III. Although the rituals and consecrations practiced in Lukumí Religion and in the so-called Traditional Yoruba Religion share ethnic, cultural, and geographical origins, our practices differ considerably. Therefore, we consider both religious systems to have specific, intrinsic and particular rites, protocols, and consecrations that respond to the specific needs of their devotees but are incompatible with each other. As such, each tradition should be considered an autonomous tradition and should remain within the parameters of its own cult and doctrine, thus maintaining a level of mutual respect, and ensuring that our rituals are not confused and/or mixed. …29 (emphasis added)

The accord was an “official” response to longstanding tensions within the Orisa community in the United States, specifically between the Cuban and Nigerian variants of the tradition.30 Followers of Cuban Lucumí/Santería have historically dominated the practice of U.S.-based Orisa religion. Over the past twenty plus years the increasing presence of followers of the Nigerian Ifa-Orisa (“Traditional Yoruba Religion”) denomination has ushered in new contestations over religious authenticity and authority between a “homeland” (Nigeria) and its Diasporas (Cuba and the U.S.). Specifically this presence challenges the primacy of Cuban Lucumí religious forms by (re-)positioning Nigeria as the reigning source of authority about how proper religious practice gets defined in North America.

What we have with these two ethnographic encounters are clearly snapshots of a diasporic moment. As countless scholars have argued more recently (Jacqueline Nassy Brown 1998; J. N. Brown 2009; T. M. Campt 2006; Edwards 2001; Patterson and Kelley 2000b), diaspora is as much

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29 See Accord of the Oba Oriatés of South Florida, June 2010
30 While there are practitioners of Orisa tradition as it developed in Brazil (Candomblé) and Trinidad (Shango) who live and worship in the United States, the debates that this project places its focus is on the systems that developed in Nigeria Cuba. The tensions, however, are not limited to only between the Cuban and Nigerian denominations of the religion.
about tensions across difference as they are about commonalities, possibly even more so. These ethnographic moments illustrate this fact quite explicitly by showing how diasporans navigate the vast differences that exist between them in order to unite on those few things they do hold in common. This process of navigation, however, brings us back to those quintessential topics that have defined African American Studies for what some deem as far too long: the issues of origins, authenticity and, by association, authority and legitimacy. As mentioned in my introductory chapter, origins and authenticity still remain crucial to these communities even though scholars have moved past their own “obsession” with them. But while scholars were concerned with origins and authenticity as vehicles of verification on the level of Africanity of certain cultural practices, origins and authenticity are mobilized within these communities to do a different kind of work. Early scholarship which privileged origins was performed in service of a political project that sought to rationalize/justify why African Americans were deserving of full citizenship by placing the roots of African American cultural practices beyond the pathology of slavery (Herskovits 1941; Drake 1982; Drake 1987; Du Bois 1903). This anti-racist political/intellectual endeavor spawned countless inquiries into origins and authenticity. For contemporary Orisa communities, however, arguments of authenticity are essentially arguments around legitimacy, authority, and ultimately power. This power defines who is considered a legitimate member of a community and thus who is allowed to exercise the rights and privileges that go along with that membership; who gets to alter a religious tradition and who gets to claim the capital (cultural, material and otherwise) associated with that right.

In this chapter I will explore the process by which the Black/African American Lucumí community in Brooklyn has navigated this conceptual and cultural terrain from the time of its founding to the present. This will allow me to tease out how the politics of authenticity—how it is
defined by this group as well as how it has been used by other diasporans they’ve come into contact with in the name of religion—works to demarcate the boundaries which determine those who are considered part of the community and those who are not. My aim is to clearly illustrate the ways in which the process of diaspora, rather than the automatic assumption of it, entails a prolonged navigation of differences that threaten any easy assumptions of communal bonds. Central to this navigation is the community’s nuanced relationship between two geographical indices—“Africa” and Cuba—that challenge easy assumptions about the motives and loyalties of Black/African American Orisa practitioners. Due to the community’s definition of authenticity that includes both “Africa” and Cuba, their position within the Orisa diaspora proves to be complex, especially given the current debates taking place within the United States. For Black/African American Lucumí practitioners, authenticity gets defined through both the roots and the routes of their religious practice. The politics of authenticity then comes from how communities and individuals navigate and negotiate when roots or routes should determine this authenticity as well as the friction (Tsing 2005) that arises when these two ideas come up against one another. The contours and substance of their practice, then, gets tested and legitimized (or de-legitimized) depending on where (and when) this community places its origins and when it decides that the paths their religious practice have undergone takes precedence. Contrary to the scholarly wish to move past the roots to examine and explore the routes of African diasporic cultural formations, this group shows that the actual process of diaspora shifts to encompass both in often messy details and with unforeseen results.

DEFINING AUTHORITY AND LEGITIMACY AMONG ORISA DEVOTEES

Orisa worship is a decentralized, non-hierarchical practice. This means that there is no legislative authority and that each house/temple is essentially autonomous and independently
managed. However it would be a mistake to assume that a de facto authority does not exist or that hierarchies are not in place. All houses/temples exist within a network of houses/temple. Again, hierarchies between the houses do not exist, but the hierarchies embedded within the practice, namely the hierarchy of eldership (including years of initiation) and ritual knowledge, greatly impact the authoritative power of individuals and groups of individuals. The main conduit of this authority is conferred through the witnessing of one’s ritual knowledge and eldership. This witnessing provides a glimpse into how integral community is within this religious tradition. The legitimacy of one’s participation in a house/temple is predicated on the fact that others are able to bear witness to a practitioner’s growth, development, and commitment to the spiritual family she is a part of. This becomes crucial at the moment of initiation but is also apparent in the months and years before the ordination ceremony takes place. As a practitioner officially enters a house through the mechanism of the eleke ceremony, where she receives the beaded necklaces in the different color combinations representative of the Orisas, other members of the house and the community bear witness to whether the ritual is performed correctly and to the neophyte’s implicit contract to enter and be an active member of that religious family. Other members of the house or the network of houses to which they belong also bear witness to see if the newly entered family member shows her commitment through varying levels of ritual labor and reciprocity. Through observing and attesting to the ritual fidelity of religious ceremonies that the neophyte has endured, the members of the house give the practitioner the authority to function within the community. Without this authority an individual is not allowed in “the room” or ritual space and thus becomes a ritual non-being.

The authorizing power of witnesses ensures that non-credentialed individuals do not enter and begin practicing within the community. The underlying assumption of this prohibition is that
unknowledgeable individuals can introduce practices that have not been authorized and are therefore dangerous to the community and to the practice as a whole. For each community this authority largely consists of the elders who have developed reputations of having deep ritual knowledge and practicing with integrity.\(^3\) This authority ensures rituals are performed according to the norms and standards that have been agreed upon by a long lineage of respected elders of the community. This lineage often transcends the immediate ritual house/temple to encompass other houses that exist across city, state, and even national borders. This is what allows a person who has undergone the Lucumí ordination ceremony in Brooklyn to be able to take part in a ceremony in Havanna or Matanzas in Cuba, so long as there is someone present who can verify the authenticity or ritual correctness of their Ocha/initiation ceremony. The power of the (reliable) witness allows individuals and communities to create meaningful and lasting connections with other members throughout the diaspora. The issue of authenticity, then, is somewhat different than the one often discussed in African Diaspora scholarship. The authenticity at work within Orisa communities has less to do with how “African” a practice is than with who has legitimized an individual, a house, or even an entire community to function and be recognized as a respected priest/house/community of Ocha and thus have access to an even larger community of practitioners. This legitimization is very much connected to longer histories of the development of Orisa worship in different Black Atlantic locales.

**A DIASPORA BY ANY OTHER NAME: “AFRICAN”, YORUBA, OR LUCUMÍ?**

Communities of Orisa worshippers in New York City, in the United States, and on the internet all lay claim to different diasporas at different moments. In these moments the histories

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\(^3\) This concept becomes important in my discussion of the tensions between Orisa practitioners from Nigeria who have come to the United States and claimed long lineages and vast ritual knowledge of Orisa practices but yet are not able to give “proper” verification through the mechanisms embedded within the ritual practices as they have developed in the Western hemisphere.
of divergent diasporas manifest in different articulations of “us” and “them,” as Avtar Brah points out in her discussion of what she identifies as “diaspora space.” According to Brah diaspora space is the site

…where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition…Diaspora space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are contested. (Brah 1996, 208–209, emphasis added)

The multiple ritual houses/temples, public gatherings to celebrate Orisa culture, and online communities such as social networking and email listservs through which Orisa communities are constituted are what I define as diaspora space because they serve as the sites where divergent groups come together to negotiate, navigate, and police those very boundaries that distinguishes “us” and “them.” These politics of belonging are evident in the current debates around proper religious practice that in fact are also about the friction that emerges when various groups lay authoritative claim to a shared, if differentiated, cultural practice. The Accord of the Oba Oriates of South Florida mentioned earlier made clear an important distinction between two groups who practice Orisa religion within U.S. borders: Traditional Yoruba Religion (TYR) adherents and those of the “Lukumi Diaspora.” The importance of these distinctions for the present study lies not only in demarcating particular ritual practices, but also in articulating a particular conceptual space within which Black/African American Orisa practitioners exist. Again I find Brah’s diaspora space very useful because she argues that

…it becomes necessary to examine how these groups are similarly or differently constructed vis-à-vis one another. Such relational positioning will, in part, be structured with reference to the main dominant group. But there are aspects of the relationship between these diasporic trajectories that are irreducible to mediation via metropolitan discourse. (Brah 1996, 189, emphasis added)
Here Avtar Brah lays the groundwork from which I analyze the relationality of the different diasporic groups engaged in Orisa worship in the United States and in the diaspora. By decentering the dominant society as the primary mediator of diasporans, Brah’s diaspora space allows me to focus on how the different communities of Orisa practitioners construct each other. In other words, I emphasize how the practice of Orisa worship in the United States not only configures particular practicing communities but also its impact on how these communities conceptualize themselves and each other in the context of Orisa practice explicitly, but also in conversation with broader issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, and power. Using the interpretive framework of diaspora space, in conjunction with the dialogic approach of Black Atlantic studies as articulated by J. Lorand Matory (2006) and Kevin Yelvington (2006), I argue that while the broader context of United States global economic and cultural hegemony has influence, it is neither the sole nor the predominant mediator through which Orisa communities engage one another. The defining terms through which Orisa practitioners engage each other is through the medium of a religion that often transcends national boundaries while at other times gets constrained by them. Constrained in the sense that the workings of race, ethnicity, gender, and class position (as well as sexuality but this is beyond the scope of the present study) impact how individuals and groups relate to one another within the context of religion. These things get their meanings from both the local and global and, as such, come to shape the diasporic space in which these religious practices occur.

Although the Accord of the Oba Oriates of South Florida held no official bearing on the ritual practices of the Black/African American Orisa community in Brooklyn that I studied, it lays bare one of the central arguments of this dissertation: Black/African American Orisa practitioners, specifically those of the Lucumí denomination, have continuously navigated between the two referents of “Africa” via the Yoruba and “Cuba” via Lucumí in their construction of a religious
practice and identity informed by a militant, pro-Black liberation philosophy. Given their unique subject positions in both the United States and the Orisa diaspora, Black/African American devotees provide the perfect opportunity to examine the process of contestation and negotiation of Brah’s diaspora space. The religious landscape to which the Accord addresses is one in which Lucumí (Cuba) devotees are on one side and Traditional Yoruba Religion/Ifa-Orisa on the other (“Africa”/Nigeria), with Black American Lucumís occupying one foot in each terrain.

By claiming a Lucumí diaspora, the authors of the accord and their supporters are privileging a particularly Cuban history that serves as both the source of much of the Orisa worship in the United States and the lens through which to understand the development of the religion here. This Cuban history supplants the original creation story of the African Diaspora by focusing not on the forced migration of enslaved Africans to the western hemisphere, but instead on the development of a cultural practice firmly embedded within the historical specificities of Cuba.32 To posit a Lucumí diaspora illustrates the fact that all those who claim to practice this denomination are tapping into a particularly Cuban (and Cuban-American) history, oftentimes quite explicitly through that aspect of ritual known as the Mojubas. Mojubas are what I call spiritual/religious citations that take place before all rituals (communal and private) when practitioners pay homage to and ask the permission of divine spiritual entities including...

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32 I should take a moment to make clear that, while the above distinctions between Cuban Lucumí and Traditional Yoruba Religion appear to be ethnically marked, the practitioners who follow these different paths do not fall neatly into these ethnic categories. In other words, those who practice Lucumí are not only Cuban or Latino (Puerto Ricans and to a lesser extent Dominicans, are well represented within the Orisa community in the U.S.) and those who practice Traditional Yoruba Religion are not only Yoruba or African American. In fact, what makes these distinctions thought-provoking is that though the different denominations have in fact developed within specific histories of specific peoples within specific nations (the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria, the Afro-Cuban “ethnic” group of Cuba, and even the Afro-Brazilian ethnic group which created Candomblé), the religions formed have emerged from the confines of ethnicity to be practiced by people of all races and ethnic backgrounds both in the U.S. and around the world. It has indeed become a world religion (Olupona and Rey 2008). However, this world religion status notwithstanding, we should pause to examine the ethnic origins of this emerging sectarianism of doctrine of Orisa devotion, and the ethnic and racial sites where legitimacy, authority, and authenticity get mapped. For these sites of authority and authenticity continue to rest along points on specifically Black and Atlantic map.
familial/ritual kinship ties, both living and deceased. Through this ritual mechanism practitioners are acknowledging the lives and contributions of specific human beings who were alive during specific historical moments. Portions of the mojubas serve as the genealogy of each house or ritual “family” and as such it chronicles the lives of those who are not only seen as being part of that ritual family but having contributed to the establishment of that house, and/or rama (ritual lineage) (D. H. Brown 2003). For example, in the ritual family led by matriarch Mama Stephanie in Brooklyn among the first names called in the section of the Mojubas devoted to blood and ritual ancestors, are Omi Toki (Susana Cantera) and Obarameji (Octavio Samá), two names that David Brown has attributed as being fundamental figures in the development of the modern Lucumí Orisa system in Cuba during the twentieth century (2003, 74). While all practitioners who have either undergone the secondary level of initiation into the religion, i.e. receiving the group of Orisas called “The Warriors” (Elegba, Ogun, Ochosi, and Osun) or the full initiation into the priesthood (the kariocha ceremony) call on the names of deceased priests who are important “in their line,” these two names (and more depending on how “complete” a list one’s mojubas are) are invoked by all who claim inclusion in the Lucumí faith, according to Baba Malik, a babalorisha (father of orisa, i.e. one who has initiated others) who was initiated by Mama Stephanie. This process of invocation before every ritual (communal or private) of a particular Cuban religious history effectively marks a divergent diaspora as Lucumí which is ritualistically and historically distinct from those ritual houses whose lineages come directly from Nigeria. This Cuban religious

33 According to David Brown’s extensive history chronicling the developments within the Lucumi religion known as Regla de Ocha in Cuba, these two names are actually names related to the founding of particular ramas, or genealogical branches (18). This means that depending on the ritual family one belongs, one may not call on these particular names. However, given the fact that only a handful of ramas serve as the origins of most Lucumi houses of Regla de Ocha (which should be distinguished from a different yet related system called Regla de Ifa) here in the United States, the argument that most Lucumi-practicing worshipers are accessing a particularly Cuban history when it comes to Orisa worship is still sound.
development is the foundation on which African American Lucumí define the authenticity of their religious practice.

The history of religious development in Cuba during the late nineteenth century through the mid twentieth century is a rich, complex one. According to David Brown, the complex ritual system of the Lucumí was clearly marked by negotiations, adaptations, and even inventions by both African-born Lucumí and their creole familial and ritual descendants in Cuba at the turn of the twentieth century (see Brown 2003, chapters 2-3). Many of the practices that are part of the Lucumí ritual field came to be re-established not through a passive process of retention but through a contentious and not always linear process of reformation. According to Brown, certain practices within the different ritual fields of Regla de Ocha and Regla de Ifa (the two ritual orders that comprise the Lucumí faith), such as the initiation style of Ocha and the “giving” of the Orisa Olofin that is crucial to Regla de Ifa, were altered or created in Cuba during the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries (see Brown 2003: chapter 2 and 3). Through Brown’s extensive chronicling of key figures responsible for shaping those “traditional” Lucumí religious practices of African-born enslaved Lucumí and their immediate descendants into the modern system(s) that exist today, we can begin to get a glimpse of what I am labeling as a Black Atlantic politics of religion. This politics of religion is grounded in the fact that religious transformations were made by historically situated actors who used the religion as one idiom through which to position themselves advantageously within a rapidly changing social, cultural, and political environment. As such, the changes to pantheons, rituals, and other religious activities was as much about the navigation of “people politics” as it was about maintaining, creating, or transforming religious doctrine and practice.
Black/African Americans who claim a Lucumí religious identity regularly tap into this deep religious history with each prayer, ritual, or ceremony. In fact, their claims of being (and being seen as) a legitimate and authentic Lucumí Orisa community are firmly embedded within their loyalty to this particular ritual orthodoxy. This allegiance to Lucumí, and by extension Cuba, should not be glossed over. Embedded within this choice is a conscious decision to identify their authentic religious practice within Cuba as opposed to “Africa,” or Nigeria. Though many older practitioners who came to the religion during the Black Power era were looking for an “African” religion, their definition of the authenticity of their practice comes from their allegiance to a Cuban ritual orthodoxy, not necessarily an “African” one (though even in their own discussions they often refer to those who maintained the religion in Cuba as “African”). This point was made clear to me time and again when listening to practitioners who came to the faith during the Black Power movement and in fact was what I heard constantly growing up within the tradition. My mother would often say to me “we come from a Cuban line.” She would make this statement in reference to certain practices that would appear to have a “Spanish flavor,” i.e. outside of the context of being Black Americans from New York City with South Carolinian roots.\textsuperscript{34} This would include the kinds of food items we prepared to celebrate certain religious holidays or as offerings, such as flan for Oshun or sancocho made with pork for Egun (ancestors). However, the importance of being from a “Cuban line” goes well beyond the cultural cues that identify specific geographic regions. “Coming from a Cuban line” confers a level of legitimacy to the religious and ritual practices of a group of Black/African Americans that had been in question ever since Walter

\textsuperscript{34} Many members of the New York African American Lucumí community have Caribbean heritage. In fact, many members have either immigrated to the United States themselves or are first generation U.S. citizens. We must be careful to not make the assumption that Black American means only those who have been born within the United States or who have family histories embedded within the Black American experience of slavery in the United States. Many of the members of the houses I did my fieldwork with claim Caribbean ancestry and culture. For those who do not claim Caribbean ancestry and who live in New York City, however, they have had extensive exposure to Caribbean culture, especially in those houses that are headquartered in the borough of Brooklyn. See Foner 2001.
Eugene King, aka Oba Oseijeman Adefunmi, began his project of imbuing Santería/Lucumi religious practices with Black Nationalist principles during the 1960s.

Oftentimes in scholarly narrations of the origins of the African American Orisa community, Walter King/Oba Oseijeman Adefunmi’s public display and disavowal of the European and Christian components of Santería/Lucumi practices mark Black American practitioners’ definitive break with their Cuban predecessors. In this telling, Adefunmi and his followers’ racial project of restoring African gods to Black Americans (Hunt 1979; Hucks 2012) by way of stripping the Euro-Christian veneer away from Santería/Lucumi practices proved to be incommensurable with Cuban ideas of religious practice, which left “Orisa worshippers of Black America on their own” (Weaver 1986). In many scholarly discussions of Black American Orisa worship this break defines their practice. As these discussions follow along the Adefunmi narrative, most notably his creation of Oyotunji African Village in South Carolina and the accompanying form of Orisa practice that he developed called Orisha-Vodou (which combined Orisa practices of both the Yoruba and Dahomey/Benin versions), the story of Black/African American Orisa worshipers is placed solely within the context of reorienting their religion toward Africa, eschewing the Cuban connection, and re-creating “Africa” within America. This narration tells the Black American story in broad strokes and fails to account for a substantial portion of the Black/African American Orisa community who did not break with their Cuban predecessors. It also misses the important nuance of a particular historical node in the larger story of Orisa worship.

The Adefunmi/Oyotunji narrative also easily fits into a particular argument about African Americans’ relationship to Africa being characterized by an anachronistic, romanticized, and overly generalized conception of Africa. In this telling Black Americans are indicted for their ignorance of and unwillingness to deal with the contemporary realities of life on the continent and
instead engage in a deeply problematic construction of Africa that silences the lived experiences of contemporary Africans. I would argue that it is precisely because Black American devotees were introduced to a very specific “Africa” through Orisa worship that they began a deeper engagement with the continent that facilitated a much less romanticized vision of Africa and their relationship to it. The generalized, romanticized version of “Africa” became the nation- and ethnic-specific Nigeria of the Yoruba. This specificity allowed for a more realistic and sophisticated understanding of “Africa,” which lost its generality (i.e. scare quotes) and now became Nigeria and, even more specifically, Yoruba-land. As practitioners developed within the Cuban system, while also closely engaging with modern-day Yoruba in Nigeria and here in the United States, “Africa” lost its privileged position as the site of authenticity and legitimacy. Instead, these Lucumí practitioners traced the authenticity and legitimacy of their religious practice to Cuba. But rather than replace “Africa” with “Cuba” outright, there has been a complex navigation between the two sites to not only draw inspiration and cultural resources, but also legitimacy and authority to function as an autonomous Orisa community.

Religion was the vehicle through which Black American devotees learned about the cultural, political, and economic specificities of contemporary African life. Many travelled to Nigeria to learn about specific rituals and practices that could supplement, not supplant, what they had learned from the Cubans. Through their travels they recognized that the “Africa” they had learned about from books was quite different from the one they encountered once off the plane. This Africa was not the idyllic Africa of their imagination but one of a nation rich in cultural knowledge yet steeped in modern-day problems of poverty and political upheaval. The idea of a blissful return to a land unmarked by the racial, cultural, political, and social violence of white supremacy and imperial domination, be it a literal or figurative return, proved to be untenable for
most. Not least because of their deep understanding of themselves as Americans and thus committed to their lives and struggles here on this ground, in this land, at this time. Troubling the popular narrative of Black American Orisa worship lets us explore the practices and guiding principles—as well as the evolving definition of what is African—of this community of practitioners who specifically identify themselves as Lucumi, which highlights the fact that the place of Africa in the minds of this group has moved beyond the search for origins. The rhetoric of reclamation has evolved into language and mechanisms through which “Africa” is but one geo-social, geo-cultural trope in play alongside others, specifically Cuba (and Brazil, as will be discussed in a later chapter). As Afro North American Lucumis engage these tropes they are not always imagined within the context of returning to “roots.” Instead, these places are mined for alternative ways of engaging modernity and all its shortcomings.

Adefunmi’s critique of modernity was/is Oyotunji African Village (“North America’s oldest authentic African village;” oyotunji.org), which represents a break with this modernity through the establishment of a pre-colonial, pre-Christian-contact Yoruba-land village in the United States. In contrast Afro North American Lucumis who live and practice in and around New York City, and their networks in Atlanta, Philadelphia, and California, stayed very much connected, engaged, and invested in a modern urban experience. This engagement, however, is quite critical of American society (social, cultural, political, and religious) and as part of their critique they’ve tapped into these diasporic resources (Brown 1998, 298) of “Africa” (via the Yoruba territories of Nigeria) and Cuba (the Yoruba-infused religions of Afro-Cubans) to create alternative definitions of personhood and community. This is quite a different task from reclaiming roots, and as such it has different implications for contextualizing Afro North Americans relationships to Africa and the diaspora.
If we take seriously this new history and trajectory of Black American Orisa worship, the contemporary context of authenticity and the authoritative value of the witness, which I briefly discussed above, begin to unfold. The experiences of those devotees who did not break with their Cuban predecessors give texture to the Black Atlantic politics of religion that I am attempting to lay out in this dissertation. By choosing to stay with their Cuban teachers these practitioners had to navigate a great deal of discrimination and continuous challenges to their right to practice the tradition; challenges that continue to this day. However, this allegiance also granted them access to an authenticating source of power that lay outside of “Africa”, although in constant conversation with contemporary Nigerians.

Trina is an elder in the African American Orisa community in New York City and leads a house/temple that is headquartered in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Initiated in the early 1970s by a Cuban padrino (godfather) Trina discussed with me how her godfather helped her navigate what she described as “the African American taint” in the religion. “The Cubans were so horrified at what Serge did”, she tells me during a phone conversation, referring to King/Adefunmi. “As an Iyawo (a new initiate) when my godfather would bring me to different Ocha functions in Cuban houses, when they saw him with me he would quickly say ‘she’s my godchild. She’s doing it the Cuban way.’” The “Cuban way” meant that the rituals Trina had undergone and the religious training she was receiving followed an orthodoxy that was defined within the context of Cuban religious development. This orthodoxy differed drastically, in the minds of her Cuban interlocutors, from Adefunmi’s engagement with Santería/Lucumí and his creation of the Yoruba Temple in Harlem and Oyotunji African Village in South Carolina. For Cuban priests Adefunmi’s public worship, African orientation, and the racial project which underlay his entire religious program violated the principles by which Cubans have understood their religion for decades. The
In the legend of Adefunmi’s, or “Serge” as many people in the community refer to him, brazenness is often illustrated through the story of a particular instance of animal sacrifice. As Trina tells the story, “I don’t know if it came from a reading of the year [a divination ceremony] or what, but [Serge] had to feed Elegba a goat. He brought the goat outside and fed Elegba right there on 125th street and the Cubans like lost their minds! For the Cubans, you have to be crazy [to do that] so all of us were considered crazy.” Animal sacrifice is the most controversial aspect of Orisa practice, especially in the United States. In 1992 the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. in its case against the City of Hialeah in Florida which banned animal sacrifice within the town. Before then, however, Santeros (as Lucumí practitioners are also known) were often the targets of police raids that were timed in order to catch illegal animal sacrifice during ritual ceremonies. The practice of the religion entails secrecy on multiple layers. However, due to the illegal nature of animal sacrifice at the time of Serge’s public sacrifice, the breach of this particular secret caused many Cuban practitioners, as Trina said, to think that African Americans were indeed crazy and thus not worthy of practicing the religion.

For Cuban practitioners the history of their religious practice was defined in large part by the need to worship in secret. Religious persecution was an integral component of the development of Orisa religion in Cuba from the time of slavery through the mid-late twentieth century. The practice of hiding the Orisa behind Catholic saints is what allowed devotees in Cuba to continue the practice, bring it to the shores of the United States, and introduce African Americans to the religion, according to Lloyd Weaver, an African American Orisa priest and filmmaker (1986). When Adefunmi defied this aspect of the religion, both through giving public bembes (drumming ceremonies) and sacrificing a goat “in broad daylight, in the middle of the largest crossroads in Harlem, the capital of Black America” (Weaver 1986), Cubans took this as a disavowal of the
religion, its Cuban practitioners, and the history in which the religion not only survived but thrived. For Cuban devotees “the religion” was not a Black religion, nor an African one. It was Cuban. Period. Therefore, the use of Catholic saint names to refer to Yoruba Orisas did not cause a cognitive disconnect for Cuban devotees as it did for Black Nationalist African Americans attempting to imbue their new religious practice with a militancy that Cubans did not fully understand or respect. However, it should be made clear that the ultimate point that the Cubans took issue with is the perception that Adefunmi broke tried and true ritual orthodoxy, specifically with the ritual initiations that he conducted in his Oyotunji African Village. This point, more so than his Black Nationalist approach to the religious practice (although this did have a huge impact), is what cast Adefunmi and his followers out of the flock. And it is what created the “African American taint” which often, though not always, shrouds Black American devotees when they enter Cuban/Latino religious spaces.

Black American practitioners who held many of the same political and cultural views broke ritual (though not friendship nor ideological) ties with Adefunmi. The distance they placed between this ritual heresy and their practice (though not the politics nor ideology behind it) is what defines the contemporary Black Lucumí community in New York City and their affiliated networks across the country. By staying loyal to Cuban ritual orthodoxy, and not altering their

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35 Practitioners, both Cuban and non-Cuban alike, still experience religious persecution to this day, especially around the issue of animal sacrifice. There is a long history within the broader US Orisa community of experiencing police raids organized to catch practitioners slaughtering animals and cities attempting to ban the practice of animal sacrifice. In 1992, the Supreme Court heard the case of the Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye Inc. and Ernesto Pichardo vs. the City of Hialeah (Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. Hialeah 1993) and ruled in favor of the Church, reasoning that the ban on the ritual sacrifice of animals was unconstitutional as it was enacted contrary to free exercise principles. As recently as 2009 the US Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit ruled in a case in Texas that the city of Euless’s ordinances which forbid the keeping and slaughtering of four legged animals greatly burdened the plaintiff’s, a Puerto Rican Santería priest, “free exercise of religion without advancing a compelling governmental interest using the least restrictive means.” (Merced v. Kasson 2009) The legal battles fought by Lucumí practitioners in the US add yet another layer to the discussion of the hard boundaries set around Lucumí practices and their distinction from Traditional Yoruba Religion. More than just ritual differences, the development of Orisa practice in the US is defined in large part on the continuous fight of Lucumí practitioners for religious rights in this country. This adds significantly to the idea of the Black Atlantic politics of religion I am attempting to develop in this project.
practice to the same extent as Adefunmi, Black American Lucumi devotees were able to tentatively hold on to the authenticating power of Cuba. This, as I detail below, was no easy task.

CUBAN BACKLASH AND AFRICAN AMERICAN TENACITY: RACE, ETHNICITY, AND THE POLITICS OF RITUAL KNOWLEDGE

As mentioned earlier, Orisa worship is not based on faith alone. It is based on a complex system of knowledge that is gained through the intense study of motivated individuals under willing and able mentors. During the Black Nationalist/Power Movement-era of the first generation of African American converts, Cuban Lucumí priests kept this information highly guarded and hidden from the Black American neophytes. Mama Stephanie talks about her experiences with “the Cubans”:

In the religion to learn things you have to go back to the elder so they wouldn’t be in Margie’s [an African American priestess] house. Her godmother was Leonore Dolme, who was a Black Cuban. [So] we would have to go help them during ceremonies at Leonore’s. Oddly enough, at Leonore’s house we witnessed a lot of racism. I would say xenophobia and racism. They didn’t particularly like us because we were African Americans. We didn’t speak Spanish so there was an assumption that we were stupid. I met more Cubans that treated me badly than I had ever met white people. Leonore happened to be a black Cuban, but most of the people around her were mulatto or lighter.

Margie would insist that we go to her godmother’s house and work and we would work all day into the evening and they would feed everybody but us. When people don’t give you food, it’s a big statement. [personal communication with author, January 2011]

Mama Stephanie’s formal introduction to the religion happened during the mid-late 1960s. With the enthusiastic encouragement of her boyfriend Baba Lloyd, to whom she would later marry and together start one of the largest and most respected African American Orisa houses in New York City (they have since separated), she received a reading from his African American
godmother, Marjorie Baynes Quinones. Quinones, considered to be the first African American to be initiated within the United States, was good friends with King/Adefunmi. Although Stephanie was eventually initiated by a Cuban priest who was closely associated with Quinones, she first began her spiritual tutelage in Quinones’ Ocha house. As she mentions above, the vehicle for learning in Orisa tradition is largely through participating in various ceremonies and religious celebrations. As new members of Quinones’ house Stephanie, her soon-to-be-husband Lloyd, and their god brothers and god sisters would travel to Quinones’ godmother’s house to “work” various ceremonies. When a devotee “works Ocha” she is performing the ritual labor that is required to make the ceremony successful. All Lucumi rituals both private and communal are labor intensive and require the cooperation of all levels of adherents, from the eldest priest to the newest uninitiated member of the house known as an aleyo. All practitioners experience a form of apprenticeship in the religion in which they begin their training (most likely in “the kitchen”) and work their way into “the room/Igbodu,” which is the sacred ritual space where only the initiated are allowed. While much significance and prestige is given to the happenings “in the room” since that is where the secret ritual ceremonies take place and one is physically closer to the spiritual and metaphysic energy that is being tapped into, what happens outside of the room, particularly in the kitchen, is of equal importance. Without this labor the ceremony would have been for naught. The labor involved in kitchen work includes preparations both before and after the sacrifice to complete the ebo (offering, sacrifice). This preparation includes plucking the birds;

36 Working ocha also means providing one’s Orisas with offerings to gain their assistance to deal with difficult life issues. This often happens through various forms of divination to identify the problem and the best way to resolve them through the mechanism of ebo (offerings and/or sacrifices).

37 Getting trained in the kitchen is often gendered whereas mostly women do the kitchen work while men assist in other aspects of the ritual, such as managing the various live animals, carrying large buckets of water to the ritual space as needed, running errands to ensure all the materials needed for the ceremony are available, etc. A more detailed discussion of the gendered labor of this religious practice will be discussed in a later chapter.
skinning and butchering the four legged-animals; prepping other food items that are offered with the animals to the Orisa; cleaning, cutting and seasoning the meat for consumption by the congregation the following day; and cleaning the ritual space and kitchen after all activities have ended. This work is exhausting and takes hours. As a sign of reciprocity and thanks giving food is served at different intervals to all who come to work the Ocha to thank them for their labor. As Stephanie said, when the Cubans refused to feed her and her Black/African American cohort who came to work Ocha in Cuban houses, they were making quite a big statement: you do not belong here and we do not want you here.

The experience of not being fed and thus informed of their status as outsiders highlights the inherent paradox of African American practitioners’ contemporary identification with Lucumí and mirrors broader Black experiences with constant challenges to the rights and privileges of their American citizenship. The race and ethnicity of the new Black American devotees were obstacles to their full inclusion within the community, which included learning the ritual knowledge needed to function as an autonomous Orisa community:

I think part of what has to be understood is what we call racism and those people not understanding us and us not understanding them. Some of it is racism, some of it is language barriers and on other levels I don’t think they understood us as a people. By the time I started meeting some of these Cubans, they had already had taken issue with people like [Oseijeman] because [he and Chris Oliana] had a temple. Then [the Cubans] had a very restricted way of teaching and learning was not that easy. Again, I can speculate, protecting territory, the bringers of the news, something that is good that you can make money off of, you don’t want other people to know how to do it. Things like teaching people how to read merindilogun [the divination system of Regla de Ocha]. There were so many secrets; this was a secret;

38 Skinning and butchering the four-legged animals, such as goats and lambs, is one kitchen activity that is in large part done by men.
39 Race and ethnicity are important because many Cubans practitioners were considered as Afro or Black Cubans. From the many stories gathered from my informants Afro/Black Cubans did not experience the kind of discriminations Black Americans did in those religious spaces. It was their identities as Americans and their racial subjectivities as Black (and Black Nationalists at that) which caused the heightened tensions. Race and ethnicity wove a complex web through which both American and Cuban practitioners engaged each other.
that was a secret. Years later to find out people had published all these books and these things were not secret, they were in books! But if you could read Spanish or if you could get the books you would know they were there.

They pretty much pushed African Americans to the side. If you talk to my godfather he says that similar things happened to Puerto Ricans. Every now and then one of the Cubans would break out and teach and give [us information] and they would become a pariah in their community for doing that. As years went on, whatever we did was not right. I used to pray for the day when I wouldn’t have to call one of them to do anything for me because it was… you can’t be at home watching dogs and hoses being put on your people and be around a spiritual thing with other people who aren’t really white who were talking bad about you in your face, acting like you’re an idiot and take those kind of things easily. The love of the religion kept us involved, kept us in it. The more we learned and the more we got involved, it came down to I don’t care if you don’t like what I am doing, I am going to keep doing it. [Personal communication with author January 2011]

Baba Lloyd is a bit more generous when he thinks back on the history and places Cuban response within the context of Lucumi theology. According to Yoruba/Lucumi Odu (sacred texts) there is a story about how the “children of cotton” are saved by Ocha. As the story goes: all the birds of the heavens got together so they could eat the sons of Owu (cotton) so they would never blossom. Finally, one day Owu went to Orunmila [the Orisa of divination and wisdom. He is the patron orisa of the Ifa divination system] and told him about his children being killed by the birds. Orunmila called for an ebo and told Owu to do it. So it was done. Since then the children of Owu grew little thorns on the cotton balls and this is the way cotton was saved. The birds get the thorns caught in their throats.40 In Black/African American and Cuban interpretations this story predicts the enslavement of Black people in America and the role of the Orisa tradition in their deliverance. Often people who have this particular odu in their initiation reading known as ita, they are told to be careful of being a slave to anything or anyone, as well as being told that part of their destiny is

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40 This parable was gathered from the sacred text of the Merindilogun system.
to help Black people. Cuban practitioners have interpreted this to mean that the salvation of many Cuban priests will come from their initiating the “children of cotton”:

Cheo’s [one of Lloyd’s Cuban mentors and the godfather of Lloyd’s now-ex wife Stephanie] interpretation is this religion was in Cuba and now in the United States because it was always bound to end up in the hands of African-American people.

And that from us it would spread back out in the salvation of the African world; this comes out of that Odu, so it’s dying in Africa but it’s growing here. These racist Cubans, the first of them, according to Polo that came were all children of Osa.41 Either that or their readings to leave Cuba, Osa/Osa-Meji would come up and they would be told your salvation would be in initiating black people, which they did in both of themselves. They didn’t like us, they didn’t care for us, and I can’t say that’s wrong. Remember, these are local country people that we don’t speak Spanish, were not of them, why should we give this precious thing we got from our parents to these strangers who can’t possibly understand what it is. So it really wasn’t racist. All right, but they did it because they had to, but just because Odu says we have to give it to them doesn’t mean we have to teach them anything.

Sometimes the only way out is through, as is evidenced by Stephanie’s retelling of the past and a quick glimpse of the present conditions of Orisa worship in New York City. Stephanie and other Black/African American houses are able to perform rituals large and small somewhat autonomously. I say somewhat because there is still large cooperation with Latino houses (that include Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, as well as some African Americans) and/or Latino small business (botanicas, animal providers, etc.) that provide the necessary materials for all ceremonies. However there are now African American Oba Oriates, priests/priestesses, akpons (singers of sacred music), drummers, diviners, dancers, and cooks; all of the elements needed for a fully functioning Lucumí community. The process of attaining this relative autonomy gets lost

41 When a Lucumí refers to a person as “a child of …” they are referring to the person’s initiation status as under a particular Orisa (i.e., a child of Obatala) or they are speaking about the different divination patterns the person received during their initiation ceremony. In this case a child of Osa refers to a person who received the Odun of Osa during their Ita or divination reading during their initiation which serves as a roadmap for their life.
in the Adefunmi/Oyotunji narrative and does a disservice to the experiences and struggles of African American practitioners who endured sustained discrimination for decades to gain the knowledge that they have. The knowledge they’ve gained lends to the authenticity (and integrity) of their religious practice.

AUTHENTICITY AND COMPETING DEFINITIONS OF BEING “AFRICAN”

Telling this history is important because it fleshes out the experiences of African American Orisa practitioners and highlights a more nuanced perspective of how this community conceptualizes ideas of Africanity and authenticity of religious practice. Within the community there is a simultaneous critique of Oyotunji African Village and overwhelming respect for what “Serge” or Adefunmi did for African Americans practitioners. Adefunmi is seen as one of the progenitors of the community and thus is given credit for introducing many in the community to the tradition back during the 1960s. Adefunmi is also the one person mostly credited when community members discuss the “Africanization” of the religion—the stripping of the saint names; use of the “African” (i.e. Yoruba) pronunciations of the Orisas; use of African/Black aesthetics for representations of Orisa through art, fabric, or clothing styles, etc.—and the important implications of that project during a time when the development of a political consciousness was imbued with a cultural and spiritual self-awakening. Practitioners acknowledge and celebrate the times and the pioneering efforts of Adefunmi and “The Village” (as folks refer to Oyotunji) as being integral to the development of the community. However, there is also a simmering critique that places the followers of Adefunmi’s brand of Orisa worship somewhat on the outskirts of how these devotees define themselves and their practice.

Due to the “African American taint” of Adefunmi’s brand of Orisa worship, as Trina described above, African Americans who align themselves with Lucumi have had to navigate past
Cuban impressions of this kind of practice and, by extension, Black/African American practitioners. The constant avowal that “we come from a Cuban line” not only marks the authenticating power of the community’s practice outside of “Africa,” it also signals that their interpretations of what is considered African are not confined to the “carnivalesque” interpretations of Africanness that Adefunmi’s Oyotunji Village is charged with exhibiting. While it may seem as if the two contradict each other, what it brings into focus is how this community defines (and operationalizes) ideas of “Africa” as well as one of the central arguments within African Diaspora studies: roots vs routes.

Reference to a Cuban lineage marks a particular ritual orthodoxy that many in the Black/African American community see Adefunmi as violating, thus casting his and his followers’ practice in the shadow of illegitimacy (i.e., “they don’t do what we do”). Seen in this light, the critique of this brand of Orisa worship is also a critique of how Africanness is being defined. Baba Oba is a thirty-five year old African American third-generation priest who was initiated in Cuba in 2005. His grandmother and mother (both deceased), along with his aunts, uncles, and all of his nine cousins have undergone initiation either in Brooklyn or Cuba. Like me Oba grew up in the Brooklyn-based Black/African American Orisa community during the 1980s. While he was too young to be around during the time of Adefunmi, “The Temple,” and the creation of “The Village,” the history and legend of this figure is not lost on Oba. Growing up we’d all heard the stories of Adefunmi’s program of “Africanizing” Santeria. However as Oba thinks back on this history, especially in light of his training as a priest and potential Oriate, he argues that “in their pursuit to be African they missed the Africanisms in this here Cuban religion” (personal communication with the author). What Oba is referring to is what I call “dashiki-style” Africanness versus a substantive African (Yoruban) philosophy and theology that becomes apparent only upon deeper inspection.
The “dashiki-style Africanity” is characterized by what has often been the outer expression of what it means to be African, often defined by African Americans. In the context of Adefunmi’s first creation of the Yoruba Temple in Harlem (which was preceded by the Shango Temple in Harlem that he co-founded with Chris Oliana who introduced him to Santeria) and Oyotunji African Village in South Carolina, “Africa” looked like polygamous relationships, royal kingships, Yoruba names, African carvings, and other outward trappings of one’s “African” culture.

Trina discusses a time in the late-eighties/early-nineties when she and two of her god sisters decided to visit Oyotunji on their way to an academic conference in Florida where one of the community’s own scholars was presenting. According to Trina they were “appalled at the carnivalesque aspect.” “Oyotunji was like going to Great Adventures [the amusement park]. We felt so out of place. The women were dancing bare-breasted. They knew we were priests and had the nerve to ask us to dance bare breast in front of the king! So we can get back on the tour bus with those other tourists looking at us? No thank you!” (personal communication with author, March 2013). Her indignation towards being asked to dance bare-breasted is more than a reaction to a request for the public display of her body. It is a resistance to the idea that the public display of her body is representative as something “more African” than her status as a priest represented alone. “I joined an African religion not to walk around bare-breasted. Don’t tell me being a priest means I have to dance bare-breasted. They were looking for the cultural while we were looking at this just for religion. They have this giant penis carving in Oyotunji. We in New York know that the [erect] penis is associated with [the Orisa] Esu, but we wouldn’t have a big carving like that in front of our house” (personal communication with author, March 2013). This rejection of a public display of a certain definition of Africanity mirrors Oba’s criticism of problematic definitions of what is considered African. What Trina and Oba are both critiquing is the privileging
of the “authentic African self” that is defined solely within the outward expression of superficial cultural cues—cultural cues most likely gleaned from the pages of anthropological and historical texts about pre-colonial “traditional” Yoruba society and culture. What gets ignored, or altogether missed, are the inherent African philosophical and theological foundations that form the core of a system that is used to understand and approach the realities of Black life. “Here we are under a condition where we need symbols to address certain pathologies within us,” says Oba. “Lucumí provides that we can get to the deeper level of consciousness of understanding the symbolism and how it is comprehended in this context.” Indeed, many of the pioneers of Black/African American Lucumí practice interpreted many of the Yoruba and Cuban Odu within the context of Black life here in the United States. This has allowed many practitioners to directly affect change in their lives as modern Western citizens with a Yoruba philosophy that challenges much of the premise of life in the West. For example Olokun, the hermaphrodite orisa who lives in the depths of the ocean where light does not reach, is directly connected with the many African bodies and souls who ended their days in that ocean during the Middle Passage. As such Olokun and Yemoja, the orisa of the upper parts of the ocean and who is the quintessential representation of motherhood, are representative of the experiences of Africans that came through the trauma of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Olokun is said to deal with the depths of the subconscious and thus since the orisa is tied to the parts of the ocean that swallowed the bones of enslaved Africans, he/she allows Blacks in the West a path through which to deal with the deep traumas of enslavement that lie within the psyche.
Baba Oba’s eloquent theorizing of religion in the context of Black life here in the United States\textsuperscript{42} speaks to the practical reasons behind why many people converted to the religion during the Black Power movement and why they continue to do so. While younger and/or newer converts may or may not articulate a desire to connect with African spiritual traditions to support a militant Black identity, what they hold in common with Black Power-era converts is an understanding of Orisa tradition as providing alternative ways of conceptualizing the self and community, which provides a means of addressing the realities of contemporary life outside of the context and confines of white, Anglo-Christian definitions and strategies. For most practitioners I spoke with over the course of this ethnographic project (and even longer given my involvement), “the religion” provides African, or more specifically Yoruba, concepts of self that are inclusive of more than just the Western-defined individual. For the Yoruba (and by extension the Lucumí) the self is constituted as much (if not more so) by connections to ritual and familial ancestral spirits and divine entities as it is by the id/ego/superego or by any other Western definitions of the self. This alternative meaning orients one differently to the world around her and thus provides different tools (conceptual, spiritual, ceremonial, or practical) to engage this world. More importantly, however, is that the strategies that practitioners develop speak to the fact that they are not attempting to escape modernity. They are seeking alternative definitions of modernity. Therefore the authentic self does not take on the image of carnivalesque costumes depicting an imagined romanticized past of royal kingships, bare-breasted dancers, and village-like conditions. Black practitioners determine authenticity through a delicate balance of adhering to a multi-geographic

\textsuperscript{42} I would like to give a special acknowledgement to Christine Pinnock and Anthony Johnson in the Anthropology department at the CUNY Graduate Center for helping me to push back against traditional definitions of what constitutes theory by opening my eyes to the fact that regular Black people theorize about life all the time.
tradition to deal with the vagaries of everyday life as well as remaining true to their experiences as Blacks in America.

**AUTHENTICITY AS BALANCING ACT BETWEEN THE SELF AND THE ORTHODOXY**

What the Black American Lucumí practitioners I studied continuously articulated was that their practice reflected their experiences. They did not see their experiences, particularly the experience of navigating American-style racial and gender oppression, as standing outside of the ritual orthodoxy set by their Cuban predecessors. They also did not define their experience within the context of some anachronistic, romantic version of an “African” self. Though most of the members of this community at one time or another (quite often, in fact) referred to themselves as African, this was not the folklorized version of a pre-slave trade trauma African self. The African self that they identified with was one in which certain philosophical and spiritual logics had been internalized to determine how they approached life; both the banal and the extraordinary. Being African had less to do with an outward display of supposedly African cultural traits and more to do with how one thought and how one “moved through the world.” This includes a process by which elements of the religion moved past literal interpretations to ones in which the ritual register, pantheon, and practices became imbued with and used as guidelines by which meaning was attached to the experiences of living a Black urban American experience. For example, the orisa Elegba is seen as more than the trickster deity who guards the crossroads and serves as the messenger between humanity and the divine order of Olodumare and the Orisas. Elegba has become a concept by which Black Orisa devotees in New York City understand certain aspects of life and how to approach them. Another example would be the adaptation of certain Odu (the
divination corpus which contains the philosophical foundations of Yoruba culture) to reflect the experiences and struggles of Blacks in this country. 43

As such many members have little use for mimicking a way of life (whether African or Cuban) in which their experiences do not match up. For practitioners like Mama Stephanie, Baba Malik, Baba Lloyd and many in this community, the hard fought battles to learn about the deep ritual knowledge that forms the foundation of their religious practice is to be put to use to honor and venerate the lives of their ancestors and their own lives rather than ignore them to portray a lifestyle and history of a people whose experiences they do not connect to. Authenticity, therefore, is also defined by this community as fidelity to one’s own history. But even this idea is somewhat controversial within this community. Mama Trina, who was among those who came to the religion in the late 1960s during the Black Power decade, has witnessed the growth of the community’s practice as well as the need for some to be on the constant search for the more authentic. “Black Americans are so caught up in trying to find something so authentically Yoruba that they ignore the strength and power in what they have right here,” she explains to me one early afternoon in her spacious living room. She was commenting on the current state of affairs where more and more ethnic Yoruba are becoming part of the broader Orisa community in New York City and the United States as a whole. “What we have in Lucumi and in our own African American culture is just as good as anything that comes from Nigeria.”

Baba Malik was born in the late 1960s into a family with strong ties to the Black Power movement. His older brother, himself a Black Panther, introduced Malik to the religion when he was just three years old. As he developed into a respected Babalorisa (“father of Orisa” which

43 Weaver 1986
means he has initiated others or ‘birthed’ Orisa) Malik has balanced his Black Power upbringing, which recognized the struggles of African people in the West, while recognizing the importance of honoring the experiences of his African American ancestors right here in this land. When asked why he thought his brother Alkamal, twenty years his senior, did not follow Serge/Adefunmi to Oyotunji Malik offers this: “I think for some people, it’s one thing to be doing an African traditional religion or Orisha tradition. It’s this whole other thing to be like, ‘I’m going to go back [to Africa].’ My brother was like, ‘How he [Serge] gonna go off to Nigeria and he gets crowned king of the Yorubas in the Western Hemisphere. It’s like we’re not dealing with no kings. We’re not!’ Remember you’re dealing with Alkamal and that crew. He’s a black revolutionary, alright, so that whole king thing… we understand that concept, but that’s not what we follow. My brother used to say, ‘That’s part of what got us here in the first place.’”

Malik’s Black revolutionary big brother, Mama Trina, and many like-minded practitioners historically have distinguished between drawing inspiration from “Africa” and attempting to recreate an imagined Africa of the past. For those who were deeply involved in Black Nationalist political organizations or even those who were more committed to the cultural aspects of Black Nationalism, Orisa tradition was used as a tool to deal with the realities of racism in the U.S. urban context. Mama Stephanie talks of how she and Baba Lloyd saw the usefulness of religious practices in furthering their political activities during an exciting and revolutionary time. The religion was viewed in practical and applicable terms in so far as it was being used in conjunction with, rather than as an alternative to, the political missions that they were a part of. Their engagement with the religion was not as part of a nostalgic longing for a long lost culture. It was to use alternative ways of thinking and engaging life to forward certain political goals in this place and at this time.
Stephanie, who was an up and coming artist during the late 1960s-early 1970s, was greatly influenced by Jacob Lawrence’s treatment of the Haitian Revolution. After seeing Lawrence’s exhibition about the revolution “I started reading anything I could get my hands on about slave rebellions,” she says. “If you go [read up] on the Haitian Revolution, half of it has to do with the use of religion – it talks about the two roles of the Haitian voodoo and the revolutionary [aspect] – the one that they use, they said that’s what stirred up the slaves and gave them the power to revolt against the white slave masters. So religion was woven into a lot of that.” Stephanie made a direct connection between African religious and spiritual traditions and the political projects that she was part of. For her (and many others like her at the time) the dichotomy between religion and politics was a false one. Stephanie’s research and engagement with African spiritual traditions, African (and Caribbean) liberation movements, and her own political radicalization at the time fused politics and religion into a coherent strategy to fight the racial (and gendered) oppression she witnessed and experienced during 1960s/70s American history.

Stephanie and Lloyd saw the religion as a tool that could help them in their political activities. Stephanie talked about going to meetings of political organizations that would descend into chaos because people would argue and not be able to come together to create solutions to the problems they faced. Thinking back on that time she remembers:

You get all of these smart people, street people, all these people in an auditorium to discuss some movement or something they wanted to do in Harlem, by the end of the first hour, people would be cussing, screaming, talking out, nothing would be done. One of the things me and Lloyd would talk about is] we need to learn more of this stuff. [If] this stuff is true and you can clean a room with sweet oils and set up a place where people can come in and be sociable and [talk to each other], we need to learn more about that because ultimately we can build a political base that’s strong.

If as a group we can’t get together, maybe because your Egun doesn’t like my Egun and you meet somebody and next thing you know you’re fighting and arguing and you don’t know why the person didn’t do anything to you, maybe some of that is
spiritual. If we learn more about [the religion], we’ll find out what it is and what we can do about it.

The practices she was learning through the religion, like spiritually clearing a space of negative energy that bred contention rather than cooperation, gave Stephanie and others like her tools through which to understand and engage a modern urban experience rather than as a means of escaping it.

Even now, long after the Black Power era, practitioners view the religion as they learned it from both the Cubans and the Nigerians as a way of building on their history here in the West. Malik points to the great emphasis on the role of ancestors in this form of religious worship. For him copying the tradition whole cloth from Nigeria is not particularly useful. He muses on the idea of establishing an Egungun [ancestral masquerade] society in his Brooklyn Ocha community:

...one of my desires was for us to parade Egungun in the street. Alright, now we had heard that some people had gone to Nigeria [to get initiated into] Egungun – and some people were here, and while I was in the [Yoruba Men’s] Collective, my thing was, “Well, I can look at that as a model, but we’re not Nigerian.” Okay, this is, I guess, the crux of Orisha tradition in the world. We’re not Nigerians, so if we go to Nigeria to get Egungun who don’t know me for what? Okay? Black Americans, who are here… We’re on this side of the world. We have Egun. And we have prominent Egun. So if you’re Jamaican, you’ve got Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley. If you’re American, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman, and so forth and so on. So my thing was how do we pull that type of Egungun for us? We’re talking about an Egungun society in a new world, what that would represent. So a lot of it, I saw would represent a revolutionary spirit, an educated spirit. Like for example in Nigeria, you have Egungun societies that are about hunting. Yeah, black people hunt, but we ain’t got no famous hunters [here], do you know what I mean? You go to Nigeria. They have stories about hunters. And there’s a hunting clan, and you don’t have that here, all right? But you have families who are educators. You have families who are freedom fighters, and what have you so that’s what I was looking at as seen as a Egungun society for us.
Both Malik and Stephanie articulate an understanding of the religion whereas it must be adapted to their way of life in an urban American context. Therefore the authenticity of their religious practice is as much about adhering to Cuban ritual orthodoxy, “African” (read Nigerian Yoruba) cultural and philosophical logics, as well as remaining true to the essence of their experiences in America. Trina’s comments, then, about the problematic search for the more authentic practices is grounded in this fact: Black American history is just as important, valuable, and authentic as Cuban or Nigerian history. So attacks that claim Black American Orisa practice as not being authentic, whether by Cuban or Nigerian standards, are read as the invalidation of Black American lives. John Mason, renowned scholar of Orisa culture in Yoruba-land and in the diaspora and a prominent member of the Black American Orisa community in New York City, takes strong issue with the idea that Black Americans need “the real Egungun” from Nigeria. If Egungun is about ancestors Mason asks incredulously “So, you’re telling me that your mother and father, your uncles, and aunts, and grandmothers, and grandfathers were all phony?!? Fake? Not really ancestors!?!?” Then, who the hell are we? What have we been doing here?”

The difference between the adaptations made by practitioners who remained loyal to their Cuban predecessors and the ones examined by Kamari Clarke in her ethnography on Oyotunji members and their affiliated transnational networks (2004) is that members of Oyotunji articulate membership in the Yoruba ethnic identity. As Clarke details in her study, Oyotunji members overcome the disjuncture of difference between American Blacks and ethnic Yoruba of Nigeria by relying on ideologies of racial sameness via the history of slavery. Reliance on the history of slavery explains away differences along lines of ethnic and national belonging. Members of Oyotunji “invoke an alternate chronology of belonging that invert[s] a] lineage-specific basis for membership to include a temporally cyclical link between Africans before their captivity into
transatlantic slavery and African Americans today” (Clarke 2004, xii). Through the mechanism of ancestral worship, specifically that their enslaved African ancestors live in and through them, and other religious institutions and rituals Oyotunji members articulate belonging to a “premodern/prenational” Oyo-Yoruba empire. For Oyotunji members Africa is their homeland and as such their social and ritual institutions are brought into accordance with this understanding of themselves and their origins (ibid: 51-58).

The Black Orisa devotees of the present study do not articulate a return to a lost homeland. Their practice is embedded within the understanding that their fate, their destinies, their histories lie in the West and it is on this land “where we must make our stand,” says John Mason. Their search for origins or roots had/have less to do with reinscribing their existence as being African, or more specifically Yoruba, of an ideal pre-slavery, pre-modern past. It has everything to do with “making a stand” in this land and at this time using mechanisms through which to create meaning and strategies to situate themselves more beneficially within a modern, urban, Western experience marked by race, and, as the next chapter will illustrate, by gender.
CHAPTER TWO:
“THE HOUSE WITH NO MEN”:

THE POLITICS OF GENDER IN AN AFRICAN AMERICAN LUCUMÍ COMMUNITY

When I entered my field site in 2009, admittedly I was a bit lost when it came to the gender issues at work. While I knew that I wanted to include gender as a central component of my analysis I was having a hard time determining exactly what about gender I wanted to explore. At the time I admit that I was much like my undergrad students who mistakenly assumed when one is talking about gender then the focus must surely be on women. And for my field site this seemed to make perfect sense since the religious practice I was examining was dominated by women. Like the old adage that states “water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink” I too felt like I was surrounded by “gender,” i.e. women, but could not quite place what was so interesting about that fact. So, like any good anthropologist, I just decided to take part in the myriad activities of my so-called informants and documented all that I saw. When I first began interviewing and talking with people, mostly women in the beginning, I kept in mind all of the stories I had heard regarding their introduction to Orisha worship. My mother’s experiences provided me with baseline knowledge about the discrimination many women faced during the Black Power decade of the 1960s to 1970s, the moment at which the African American Lucumí community began. As with many Black folks coming of age during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, my mom was properly radicalized by all that was happening around her. Whenever she talked about her involvement with any group, movement, or her experience overall her recollection was always qualified by the way she was treated as a woman. “They used to talk that bullshit of women needing to walk seven paces behind and ‘the only position for women in the movement is prone’ nonsense,” she would often recall in a tone of annoyance and defiance. This
blatant gender inequality was also present in her first introduction to the religion as a teen. As she recounted for me one spring day recently as we grabbed lunch near Times Square, her “Spanish” boyfriend, who was adept at playing the batá drums, told her that her gender relegated her to being a child of the female Orisa Oshun and that she could not play the batá drums; for her he espoused a gender politics that she “just couldn’t get with.” I had heard my mom tell this and other stories about that historical moment many times, which allowed me to immediately connect to the experiences of other women who came to the religion during the same era.

As I continued to speak to women of this particular generation I would hear this basic theme reiterated time and again. But I still felt as if something were missing; that I wasn’t really getting at the “gender issue” that was so pertinent for this community now. While I saw clearly that this laid an important historical foundation, my gut was telling me that this wasn’t “it.” Then I began to notice something. In just about every interview I conducted or conversation I had during different ceremonial events, there was a constant reference to the presence of men, or more accurately the lack thereof. If you were to attend any number of Lucumí rituals within the Black/African American Ocha community in New York City, one would immediately notice that women often outnumber men by a ratio of 3:1. But the conversations that I found most intriguing were happening away from ceremonies, in quieter spaces, where the reasons why there were so few men were quietly discussed. Many years prior to the start of my research a close male friend of mine who also grew up in this community would mention how there was no “real”

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44 Bata is a type of drum that are consecrated and used in religious celebrations in the Orisa tradition and they are traditionally part of a male secret society.
45 The fact that my mother did eventually become a priest of Oshun, which possibly speaks to her boyfriend’s keen spiritual intuition, does not negate the fact that many women who were first introduced to the religion around this time were often said to be children of the female Orisas Oshun or Yemonja/Yemaya simply based on their gendered identities as women.
place for men in the religion. Not only would he point to the fact of lower numbers of male practitioners compared to female practitioners but that the reasons for those lower numbers was because men held no real positions of power. According to him even the men in high positions, the Oba-Oriates, were still under the thumbs of the female heads of the Ocha houses. In his mind, and in many others I later found, the lack of positions of power reinforced the idea of the endangered or emasculated Black man, specifically at the hands of Black women; an idea that has its roots within a larger historical trajectory of race, gender, and African American struggles against racism in the United States. Finally I had found “it.” The gender issue I knew was there but had to uncover was not only the fact that the community I was studying was a woman-dominated one, but that this gender order provided specific challenges to ideas of masculinity that the men in this community dealt with in a variety of ways.

These ideas around gender more broadly, and Black masculinity in particular, are what guide this chapter. Why Black masculinity/ies? I choose to explore this particular aspect of gendered identities and subjectivities because as I conducted my ethnography masculinity, or more specifically the lack of “proper roles” available to Black men in this community, continued to present itself as a “problem.” Rather than attempt to answer directly the question of why men feel they do not hold pride of place within the community, I instead focus on the questions of how are men envisioning, performing, or articulating different models of masculinity and how do these masculinities connect with broader arguments around the role and crisis of masculinity experienced in American society as a whole and by Black men in particular. The answer to why some men in this community do not feel as if they hold proper place, I argue, is directly linked to

46 While I cannot give a full census account of the total number of practitioners nor a gendered breakdown of the entire demographic, I can say that at every religious ceremony/activity I’ve taken part in male attendees make up, at most, one third of the entire population of said event.
how masculinity has been defined within the context of particular political and cultural discourses—such as Black Nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and Africanity, which I will explore throughout this chapter—and how they come up against gendered religious practices that directly counter these imaginings. This chapter will examine how members of this community have used religion as an idiom through which to articulate particular models of Black masculinity. By doing so, I take seriously the call that Jaqueline Nassy Brown makes when she urges scholars to attend to the “politics of gender” at work within Black and diasporic locales and cultural practices (Brown 1998, 301). Brown’s call critiques articulations of the diasporic concept that privilege men’s experiences while silencing women’s. Rather than focus solely on women’s experiences in an effort to bring gender balance to theorizing the diaspora, Brown instead advocates for an approach that “[centers] gender ideologies [in] the production of diasporic space” (ibid). In the ethnographic context of Black/African American Orisa practitioners in Brooklyn, New York, where the gender ideologies at work construct a diasporic space in which women’s experiences become normative47, a focus on masculinities exposes a gender politics which challenges how we’ve generally come to understand concepts of male dominance and female subordination. In Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule: Santería Ritual Practices and Their Gender Implications (2001) Mary Ann Clarke examines the various practices that define Santería (i.e. Lucumí) ritual—specifically initiation, possession, sacrifice, and witchcraft—and identifies a gender normative system that holds the feminine body and female social position, as found within the larger Yoruba cultural milieu from which the religion sprung, as the ideal type for the devotee regardless of their gender identity. As such the gender dynamics at play within the African American Orisa community in New York City are ones in which

47 See Mary Ann Clark 2005 Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule: Santería Ritual Practices and Their Gender Implications
women dominate and men are left having to determine how they fit within a gender construct which inverses traditional gendered relations of power.

Given this inverted gendered structure the quote “God gave women power and men position” proves to be quite fitting. It is a quote from an African American male oba-oriate (i.e. master of religious ceremonies and ritual) who was describing the reality that although men do hold prominent positions within the religious hierarchy of Lucumí practices, women are the ones who determine when these men are called upon for their (paid) services. To use the terminology most prevalent to the members of this community it is women’s ase, defined among practitioners as the power to make things happen, that serves as the driving force in the construction of this Black/African American Lucumí community. Women’s labor, women’s bodies, and the traditional roles ascribed to women define the contours of practice in this community. In other words, “…the work of Orisha devotion parallels a wife’s work in a traditional family. Both wifely and priestly work is concerned with the well-being of others. Its responsibilities include procuring and preparing food, maintaining the living area, monitoring the health of the family and caring for the ill, and guarding the family from both visible and invisible hazards” (Clark 2001, 83). In creating a religious subjectivity as an “omo Orisa” (literally child of Orisa), for initiated priests and non-initiates alike, requires an individual to conform to the behavior that has been historically associated with the socially-relegated role of wife. As such Black male practitioners have had to conceive of their own subjectivities as men within a gender construct that on many levels challenges the underlying entitlement to power that most men assume to be theirs (Kimmel 2004). This idea of a sense of entitlement to power takes a particularly ironic turn given Black men’s position in American society and their historic struggle to assert and define
their masculinity in conversation and in tension with broader American concepts of masculine gender identity.

This chapter will examine the context in which ideas of masculinity have been constructed through Black Nationalist and Africanist cultural discourses that constitute the masculine in very particular ways. What I attempt to illustrate is how different ideas of masculinity, articulated through religious subjectivities, connect to broader American concepts of masculinity as well as to Black Atlantic political and cultural projects which define the masculine in certain terms. By placing the different masculine identities explored in this chapter within this context I hope to illustrate the importance of including religion alongside race in examining the construct of masculinity. This kind of intersectional analysis, which takes seriously the role of religion in the construction of gendered identities, can “[lead] to the fact that there is no monolithic black masculinity [and]…has the potential to construct different social narratives” (Boyd 2011, 6, 9). One of the social narratives in place in this community tells a story of Black male negotiation of inverted power dynamics which have proved challenging for some male community members. As such I will explore the various ways that men have organized to address this issue and how some have developed a variety of masculine religious identities that engage head on the “problem” of the “lack of proper roles for men” in the religion.

“THE HOUSE WITH NO MEN”: THE YORUBA MEN’S COLLECTIVE AND THE “PROBLEM” OF BLACK MASCULINITY

Malik is a quiet, unassuming guy. The spectacles he wears hide eyes that always have the glint of humor …as if a joke is waiting to spring forth, coupled with a wisdom that sometimes seem beyond his forty-two years. Malik is a priest of Elegba, that Orisa known as the trickster whose domain is the crossroads and who serves as the divine messenger between
humans and Olofi/Olodumare (God). As such, ómó Elegba, as initiates of this Orisa are known, are often described as being mischievous and many times involved in trickery and jokes, albeit of a lighthearted nature. Malik, however, defies this characterization. His personality reflects that side of Elegba that the “stereotypes” often ignore: the wisdom and subtlety with which Elegba often uses to teach the many divine lessons that appear throughout the apataki, the Yoruba/Lucumí parables that tell the tales of the orisa. I always joke with Malik that the reason he and I could hang is because he carries himself like an Obatala, my tutelary Orisa who is characterized as old, wise, and calm. Malik is one of the few men in the house in which I did my primary fieldwork who is a very active practitioner with nineteen godchildren of his own. He has initiated twelve of these godchildren, making him quite “fertile” in colloquial parlance referring to the number of Orisa he has birthed through initiation ceremonies.

Malik was introduced to the religion by his now-deceased older brother back in the late 1960’s early 1970’s. Raised by a single mother with four other siblings, three of whom have died due to sickle cell anemia, Malik’s eventual return to the religion was marked by his appreciation for and need to connect with a spiritual tradition that emphasized ancestors. Though he had been introduced to the religion at a young age, Malik admits to having strayed once he reached adolescence and young adulthood. “I was hanging out, doing whatever it is that teenagers do so I wasn’t around a lot.” But around the time of losing his sister-in-law in a tragic car accident in 1989 and his brother to sickle cell anemia one year later, Malik found himself searching. “At that time in my life I was lost. I wasn’t doing anything. I wasn’t really about nothing. So it became this conscious decision for me to tap into my spirituality, and this was the tradition that I wanted

48 Oftentimes in the apataki Elegba is the conduit through which Obatala learns difficult lessons. Elegba often humbles Obatala through his trickery to bring the Father of all Orisa, as Obatala is known, off his high arrogant horse. As such Elegba and Obatala, and their initiated children, sometimes have a respectful, if at times guarded, friendship.
to do it in, that spoke the truest form to me with the whole ancestor connection and having experienced so many deaths in my family, I felt I had to honor my ancestry.” Through the mechanism of Egun (the spirits of departed ancestors), Malik was able to connect with his recently departed brother, and his sister-in-law, not to mention his two other siblings, a brother who passed at the age of five and an older sister. Egun for Malik would always be central to his identity as an Orisa practitioner and thus why it became so central for his involvement in the Yoruba Men’s Collective (YMC). According to Malik, the Yoruba Men’s Collective grew out of a response to a rumor:

“…there was this heavy rumor in the Ocha community that in Steph’s house and Lloyd’s house that the women run the men off. They were calling it the house with no men. So a few of us just keep hearing these rumors, but we’re looking around and we’re seeing these men so what’s going on? So the thought came about, “Well, what if we had a collective with just the men of those two lines: Steph’s house, Lloyd’s house, just the men of those lines?” And it just became a collective where we wanted to, as men, center it around Egun because in the Orisha tradition, Egun comes through the male line and regardless if you have Ocha now [or not], when they go to do Egun, you have to step up in the front. So that was the impetus though at a collective like we just, “No men? No, there’re men here.”

During my fieldwork the Yoruba Men’s Collective was not active, though according to some of the founding members it was still in existence. As I began to ask around I noticed that there was an overarching uneasiness when practitioners spoke about the group. For both men and women in the community, the Collective represented an often contradictory focal point on the issue of gender relations among Black/African American Orisa devotees. For some YMC held the possibility of gathering the men to learn and teach one another about the many different facets of the religion. For others, the Collective was evidence of the fractious relationship between Black men and women in the community and served as a site where men could get together to “women bash.” One male priest, who wasn’t a part of YCM but was active in the
community at the time, put it this way: “Its very existence announced some lack in the community.” And still some others felt that the Collective served as a necessary support system for men to confront and deal with the impact of these very same fractious relationships that were playing out in the religious sphere. Overall, YMC represents a controversial moment within the Black/African American Orisa community in Brooklyn that serves as a useful lens to explore the issues of gender relations and masculinity within this diasporic community. The fact that the Collective represented often competing visions of its mission, its much contested nature illuminates the issue of antagonistic gender relations in play within the broader African American community that needs to be contextualized within an historical moment. That moment, I argue, begins with the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 70s.

From the stories culled from many of my informants, as well as from literature by various scholars and participants in the movement, the Black Power movement and its accompanying militant ideology of Black Nationalism was a highly gendered and male dominated project (E. Brown 2015; Collins 1998 and 1999; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003; hooks 1992 and 2004; Wallace 1990). Ideas of revolutionary Black manhood and womanhood, particularly in the cultural nationalist iteration of the movement, suspiciously mimicked White, middle-class, patriarchal America. Challenges to this conservative gender ideology brought about harassment and questions of one’s loyalty to the cause. But the movement did more than promote a conservative gender ideology. At times the movement’s conservative gender ideology, coupled with negative images of the Black family, prompted an antagonism and disunity between Black men and women that was counter to the goal and image of a presumed racial solidarity. While I am careful not to overstate this antagonism as the overarching mood of Blacks in the United States during that time, I do argue that the conservative gender ideology of the movement
inspired a discord between Black men and women that manifested in particular ways and at particular times, specifically as it regards the Black and African American Lucumí community. The sixties were defined by the awakening of a radical racial and gender consciousness represented by the Black Nationalist and the women’s movements (two movements often at odds with each other), as well as by prominent gains in Civil Rights legislation. The sixties also brought about a piece of government-sponsored research on the state of the Black family that would greatly impact how society at large viewed the Black family as well as how Black men and women at times viewed each other: The Moynihan Report. In 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then Assistant Secretary for Policy Planning and Research at the Department of Labor, released the report entitled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* in which he argued that the higher levels of Black unemployment and persistent poverty were directly correlated to the high levels of woman-headed households and absent Black fathers in poor Black families. Although the Moynihan Report was not the first to promote the idea that slavery and ongoing racial oppression in the United States had a detrimental impact on Black family structure specifically through the reversal of gender roles, according to Hughey and Parks (2011) the report ushered this view firmly into public discourse. At the center of Moynihan’s analysis was the “matriarchal” Black family structure in which men hold little to no power, which in turn was the defining characteristic of the “tangle of pathology” that kept Black folks on the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Moynihan, a politician and trained sociologist, argued that since the dominant society followed a patriarchal model then Black families that inverted this relationship were at a clear disadvantage (Moynihan 2015). “A national effort is

49 I would also venture to say that this discord was evident some twenty to thirty years later beyond the contours of this community, specifically within the conservative gender ideology espoused in hip hop of the late 1980s/early 1990s.

50 See E. Franklin Frazier “The Negro Family”;
required that will give a unity of purpose to the many activities of the Federal government in this area, directed to a new kind of national goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure”, wrote Moynihan. “This would be a new departure for Federal policy. And a difficult one. But it certainly offers the only possibility of resolving in our time what is, after all, the nation’s oldest, and most intransigent, and now its most dangerous social problem” (Moynihan 1965; emphasis added).

By arguing that Black families who inversed a patriarchal family model were at a severe social and cultural disadvantage, thereby pathologizing this non-patriarchal family structure, Moynihan provided government, academic, and ultimately public support to a tradition of women being subordinated in the Civil Rights movement as well as the nationalist ideology which undergirded the Black Power movement. If one were to mine the range of gender discourses from 1965 to present day, the ones that often get attention (in both the mainstream and Black-centered media and popular culture) is that of the emasculated Black man and the emasculating Black woman. One of the predominant images of the Black woman was the matriarch, “the castrating black female, the domineering Black woman” (Cummings 1988, 76) who “despises [the Black man’s] weakness, tearing into him at every opportunity until, very often, there is nothing but a shell left” (Neal 1968, 38). Though these tropes of masculinity and femininity in the US Black community (or more specifically the pathological masculinity and femininity supposedly inherent to this community as is often argued), are part of a longer history

51 A few examples: the idea of an emasculating Black woman and the Black man freeing himself from this construct was evident in works from Black Arts movement playwrights such as Ron Milner and Jimmy Garrett (Neal 1968); the stereotypical image of the Black woman as the emasculating matriarch was among the most often dispelled myths in Essence magazine between the 1970s and 1990s (Woodard and Mastin 2005); the television show *Amos ‘n Andy* “perpetuated the myth of the Black matriarch, the castrating black female, the domineering Black woman. ...The men were classic minstrel types... Their mispronunciations illustrated their basic and deep-seated ignorance about everything. They were constantly being devastated by abusive women.” (Cummings 1988, 76).
tied to imperialism, colonialism, and slavery, I would argue that the 1960’s was a pivotal era in which certain ideologies around gender and Black liberation converged and contributed to those moments where relationships between Black men and women have at times become antagonistic. This antagonism provides the soil which made the Yoruba Men’s Collective possible.52

I AM A MAN: BLACK MASCULINITY IN NATIONALIST AND “AFRICAN” CULTURAL DISCOURSE

The masculinist focus in nationalist ideology is not restricted to Black Nationalism. The ideology of nationalism in general gets constructed in masculinist terms, creating specific versions of both the masculine and feminine ideal-type. According to Nagel nationalist projects “are best understood as masculinist projects, involving masculine institutions, masculine processes and masculine activities” (Nagel 1998, 243). More specifically, Nagel quotes Cynthia Enloe in arguing that “nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (Nagel 1998, 244). The rhetoric of the Black Power Movement bears this out. Revolutionary calls for liberation were often couched in terms

52 As a priest, scholar, and Black woman who was heavily influenced by hip hop of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the fractured relationships between Black men and women had become self-evident in the music that shaped me. Many artists that I listened to during this period were themselves concerned with Black liberation and were inspired by the revolutionary ideology of Black Nationalism and the Black Power movement. As such the masculinist focus of Black Nationalism had taken on a virulent and often violent tone in hip hop, due in no small part to the rapid and devastating effects of deindustrialization, the failed “War on Drugs” and the mass incarceration it generated. The caustic nature of this era of hip hop was artists—who were part of the post Black Power/Civil Rights generation—response to the changing economic and political environment and were inspired by ideas about gender that we can find during the Black Power decade of the 1960s and 70s. For a detailed discussion of the impact of Black Nationalism on hip hop, see Cheney 2005. Although I am emphasizing the linkages between specific ways of identifying and articulating a revolutionary manhood that we find in the Black Power era and the ways men in the Black and African American Lucumí community are drawing on these ideas, I am also very clear that the interim period between the Black Power decade and the formation of the Yoruba Men’s Collective during the mid-1990s was indelibly shaped by the issues I’ve just mentioned. As such the Yoruba Men’s Collective needs to be understood within this broader context. I choose to highlight the Black Power movement, however, because it provides a very useful lens through which to understand the issue of masculinity in the community of my study due in no small part that it was during the Black Power decade that these ideas became so crystallized in the works of some prominent activists, artists, and leaders of that time who have influenced many of the activists, artists and leaders of the following generation. All of these have had impact on the ideas of masculinity held by members within this community.
of “the Black man” with a focus on his needs and his desires. This Black man, history shows, has suffered at the hands of white supremacy for hundreds of years and has been kept from achieving “his proper place” both in society and in his home. This place has always been imagined as being at the head of the revolutionary struggle, the head of the national family, the head of the nation. As the head, the leader, the “father” of the nation, the Black man could determine the vision and goals of his nation and set about on a plan to make it come to fruition. If nationalism springs from masculinized memory, humiliation and hope as Enloe argues, then the history of Black men in the United States provides fertile ground for this inquiry into masculine constructs of the Black Power Movement. This history has been defined through and through by the struggle for freedom.

What follows is a brief foray into the various historical moments which highlight the different ways Black men (and women) imagined Blackness, masculinity and femininity, and how these intersected with liberation struggles. Careful not to list a set of historical occurrences as if they lead in a straight line from slavery to the ethnographic present of the Yoruba Men’s Collective, I heed Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s caveat about the re-presentation of “The Past” and “Time”: “Time here is not mere chronological continuity. It is the range of disjointed moments, practices, and symbols that thread the historical relations between events and narrative” (Trouillot 1995, 146). Below I highlight those moments throughout “history” that thread together a narrative of masculine hopes, expectations, and disappointments that unfold in particular ways in the present in this Black/African American Lucumí community. Much like in my approach to the anthropological object of “African American culture”, the historical “events” I highlight do not necessarily present an “authentic” origin or source in which we can find certain gender ideologies. These “disjointed moments, practices, and symbols” merely illustrate the
multiple ways in which these ideologies have been mobilized at different times and how they inform understandings of masculine religious subjectivities among these practitioners.

Freedom has often been defined and imagined in masculinist terms in the Black community. Dating back to the period of slavery, concepts of masculinity and ideas of freedom were contiguous, oftentimes metonymic. Black masculinity (and freedom), therefore, have been imagined in constant conversation with broader American concepts of manhood and the privileges of full citizenship. In his discussion of American masculinities, Michael Kimmel writes “masculinities are constructed in a field of power: 1) the power of men over women; 2) the power of some men over other men” (Kimmel 2005, 6). American definitions of masculinity have more often than not excluded Black men from the privileges conferred to those identified as “men.” More accurately, hegemonic definitions of American masculinity have often been defined in explicit opposition to and exclusion of Black men (as well as women, gay and/or non-native born men). To quote Kimmel again: “[t]hrough American history, various groups have represented the sissy, non-men against whom American men played out their definitions of manhood, often with vicious results....The ‘real man’ of the early nineteenth century was neither noble nor serf. By the middle of the century, black slaves had replaced the effete [European] nobleman. Slaves were seen as dependent, helpless men, incapable of defending their women and children, and therefore less than manly” (2000:216). The barbarity of the institution of slavery did not foreclose the patriarchal model of freedom and masculinity from nineteenth century freedom-fighters. Freedom was often defined in terms of patriarchal masculinity in which Black men sought to be and be seen as “hardworking men who longed to assume full patriarchal responsibility for families and kin” (hooks 2004, 4). As American constructs of masculinity (i.e. white normative models of what it meant to be a man) developed alongside a
burgeoning market economy, definitions of what it meant to be a man directly correlated to one’s ability to dominate the market (Rotundo 1993, 4). In Angela Davis’s exposition of the role of Black women in American society (1981), she details how nineteenth century ideologies of proper femininity in the slave-holding South perceived Black women as “practically anomalies” (Davis 1981, 5). Proper femininity in this age defined women as “nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands” (ibid). Black women who were forced to work in the fields alongside their men lacked the privileges and lived experiences to be identified as such. In this sense, Black men were also not afforded the privilege of manhood because the institutional structure of a plantation economy did not grant them access to positions of heads of households and protectors and providers for their wives and children as did white men. Instead Black men were seen as beasts of burden, infantile, uncivilized and lacking in all things associated with being real men. In a society that was increasingly becoming oriented toward a market economy, manhood was being defined in a way that privileged one’s relationship to the market and his ability to dominate it. Black men, like Black women, could not dominate a market where the only position for them within it was as commodities. If masculinity was being defined in terms of one’s position to the market, Black men whose position within that market was only as commodities (largely as slaves and then, after abolition, as cheap labor), then, could hope for a tenuous relationship to this idea of manhood at best.

Though America was increasingly identifying manhood within the context of a growing white middle class subjectivity and its dominant, competitive relationship to the market (Rotundo 1993), Black men themselves were constructing ideas of masculinity based on their experiences and struggles for justice and liberation. Though the white norms by which masculinity was being defined was denied Black men, Black male ideas of masculinity tapped
into these white norms which served as the model on which Black definitions of manhood were being constructed. According to bell hooks Black men aspired to a patriarchal masculine ideal which included male domination of women. “They wanted to be recognized as ‘men,’ as patriarchs, by other men, including white men” (hooks 1992:92). This included the roles of benevolent patriarch, assumed by the Black elite, or the more prevailing masculine model that included domination and violence that was embodied in white masters (hooks 2004, 4). Even as some abolitionists believed in equality for women, such as Frederick Douglas and Martin Delaney, freedom was defined in masculine terms in which, though their women were seen as “equal” in that they believed Black women should have full access to education, they remained subordinated to Black men in the private sphere (hooks 1992, 92). The at-times contradicting ideas on gender roles held by both men and women played out after the abolition of slavery. “After slavery ended, enormous tension and conflict emerged between black women and men as folks struggled to be self-determining. As they worked to create standards for community and family life, gender roles continued to be problematic” (ibid).

Once freedom was achieved the ability of Black men to claim the patriarchal head (and protector) of the family was undermined by the modes of violence and terror enacted upon Black communities. Lynching campaigns and the policing of Black mobility (both physical and social) denied Black men the ability to not only protect their own lives but the lives of their families as well. The capitalist and white-supremacist model of masculinity which ruled the day kept Black men in subordinate positions in the labor market, preventing them from achieving full and economically rational employment which would allow them to provide for their families. Lack of full employment threatened Black men’s abilities to take the role as breadwinners for their families. This system was seen by both Black men and women as emasculating and furthering
the idea that Black men were systematically denied their proper place not only within the nation, but within the family as well.

As Black communities in the United States continued to organize to fight for freedom from racial terror and thus be included as full citizens within the nation, there was a continuous focus on Black men’s experiences with racialized terror. Black female experiences and participation, though essential to the success of both movements, was silenced and relegated to “support” roles. The Civil Rights movement was often characterized as “the struggle between black and white men” (McGuire 2011, xix) where Black men set the agenda for racial liberation. Danielle L. McGuire argues in her book At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power that historians of the movement have too long ignored the central role of Black women’s fight against the sexualized violence that was integral to white supremacist racial violence in the segregated South (2011). Throughout the book McGuire discusses watershed court cases in which rape victims gave testimony around their experiences with racialized sexual violence and how Black women organized to put an end to the rapes and sexual assault at the hands of white men. These cases, these collective movements to gain autonomy over their own raced and gendered bodies are what spurred the Civil Rights movement, according to McGuire. But in the going historiography of Black liberation struggles, the violence against Black men—like Emmett Till and Medgar Evers—plays the foreground while the daily sexual violence that Black women experienced have rarely made it into the history books. The Black liberation agenda was set by men and emphasized, once again, Black men’s memory, humiliation, and hope; their memories of racialized violence, their humiliation over being infantilized by white supremacy, and their
hopes of achieving their “proper place” in the home, the Black community, and the broader American society.

As the 1960s brought about a more militant perspective to the fight for Black freedom activists, artists, and intellectuals increasingly drew inspiration from liberation struggles taking place throughout the colonized world. Linking the freedom struggles in the U.S. to those throughout the African Diaspora, I would argue contributed to the increasing militant tone of those involved in the fight for freedom here. While connecting the plight of Black folks in the “wilderness” of North America to those throughout the continent of Africa and the Caribbean was not new, the focus on creating and uplifting African-centered philosophies and traditions was adopted by a larger cross-section of the Black populations in the United States.

Identification as Black expanded to an identification as African for many in the movement, especially those in the cultural nationalist arm of the movement which serves as the focus of this chapter in particular. As such, African-centered philosophies around family, community, culture, and religion were researched and mined to incorporate into this burgeoning militant identity. African art, music, dance, philosophy, and religion provided the cultural and aesthetic map. Pre-colonial African family and community structures provided the ideological backdrop from which the new militant Black nation would find its bearing. These African-centered ideologies around family, and by extension gender roles, ironically mimicked Victorian-era gender norms. In *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women’s Equality in African American Communities*, Johnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy Sheftall characterize this era as the “masculine sixties” in which patriarchal gender ideologies were promoted by some of the most famous Black nationalist thinkers and artists of the day. Quoting both Amiri Baraka and Maulana Karenga in two separate writings, Cole and Guy-Sheftall illustrate how in the re-conceptualization of gender
roles in this cultural nationalist move to counter the detrimental impact of American and European influence on African peoples throughout the world, the ideal model for the liberation of the Black nation was for men and women to take back their proper places in which they complemented each other in a male supremacist gender order. In fact, Karenga clearly states “We say male supremacy is based on three things: tradition, acceptance, and reason. Equality is false; it’s the devil’s concept. Our concept is complimentary” (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003, 80). In his own article, Baraka adds “We say that a black woman must first be able to inspire her man, then she must be able to teach our children, and contribute to the social development of the nation” (ibid). For the new Black nation, a woman’s role was as support to “her man;” a legacy that had played out throughout Black liberation struggles in the US since slavery. This nationalist gender order, as Nagel and Enloe argue, clearly placed the forging of the nation—its contours and agenda—squarely within the domain of male agency.

As identification with all things “African” developed, the Africa that Black Power freedom fighters tapped into was one of a supposed pre-colonial, pre-European and pre-Christian contact Africa. This Africa was allegedly not sullied with the social ills that were plaguing current-day Black communities in the United States. Not only were Black nationalists concerned with countering outside threats of racial terror and the overarching white supremacist ideology which made them possible, they were also concerned with re-imagining the Black family so as to bring forth the militant Black (aka “African”) nation that would rise to take its proper place in the world (if not necessarily in the American state). The family served as the backbone of this emerging nation and as such it required that Black men, women, and children throw off the mental shackles of slavery and return to models and philosophies of their pre-slave trauma familial selves. The family, in the Black Nationalist vein, was the site of intense revolutionary
restructuring where Black women needed to part ways with ideas of independence and equality in order to help build a better nation. As stated by Karenga and Baraka (and countless others), the role of Black women in the revolution underway was as mothers to the nation whereby they served as culture bearers, teaching the children and supporting “their men” in the struggle. All nationalisms push for “women’s potential militancy [to be] muted and their political agency [to be] domesticated by the language of familial service and subordination” (McClintock 1997, 106).

In her discussion of the role of race and gender in Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa, Anne McClintock underscores how motherhood represents “a retrospective iconography of gender containment, containing women’s mutinous power within an iconography of domestic service” (McClintock 1997, 105). Although Black women were ardently involved in planning and organizing within the movement, the ideology promoted by many men (and women) in activist organizations attempted to counteract this reality with a “blackwashed”53 cult of domesticity model. To be vocal about gender inequality within the Black community (and within Movement organizations) was to be against the revolution. According to Elaine Brown:

A woman in the Black Power movement was considered at best irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. A woman attempting the role of leadership was, to my proud Black brothers, making an alliance with the ‘counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian, feminist white bitches.’ It was a violation of some Black Power principle that was left undefined. If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of black people. (quoted in Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003, 92; emphasis added)

Black Power rhetoric often envisioned Black women to be docile and subservient. To bolster this position many emphasized that this was not only women’s “true” nature, but that it was the

53 I credit Christine A. Pinnock for this term. She uses it to discuss how Afro-Caribbean women service workers are saddled with a U.S.-centric version of Blackness that tends to homogenize definitions of Blackness and erase differences in the historical and cultural constructions of Black identity experienced by Afro-Caribbean migrants to the United States. See Pinnock forthcoming. I use the term here to highlight how the cult of domesticity took on a particularly Black Nationalist tint at this time.
role of women in the pre-trauma African past that they must return to. To be African (and thus Black and revolutionary) meant conforming to patriarchal norms of gender and family. Norms which many Black men in the movement felt would allow them to finally take their “proper place.”

In an earlier chapter I briefly discussed how the “father” of Black American Orisa worship, Oseijiman Adefunmi (aka Serge) saw as his mission the return of the African gods to the people of Harlem. Not only did Serge pioneer African-centered religious forms among Black Americans, he was also one of the leaders that ushered in the adoption of a more holistic African cultural orientation. During the 1960s and 70s Black people began adopting African names, engaged in African cultural forms like dance, music, and clothing styles, and connected their political activism to one that included African peoples around the world. With the adoption of African cultural styles, to be African meant connecting with an African aesthetic, communal, familial, and political orientation that was dated before the continent suffered from the ravages of European and Christian contact. In terms of family structure and gender roles, these new African identified nationalists incorporated polygamous relationships in their repertoire as well as more “traditional” roles for men and women within the family structure. Many Black Nationalist and African identified folks of the movement began to build an image of the Black (African) family that mimicked the nuclear family of middle-class White America, circa the 1950s, albeit with a Black African revolutionary gloss.

The image of masculinity that accompanied this new vision did not stray very far from how masculinity had long been imagined within the Black community in the United States. A male supremacist gender order was kept in place, this time buoyed by the rhetoric of reclaiming African roots. To be an African man meant to be at the head of the household and/or family; a
family which could consist of as many as four wives, one man, and multiple children. While there were attempts to restore to Black people in the West the vision of themselves as kings and queens rather than as slaves and oppressed people, these monarchical visions positioned these queens in supportive roles to their kings rather than as equal political agents in the liberation project. “Africa” became the cultural, political, religious, and aesthetic trope that Black Americans created to legitimize this revolutionary turn, while actual existing contemporary Africa (minus the lauded anticolonial struggles) with its own battles with colonial-style racism and sexism were ignored or dismissed as by-products of European rule and failure to maintain “traditional” cultural forms. This new African family model was used to counter the existing family structures within the United States in which women-run households were seen as the crux of the social problems Black people were facing (see Moynihan [1965] 2015).

The family became the sight in which Black liberation activists, along with mainstream and government actors (via the Moynihan Report), agreed that women who were heads of households were placing Black families at severe disadvantages. In this vein, many Black male nationalists uneasily agreed with government agencies that independent-minded women who headed matriarchal family structures were a crucial part of the problems impeding Black social mobility in the United States. Since the family is often one of the primary foci of nationalist projects, nationalists attempted to reorganize the domestic sphere to model ideal patriarchal family structures where women remained subservient and supportive of men. While some women in the movement “felt compelled to support female subordination in response to representations of Black women as castrators of Black men” (Cheney 2005, 107), others spoke out and fought back against these ideologies which attempted to silence them and sublimate their political and intellectual agency. The cultural and social awakening taking place during the
1960s and 70s included a closer focus on gender inequalities. Black women within nationalist and civil rights organizations had long voiced their concerns over the gender inequalities present within the movements. However, this particular era was marked by an overarching environment in which a focus on gender inequalities was brought to the mainstream. Even those Black women activists who rightly critiqued the myopic emphasis in White feminist organizations agreed that there needed to be an equal focus on gender issues within Black Nationalist projects. This orientation, however, came into direct conflict with the masculine focus of nationalist political and cultural projects. As mentioned above, those women who fought for full equality within nationalist organizations were met with charges of being “traitors to their race.” To be independent minded Black women who eschewed the supportive roles being pushed in nationalist and Africanist discourses meant being un-African and counter-revolutionary. Artists and intellectuals, like Ntozake Shange and Michele Wallace just to name a few, who called out Black Nationalist patriarchy in their work came under attack and their loyalty to the cause was brought into question. Black women also critiqued “attempts to impose ‘…traditional African concepts of polygamy for the manipulative and vulgar purposes of American adultery and sexual exploitation’” (Springer 2006, 116) but were met with counter claims that their anti-male chauvinism leanings were antithetical to the race struggle. As the number of Black feminist critiques increased, coupled with “sociologists [like E. Franklin Frazier and Daniel Patrick Moynihan who] …attempted to create a competition between black men and black women by reinforcing a separate spheres ideology” (Springer 2006, 111), an aspect of the relationship between Black men and women began to be defined by antagonism more than solidarity.
“THE WAR BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN”\textsuperscript{54}: GENDER RELATIONS AND DISCOURSE IN AN LUCUMÍ COMMUNITY

In 2010 I was a youth mentor in the organization Egbe Iwa Odokunrin and Odobinrin, the Society of Young Men and Women of Character. Egbe Iwa is a rites of passage organization founded by one of New York City’s African American Orisa priests and akpons (singer of sacred songs). One of the main goals of the organization is to create a sense of close community and an atmosphere where youth feel that there are adults who are not their parents or direct family members yet who are actively invested in their future. In November of 2010 the founding director organized an outing of Oluko (mentors) and Akekos (mentees) to the Broadway play, Fela!, about the life of acclaimed Nigerian artist, activist, and pioneer of the musical genre Afrobeat Fela Kuti. The outing provided a chance for mentors and mentees to spend some time together outside of the normal workshop activities. Fela! was of particular interest to Egbe Iwa because of Fela’s Yoruba heritage and the fact that this was the first Broadway play to bring African and African-diasporic music, dance, and politics to a “mainstream” (read White) audience. After the play eight of us (mentors and mentees) decided to get dinner at a nearby restaurant. As we were finishing up our meal and talking we somehow got on the topic of Black boys. I mentioned that I had recently read an article in the New York Times\textsuperscript{55} about how Black boys were seriously falling behind everyone else in terms of education. I was telling the group how I was suspicious of news articles that are constantly pointing out the so-called “deficiencies” in Black children. Out of nowhere the one male mentor in attendance blurted out “well I’m suspicious of Black women talking about the topic of Black boys when they don’t know what the

\textsuperscript{54} This is a heading in one of the Odu of the Lucumí divination system of Merindilogun that discusses the fractured relationship between men and women.

hell they are talking about.” Needless to say the table went quiet. Finally I said “Baba, I’m offended. I didn’t even…” but before I could finish my sentence he said “Good! I’m glad you’re offended. You should be.” At that moment another mentor and I decided to leave. A few days later Baba emailed me to apologize and explained that his misplaced anger often came out in conversations about Black men by Black women.

Baba’s sensitivity around Black masculinity in the face of what he assumed was Black women’s scrutiny and judgment highlight the complex and at times strained relationship between Black men and Black women in the United States. This relationship, often characterized as antagonistic, stems from the convergence of male-supremacist ideologies promoted during the Black Power era, Black feminist critiques of these ideologies, and the backlash against Black women by both Black male activists and government-sponsored research that placed Black female-headed households (and by extension Black women) as the central force impeding Black mobility. It is also emblematic of an inherent “misogynoir”56 that is existent in the American social sphere. As I discussed above, this tension became most pronounced after 1965 during the Black Power era in which “a misogynist, Black-woman-as-traitor-to-the-race theme [emerged], and this scapegoating of Black women for all of the race’s problems helped to fuel increased hostility between Black men and women” (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003, 96). As Blacks adjusted to the gains (and setbacks) of the Civil Rights Movement and the waning radicalism that defined the Black Power Movement, discussions of the Black achievement gap began to highlight the unequal numbers of women to men who were experiencing growing success in college enrollment and access to corporate America. While affirmative action policies opened doors for

56 Misogynoir is a term coined by Dr. Moya Bailey “to describe the unique ways in which Black women are pathologized in popular culture. What happens to Black women in public space isn’t about them being any woman of color. It is particular and has to do with the ways that anti-Blackness and misogyny combine to malign Black women in our world.” See Bailey 2015.
the Black middle classes, some argued that Black women were making gains at the expense of Black men.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s the image of the Black man as being endangered populated both scholarly texts and popular media (Gibbs 1988; Harper 1998; Kunjufu 1985). As Black communities across the United States dealt with the plague of poverty, high unemployment, drugs and violence, much energy and attention were focused on saving Black boys (and ultimately Black men) from the havoc that was tearing families and communities apart. The current “war on drugs”, first launched by Ronald Reagan during his administration and then picked up with renewed vigor by George H. W. Bush, decimated communities through the increasing criminalization of young Black (and Latino) men and women. In response to the increase in violence and crime in urban areas, the war on drugs imprisoned Black youth impacted by the illegal drug trade rather than deal with the social problems—including crime and violence—that poverty wrought (Gordon 1999; Powell and Hershenov 1990). A key example of this would be the implementation of the Rockefeller Drug Laws which imposed mandatory minimum prison sentences for non-violent drug offenses. This and other draconian drug policies—fueled by the heightened hysteria promulgated by politicians, police agencies, and popular news media about the ravages that drug use, possession, and sales were having on American society—led to the skyrocketing imprisonment of poor Black and Latino youth. With the growth of the prison industrial complex, populated disproportionately by Black male (and female) bodies, the social costs of the drug war and the penal response to it was felt most heavily by Black families and communities. Drug addiction, violence, and incarceration tore apart families while the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic began to take its toll as well. The Black family,
once again, became the lens through which the ills of society were anxiously examined. And once again, the crisis of Black masculinity began to dominate both public and private discourse.

During this troubling time Black women were seen as making marked advances in society, an idea that was also espoused during the Black Power decade (see Cheney 2005, 107–110 for this attitude during the 1990s; see Neal 1968, 38–39 for the late 1960s). College education and access to corporate America found more and more Black women achieving success while Black men were languishing away on street corners, in prisons, on drugs, or ultimately ending up dead. A statistic that stated there were more Black men in prison than in college emerged to highlight just how much of a crisis Black men were in. Though proven later to be false (Toldson and Morton 2011), the statistic perpetuated a myth on which much social policy and activism was based. Black men were in danger of becoming obsolete; extinct even. Something drastic needed to be done. The creation of the Yoruba Men’s Collective occurred at an important historical moment in the United States in relation to the “crisis of masculinity” within the general society at large and within Black communities specifically. This crisis can be most notably illustrated through the historical Million Man March which had a direct impact on the founding members of the Collective. As close to a million Black men (and women) converged on the National Mall on a fall day in 1995, the nation looked on as Black men pledged a deeper commitment to themselves, their families and their communities.

Joey, like Malik, is a priest of the Orisa Elegba and one of the founding members of the Yoruba Men’s Collective. Though short in stature Joey’s huge personality and sense of humor make him a noticeable presence in any room. Joey is a leading member of Ijo Orisa Yoruba Church, an organization whose mission is to “preserve the Orisa-based spiritual and religious traditions, customs and legacy of our forefathers. This includes the spiritual and religious
traditions of the indigenous Yoruba people of Nigeria, Dahomey, Benin, the Congo and those of the African Diaspora in the Caribbean area Cuba, Trinidad, Haiti, Brazil, and the United States” (from Ijo Orisa Yoruba Church Facebook page). Twice a month Ijo holds fellowship meetings where practitioners of the various Orisa denominations and other African Diasporic religious traditions (especially but not limited to Afro-Cuban traditions) come together to discuss a range of topics related to their practice. This organization, started within the Black/African American Orisa community but open to all who practice, is one example of the institutions started that transcend Ocha houses, which are the main organizing features of Afro-Cuban Orisa practice.

When talking with Joey about the start of the Collective, his narrative differs quite interestingly from Malik’s:

We started a few months before the Million Man March. The concept was we were in a religion dominated by women where there was mostly women and most of us were doing this hard core we didn’t have much of a social life and the only other time we saw other men was when we were working. So we wanted to have a social thing going on and a support group. … [After] we went to the Million Man March it solidified us to where we stop talking so much social and we started talking about us as individuals. (personal communication with the author December 2011)

Joey clearly saw the Yoruba Men’s Collective as a place where male practitioners could have a safe space to work through issues relating to the uneven gender dynamic at play within the Orisa community in New York City. Joey’s rendition of the origins of the Collective deviates interestingly from Malik’s, though both were responding to the idea that men in the religion needed to elevate their profile. Regardless of the different ways these two men remember the origins of the Collective some fifteen years after its inception, both men, along with the other founding members, were responding to the idea that “the house with no men” was a direct reflection on the conflicting ways masculinity was being defined and experienced among
Black American Orisa practitioners, both men and women, in New York City at that time. And while Malik initially discussed the need for the men in the Collective to organize around research on Egun, the rituals in which men are theologically called to dominate, he also recognized that the gendered order in place—where women dominate—compelled community members to create a safe space where they could work through these issues. According to Malik,

…the Orisha tradition, there are a lot of women. There’s a lot of women in eldership roles and leadership roles so for me, it was having it for men – to help men to have an understanding of how to deal with that. Because not every man is good with that. I was raised by a single mother so I didn’t really have the issue. So it was helping men, men that were coming in. Yeah, you’re coming into an Ocha house or in Ocha, there’s a lot of women in leadership roles, but if she got the information, and she knows what the hell she’s doing, then you need to pay attention, and not be tied up into that [other] nonsense. So, yes, that was our other goal in the Yoruba Men’s Collective.

Joey echoes Malik’s sentiment, but for him the issue was placed front and center, rather than as an addendum. For Joey the female dominated gender dynamic created an environment where some men felt that the power dynamic allowed for abuses of Black men. Rather than engaging in sharing the salacious details of who treats whom badly, I instead examine the gendered structure of power in which women “dominate” through the specific lens of those who feel they are being dominated. By exploring the gendered structure of power from below, masculinity becomes the framework within which this analysis is most rightly situated. As such, I examine the various masculine responses to this gendered power structure and contextualize within certain historical, political, and spatial/geographical cultural frameworks: Black Power nationalism, “Africanity,” Yoruba religious philosophy/theology, Cuban religious development, (Black) masculinity in the United States, and Black feminist critiques. All of these frameworks converge to produce contested and gendered spaces in which competing ideas around proper gender roles get acted out.
Therefore it would seem the first step in this exploration would be to map out the
gendered power structure in place among Lucumi practitioners in Brooklyn, NY. The hierarchies
in place need to be articulated rather than taken for granted because the processes through which
it exists are not self-evident. In the Black American Orisa community in New York, specifically
in “the house with no men” where the gender order in which women not only dominate but also
rule is not merely a by-product of the practice of Orisa religion. While it may be true that
women in Orisa religion, like women in the Black Christian Church, make up the majority of
practitioners, it is not always the case that those numbers automatically lead to women in
positions of power. If we take as an example the Black Christian Church it is organized in a way
in which men are held in high regard and in positions of leadership that have immediate
influence on the day to day functions of church business and church life. Indeed, if we even look
to studies of Orisa religion, we often find examples of Orisa houses, communities, or temples
within the United States, or even in Cuba, where the dominant image is of men running houses
and holding positions of prominence and rule (see Brown 2003; Clarke 2004; Gregory 1999;
Palmié 2002). But in “the house with no men” there was a specific occurrence of events which
placed women in positions of authority.

Although I continue to refer to “the house with no men” it is a designation that requires
more than a little bit of explanation. First, this house is actually the combination of multiple
houses which fall under the auspices of the “combined houses” of a matriarch and patriarch—
Stephanie and Lloyd. They are both part of that second generation of African American priests
who “came to Ocha” during the late sixties and early seventies. Lloyd is the direct ritual
descendent of the first African American to be initiated within the United States. Stephanie was
introduced to the religion by Lloyd but was initiated by a Cuban padrino or godfather. The two,
who eventually married (and separated), each began their own houses. When Stephanie served as ojugbona (first witness; second godparent) for one of Lloyd’s godchildren this led to their houses ritualistically combining. Many of their initiates went on to initiate others, thus starting their own houses, but still worked closely within the houses of their initiatory parents. The two combined houses (and their sub-houses) are what make up “the house with no men.”

Second, I recognize the problematic usage of the term “the house with no men” which was used to deride the gender order in play but was not true on its face. “The house with no men” does in fact include quite a number of men, as Malik pointed out. So how does a house with men become referred to as “the house with no men?” As Joey and Malik explained, this house, which has at its helm two women elders who serve as the ritual and protocol authorities and who guide the regular activities of the house, represents an inverted gender order which challenges certain assumptions about proper gender roles. Women rule in this house. And the idea that there are no men stems from the idea that men within this gender dynamic do not hold their “proper” place of authority within it. I do not mean any disrespect by continuing to refer to “the house with no men.” I use it because it allows me to keep front and center the problematic ideas around gender and the theoretically interesting arguments I wish to lay out.

Returning now to the events that set this gender order in motion, the leadership of this house has shifted from the hands of the matriarch and patriarch, Stephanie and Lloyd, into a full-fledged matriarchy led by Stephanie and Lloyd’s eldest godchild Oseye. During the late 1980s-early 90s Lloyd relocated from Brooklyn, NY to Lagos, Nigeria. In his absence Stephanie came to take care of the many godchildren he left behind. Oseye, his eldest, came to stand in as the elder of his house. Together the two women helped to grow the house under their leadership. Their positions of authority are not founded upon them being charismatic figures but on the
concept of eldership and ritual knowledge. In Yoruba cultural tradition eldership confers authority and is highly respected. Within the ritual sphere, eldership, along with ritual expertise, confers both respect and authority to make decisions and set the tone in the running of a house. Not only are Stephanie and Oseye the elders of the two houses, they hold deep ritual knowledge and have been passionate and disciplined in learning, teaching, and growing the practice of the tradition. Yet their eldership and knowledge alone are not what makes this house female dominated. It is also a numbers game; and an interesting one at that. According to the house chronology which lists the initiation of house members beginning with Baba Lloyd and Mama Stehpanie (1973 and 74 respectively) through December 2012, out of the 161 total initiations 42-46 are men. And the lapses between those initiations span anywhere from one to four years compared to the months-long gap between the initiations of women devotees. To discern the numbers even more, if you observe the number of total practitioners, including non-initiated members who are not included in the house chronology, the number of male practitioners to overall members drops considerably.

So what we have when we examine “the house with no men” is a collective of individuals who are led by the vision, knowledge, commitment, and activities of women. The authority with which these women “rule” not only derives from the number of years of Ocha they carry (years of initiation), but also from their active pursuit of ritual knowledge which they in turn shared with their ritual family and related networks. This knowledge has been deemed credible and legitimate by trusted authoritative figures. However, while the leadership of Stephanie and Oseye has been authorized and legitimized the image of the house is one in which this gendered order is perceived as being detrimental to the men involved. “Don’t make ocha in that house,” was the advice Andrew received before he underwent his initiation. A forty-five year old priest of the
Orisa Obatala, Andrew was warned by well-meaning male practitioners that “having two female
godparents will make you a pussy.” The idea of women not only leading a house, but leading a
house with men in it meant that the avenues available for men to aspire to were extremely
limited, thus posing a challenge to their “true” masculinity which was at stake. It also directly
challenges the Black Nationalist and “African” cultural discourse which demands Black men be
in positions of dominance and superiority. The accompanying rumor to the supposed “house
with no men” was that women in the house, specifically those in leadership roles, were seen as
man-eating women. A colleague of mine who is new to the religion and is not associated with
“the house with no men” had heard about “those women in that house” from her godfather and
was warned “to watch out” for them.” The warning to my colleague to “watch out” and to
Andrew who was being initiated in the house that having female godparents “will make [him] a
pussy” illuminates the power dynamic in which women who attempted to concentrate leadership
within their hands instead of allowing men to take their rightful positions were demonized as
being emasculators.

What makes these assertions even more troubling is that it is accompanied by a
supporting logic that touts gender balance, which is allegedly inherent to these religious
practices. According to many practitioners in this community, both men and women, the
religious practice of Orisa worship is one where balance and harmony serve as the guiding
principles to much of the rituals and practices. There are no absolutes. There is no such thing as
a completely negative entity, nor is there an entity that is wholly positive. All things exist in
balance. This is why Olodumare, God in Yoruba belief, encompasses all that exists in the world,
both good and bad. Unlike in Christianity where God is everything that is good, pure, and
positive while the devil is all things evil and hateful, in Yoruba theology Olodumare consists of
everything good and bad. And that these things are kept in balance. As such all human behavior is a quest to keep things in balance, in harmony. As it regards gender, the two genders most readily recognized (man and woman) are said to be different yet complementary. Each has its role in the function of life, which is, of course, supposed to be in balance and harmony. Pausing for a moment on this point, the ideology of balance (not necessarily equality) of the sexes and their supposed accompanying genders, the logic is that each has its place in nature and each should remain within its domain and not cross over into the other’s territory. The balance comes in recognizing that each has its part and to not usurp that of the other. In other words, stay in your lane. But the problem that arises is one that feminists have long recognized: the creation of binaries inevitably leads to hierarchical relations of power that are characterized by domination (Collins 1999; Jakobsen 1998). Within the Lucumí tradition, while there exists an ideology that touts gender balance alongside a celebration of the “divine feminine,” what I have found are underlying gendered relations of power which value the feminine in problematic ways that call for masculine containment of the power of the feminine while simultaneously espousing the affirmation of the feminine.

The manifestation of this differential valuing of the feminine is most apparent in discussions around the divinatory corpus of Odu, which is characterized as feminine/female. Baba Ronald, an African American Ifa priest in the Lucumí tradition for the past forty years, explained Odu to me like this:

Odu – it’s a woman in Nigeria. Odu is a jealous woman. She tells Orunmila, I’m gonna marry you, but you’re not gonna have five and six wives – just me. I’m gonna give you everything, but you’re not having [these other women]. So in ceremonies it’s the same sort of way. No women can come in front of her. So here’s the concept I want you to understand – that women will stop doing this and stop worrying about this. A man is incomplete. The – not the secret, but the philosophy of an older man who realizes at the end of it all men are not the
ultimate human. Women are the ultimate human. Why? Because women have the secret of having children. I have three kids. I gave somebody three kids, but you’ve had children. You know, that’s the secret of life. There’s nothing any more glorious and profound than the woman. But I can’t sit there and argue with every woman and say, listen honey, sweetie – I can’t tell you that. But I have to – I’m telling you because I have the opportunity. That’s the secret – that you already have it. You already have Odu. You have that secret. That’s woman. Even the masons say; God is a woman. God’s not a man because men are – you know, we are what we are. But we don’t have children. We don’t – you know, you see a woman walking down the street pregnant, what’s more beautiful than that? So Odu is a woman. We receive Odu because we’re missing something. A woman doesn’t receive Odu. She’s got it already. So you can spend all your time trying to get Odu and then realize – and then be told, honey, you’ve had it since you were 12 years old. You know, that’s the secret. But because of the Internet and because of all kinds of things that suddenly is revealed, all of a sudden, women say, oh, we want Odu. You can’t have Odu. You can’t have it. You’ve got it already. So it’s not given to you. The most powerful – the Yoruba have certain philosophical concepts lost in macho Cuba. It is that the women, the mothers, are the most powerful. The only one who can combat the mothers is a person – a man who has Odu because we have Odu, which is the same as the mothers. It’s given to us by the mothers – so that’s our thing. Of course, it’s another way of men constantly trying to dominate a woman, you see. There’s always gonna be that, but that’s our equalizer. And so, if I have Odu, then all those problems that you have with the powerful women can be neutralized because I have something that was given to me to [contain it].

Throughout my research I have heard different iterations of this same concept. Odu, which is the divinatory corpus of Orisa practice used in both the Ifa and Merindilogun priesthoods, contains the religious and cultural philosophy of the Yoruba people. It is the format through which the Orisa communicate with humanity. As such the power of Odu cannot be underestimated. For practitioners, Odu is everything. Orisa speak through Odu. An individual learns of their life path via Odu through readings and initiation. The process of accessing and interpreting Odu is a rich and complex one and has been lauded by researchers and practitioners alike as being highly sophisticated (see Bascom 1993). To have Odu is to have access to immense knowledge and understanding of the world. As such, it is a prize possession. The fact
that Odu is characterized by practitioners as feminine is telling, as is the idea that this ultimate power needs to be contained and interpreted by men. In Baba Ronald’s telling, and many others I’ve heard throughout my research, characterizing Odu as the “jealous woman” provides the theological justification for ritual and religious practices that work to redirect the power of the feminine (and therefore women) into the hands of men. His discussion of Odu Ifá being given to men by “the mothers” implicates the divine feminine’s own complicity in giving men the power to contain and control their own power. If, following Baba Ronald’s description, the ultimate power is with women’s ability to reproduce (specifically to carry and nourish children through breast feeding), then there are other areas where this supposed affirmation of the feminine gets checked by the masculine; specifically around Egun worship and in the Lucumí post of the Oba-Oriate.

In 2005 I gave birth to my eldest son, Adisa. As has become customary among Black/African American Orisa practitioners I took part in a naming ceremony which serves to introduce the child to his/her ancestors and community and to get a reading as to what his path will be in this life. In attendance were my husband, his and my immediate family, friends, and members from my religious community. While it is not required for an Oba Oriate to facilitate and perform the reading in this ceremony, in this instance a family friend, Baba Alex who is an Oba Oriate, officiated the ceremony. One of the first parts of the ceremony is a ritual in honor of Egun, the ancestral force. As Baba Alex gathered everyone to begin the ceremony he requested all of the men in attendance to step forward. He explained to those male attendees who were not part of the religion that the purpose of the men to take the lead in Egun ceremonies, specifically in this instance of Adisa’s father stepping to the front, was to restore balance. The prior nine months had been all about me, the mom, and my relationship to and role...
in bringing this child into the world. Now that Adisa was born we needed to balance the energy that had been predominantly focused on the feminine (the mother).

On the face of it, the idea of balance in this situation seems harmless. But if we were to couple it with Baba Ronald’s explanation of Odu and add to it a discussion around the post of Oba Oriate, then we begin to see a philosophy that, again on the face of it, affirms the feminine in the spiritual realm while containing and controlling it in the physical world. The position of the Oba Oriate bears this out. The post of Oba Oriate is a tradition that was invented in Cuba and as such bears the weight of historical and cultural formations around gender and masculinity of that specific locale. This becomes even more apparent when we recognize that Oriates were at one point largely elder female priestesses. Prior to the post of Oba-Oriate being formalized by Octavio Samar Rodríguez, known ritualistically as Obadimelli/Obaraimeji (Brown 2003, 150), those with the deep ritual and divinatory knowledge to perform the various ceremonies including the initiation ceremony included many women. In fact, according to David Brown, much of the reorganizing and codification of Lucumí religious traditions were spearheaded by women who transformed some “traditional” practices into the modern liturgical register in existence today. Obadimelli/Obaraimeji was himself trained by a renowned female oriate Timotea Albear Latuán, but he did not go on to train any female protégé (M. W. Ramos 2003, 53). “By the time of Obadimeji’s death in October 1944, the Obá Oriaté position was an almost exclusively male function” (ibid). While women in the past have often held the deep ritual knowledge that is now seen as concentrated solely in the hands of the Oriaté, apparently the accompanying position of

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57 I put quotes around traditional to highlight that the assumption of traditional practices meaning those practices brought from Africa with enslaved Africans. This position has been refuted through oral history research conducted by David Brown in his book *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (2003).
holding “‘ultimate’ ‘administrative’ authority over houses of Ocha” (Brown 2003, 151) was seen as the domain of men.

The literature on the development of the post of Obá Oriaté does not divulge why women at this time were slowly phased out. Among practitioners the reasons given why women can’t be Oriaté can range from the characterization that women who are still menstruating can “contaminate” the sacred ritual space with their unclean blood to the fact that at the point of reaching menopause many women don’t feel like doing the labor-intensive work that the post requires. There is discussion that if women are to be Oriaté it must be elder, post-menopausal women who are not still menstruating. The discussion around menstruation itself takes on different characterizations of why menstruating women cannot perform the functions of Oriaté. Some give the “unclean” argument where women are not allowed to take part in any ritual ceremony nor are they allowed to touch sacred objects during menstruation. Another variant of this argument posits that since the religion is about generating power and life, the fact that a woman’s menstruation has been interpreted as a form of death since life cannot be produced at that time renders her incapable of taking part in any sacred ritual work, whether in a ceremony or in the privacy of her own home with her own Orisas. Baba John Mason, an African American Orisa priest and renowned independent scholar on Yoruba/Lucumi religious and cultural history, challenges the menstruation argument. “If a man has a vasectomy doesn’t that mean he’s not generating power and life? But nobody would check his hardware at the door!” (personal communication with the author, March 2012). Though both male and female practitioners make this argument, women have a more practical approach. Some female practitioners have acknowledged that when they were “made” (initiated) they were on their periods, therefore they can touch their own Orisas since they were “born” during this period in their menstrual cycle.
Others have stated that when they don’t want to work ocha (take part in ceremony) they say they are “checqua”\(^5\). But overall it is a rule that most women appear to uphold. And to this Baba John Mason takes umbrage: “And this is where female power has been co-opted. And here is the – here is my issue. Women have, somehow, been complicit.” (personal communication with the author, March 2012). In an effort to challenge the taken-for-granted nature of male power expressed through religious theology and practice, John Mason conducts a workshop entitled “The Role of Female Power in Yoruba Spirituality” in which he asks on the flyer “‘why was Odu, a critical primal female energy, silenced, concealed, and assigned a spokesman?” (email flyer for workshop, February 2014).

As regards the role of Obá Oriaté, post-menopausal women are seen by some as having not only the ritual knowledge but the accompanying respect that comes with eldership. It has been argued by some that this ability to command respect is one of the more crucial roles of the Obá Oriaté. Baba Alex is a fifty-year old Obá Oriaté in the African American Orisa community in New York City. As a close friend of my family’s for over twenty five years, he has been a crucial resource in my education on the function of the role of Obá Oriaté. “Being an oriaté is not about being able to pass an Odu quiz,” he says, referring to the complex divination system that lies at the root of the ritual knowledge of the post. “It is about being able to command the respect of everyone in the Ocha room and recognizing who you are responsible to without wavering.” Baba James, 38, is an Oriate-in-training in New Jersey and he does not see women of child-bearing age as having this ability, this power. “Imagine a woman of child-bearing age, who you don’t know and who is not part of your house, entering an Ocha room and trying to get

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\(^5\) The term checqua refers to a woman having her period. According to Oba Oriaté Alexander Spencer it translates to ache (ase) wa which means the power is here. Menstruation blood is also seen to contain immense spiritual power that can shift the balance of the spiritual energy practitioners are attempting to tap into during ritual ceremonies.
everyone young and old, male and female, to fall in line,” he asked me one afternoon during lunch at a Pizzeria Unos after he and I took our children to see a movie during a holiday break. “It couldn’t happen!” he yelled. As we discussed the history of Oriatés in Cuba including a long line of influential women who were Oriatés he conceded that yes, there is historical precedence of elder priestesses holding the role but that he is glad that the role is open to only men today. When I asked him why he said in a matter-of-fact tone, “What would men in the religion have to aspire to then?” When I pushed him to explain further he said, “look, women dominate the practice. The religion is 90 percent women. If they were to be Oriaté then there would be no place for men in the religion.” I pushed even further, countering that men could be godparents and initiate people. Baba James finally said, “being a godparent is like taking care of children, that is a feminine role. Men need something more than that to aspire to.”

For Baba James and some other men in the community the reality of being in a religion dominated by women means that the only way for them to achieve balance is to take on a role where their position is that of power over the women they administer to. When I began my early forays into the field Baba Alex explained to me that to be male means to do, that what he loves about being Oriaté is the active process of conducting and guiding ritual. “My intellect wouldn’t be challenged if I wasn’t an Oriaté. Doing the things that an Oriaté does is what fulfills me as a man,” he explained. I asked him to articulate what these things include. He stated “I live for standing in front of Orisa and praying; standing at the point in the person’s life where it is changing. At that point when there is no longer a person but a thing until we paint those lines on that head.” The specific ritual practices that he is speaking about do not differ much from those

59 Here he is referring to the part of the initiation ceremony that includes different actions taken to consecrate a person’s head. The head in Yoruba belief is the seat of all things that guide a person’s life and destiny.
practices that are performed by women devotees outside of that particular ritual context. That female devotees—especially those who have godchildren, who conduct divinations for people and pray for those under their care, who continually work with an individual on a regular basis to bring about necessary change in their lives—are not “standing at that point in the person’s life when it is changing” devalues the work that these women and their practices achieve. All of these actions are part of the process of development of a devotee but they are not considered as being equivalent to the ritual work an Oriató does during the three day initiation ceremony. The idea that the daily religious practices of Lucumí devotees are not enough to answer the philosophical questions or fulfill the need to “do” belies the fact that the practices in which female devotees engage include many “things to do” and they incorporate the philosophical answers that are embedded within the divination oracle made available to both women and men. The definition of power within these religious contexts, then, is a moving target; a target that has gender at its center. For if power is defined as the ability to make things happen—called asé in this religious setting—then what gets defined as “making things happen” relies on the gender of who is “making things happen.”

The association of power with the position of Obá Oriató and the Babalawo (male priest of Ifá), and the discussion around the need to check female divine power with an equal, or superior, masculine power is borne out in the discussions around Odu, Ifa, and the roles of Babalawo and Oriató. On the face of it it seems that what imbues the specific role of Oriató with power is ritual knowledge (see discussion of the emergence of the Oriató post in Brown 2003, 150–152). But this level of ritual knowledge is not unattainable by women in the religion. In fact, the elder priestesses whom I’ve interviewed were all confident that, given the number of rituals they’ve witnessed and performed in their lives, coupled with their being adept at reading
Odu in the Merindilogun system—which is the basis on which the Oriaté situates his knowledge—they could easily perform the initiation ceremony. So what is it that makes the post of Oriaté imbued with so much power? Why is it that the ritual actions he performs during the three day initiation ceremony trumps those same actions taken by male and female godparents throughout the course of an adherent’s life and is valued so differently? I contend that the power comes not from their knowledge or actions but from the witnessing of these actions by others. The position of Oriaté is one in which the self-conscious quest for power and position over women in the religion is one in which “…the process of self-making, of identity formation, is a public enactment, performed before the valuative eyes of other men.” (Kimmel 2005, 8). Power comes from the enactment of certain activities within the public sphere; before the eyes of a religious audience that can witness, attest, and consent to the hegemonic power of the male Oriaté. Similar actions that are taken within the domestic sphere (i.e. the homes and private alters of male and female devotees alike) have been feminized and devalued as not containing the similar power found in the Oriaté post. Therefore ritual and ceremony enacted in the semi-public sphere of the Ocha room becomes associated with power and this power becomes associated with masculinity. The authenticity and legitimacy attached to specific rituals then reinforces the association of masculinity with power which then becomes pervasive in this religious practice because it clearly delineates the paths available to men and women upon entering this religious tradition. Although one can attempt to counter this association with the idea that gender balance is a foundational component of Orisa worship, the ethnographic record does not bear this out. The claim of gender balance that is affirmed by most practitioners is supported by an underlying logic in which the feminine needs to be contained, controlled, and in many ways surveilled to assure that the most potent form of power (the feminine) is being used
in appropriate ways. So when Baba James tells me “this is a religion of balance, not of dominance,” what he is telling me, possibly unbeknownst to him, is that this balance comes from curtailing the agreed upon potent power of the feminine in the material world.

This idea of the containment and control of feminine power attendant in the spiritual realm and female bodies in the material world connect with the theory of gender complementarity strongly emphasized during the Black Power movement. In this religious context, as in the context of the movement, there is the assumption that balance is based on domination and control. For some Black Power activists who touted a male dominant political movement in which the contributions of women were continuously relegated to the domestic sphere or merely as support in the political field, gender complementarity did not translate to gender equality (see quote from Maulana Karenga mentioned earlier in this chapter). The same is in play in this religious context. Gender balance does not mean gender equality. Gender balance comes to mean the control and containment of gendered female power. So the idea that there is no “real” place for men in the religion speaks to two things: first is the failure to realize that the very theological and philosophical foundations of the religion have been inadvertently (or advertently depending on who you’re talking to) interpreted in very masculine dominant ways. Most practitioners, both male and female, have conceded and consented to this interpretation to the point where there isn’t any overt challenge to the functioning protocols of the religion which discriminate on the basis of gender. The fact of this unquestioning acceptance of these protocols points to the taken-for-granted nature of men’s power (Hearn 2004) in the religious field and how that power becomes invisible to men themselves (Kimmel 2005, chapter one). This leads to the second point in which the fact of the invisibility of men’s power that is embedded within many religious practices of the Black/African American Orisa community in
New York City leads many men in search of, and in anxiety around, the supposed lack of positions of visible power that are available to them. The way power becomes legible to most who search for “their proper place” is in positions in which men can be seen as having some form of dominance or control over a group of women. The anxiety around the apparent lack of these positions manifests in the need to negotiate a religious space in which women, because they have larger numbers of adherents and because the positions that are available to them are as elders and leaders within their Ocha houses, appear to be usurping the dominant roles many men inadvertently (or, again, advertently) feel entitled to. The quest for proper roles is a response and reaction to this alleged usurpation and therefore the kinds of roles these men are searching for are ones in which their power, control and dominance over themselves and others (women) is easily apparent.

CONCLUSION

The construction of Black masculinity in different historical and cultural epochs in American history has been a process in which the defining characteristics of this masculinity often hinge on a quest for proper roles in which Black men can express their domination over Black women (and other Black men). This quest aligns with an overarching American cultural, social, and political milieu in which the hegemony of men has been normativized by various cultural groups of the American public. The masculinist focus of the culturalist leg of the Black Power movement, the accompanying Black Nationalist ideology which supported it, and the turn toward an Africanist cultural movement which all sought a radical break with the cultural dominance of white supremacy rarely challenged the patriarchal gender order that is central to white supremacy. The model for a revolutionary Black subjectivity often included a troubling acceptance and support of gender inequality in the form of the ideology of gender.
complementarity that was seen to be the “natural” and “traditional” model for gender relations in this burgeoning militant identity. As scholars and policy makers popularized the idea of Black pathology based on the inverted gender roles in existence in many Black communities (i.e. the Black matriarchy debate), the characterization of Black women as emasculators of Black men further cemented the idea that the rightful place for Black men was as the dominant patriarch.

That the Black/African American Orisa community emerged and developed during these times means that the tensions around gender politics in the Black community became embedded within some of their religious practice. While the Orisa tradition provided a subversive spiritual practice that challenged Euro-American/Christian hegemony, the destabilization of the patriarchal gender order has been a bit more challenging and complex. Many women devotees found solace in a religion that affirmed the feminine and provided space for women in leadership roles. Although these roles have been circumscribed by what positions and religious paths are available to women in the tradition as it came from Cuba, for the most part women practitioners with whom I did my research have overwhelmingly expressed a sense of empowerment and contentment in the practice of their faith. Many male practitioners, however, have expressed a corresponding lack of empowerment due to the inverted gender order in which they function in the religion. The response for some has been to develop the Yoruba Men’s Collective in an effort to increase the profile of men in the religion and to provide a space for men to work through the emotional issues they experienced from their subordinated positions. Others have opted to seek refuge in the positions of Oriaté or Babalawo to reassert themselves in visible positions of authority. And still there are those who have come to terms with and appreciate the value of female spiritual leadership and work to support it. Whatever the response, the process of incorporating a religious practice borne of cultures outside of the cultural matrix of the Black
American experience has proven to be a complex one, not least of which has been made more complicated by the interplay of multifarious gender politics of different points on the Black Atlantic map. The convergence of American, Cuban, and Nigerian/Yoruba historical, political, and cultural models have constructed a diasporic space in which gender becomes a defining characteristic of the liberatory potential embedded within this religious practice. This has manifested in particular ways within the Black/African American Orisa community. But the complexity of this navigation is not confined to the local. In the following chapter I will discuss how the debates taking place in the broader Orisa community in the United States and throughout the Black Atlantic have gender politics at their center.
Cipher/Cypher— Two or more rappers freestyling together in an informal context. They could be battling or simply playing off each other; anything cyclical
(urbandictionary.com)

I begin this chapter with a riff on the notion of a cipher/cypher. I use the concept of a cipher/cypher as I learned it growing up in a hip hop context. As stated above a cypher is a cyclical process by which individuals take turns, in no specific order, contributing to the process of cultural creation. This could be in the form of freestyle rhyming (off the top of the head with no prior preparation), dancing a solo in a circle, or performing poetry; each person having their moment in the spotlight to showcase their talents and skills. The key to the cypher is its non-linearity. Although people take turns they do not line up according to age, skill level or fame. They jump in when it is their turn, something determined by the energy of the cypher. While all-welcoming, a cypher is still a contained space; participants’ energies are directed within that space so that the one in the spotlight can feed off the spirit of those taking part in that moment.

As a product of the hip hop generation the cypher proved to be the most apt hermeneutic device with which to grapple the complex subject matter at hand in this chapter. Any attempt to write this chapter in a linear fashion proved to be disastrous. I finally realized it was because the subject at hand defied what was once the prevailing notion of the birth and development of African American culture: that it was confined to the framework of origins and continuity. But as has long been argued (Mintz and Price 1976; Brown 2003; Palmié 2007; Palmié 2003) the
growth of African American culture can no longer be defined as a passive process of retention. It is an active and agentive process of transformation given the environment within which it took root. Such cultural developments, therefore, cannot always be discussed in linear historical format; as if occurrences of the past happened in a clear, concise, and orderly fashion. A linear framework proves to be especially onerous when attempting to highlight connections between different yet related historical, political and cultural processes across different time periods and different geographic spaces.

This chapter explores the different ideologies of gender and religious authority circulating throughout the Black Atlantic; specifically in the context of the development of Orisa worship in Nigeria, Brazil, and Cuba, as they all converge in the diasporic space (Brah 1996) of the United States. I analyze these different religious centers through the lens of Black/African American Lucumí practice because each site plays a significant role in the experiences of the community I studied. As such we can see that the framework of Atlantic dialogues is most apropos; I will highlight just how the different gendered religious ideologies of these points on the Orisa Atlantic map engage one another through the sojourns of Orisa devotees. For Black/African American worshippers their practice is touched by Cuba through the variant of Orisa worship they adhere to (Lucumí); Nigeria as both the “foundation” of that practice and as a contemporary source from which to learn and build community (Ifá Orisa); and Brazil as another site where transnational community is actively forged and maintained based on shared religious traditions via Candomblé. Members of the Black Lucumí community in Brooklyn have had sustained engagement with each of these sites, therefore it is imperative that we clearly articulate the gender ideologies that are at play. This is especially critical given the position of this community in current debates over proper religious practice taking place in the US. I argue that
gender is a central, though somewhat unspoken, element to who gets to be defined as religious authorities. As the religion is presently being institutionalized in ways that mimic the corporate alliance model of late capitalism I also argue that these gender ideologies can eventually become cemented in the social structure and the collective consciousness of the religion and its adherents. For a religion that has been historically decentralized, the current move toward providing both practitioners and non-practitioners alike with an authoritative source that provides guidance on proper religious practice moves swiftly towards solidifying certain practices as proper and others as not. In this process the seat of religious authority and power gets further concentrated into the hands of men.

As I view this process through the lens of Black/African American experiences, as well as through a feminist analytical framework, the questions that continuously emerged for me were: how has religious authority within Orisa worship been gendered throughout the Black Atlantic? How have the politics of religious authenticity been explicitly and implicitly gendered throughout the Orisa diaspora? The impetus for this current move to centralize authority in Orisa practice, specifically within Lucumí, emerged partially in response to the presence of practitioners of the Nigerian variant of Ifa Orisa within the vast Orisa community in the United States. Ground zero for this move to centralize is Miami, home to a large contingent of Cuban-American practitioners. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, ongoing tensions between devotees of the two denominations came to a head in 2010 when a group of Oba Oriate (Lucumí religious authorities) issued a formal statement clearly demarcating the boundaries which separated the two traditions. With the drafting and signing of this document not only were two chapters of Orisa worship formally separated in a way that hadn’t been done in the past, it also made very clear who would be in charge of determining a set of practices and behaviors that were to be
followed by Lucumí devotees in Miami and the many affiliated networks associated with the supporters of the accord. “The Accord of the Oba Oriates of South Florida” put forward by the Lukumí Council of Oba Oriates of South Florida announces who gets to make these determinations: a homo-social space where religious knowledge and authority are concentrated solely within the sphere of men.

Some four years later more news came out of Miami. This time the “two top hierarchies” of Lucumí religion announced an historical alliance. The Church of the Lukumí Babalu Aiye, the organization that filed and won a lawsuit with the Supreme Court securing the right to animal sacrifice for religious purposes, and Kola Ifá Miami, an organization of babalawos, announced an “ecumenical alliance”. During the press conference for the official signing of this new alliance, Oba Ernesto Pichardo, the co-founder of CLBA and its “current corporate president” (CLBA website), stated: “We’re heading toward institutionalization globally with this. What’s gonna happen here is if you have a rogue element in the priesthood they’re going to start having a hard time because now [that] you have the hierarchies have come together there’s going to be rules” (Miami Santería Faiths Join Forces 2014). While Oba Pichardo and his followers stated in later discussions\(^{60}\) that this ecumenical alliance was about bringing order to the Miami Lucumí community specifically, his language in the video says otherwise. Using his own words, this institutionalization is aimed well beyond a local context. The ultimate goal, whether in his lifetime or not, is to establish a global or multiple global centers of religious authority in which this particular alliance in Miami can serve as a model. Miami is a critical site in the Orisa Atlantic because it is home to a large contingent of Cuban and Cuban American practitioners. As such it is often seen as a site of authenticity, as well as a site in which the debates between

\(^{60}\) In online radio shows and in Facebook discussions
Lucumí and Nigerian Ifa Orisa practitioners are most apparent, in a way that other U.S. cities are not.

Whether CLBA and Kola Ifa Miami plan to take their alliance of religious authority global is not the reason why I make special mention of it (although this certainly deserves further study). I focus on this alliance because the coming together of the self-proclaimed “two top hierarchies” as the religious authorities whose goal is to establish rules to guide the Miami Lucumí community concentrates religious authority within the hands of men. This alliance, combined with the accord of the Oba Oriates in 2010, a separate yet related group, holds that the male dominated posts of Oriate and Babalawo are authoritative figures who get to define proper religious practice. Although CLBA is not an organization of men, the structure of Lucumí religion in general holds men as the religious authorities through the “offices” of the Oriate and the Babalawo. I examine this process of institutionalization and its gender implications by broadening the scope beyond what’s happening in Miami or even in the United States. Given the extensive transnational networks of many Orisa communities, what transpires in one “ile” has the potential of a ripple effect that can be felt across/throughout the Atlantic. For although the supporters of these moves to centralize and institutionalize, as well as many critics, maintain that these moves do not impact people outside of these local circles, the “chatter” that I’ve observed on-line and in real time prove otherwise. The very calls for an organizational model to ensure and protect the integrity of Lucumí practices is often borne of the encounter between different and non-local (and often non-Lucumí) devotees that challenge the boundaries of what gets defined as proper religious practice.

I will admit to the ambitious aims of this chapter. To tie together multiple and varying processes of religious development, at times separated by hundreds of years and across vast
geographical areas, is quite difficult. To highlight the gender ideologies embedded within these multiple histories is even more complex. This is why I began this chapter with a brief discussion about the cypher. This story cannot be told in a linear fashion. This chapter is not about the move/development/ transformation of a cultural form from its “original” or “pure” past to its creolized “adulterated” present. I bypass that line of analysis through the use of a dialogic model. This dialogue will take the form of a cypher: each “site” taking its turn, often not in any chronological order, but just as a brief display of their contribution to the cultural cypher at work. All while being refracted through the lens of the Black/African American Lucumí community of New York City. Their sojourns throughout the Black Atlantic, both in the name of Orisa worship and a pan-African sense of community, provided a path by which their practice and politics have influenced and been influenced by multiple gender ideologies that are now in dialogue. From Cuba to Nigeria to Brazil to the United States, spanning not only the fifty five plus years of this community’s existence, but also including the longer history of cultural and political development among enslaved Africans and their descendants, we can parse how gender has impacted these developments.

In true cypher fashion, I am going to begin not at some mythical point of origin but just where and when the ethnographic record jumps out: present-day Brazil. I begin here because of the special relationship members of the Brooklyn Black American Lucumí community have with the Candomblé community in Bahia (Salvador and Cachoiera). This relationship expands beyond the context of heritage tourism if we look at the development of female leadership in Orisa worship in Brazil compared to the male dominated order of Cuban Lucumi and Nigerian Ifa Orisa. In the context of Black American Orisa experience, the dialogue that is happening
FROM BROOKLYN TO BRAZIL

In August of 2012 Mama Oseye Mchawi embarked on the 25th anniversary of her annual trip to Brazil. Traveling with more than fifty African American devotees of Orisa religion from New York, Atlanta, and Philadelphia, Oseye’s itinerary for this trip included a Lucumí-style drumming ceremony to be held at the famed Candomblé terreiro (temple) Casa Branca; a concert of Lucumí Orisa music performed by the African American group Omi Yesa, headed by National Endowment for the Arts Fellow Amma McKen; and a roundtable panel presentation on the role of memory in African Diasporic spiritual practices. The highlight of her annual sojourn was the tour of different temples throughout Salvador, especially Ile Axe Opo Afonja, and attendance at the Agua de Oxala ceremony at Casa Branca. Although Casa Branca and Opo Afonja are tourist destinations for those seeking to experience a slice of Brazil’s authentic African culture, Mama Oseye’s affiliation with the two terreiros goes beyond mere touristic experiences. It is the product of a twenty five year process of community and friendship built on the idea of a shared religious experience and a need to connect with Orisa worshippers throughout the diaspora. This process began in August of 1986 when Oseye took her first trip to Brazil.

Earlier that year (1986) Oseye had seen a local department store campaign advertising travel to Brazil. In the store she saw women dressed up as Baianas and her interest was piqued. At the time of her arrival Mae Menininha, the leader of the terreiro Gantois which Ruth Landes made famous in City of Women, had recently died. Gantois was an offspring of Casa Branca and is considered one of the casa grandes (great houses) of Salvador. As such many of the terreiros
were closed to ceremonies. Oseye, however, was allowed a tour of Casa Branca when she arrived. When they brought her to the room which held the shrine of the orixa Oxala (Obatala in the Lucumí pantheon and to whom Oseye is initiated), Oseye fainted. “Perhaps because I had that overwhelming experience with Obatala, as well as the overwhelming welcome of the sisters I met there that endeared me to Casa Branca,” she says. In fact, most of her early connections to Bahia’s Candomblé community were through the “sons and daughters of Casa Branca.”

To reciprocate the warm hospitality extended to her Oseye invited her hosts to her home should they ever visit New York City. A few months later a few of them took her up on her offer. That year the Caribbean Cultural Center held its International Conference on Orisha Traditions and Culture in New York City (previous conferences were held in Nigeria and Brazil). One of the daughters of Casa Branca, Kutu the Ogun (as Oseye calls her) stayed with Oseye for the conference. While Kutu was the only one to stay with Oseye during her visit she was one among many whom Oseye hosted in her home with a small reception she organized for the Bahian contingent who’d also traveled to New York for the conference. One such visitor was Mae Stella de Oxossi (Maria Stella de Acevedo Santos), mae-de-santo of Opo Afonja, one of the three “great houses” of Candomblé in Bahia.

In 1987 Oseye decided to take her first group trip to Brazil. “ Mostly because I was introduced to something that everybody should see. Everybody should experience Orisa that open, that visible, that easy-going to acknowledge its existence as part of the culture.” Having had such an overwhelmingly positive experience on her first trip Oseye wanted to establish a more meaningful relationship with the terreiro that welcomed her with open arms. “Also, knowing that it was not a rich terreiro, the people were relatively poor and lived modestly the notion of being able to bring them something on each visit made it feel like a sister house,” says
Oseye. On that first group trip Oseye collected donations of school supplies, clothes and a small monetary gift of $300. She also drafted a statement that one of her Brazilian godchildren translated into Portuguese and that she read upon her arrival to Casa Branca. The statement read in part: “Our purpose in coming to Bahia is to strengthen the tie between Afro-American and Afro-Brazilian Orisha worshippers. We seek to understand and share in the rich legacy of our forefathers who landed upon the shores of Bahia. We seek to exchange ideas and experiences and to teach each other about the ways in which we can keep alive the traditions of the Yoruba faith” (Curry 1997, 228). Oseye also pledged to a commitment in which members of the Yoruba Society of Brooklyn would donate an annual amount of $400; to send donations of clothes and school supplies (the supplies targeted more toward Opo Afonja since it has a school on its grounds); to open their homes to members of Casa Branca who visited New York City; to allow these visitors into YSB’s shrines and ceremonies on these visits; and to “continuously exchange ideas and information with each other” (Curry 1997, 229). 1987 cemented a lasting relationship between Orisa worshippers in Brooklyn, New York and Salvador da Bahia that has continuously flourished over the past twenty eight years. This includes the ability of Oseye and fellow US travelers to attend the Agua de Oxala ceremony which, according to Oseye, was closed to outsiders until that “historic” first group trip. As stated in the pledge Oseye and other members of the Brooklyn community have reciprocated the warm welcome they’ve received by opening their homes to their “sister house” members who’ve come to New York to visit.

I detail the origins of Oseye’s annual heritage tours of Salvador for two reasons. The first is to highlight how her travels to Brazil move beyond the characterization of African American heritage tourism by the scholarly literature (insert citations here). In this literature African Americans travel to nations in the African Diaspora in a blind pursuit of roots; seeking
connections to those African descended people who have held on to some of the “African” culture Black Americans feel they have lost. I will address this issue in more detail in the conclusion of this dissertation. The second reason I discuss the origins of Oseye’s travels to Brazil is to illustrate how her exposure to Brazilian Candomblé and the gender dynamic that structures religious authority differently than her “native” Lucumí was “very very eye opening” for her. The relationship between Brooklyn and Brazil, facilitated by Oseye, Mae Stella, and the sons and daughters of Casa Branca, demonstrates the dialogic process of diaspora. In this context we are exposed to the different ways gender and religious authority are conceived of, enacted, and challenged by different members within “a” diaspora. The engagement between these two religious communities provides us with a map of diasporic possibilities, not least of which is a blueprint for alternative routes of gendered religious authority. For despite the common discussion of the supremacy of the male dominated Ifa priesthood in Yoruba religious practices of Cuban Lucumí and Nigerian Ifa Orisa traditions, these women are building on an historically female-dominated and recently female-led religious practice.

As I discussed in a previous chapter, within Lucumí the homo-social office of the Oba Oriate is currently the domain of men. In Cuba the role of oriate was held largely by women until the famed Octavio Samá, Obadameji, developed it into the titled post it is known as today in the mid-twentieth century. “Obadimeji revolutionized the position of the Oba Oriate. By the time of [his] death [in 1945], the position was dominated by men.” (Ramos 2000:105; emphasis added). Prior to Obadameji’s innovation, the function of oriate as master of ceremony was often performed by the head of the house or ile (regardless of gender), just as it is done in Brazilian Candomblé. Like the oriate of today, the head of a house of Ocha in the past was well-versed in divination, herbs, prayers, sacrifices, songs, rituals, historical information about the various roads
or aspects of each Orisa, etc. Or, as David Brown states, “the many specialized tasks of the locally and regionally variant forms of initiation were probably distributed among a number of skilled participants” (Brown 2003, 150). Obadimeji, who was trained by the famed female oriate Timotea “La Tuan” Albear, This shift, though relatively recent, has taken on the patina of “ancient tradition” among contemporary practitioners. Baba James, who is himself an Oriate-in-training, argued that the post demands respect and it would be almost impossible for a woman of child-bearing years to command that kind of respect in the ocha room. A post-menopausal woman would be up to the task, in his summation, but as some of the women with whom I discussed the issue laughed, by that time why would they want to? These position have worked to naturalize/normalize the post being solely the domain of men. But the situation in Brazil is much different. Gender has been argued to be an adequate measure of the authenticity of religious practice. The process through which this occurred implicates both practitioners and non-practitioners alike. Although Candomble terreiros have long been led by both men and women, the model of women being the traditional, and therefore authentic, leaders has been cemented in popular memory. As misleading as this “cultural fact’ the well-documented process by which this became tradition is useful for our purposes. For it illustrates not only the relative newness of this “ancient” tradition, it also highlights the place of gender in the political motivations of interested participants. Thus this begs the question: What ideological and cultural work does touting women-led terreiros as “ancients,” “authentic,” and “pure” traditions do for those involved?

If we are to believe Matory the feminist agenda of anthropologist Ruth Landes is what catapulted the international image of Candomble as a “real-world matriarchy honored by time and tradition” (Matory 2006:122). Her book *The City of Women* (Landes 1947) touted the
traditionalist Gantois terreiro as exhibiting authentic Orixa worship as it was practiced in Yoruba-land. Matory argues that Landes ignored the ethnographic evidence of the involvement of male priests to forward her feminist desire to document an ideal matriarchy (ibid). Matory calls on Kim Butler (1998), Rachel Harding (2003), and even Landes’ own companion Edison Carneiro (1948) to illustrate the fact of a predominantly male Candomble community prior to Landes’ published work. Landes’ rationalization for those male priests she did witness was to dismiss them as ades (passive homosexuals) who were a recent pathological addition to the practice (Matory 2006b, 124). For Landes, and many other scholars who followed, Ketu-Nago (Yoruba) practices were uplifted as authentic and pure along with the idea of female religious authority. “There is no single priest with authority over the entire Candomble religious community, even within any given Brazilian state, but some axés have the institutional power and some priests achieve degrees of projection in the media that give their public pronouncements and ritual protocols overwhelming authority, inspiring widespread deference, quotation and imitation. These are called the 'great houses' (grandes casas) and the 'greatest' of these are linked to the axe of Iya Nasso” (Matory 2005, 125, emphasis added). Three of the great houses of Bahia—Casa Branca, Ilé Axé Opo Afonja, and Gantois—are regaled as among the oldest, most traditional and most revered of the Candomblé terreiros of Brazil. Opo Afonja and Gantois each descend from Casa Branca thus solidifying Casa Branca’s position in the cultural memory of Bahian and Afro-Brazilian culture. Casa Branca was founded around 1830 by three African women: Adetá, Iyá Kalá, and Iyá Nasso (Matory 2005, 123). Often touted as the oldest terreiro in Salvador (and thus Brazil as a whole) Casa Branca’s ritual lineage founded by three women from “the Coast” provides it with a prestige and honor that is accorded to those terreiros/priestesses most closely associated with Africa and Africans.
According to Butler (2001), Pares (2005), Matory (2005) and Sansi (2013) the discourse of African purity emerged from multiple processes of cultural and political transformations on both sides of the Atlantic, connected by the trans-Atlantic travels of Afro-Brazilian elite and their children. Whether it was the Lagosian cultural renaissance of the late nineteenth century (see Matory 1999 and 2005) or the business and/or religious interests of itinerant merchants, “Africa” became a venerated and eventually sought-after legitimizing identity. During the post-Abolition period in Brazil claims to an idealized African identity were tied to “the articulation of a new sense of Black community” (Nicolaï Parès 2005: 6). This new sense of Black community coalesced around an idea of Afro-Bahian identity that privileged Africa as the site of its cultural heritage. Yet “Africa” was being transformed from an identity related to place of birth into one associated with ritual identification. Kim Butler (2001) argues that as the end of the slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century decreased the numbers of continental Africans in Bahia, the creole and Brazilian-born children of these forbears began the process of transforming Africa into an identity of ritual specifications. Butler identifies this as the Brazilianization of Candomblé: a move from the culmination of various traditions remembered by individuals from different communities to the “conscious choice of the Brazilian-born to maintain African culture as a source of moral and spiritual support. …Candomblé provided an institutional basis for African-based culture, and, thereby, continuity and formalization of its cultural components” (Butler 2001:140).

The great houses of Bahia were upheld as the models of authentic Nago practice and all had women as leaders. That Gantois and Opo Afônja were offshoots of Casa Branca, said to have been founded by three African women enslaved in Bahia, female leadership became further cemented in the image of the practice. But this idea of female leadership was itself “invented”
(as all traditions are) in the early-mid twentieth century through the work of politically motivated
scholars. According to Joao Jose Reis (2001) the sociological impact of slavery transformed the
leadership from the hands of predominantly men to the hands of predominantly women:

From a sociological point of view, the eventual female hegemony in Candomblé was
historically constructed under a slave regime, particularly in an urban setting, where
women had become more independent and enjoyed more opportunities for social
mobility than slave men. Women obtained manumission in greater numbers than men, for
instance; and they became successful small and medium-business entrepreneurs in Bahia,
especially in the food-distribution sector. Thus ritual pre-eminence in Candomblé in a
way mirrored creole slave-women’s higher social standing. Female-only initiation groups
became a tradition in several cult houses in Bahia, including the Ilê Iya Nassô. And while
the male-only post of babalawo (diviner and Ifa or Fa priest) declined almost to
extinction, women took over the business of divination along with other essential ritual
positions within the religion, except perhaps for those of maestro or alabe of the
percussion orchestra and of head-sacrificer or asogun. With the disappearance of the
Africans in Bahia’s population and the supremacy of women among the initiates, the next
generation of creole leaders thus became predominantly female. (Reis 2001, 131)

According to Butler (2001a) “women’s influence was further strengthened by their financial
autonomy” (141). As Reis also argued, the specific parameters of slavery in an urban setting
allowed women more opportunities to amass the capital needed for initiations and other rituals,
as well as the freedom of movement and relative autonomy to participate in these practices. As
these historians document the sociological reasons for the gendered shift in religious authority,
Matory argues that Landes, Carneiro, and other interested parties denied or dismissed the
presence of male priests by characterizing them as ades, linking the apparent homophobic
treatment of male priests with a specific image of the Brazilian nation with which homosexuality
was incompatible (2006b). The exaltation of female-headed candombes fit nicely with the
image of the Black Mother (Mae Preta) that had been nostalgically deified in Gilberto Freyre’s
classic tome Casa Grande é Senzala (The Masters and the Slaves) in the 1930s. As part of the
Northeastern Regionalist movement, which sought to redeem the racial image of Brazil, the
beloved Mae de Santo represented the noble and rich African cultural heritage that distinguished Brazil from other nations. She personified the intimate relationship between the Whites and Blacks of Brazil —nostalgically remembered in less violent and more innocuous ways—that created the creolized nation in which the races got along.

In this environment the terreiros of Casa Branca, Opo Afonja, and Gantois stood out as emblems for local, national, and even transnational agendas alike. The eldest of the three, Casa Branca, “was a candomblé founded and led by women who assumed the mission of faithfully recreating…the traditions of the African nation of Ketu” during the nineteenth century (Butler 2001a, 140). “Their focus on institution-building eventually established standard elements of Candomblé by which others were measured and which were imitated to varying degrees throughout Salvador” (ibid). Historians Butler (2001a) and Reis (2001) point out that during the nineteenth century leaders of Candomblé temples were both men and women with men holding a 61 percent majority of the posts (Reis 2001, 120). Reis notes that the percentage of male leadership was directly proportionate to the African-born male slave population between 1811 and 1860 but that women were a higher percentage among Candomblé clients and initiates (ibid). In fact, Reis states, “I have found no examples of men undergoing initiation rites…. This may explain why, at the turn of the twentieth century, women became the dominant element in the Candomblé hierarchy: they were being initiated in much greater numbers than men” (131). So it seems, according to Butler and Reis, that sociological factors led to “the hegemony of female leadership” within the Candomblé. Combined with Matory’s assertion that the preeminence of female Candomblé leadership is a product of multiple more recent ideologies of interested parties on the local, national, and transnational stage, we come to see how “the conditions of the female triumph in the …priesthood have been recent in genesis, unique in the Yoruba-Atlantic
world, and explicable only in terms of an ongoing transnational cultural politics” (Matory 2006b, 129).

What we can take from the above details is that the sociological impact of slavery on the changing demographics of Candombé leadership, the internal dynamics of Candomblé religious development, and the ideological agendas of local, national, and transnational actors converged to create a specifically gendered diasporic space appear as a long-held tradition (i.e. unchanging since time immemorial) when in fact it is really a recently constructed practice built on competing renditions of a cultural past. Or, as Charles Briggs sums up the work of scholars who study the invention of traditions puts it: “traditions were created in the present, thus reflecting contestations of interest more than the cultural essence of a purportedly homogenous and bounded ‘traditional’ group” (1996, 435). The contemporary construction of female leadership in the “authentic” practice of African traditions has made terreiros like Casa Branca, Opo Afonja, and Gantois symbols of the resilience and ingenuity of enslaved Africans in the West. These symbols carry meaning not only in Brazil but throughout the Black Atlantic. For Orisa practitioners, particularly ones like Mama Oseye, they represent what Black America has lost but what they are gaining back through their diasporic religious journeys. The fact that Oseye’s first trip to Brazil brought her to Casa Branca was no accident. Due to the reputation of the terreiro as being among the oldest and most authentic ones around, Casa Branca, along with others, have received a great deal of recognition and support (not least of which is financial) from both local and federal agencies. Since the 1960s the three “casas grandes” and other female-led terreiros have received “disproportionate moral support and funding” from “the city government of Salvador, the Bahian state, the Brazilian federal state, businesses, and the national media outlets….” (Matory 2006b, 128). As such, the terreiros that tourists like Oseye and her fellow
travelers are ushered toward are those that have been established as representing Brazil’s authentic African culture. I will discuss the marketing of Afro-Bahian culture as an economic development strategy later on in this chapter. For now I will focus on detailing the construction of authentic and gendered religious authority and its impact on members of the African diaspora.

To recap, the idea of female-headed temples as normative in the Brazilian Candomblé is less the product of passive retentions of an “authentic” African past and more a construction and reconstruction of contemporary invested actors throughout the twentieth century. This contemporary construction has worked to produce meaning in multiple contexts: local, national, and global. While I would not go so far to say that the development of the Candomblé as a “cult matriarchate” (Landes 1940) was solely the work of scholars and nationalists that were not themselves members of these communities, I do agree that these “outsiders” contributed greatly to the international image of Candomblé as female dominated and female-ruled. This image has cache within the African Diaspora which paints Bahia as “the Black Rome,” the site of authentic African culture, the heart and soul, if you will, of the Brazilian nation. Within the Orisa diaspora this site holds even greater significance as a site in which enslaved Africans and their descendants fought tooth and nail to create and maintain their emotional, social, and cultural lives.

Candomblé practitioners along with scholars and Brazilian nationalists constructed the concepts of authenticity, purity and tradition heavily reliant upon a female religious hegemony. Each interested party had their reasons for such constructions. Whether or not the historical reality supported this ideological belief is no matter. As I’ve said countless times throughout the dissertation the verity of these claims is inconsequential for this study. What these claims have allowed different actors to do is of significant consequence for it illustrates the processes and
logics that inform the creation of cultural practices. Salvador’s emphasis on female leadership has placed women at the center of religious development throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Both public and private institutional support allowed for the Candomblé elite to establish connections, credibility and capital (economic, cultural, political, and social) both within the Brazilian nation and around the world. Candomblé elites have used this capital as a global platform to forge ties with religious, business, and NGO elites. This further cements their status as national treasures of the Brazilian nation and of the Black Atlantic. In the context of the Orisa Atlantic these women leaders hold pride of place for being the keepers of the tradition; of keeping Yoruba culture alive and well in the New World. These women have used their relatively new status as platforms for furthering their own political/religious agendas on behalf of their communities.

One of Oseye’s first introductions to Brazil was through an advertising campaign in a local department store. This campaign, I’m sure, was the product of a shifting relationship between Afro-Brazilians and the Brazilian state. In this new association the Brazilian state sought to foster foreign policy and establish trade partnerships with newly independent African nations by promoting “African” culture (Santos 1998). According to Jocelio Teles dos Santos “the state manipulated the symbolic realm of culture to gain political control and realize economic gains…. [It] sought both political control and what might be termed symbolic surplus value for economic development, in particular the reproduction of a national culture that could be marketed by Bahia’s developing tourist industry” (1998, 123). As early as the 1970s the Brazilian state began promoting Afro-Brazilian culture to lure tourism to the country. Santos references a 1973 news article announcing the arrival of some 5,000 Afro-North American “high income” professionals to Salvador. Their arrival was part of a program that aimed to attract one
million Black North Americans to Bahia which was seen as the “cradle of Afro-Brazilian culture” (Santos 1998, 123). This goal was aided no doubt by the public-private hybrid company Bahiatursa, which was established in 1968 for the sole purpose of establishing tourism as an economic development priority (see bahiatursa.ba.gov.br/institucional/historico/). Brazilian foreign policy goals with African nations served as the foundation for domestic policies that supported the creation of institutions like the Afro-Brazilian Museum and educating Brazilian nationals on the country’s African culture. The ideological myth of racial democracy permeated both foreign and domestic policy to varying ends. In furthering the idea that the different races which constituted the Brazilian nation intimately and lovingly came together ignored the vast social and economic inequality experienced by Black Brazilians. Within this narrative the Afro-Brazilian was relegated to the realm of folklore and culture only, which in turn was used to further the economic interests of the state. Thus Afro-Brazilian culture became the prime route to economic development for the poorer (and Blacker) northeast territory.

This problematic positioning of Afro-Brazilian culture notwithstanding, the promotion of this “folklore” reached its intended target. In the Unites States Black American travel to Brazil increased and Brazil had become an increasingly desirable site for Black American tourism. For Black Orisa practitioners the pull was two-fold. It was a country that honored its African heritage in general and its history and practice of Orisa traditions in particular. For Lucumí practitioners in this community Brazil provided much easier access than Nigeria or Cuba to tap into the tradition of Orisa worship. During the 1980s the practice of the religion had not gained acceptance in the American public. Orisa worship, or Santeria as most people outside the community refer to it, was likened to devil worship due to its non-Christian practices of honoring ancestors, multiple deities, and animal sacrifice. Negative images of the religion and its devotees
peppered popular culture. Practitioners were plagued with surprise raids from police bent on catching them in the act of animal sacrifice. This is before the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aiye went up against the city of Hialeah in Florida in front of the Supreme Court to secure the freedom to practice their religion without fear of police persecution. It is in this context that Brazil entered the consciousness of New York’s Black Orisa community. In 1986 the Brazilian movie *Quilombo* was released in the U.S. The movie was a fictionalized account of the maroon community of Palmares and two of its leaders: Ganga Zumba and Zumbi.

The film’s focus on the resistance and rebellion of enslaved Africans, their astute military and leadership skills, and the centrality of Orisa spirituality to their success resonated deeply among members of this community. “It was a powerful film” remembers Ayo who grew up in the religion in Brooklyn. A priestess of Ochosi and part of a family in which every adult member has been initiated either in Brooklyn or in Cuba, Ayo, whose guardian Orisa is a hunter and part of the group of Orisa known in Lucumí as “the Warriors” who live in the forest, recalls how “there were wonderful images of personified Orisa throughout that movie. I loved how they used the forest to fight [off the Portuguese].” Isyla, a priest of Oshun and also from Brooklyn remembers how she and her husband, who is now deceased, were impacted by the film. “I was pregnant with my youngest. We knew it was powerful. That’s why we jumped at the opportunity to enroll my eldest in capoeira at six years old. My youngest joined when he was eight. That also set my desire on fire to go. My youngest made that happen for me in 2012.” She beams whenever she remembers how her youngest son Hasaan, himself a priest of Yemonja/Yemaya

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61 African and Diasporic spiritual traditions have a long history of being maligned in popular culture. A few examples include movies such as Tarzan, The Believers, Angel Heart, Serpent and the Rainbow, The Skeleton Key; television episodes of Law and Order; Law and Order: SVU; Criminal Minds; The Witches of East End; there is even a current series in development called Santeria by the cable television network Starz.

62 Ochosi is the Orisa of the hunt who lives in the forest. He is closely associated with blind justice.
and is now a merchant marine, surprised her by paying her passage on Mama Oseye’s trip. In
1986 the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI) held its third annual
International Conference on Orisha Tradition and Culture in New York. It was at this conference
that Mama Oseye first met the renowned Mae Stella of Opo Afonja and when she held a
reception for the Brazilian conference attendees at her home.

FROM BROOKLYN TO BRAZIL AND BEYOND: NIGERIA

Brazil, although not part of the ritual family tree of Brooklyn Lucumí worship, entered
the community’s consciousness as a valid site on their spiritual sojourns through the African
Diaspora. This was made possible, not only by the machinations of the state but also by an
internal logic of Candomblé practitioners, religious elites, and other actors (scholars,
intellectuals, politician and policy-makers) invested in a particular image of Brazil in general and
Bahia in particular. As the African heart of the nation, Bahia serves many purposes and part of
its prestige was that so much of its treasured Africanity was gendered female. The mae-de-santo
fit within the feminized way Africa was remembered in the national imaginary. As such, the
image that was projected to the world was one in which the Afro-Brazilian woman held pride of
place. Within the context of Orisa worship it showed a religious system in which the deep ritual
knowledge of women was acknowledged, respected, and honored. This stands sharply counter to
how women’s roles and work within Candomblé’s sister traditions of Lucumí and Ifa Orisa are
portrayed. Although both systems value divine feminine energies and whose practitioners are
quick to state “an enemy of women is an enemy of Ifa,” the current atmosphere in the US and
throughout the Orisa diaspora tends toward silencing women’s authoritative potential.

As discussed in the precious chapter, women’s religious and ritual labor tend to be erased
in broader global discussions of Orisa worship. Though the idea of women as religious leaders is
fashioned as “authentic tradition” in Brazil, it stands as an outlier when compared to Lucumí and
Nigerian Ifa Orisa. Within the US context this is significant given the growing sectarianism of
the religion. This also raises an issue in a global context given the institutional legitimacy
growing behind certain forms of Orisa practice; namely UNESCO support of Ifa Orisa as a
protected intangible cultural heritage of Nigeria. Increasing calls for institutional legitimacy here
in the US among KOLA Ifa Miami and the Church of the Lukumí Babalu Aiye, Inc. (both
Lucumí organizations mentioned earlier in this chapter) foretell a global institutional silencing of
women’s work and the solidification of male religious authority throughout the Orisa Atlantic.
The characterization of Ifa as masculine has historical precedent in the scholarly literature about
the divination system and priesthood. It is also, of course, part of practitioners’ (both native
Yoruba and throughout the diaspora) understanding. Although there has been recent argument
around the role of women in Ifa, especially the issue of women being initiated into the priesthood
as Iyanifa, the priesthood has historically been the domain of men. Within the Orisa tradition Ifa
and its priesthood (called Babalawo) is often ranked higher than the separate yet related
divination system known as Merindilogun. Merindilogun is a divination system also used by
Orisa worshippers, primarily by olorisa (initiates) of the other Orisa cults. It has a corpus of 256
odu which are determined by throwing/casting sixteen cowrie shells. The mathematical pattern
in which the shells fall determine the corresponding Odu (refrains) and thus enables the diviner
to “diagnose” the problem, prescribe treatment, and administer what is needed to resolve the
issue (see Ogungbile 2001:189 for discussion of framing divination within medical terminology).
According to David O. Ogungbile “the Erindinlogun system today is the most popular, reliable,
and commonly used form of divination among Orisa devotees” (2001, 191). In his 1980 book on
the divination system William Bascom made the distinction that though “it is simpler than Ifa
divination and is held in less esteem in Nigeria, …in the Americas it is more important than Ifa because it is more widely known and more frequently employed” (1980:3). Both men and women access Merindilogun “whereas only men can practice Ifa” (ibid).

The status of Ifa divination over Merindilogun raises interesting questions. Among practitioners Ifa is sometimes regarded as more accurate than dilogun. Others interpret Ifa as merely a different, not necessarily better, divination system. Growing up in the tradition I learned that after a particular Odu fell, you had to go to Ifa for further “counseling.” For instance, for any odu higher than 13 that fell on the mat (was pulled/thrown) one had to visit a babalawo. After my own initiation at the age of eight years old I didn’t visit a babalawo until I was 17 years old. After that it would be another 20 years before I would visit a babalawo for “a reading” (divination). I remember mentioning this at a local town hall meeting at the Caribbean Cultural Center and one babalawo present shook his head and told me how I’d been poorly trained as an Olorisa (ordained/initiated devotee). My life as an adherent was rendered lacking in that moment because I followed the divination protocol of my elders. In fact, since I was raised in what I later learned was an Ocha-centric versus Ifa-centric house (see Brown 2003 for discussion on Ocha-centric versus Ifa-centric practice), the depiction of Merindilogun as less than Ifa frustrated me greatly. At first I thought this was an idiosyncratic description used by a small minority until my academic pursuits proved otherwise. As I began to read more broadly I learned of the supposed inferiority of the dilogun system. But I could not reconcile the centrality of dilogun in determining the life paths of so many individuals I’d witnessed over the years with its apparent inferiority as scholars and proponents of Ifa professed. Bascom states “compared to Ifa divination with its manipulation of sixteen palm nuts or even casting of its divining chain, sixteen cowrie divination is simple” (Bascom 1980:5). “However,” he warns, “memorizing the
verses is as difficult and time consuming as learning those of Ifa” (ibid). If learning dilogun verses is as difficult as learning those of Ifa what, then, makes dilogun so “simple?” This question becomes even more pressing when viewed in the context of the development of the system within Lucumí. Bascom notes that though merindilogun is held in less esteem in Nigeria, the system is widely used, highly regarded, and “probably the most important system of divination in the Afro-Cuban cults” (1980:4).

The simplicity of dilogun or sixteen cowrie divination is perhaps related to how the cowries were originally cast among diviners in Yoruba-land. The relevant odu the diviner focused on was determined by one throw of the shells. According to Bascom diviners would recite the many verses associated with the corresponding Odu until the client chose the verse that was most relevant. If more specific information was sought, the diviner would cast the shells again (1980, 5–6). In Cuba, however, famed olorisa and Oriate Obadimeji is credited with transforming the manipulation of dilogun into the current two-throw system which is standard (D. H. Brown 2003, 132). Though once believed to be simpler, many Oriates and Babalawo believe that those using the dilogun are “really divining Ifá” (D. H. Brown 2003, 339, n.52). Once again, if dilogun are currently divining Ifa, why then does it still hold a reputation of being “less than” Ifa? An even more intriguing question is how can we understand the devaluing of dilogun in a broader context of the global reach of Orisa traditions? While within the Lucumí traditions found in Cuba, the United States, and throughout the Cuban diaspora there exists the distinction between Ifa-centric and Ocha-centric houses, the higher esteem of Ifá is matched by a growing popularity of Ifá as the predominant system through which to access and practice Orisa tradition. We can look to the increased presence of practitioners of Nigerian Ifa Orisa (also
known as Yoruba Traditional Religion) here in the Unites States, the ongoing debates between devotees of Lucumí and Ifa Orisa, and Ifa Orisa’s institutionalization that is underway in Nigeria.

As I’ve discussed at different points throughout this dissertation the debates between Lucumí and Ifa Orisa shed light on many key points in the discussion of the globalization of Orisa practice. The increasing presence of practitioners of the Nigerian system marks not only growing interest in the United States but also an increasing institutional support of Ifa by supranational organizations such as the United Nations, with the financial backing of countries like Japan (Clarke 2007). In 2006, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared Ifa divination an intangible cultural heritage. This designation calls for the divination system to be “protected” and “safe-guarded.” According to UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage “only intangible cultural heritage that is recognized by the communities as theirs and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, is to be safeguarded (see FAQ on unesco.org/culture/ich). UNESCO also argues not all intangible heritage should be safeguarded. “It might be so that certain forms of intangible heritage are no longer considered relevant or meaningful for the community itself” (ibid). If this is the case, how, then, are we to understand what this means for the system of merindilogun? Why wasn’t merindilogun included as part of the Ifa divination system and an intangible heritage that needs safeguarding? Is it considered to no longer be relevant or meaningful to the Orisa worshiping community in southwestern Nigeria? How is that relevance and meaning determined? Who determines it? I argue that we can find some of these answers in the historical record of how Ifa and Merindilogun were regarded by both practitioners and outsiders (scholars, missionaries, colonial administrators, etc.) alike.
As I mentioned earlier, according to Bascom Ifa is regarded more highly than dilogun in Nigeria. He alludes to the reasoning for this possibly lying in dilogun’s more simple structure compared to the complexity of Ifa. But J.D.Y. Peel offers a more intriguing possibility. Peel’s studies of the encounter of Christianity and the Yoruba during the nineteenth century shed light on exactly how Ifa (and merindilogun) began to enter the historical record of the West. In Peel’s discussion of the meeting of “The Pastor and the Babalawo” he signals out Ifa as particularly special due to its “capacity to ‘ride’ social change, detach itself from much of what Muslims and Christians call paganism, and to impose itself on the respectful attentions of the modern educated” (1990, 338). Peel endeavored to highlight the historical processes through which Ifa developed and came to provide those identified as Yoruba with a sense of identity. For Peel this was very much tied to the encounter of Christian missionaries with the Yoruba during the nineteenth century. Mining the archives of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) he found that the position of babalawo (Ifa priests) was revered and respected. The priesthood, defined by its divination system, was a professional one in which babalawo travelled to provide their services to paying customers. Their counsel was sought by monarchs who included babalawo as part of their trusted circle of advisers. Babalawo traveled extensively to increase their knowledge of ese (Ifa verses), herbs and whatever other information or skills that could be used in their practice (Peel 1990, 342–343). In their travels throughout Yoruba-land these babalawo would meet and sometimes work with Muslim clerics with whom they’d share scriptural, healing, and protection (amulets) knowledge (ibid). As a profession geared toward public service Ifa held the real potential of amassing great wealth and prestige. And lastly, its association with Ife, the sacred founding city of the Yoruba, provided a counter-narrative to the political and economic power of
other Yoruba polities, the most definitive being the Oyo Empire which displaced Ife as the Yoruba political center (Apter 1992; Law 1977; Peel 1990).

The CMS depiction of the other Orisa cults, and the women who largely participated in them, was strikingly different. Compared to Ifa the function of the other Orisa cults appear subordinate and somewhat frivolous. CMS missionaries recorded their musings about the “senseless prostrations” of women devotees with their Orisa when a house was struck by lightning, “or how “young women do not think their household furniture is complete if they have not yet purchased some sort of gods to worship” (quoted in Peel 1990:343). CMS missionaries saw the women who dominated the other Orisa cults as “more ignorant than the men,” whom with seeming respect were described as not worshipping “any god, they hold Ifa in great reverence and believe in charms for protection and success in their ways” (ibid). The function of the other Orisa in the lives of women appeared to be most directly related to ensuring women’s fecundity—motherhood being the defining and most respected aspect of being a woman—and to protecting against witchcraft (Peel 2002). Unlike Ifa, most Orisa cults were confined to dealing with domestic matters, although there were some cults oriented toward civic affairs. The title-holders and leaders of these priesthoods, however, were usually men (Peel 2002, 147). Compared to Ifa priests, aworo (devotees of the other Orisa priesthoods) were “heaped with unalloyed contempt: corrupt and ignorant deceivers, enriching themselves through encouraging the superstitious fears of their more ignorant countrymen” (Peel 1990, 345). Peel goes on to explain that as the Christian missionaries began their long term task of evangelism they structured traditional religious practices as having a related structure to Christianity, thereby allowing some practices to remain while some others would be replaced. Within this
construction of what came to be known as “Yoruba religion” “the babalawo rather than the aworo…came to be central” (Peel 1990, 347).

Much of what we have learned about Ifa has been refracted through the prism of Christianity. As Peel observes, the literature on Ifa largely originated with Yoruba clergy intent on understanding and translating, if you will, the theological content of Ifa verses, ritual, and practices and has itself been conflated with “the fact of Ifa” (Peel 1990:339–340; see also Peel 1993). I will not go as far as saying that everything about Ifa has been filtered through a Christian lens, thus denying the agency, ingenuity, and keen intelligence of indigenous Yoruba. But I do think it is important to note how the encounter between Ifa and Christianity has impacted the historical record and thus our understanding of the function and status of these practices (and the people who participated in them) in pre-colonial Yoruba-land and, eventually, the Yoruba diaspora. And of course what does this do for our understanding of the function/workings of gender within these practices at this particular time in Yoruba history?

While we can concede that much of what CMS missionaries recorded at the time could be considered an accurate account of what they found “on the ground”, I also think it is important to note the very real gendered and cultural biases of these missionaries and how what they were observing was interpreted by them entered into the historical record have become conflated with observable facts. These observed facts and subjective interpretations decades, even almost two centuries later can do the work of providing its readers with a verifiable record to which they point in an effort to legitimize a current practice as being a long held tradition.

What does this have to do with gender and religious authority, which is the focus of this chapter? On one hand the construction of gendered religious hierarchy is most likely a product of both pre-colonial Yoruba society and the Christian missionaries (many of them Yoruba
themselves) who gave us much of our first insight into this society. My broader point, however, relates to how this gender order traveled to and was transformed by the conditions found within diaspora. Although Ifa was prominent in Nigeria the other possession Orisa cults came to be dominant. This was due in large part to the conditions of pre-colonial Nigeria, the Oyo wars and the collapse of the Oyo empire which surely had an impact on who were captured and enslaved. In the New World, Ifa lost its preeminence. Priests of the possession cults came to reign and with it a new order in which women played central roles. As Reis (2001) noted above, in Brazil the historical record shows little to no evidence of men undergoing Candomblé initiation rites although they held at one point a majority of leadership roles. This left the space for women, who served as the vast majority of clientele and devoted practitioners of these male leaders, to enter the vacuum left by low male participation. Since Ifa was male centric the fact of low male participation led to the practice becoming almost extinct in Brazil. Knowledge of Ifa had to be sought back in Yoruba-land as we see through Martinano Bonfim, the famed Brazilian babalawo who traveled back to Lagos to undergo ritual training when he was a young adult.

Ifa, however, was not dead in the New World. Nor was the gendered structure of the priesthood lost. David Brown chronicles the lives of three babalawo (two were master bata drummers and credited with “birthing” the first set of consecrated bata drums in Cuba sometime during the 1830s) who were essential in establishing what Brown calls the casa-templos, the structure of Lucumí religious families and communities that developed after the cabildos de nacion. These three were but a few of the respected Ifa priests living in Cuba during the 20th century. At the turn of the twentieth century there were both African-born and Creole babalawo

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63 Ifa’s guardian Orisa Orunmila is a non-possession Orisa. This fact distinguishes Ifa priests from aworo partly because the oracular knowledge of the Ifa priest was gained through long, intense study; a method admired by colonial missionaries who recorded those facts. Aworo, on the other hand, attained status/oracular knowledge often through trance/possession, along with extended intense study of Odu. This fact, however, seems lost/ignored in CMS records.
who established long-standing and well respected lineages of Regla de Ifa (the male diviner fraternity of babalawo⁶⁴) that are still in existence today. Together with the male and female leadership of Regla de Ocha (the priests and priestesses of the order of Orisa worshippers) these Ifa leaders helped establish and transform the Lucumí religion of Afro-Cubans.

Priests of Regla de Ifa worked with priests and priestesses of Regla de Ocha to transform Lucumí identity into one of a religious and cultural identity divorced from one based solely or predominantly on ethnic origins of birth, much like the process that was underway in Brazil. Ifa priests, the babalawo, established their practice as somewhat separate, although integral, to the spiritual practices of the orisa cults. Both traditions experienced their own internal struggles throughout the twentieth century. For the practice of Ifa much of the struggle centered around the ability to reproduce a central component of Ifa practice—namely the sacred implement called Olofin—which granted male initiates the ability to initiate other male members into the fraternity of diviners (babalawo) (see (D. H. Brown 2003, chap. 2). The proliferation of babalawo in Havana, as opposed to Matanzas which was another center of Lucumí religious practice, speaks to the “anti-babalawo” atmosphere attributed to the strong female leadership; among other possible social factors. Brown credits five African-born babalawo with establishing the renowned ramos, the ritual families and lineages that exist until today. While at the end of the nineteenth century there were relatively few babalawo in relation to the overall population of Havana and Matanzas, the number of babalawo increased exponentially from the mid-twentieth century on with the period between the 1950s and the 1970s illustrating the first rapid change in growth. Brown (2003) attributes this to the conservative nature of the founding generation and their early creole descendants in regards to the sharing of ritual knowledge and the initiation of

⁶⁴ (D. H. Brown 2003, 69)
new babalawo. In fact, among practitioners of both branches of Regla de Lucumi (Ocha-Ifa) this tendency towards conservatism is credited with the loss of much ritual information upon the deaths of knowledgeable elders. Their fear of persecution and/or the very strict sense of how and who should be gifted with these sacred secrets kept the religion from growing too rapidly. However it also laid the foundation for much of the innovation that has transformed the practice into its current structure.

For Regla de Ifa, with the passing of their conservative elders during the early to mid-twentieth century, and thus their hold on the reproductive authority of the sacred object Olofin, opened the way for more babalawo to be initiated. With the broader social factors at play within Cuban society during the time before the Revolution, Ifa priests were a multiracial group with connections rising as high as the president of the country ((D. H. Brown 2003, 84–85). The internal power struggles around the procurement of Olofin, which conferred the ability to initiate more babalawo thus “atomizing” the different ritual lineages from five main ritual families to many more, helped secure Ifa’s presence in both Cuba and abroad.

Successive generations of Afro-Cuban religious practitioners emigrated to the United States, carrying with them the tools to practice and reproduce their traditions outside of their homeland. The migration of Cubans to U.S. locales such as Miami, New York, New Jersey and even Puerto Rico in smaller numbers in the mid-1940s and in rapidly increasing numbers after the Revolution in 1959, found fertile soil in which La Regla Lucumi could grow. Back in Cuba as the number of babalawo increased so too did their ties with houses of ocha, without which they could not have functioned and grown so rapidly. Within Lucumi tradition though Ifa is a separate yet related system, its client base is increased greatly by their connections to houses of ocha. Babalawo provide certain services for priests and priestesses of ocha, although for many
houses the bulk of the services that are required are provided by the Oba-Oriates. The position of Oriate, though historically held by both women and men in Cuba, has become a fraternal order of mostly men beginning in the mid-twentieth century (see earlier discussion in this chapter).

The services the oriate provides include the complex initiation ceremony and many ceremonies where initiates “receive” different orisa outside of the initiation ceremony. Other services provided by the oriate include different ebos (offerings or sacrifices) related to initiation and receipt of orisas, funerary rites known as the Itutu, as well as the Pinaldo ceremony (literally “knife”) which is said to not only confirm one’s initiation but also confers eldership for the person undergoing the ceremony. For ocha-centric houses the oriate is kind of a one-stop shop for most ceremonies. For those ocha-houses that are Ifa-centric, babalawo (who use the Ifa corpus as opposed to oriate who use Merindilogun corpus) are incorporated more heavily in the functioning of these houses. In these houses babalawo are tasked with giving the group of orisa known as the Warriors (Elegba, Ogun, Ochosi, and Osun) as well as parts of the initiation ceremony. In both ocha and Ifa centric houses the babalawo gives the initiate what is known as the Hand of Orula (for men) or Kofa (for women) if it is so called for through divination (either Ifa or Merindilogun). For Ifa-centric houses the babalawo established close ties with ocha priests and priestesses. One African American babalawo who I interviewed for this study spoke of the “brilliant” strategy of many babalawo who married ocha priestesses, thus providing the babalawo access to a steady stream of clients.

I highlight the distinctions between Ifa-centric and Ocha-centric houses’ use of babalawo vs. oriate not only to discuss the development of Ifa in Cuban (and eventually American) society but to also point out the historical competition between oriate and babalawo. Both are viewed as the intellectuals of Lucumi society for their extensive knowledge of Odu (Ifa for babalawo and
Merindilogun for oriate) as well as herbal remedies for physical and spiritual problems (known as Osain), ebos (sacrifices and offerings) for spiritual ailments, and deep philosophical and ritual knowledge based in Odu. Babalawo in Cuba, like in Nigeria, held the prestige of being leaders in their communities and as example of moral, upright citizens (Ayorinde 2004, 171–172). This idea of babalawo being models of respectable morality is refuted by some oriates and priests and priestesses of cha. In January 2011 I attended a ceremony in which a priestess of the orisa Yemoja had received an orisa that is not traditionally given in that orisa’s initiation ceremony. During the ita (a Merindilogun divination reading) the oriate conducting the reading spoke of how many of the babalawo did not meet the moral standard of being above reproach. He spoke of an incident where he had to disinvite a babalawo from a bembe (drumming ceremony) because the Ifa priest had told the oriate to make sure off of his goddaughters would be in attendance because he was looking for wives. The iyalosha (elder priestess who was giving the orisa for the ceremony) talked of her own experience many years prior when she was still marries when a well-known Ifa priest she had invited to her house pinched the butt of her 14 year-old stepdaughter. When she found out about it she never allowed him back into her house again. When discussing the growth of Ifa in Cuba, particularly around the idea that Ifa was no present in Cuba in the beginning, the African American babalawo I interviewed pointed to the supposed role Ifa priests played in the enslavement of priests of the other orisa cults. Baba Raymond offered a counter-argument:

“Ile-Ife, which is the spiritual capitol of Yoruba people, is a wooded area. Oyo [which usurped Ile-Ife in tk year] is in a plains area. And Oyo spread out in terms of empire using the horse. In Oyo, Sango was everything. But they were never able to conquer Ile-Ife because of the woods. The horse is not gonna work in the woods. Orunmila [the sole tutelary orisa of Ifa priests] and Eshu were the main components of Ile-Ife. Sango was Oyo. So when the slavers came they grabbed the Oyo people because their empire was
Breaking up. Take them to Cuba and basically Lucumí ritual is based around Sango. Lucumí are all the Yoruba survivors. So Sango is everything. You can’t do anything without Sango. You can’t go to Ifa [become a babalawo] unless you do Sango [initiate into Regla de Ocha] first. The babalawo in Ile-Ife didn’t really come [to Cuba] until after slavery was abolished [through the] many repatriated Cubans who came back to Yoruba land after abolition. Because of that the babalawo had to say ‘well, you know, we used to be the boss around here. You came to us [instead of the priests of the other orisa cults]. But in Cuba it wasn’t so much like that.’” (Interview with the author May 12, 2011)

According to Baba Raymond’s recitation of history the Ifa priests who came to Cuba later than the priests of ocha entered a religious environment in which the religious order of Yorubaland was turned on its head with babalawo no longer dominating as leaders of society. As mentioned earlier the babalawo’s way of navigating around a religious practice in which their services were no longer central was by female priests of ocha and leaders of the Lucumí community in Cuba. Lon with establishing respected Ifa lineages babalawo resumed their positions as leaders as they had been in Yorubaland.

The importance of this image of babalawo as standards of morality cannot be understated. Nor should it be assumed that this was a “natural” progression or retention from its noble past in Africa. For much of Cuban history the practice of all Afro-Cuban religion (La Regla de Lucumí of the Yoruba; Palo Monte or La Regla de Congo; and Abakua of the Carabali region) was steeped in persecution. Though practitioners of these religions had long been comprised of multiracial members of Cuban society since the days of slavery, for the most part these religions were mostly identified with Cuba’s Black and poor population. Since these were the most marginalized of society their practices were persecuted and criminalized. And since many pimps, prostitutes, and other criminals were counted among devotees it was assumed that the

65 Brief explanation about the Oyo Empire wars here
religious practices of these individuals and the communities they were from were the cause of their criminality rather than the institutions which kept these groups marginalized and oppressed. Famed Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz began his investigation of Afro-Cuban religions through this lens. His *Los Negros Brujos* (1906) was part of a growing political, intellectual and public health discourse that tackled the issue of the inclusion of African-descended Black Cubans in the new Cuban Republic (Bronfman 2002). Faced with the need to prove to the world, most notably the United States and Spain, and to itself its capacity to self-govern under a new model of modernity. According to Alejandra Bronfman, “[f]or intellectuals monitoring Cuba’s imbibement of modernity, evidence of practices deemed primitive threatened the achievement of political autonomy and universal manhood suffrage and aspirations to social order” (2002, 550). Much like in Brazil Cuba’s African cultural heritage was seen as one of the biggest stumbling blocks to Cuba’s project of nationalism and modernity. In an attempt to “capture, explain, qualify, and prescribe against” the figure of the primitive and barbaric Afro-Cuban “brujo” (Bronfman 2002, 556) social scientists like Ortiz began intensive investigations into this figure and the practices he engaged in. Ortiz, known as the father of Afro-Cuban studies, contributed to this discourse of the inherent criminality of Afro-Cuban spiritual practices. His early work, conducted via the emerging scientific method of ethnography, characterized these practices as stemming from the primitive nature of African cultures and their “dissonance with Cuba’s generally advanced state of civilization” (ibid: 559). Ortiz himself was heavily influenced by the works of Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso as well as by Brazilian criminologist and anthropologist Raimundo Nina Rodrigues, who was also influenced by Lombroso. Nina Rodrigues conducted a similar study to Ortiz’s on Brazil’s African-descended population around the same time period from which Ortiz cited heavily in his own work (see
Matory 2005:62). For Ortiz and his contemporaries in Cuba and throughout the Black Atlantic the African heritage of its Black population caused insecurities about the countries’ ability to emulate the modernity of the self-governing nation-state.

For Afro-Cuban practitioners this meant that they faced continued and increasing persecution of their spiritual practices. This continued throughout the twentieth century into the Revolutionary period of Castro and the socialist (and eventually communist) regime. The revolution, however, did relax some of these persecutions to differing degrees throughout its continuous rule from 1959 unto the present day; although full freedom from persecution did not end automatically. Instead of the revolutionary regime characterizing Afro-Cuban religions as inherently criminal, its Marxist/Leninist orientation distanced itself from all religious thought, including Catholic religion, since their ideals were seen as antithetical to revolutionary ideology (Ayorinde 2004, chap. 4). Although religion was not seen as the natural bedfellow of revolutionary ideology Fidel Castro made it clear that the government should not appear as an enemy of religion and the faithful (ibid: 96-97). According to Ayorinde the Cuban government during the 1970s, with increasing influence from the Soviet Union, began to adopt the theory of scientific atheism which “was a methodology for studying religion. Proponents examined the social conditions in which religions developed and attempted to determine the factors which fostered religious belief. The theory reflected the view that a scientific and technical revolution would eliminate the need for religion as a compensatory social mechanism” (ibid: 97-98).

Though the government recognized that institutional reasons contributed to the spread of Afro-Cuban religions among the most marginalized of society, thus being viewed by the law as leading to criminal activity, the revolutionary regime still tasked itself with “[curbing] antisocial attitudes and behaviors associated with the syncretic cults” (ibid: 99). As the Cuban government
continued to develop its socialist ideology and policies the freedom from persecution of Afro-
Cuban cults waxed and waned depending on the government’s project at the moment. This
meant at times Lucumí practitioners were discriminated against when they tried to enter Cuban
universities, apply for civil jobs, or join the communist party. Access to these opportunities were
determined through interviews in which applicants were questioned on whether they or their
family members were “religious.” If so they were denied access to these jobs and resources to
these resources, thus pushing many Cubans to leave the practice or to go further underground
with their religious beliefs. At other times Afro-Cuban religions were seen as inherently
predisposed to the revolutionary project given their history of resistance to Catholicism, slavery,
and the colonial order. Some believed that “African cultural activity is by nature revolutionary”
(quoted in Ayorinde 2004:108). As such the government moved to incorporate the folkloric
elements of the traditions—the music, dance, and art forms—while distancing them from the
supernatural facets of these traditions. This was done in an effort to bring these customs in line
with the scientific atheism of the government’s socialist ideology as well as use them in the
process of creating a Cuban national culture (Ayorinde 2004, chap. 4).

As Cuba entered the Special Period after the fall of the Soviet Union the regime’s
relationship with Afro-Cuban cults shifted again. After having worked to secularize some
practices of the traditions, revaluing them as folkloric components of an overall Cuban national
culture—for instance the creation of Conjunto Folklorico Nacional de Cuba—the Cuban
government began to incorporate the religious aspects of the tradition into its economic
development strategies. As the economy shifted to become more dependent on foreign currency
gained mostly through the tourism industry, Afro-Cuban religious cults, especially La Regla de
Lucumí, became integral components of this strategy. As part of the liberalization of the
economy (apertura economica) those industries that brought in hard currencies, such as tourism, were privileged over others. In the 1990s as religious involvement became more openly accepted the Cuban government established official relationships with the leadership of different denominations. However, the lack of institutionalization of the different Afro-Cuban religious cults, seen in the past as a strength among practitioners, was now viewed as a hindrance. “Some practitioners link institutionalization to their struggle for representation in society and consider it essential for achieving equal footing with other religions” (Ayorinde 2004, 164). As many religious denominations were gaining a voice and representation with the Cuban government a group of babalawo formed the Asociación Cultural Yoruba (Yoruba Cultural Association; ACY) to have a voice within the government. As of 2004, they were the only Afro-Cuban religious body to have gained official status (ibid: 165). According to Ayorinde “becoming a recognized association brings with it certain benefits, including the chance to buy goods at a lower price than in the state-run shop and the right to purchase a vehicle” (ibid: 168). Clearly membership has its privileges. It is rumored that with official recognition by the state certain Afro-Cuban religious organizations like ACY are privileged by the state which directs foreign tourists to state-approved practitioners for religious initiations. “Approved practitioners who have a good relationship with the Oficina para la Atención a los Asuntos Religiosos or other state institutions benefit from the visits to casas de santos which are now almost obligatory for tourists and other foreign visitors to Cuba” (ibid: 162).

The gender implications of this are glaring. Those religious associations that have gained state approval are dominated by men. The ACY is an association of a group of babalwos. This privileging of male spheres of power has transnational implications that tie in different nations of the Black Atlantic in similar processes which can work to solidify authority—in this case both as
religious authorities within the community as well as within the eyes of the state. While the high status role of babalawo within the larger Regla de Lucumí is debatable depending on if one belongs to an ocha-centric vs. Ifa-centric ile (house/temple), the Ifa priesthood gained even more support from the Cuban government developing relationships with Nigeria. In 1987 the government invited the ooni of Ife, the spiritual “leader” of the Yoruba people to Cuba. On his visit, because Regla de Lucumí lacked institutional structures like the Catholic and Judaic faiths, the ooni only met with a few hand-picked (i.e. Cuban government-approved) babalawos. The ooni also suggested an exchange visit to Nigeria for some Afro-Cuban babalawo but the offer was never taken up by the Cuban government. Castro did support the idea of holding a congress of babalawo in Cuba (Ayorinde 2004, 126–127). According to Ayorinde the ooni’s visit established Nigeria as a point of reference to confirm the purity and orthodoxy of Regla de Lucumí practitioners. The ooni’s visit also encouraged many of the island’s babalawo to unite and attempt institutionalization, thus the creation of ACY and other not officially-recognized groups of babalawo.

It is important to note that the characterization of the ooni as the spiritual leader of the Yoruba people (and their spiritual descendants) is somewhat misleading and gets at the heart of my discussion in this chapter. There are some factions in Nigeria who argue that the ooni of Ife is the spiritual leader of the followers of Orunmila—the deity who rules Ifa divination—the babalawo and not the followers of the other Orisa cults who are open to both men and women. In March of 2015 members of Asa Orisa Traditional Religion Worshippers Association of Alaafin of Oyo uploaded a letter they had written to the International Council for Ifa Religion to Facebook. The letter circulated to many orisa religion groups f which I had been following. The letter read in part:
Our religion DOES NOT have the same concept of theism preached by the colonizers which is based on direct action of God, like Islam and Christianity…. Our traditional religion has been undergoing major changes with a New Creation mythology of Ifa claimed by the Modern Church of Ifa, the Ijo Orunmila, adapting new purposes away from the traditional religion…. In this purpose you are eliminating the cult of the Orisa…. We don’t approve and [sic] support what you are doing which is against our traditional religion to preach Ifa as the only religion of the Yoruba with total supremacy of Orunmila divinity. Orunmila is just ‘one of the divinities’ pantheon, the divinity of the Ifa oracle, and not ‘the main divinity’ as wanted and not the prophet of God to the Yoruba as Jesus Christ was the prophet of God to the Jews. Giving supremacy to Orunmila is deviation from Orisas as well as places them on the fringes of the main divine actions, always subdued and losers. It is not ETHIC [sic] to use academic letters for reframing the imperative form to control the followers of traditional religion based solely on the philosophy and teachings of Ifa Orunmila…. Our forefathers left us a well organized system, which gives the respect to different leaders of different orisa communities in each town. There was never in our tradition a UNIQUE LEADER for all Orisas in one town. (Facebook post of letter from ASA Orisa, March 2015)

This letter highlights the internal struggles within Nigerian Orisa tradition that get at best glossed over and at worst completely silenced in the discourse of Ifa supremacy from many in the diaspora who practice the Nigerian denomination of the religion. However, more to the point of this chapter, it also highlights the negotiations of these internal tensions and the gender implications embedded in these debates. In the struggle over control of religious authority supported by the state in various countries and supranational organizations such as UNESCO, Ifa in both Cuba and Nigeria has gained a highly privileged space in the discourse of religion and religious authority. These state and supranational actors are, most likely unwittingly, aiding in the solidification of the idea of religious authority being concentrated in the hands of men. In Cuba, the move to institutionalize, led mostly by male babalawo, “might aggravate, rather than reduce, internecine disputes if it claims to create a recognized caste of ‘theologians’” (Ayorinde 2004, 181). Indeed, these internal debates are already being exacerbated by these moves.
The Cuban government’s recognition of ACY does the work of making male religious authority normative in its move to capitalize on the religion’s potential to generate hard currency. When foreign tourists and diplomats visit the island they are ushered to state recognized babalawo—known as diplo-babalawo—to experience and often undergo “authentic” religious ceremonies and initiations in which the government takes a significant cut of the thousands of dollars charged by these ritual specialists. Though this practice of charging exorbitant prices for religious services is not confined to the Ifa priests—many priests of ocha also charge foreigners high fees for their ritual services—the state recognition of babalawos as the de facto high priests of the entire Regla de Lucumí (Ocha and Ifa), an idea supported and promoted by the ooni of Ife, normalizes Ifa and its all-male priesthood as the sole religious authorities.

In Nigeria the role of the Nigerian government and UNESCO in normalizing Ifa as the high priests Ifa-Orisa (including all orisa cults) does similar work as is happening in Cuba. In January 2015 the UNESCO cultural sector announced a project funded by Japan “to create an effective institutional and legal environment for the safeguarding of rich intangible cultural heritage that exists in Nigeria” (“UNESCO Culture Sector - Intangible Heritage - 2003 Convention :” 2015). According to the article “Nigeria: Towards Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage,” the project launch brought together “community representatives, government and non-governmental experts as well as representatives of the ministries.” There is no mention of which “community representatives” were present or whether these representatives included delegates from both the Ifa priesthood and the other orisa cults. Given that Ifa was included on the list of UNESCO intangible heritage in need of safeguarding (and not Merindilogun divination which is used by the priests of the other orisa cults), its place and representation in national and transnational discussions has given it an authority not shared by the other orisa cults. As the
letter from ASA quoted earlier shows, Ifa divination, the corresponding orisa Orunmila and its priesthood have all been given the stamp of authority by Nigeria, Japan, and UNESCO.

The most prominent advocate of Ifa, himself an Ifa priest, is Wande Abimbola who has written extensively on Ifa and has been instrumental in promoting the spread of Ifa throughout the Black Atlantic. As Professor Emeritus of African Languages and Literature at Obademi Owulowo University (formerly the University of Ifa) in Nigeria, Abimbola founded the Ifa Heritage Institute, “the only Higher Education institution in the world that specializes in the study of all aspects of Yoruba indigenous culture” (ifaheritage.org). With Ifa being declared an intangible cultural heritage in need of safeguarded. Abimbola was able to found the institute in part with an $80,000 grant from UNESCO, funded by the Japanese government. This was made possible by the discourse of Ifa’s supremacy over other forms of divination. In UNESCO’s proclamation of Ifa as a “masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity” Ifa, the corresponding orisa Orunmila, and Orunmila’s priesthood of babalawo are highlighted. There is no mention of Merindilogun, which is understood by all including Abimbola’s interpretation of Ifa odu, as deriving from Ifa (Abimbola 2001). As discussed earlier in this chapter, Merindilogun is the complex divination system accessed and interpreted by non-Ifa priests, both men and women. But in the proclamation it is not mentioned, thereby almost erasing it completely from this particular public record. And once again the pathways by which women’s voices and authority can be recognized, have been closed.

As we look at the spread of Ifa throughout the Black Atlantic we can begin to see how perhaps the unintended consequence has been the privileging of male spheres of influence. Even in Brazil, the outlier to this phenomenon with its female hegemony of religious authority in the north in Bahia, If has begun inserting itself into the religious discourse of the nation.
Practitioners of Candomblé in the southern states like Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paolo have led the charge in ushering in a re-Africanization of Candomblé—different from the process spearheaded by Mae Stella de Oxossi of Ile Axe Opo Afonja—by bringing in notable Yoruba scholars from Nigeria to teach Yoruba language and culture. While this was accomplished through the work of iyalorixa and babalorixa (priestesses and priests of the non-Orunmila orisa cults), it paved the way for Ifa to enter the religious milieu of African spiritual traditions already present in Brazil (Capone 2010, chap. 8). Those scholars who came from Nigeria to teach language and culture soon realized that their students wanted more information about religious rituals and practice, one of which was divination which had fallen out of use over the course of the religion’s development in the South American country. The divination method introduced and taught was that of Ifa. These Nigerian scholars, who some believed weren’t actually initiated in Ifa, began bestowing modes of initiation to Brazilian practitioners. These initiations were considered to be the first steps toward becoming babalawo (Capone 2010, 240).

Though the practice of Ifa has not reached the levels that exist in Nigeria, Cuba, and even the United States, it continues to grow. Promoted by both Nigerian and even Cuban Ifa proponents the growth of the divination and corresponding priesthood ushers in a new pathway through which the supremacy of the women-headed Bahian terreiros have been and will continue to be challenged. Using the same logic of authenticity and purity that established Bahian supremacy in the past, this current iteration which looks to Africa for authenticity is happening through the vehicle of university students and scholars, who are predominantly men, whose orisa practice is oriented in Ifa as opposed to the other orisa cults. This is due in part by the increasing use of scholarly texts, often by anthropologists, that privilege Ifa over Merindilogun. Again we see the role of both the state and private institutions in promoting this privileging. In the case of
southern Brazil this has happened through universities and other cultural institutions formed by practitioners.

**CONCLUSION**

The cypher I’ve engaged in ties together similar processes that have and are occurring throughout the Black Atlantic. Following Stephan Palmié’s (2007) methodological charge—itself heavily influenced by Mintz and Price’s canonical intervention (1976)—to situate cultural forms within historical context, we see that the different points on the Orisa Atlantic map have all undergone similar economic, social, and political processes. These processes have spurred similar engagements beyond the sacred into the secular world of the state, private cultural and educational institutions foreign governments, and supranational organizations. These engagements have therefore thrust religious elites and their followers into a quite non-religious project of building institutions through which to capitalize on the power, prestige, and access to resources within a logic that defines this current era. In an attempt to survive the changing political, economic, and social contexts of each of these nations individually and in the transnational contexts they forge, practitioners have strategized their survival and continuing relevance in this neoliberal era. In this process, the solidification of unequal gender dynamics in which men’s positions and voices get privileged over women’s becomes more articulated.
CODA:
ON THE (NON-) AUTHORIZING POWER
OF THE WITNESS

On October 19, 2014 a Facebook post in one of the Orisa worship-related groups I followed for my research announced an historic ecumenical alliance between two Lucumi religious organizations: Kola Ifa Miami (KIM), a group of Miami babalawos, and The Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. (CLBA; an organization of Lucumi practitioner of all levels, initiates and non-initiates alike). This alliance, which was reported in the Miami Herald, had a goal of establishing “a central and very visible hierarchy for a faith often associated by outsiders with mysterious rites, colorful deities, and animal sacrifices” (Miami Santería Faiths Join Forces 2014). An accompanying video to the online news article features CLBA “corporate president” (CLBA website) Oba Ernesto Pichardo who states that the alliance will help them address rogue elements within the religion with maturity, respect, and some force. Identifying the two organizations as “the two top hierarchies,” the purpose of the alliance appears to be establishing religious authorities that will determine what is proper religious practice and what is not. Oba Pichardo is an oba-oriate (hence the title Oba before his name) and is best known for winning the Supreme Court case which secured constitutional protection for Lucumi practitioners’ right to animal sacrifice for ritual purposes.

In response to this post I posed a question to Oba Pichardo asking if he could articulate his vision in terms of how this alliance would affect communities outside of Miami. He answered by stating that after his Supreme Court victory in 1993 Dr. Marta Vega, head of New York’s Caribbean Cultural Center, invited him to speak at a conference sponsored by the Center. He stated that in that conference he called for New York’s fractured Lucumi community to
organize. The division to which he was referring was between, as he defined it, the Afro-centric group and the Lucumí. This framing of the division is telling insofar as he defined the Afro-centric group as “Other” from the Lucumí. The form that this organization, according to Pichardo, was the establishment of the various Orisa Egbes. Egbes are secret societies of priests of particular orisa (Obatala Egbe, Oshun Egbe, etc.). Each egbe consists of only the initiated priests of that particular orisa. According to Oba Pichardo’s initial response to my question he stated that the Egbes emerged after his presentation. When I ventured to correct his timeline with the fact that the Egbes had already been well in place at least some six years prior to the Supreme Court victory, he countered that CLBA was incorporated in 1974 and opened its doors for public worship in 1987, thus implying that they were formed through the influence of and example set by his organization CLBA. Pichardo’s framing of the timeline of the organization of the Orisa community in New York differs considerably from that of the practitioners with whom I conducted my primary ethnographic fieldwork. According to Black/African American Lucumí legend, the egbes were formed after an African American Orisa priest became possessed by his tutelary Orisa who told the practitioners in attendance that they needed to begin organizing as a community and as priests of the different Orisa. This organization took the form of the egbes. The first to form was the Yemonja Egbe in 1987 followed in 1988 by the Obatala Egbe, seen by many as the most powerful and active of the Orisa egbes with their annual conference. Egbes for the other Orisas followed suit not long after—all within the Black/African American Orisa community in New York. Pichardo countered with “I’m saying that by the time I did my presentation in NY [at the Caribbean Cultural Center] some groups did exist and sad [sic] down in their respective camps in the conference. As for organization regarding timelines CLBA was
incorporated in 1974 and opened its public place of worship in 1987 followed by 7 years of litigation” (Facebook post on Oba Pichardo’s page, dated October 19, 2014).

In Pichardo’s response to my question he spoke of the divisions within the Lucumí community that according to him “were palpable” (ibid). “The afro-centric [sic] sad [sic] in a group. Lukumi sad [sic] in a separate group, etc.” (ibid). This last bit he repeated twice in his answer to my inquiry. In it he clearly placed the Black/African American Lucumí community as separate and “Other’ from “the” Lucumí community, i.e. the Latino Lucumí community in New York. According to his response it also appears that he was attempting to take credit for the kind of organization and unification of the New York Lucumí community that was spearheaded by Black/African American devotees. He mentioned that in his presentation he recommended a kind of organization modeled after the United Nations and implied that those in attendance followed his suggestion. When I spoke about this particular exchange with a male priest when we were en-route to a ceremony, he was exasperated at what he viewed as a re-writing of history and another example how the Black/African American Lucumi experience was being co-opted and silenced by those who saw themselves as having supreme religious authority: Cuban-American practitioners. After more than fifty years in the game, Black/African American practitioners are still often seen as outsiders to the larger Lucumí community in the United States. And their practice is still seen by many as suspect and lacking in terms of the orthodoxy of their ceremonies and ritual knowledge. As a priestess I’ve experienced this kind of prejudice on a number of occasions, both here in the U.S. and in Cuba. As part of a contingent of writers and editors from Essence magazine66 that visited Cuba in 2001, a fellow practitioner and

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66 Prior to graduate school I worked as an editorial assistant, research editor, writer and eventually associate editor at the magazine for seven years.
colleague of mine were peppered with questions regarding our practice by our tour guide. He asked us questions about certain aspects of the initiation ceremony into the priesthood to see if we were “legit.” His questions, while light-hearted in delivery, were actually quite indicative of the view that African American practitioners were not seen as being legitimate devotees of the Cuban denomination of Orisa worship. That what we had was different and therefore less than. His ideas of what we did in our ceremonies was, beyond insulting, preposterous. But he was not trying to insult us. This was just what he heard was coming out of the United States in general and among non-Cuban Black practitioners in particular.

Here in the United States I’ve encountered much less light-hearted skepticism of my practice. One incident took place in the Old Navy clothing store located in the shopping district of 34th street in Manhattan. As the Latino cashier rang up the items in my cart I noticed he was wearing the yellow and green beaded bracelet that is indicative of the Orisa Orumila (Orisa of the Ifa divination system). I greeted him with the customary Yoruba greeting of “Alafia” used by many Black/African American practitioners. Immediately he had a scowl on his face and grumbled “Bendición,” the usual greeting given by Latino Lucumí practitioners to other devotees. I asked him if he was “in the Religion” and he said he was. I answered that I was too in fact and showed him my initiation bracelets that I always wear, indicative of my priesthood status. Immediately he asked “who shaved your head,” referring to the Oba-Oriate who conducted my ceremony. I initially misunderstood his question, as that had never been asked of me before, and mistakenly mentioned one of my godmothers. Dismissively he told me that he didn’t know her, indicating through his tone and demeanor that already I had not lived up to a standard he held in his mind. Once I realized what he was asking I told him the name of “my Oba,” a Cuban who had died long ago. Upon that he perked up a little realizing that I must have
been around for a long time because while he didn’t know the Oriate who conducted my ceremony personally (the cashier looked to be in his early twenties at best), he knew the name. He then proceeded to ask me who my godparents were and didn’t seem satisfied until I mentioned my godmother’s deceased godfather who himself was also a Cuban that he had heard of. When I asked him similar questions, purely to reciprocate the interrogation I had received, his answers didn’t even register. I thanked him, offered my blessing, took my purchases and went on my way, angered by the fact that I allowed someone so young (in both biological and initiation years67) to demand I prove to him my validity as a practitioner.

These encounters mark my position as both an insider and an outsider with this practice. My insider status stems from my initiation and active involvement in a community of practitioners; a status that I have been able to parlay strategically to enhance my status as an ethnographer, the iconic outsider, the foreign local or the local foreigner. But this outsider status is not just felt as an ethnographer researching the contours of feeling and meaning amongst and between different groups of Orisa practitioners. It is an outsider status felt as a priestess who is a part of the communities which she studies. All of these encounters and more mark how I and the community to which I belong continue to be seen as outsiders, and as such whose practices are still viewed with skepticism. This outsider status is even evident in fictional accounts about “the Religion.” In Irete Lazo’s novel The Accidental Santera the protagonist is a Latina scientist and professor who reluctantly comes to the Religion due to personal and professional troubles and discovers the practice has long been a family legacy. In one particular scene in which the main character Gabrielle is sitting in a Berkeley coffee shop with her new found Miami cousins and

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67 At the time of the encounter I had about 29 years of being initiated a priest of Obatala, and considered an elder by the most basic standards within the religion. As of this writing (December 2015) I have 31 years initiated.
religious mentors, an African American woman enters who turns out to be a priest of the Orisa Osun. Gabi’s cousins warn her of getting too close with this particular community in her search for religious comrades in her adopted hometown. The author writes: “A lot of African-Americans who are into orisa worship call what they practice Lucumí. It’s like Santeria without the Catholic santos. It’s similar because it also came from Cuba, but the bottom line is that it’s not the same as what we practice and Ma wouldn’t like you messing with it. Not one bit! In fact, even if you found santeros around here, she would prefer you not go outside the family” (Lazo 2008, 225; emphasis added). Throughout the novel the author writes about a number of religious ceremonies and practices that mirror the ones I and my religious community engage in on a regular basis. The experiences of the various characters resonated deeply with me as I have been in many very similar situations. I saw no difference. I was excited to find such strong comradery with a work of fiction that read more like a memoir for me than a fictional account. I did, that is, until I read those words. Even in fiction I and other practitioners like me are labeled outsiders even when all things, save for a few aesthetic changes, are essentially the same.

As a priestess and enthusiastic member of the Orisa community one of my roles as a witness is to verify the legitimacy of the ceremonies and rituals conducted on behalf of other devotees. Four years ago I became an Ojugbona, second godparent to an initiate into the priesthood. Ojugbona is also defined by many as “the first witness” to the ceremony for a new initiate, a witness who can verify that what occurred in the multiple ceremonies the initiate took part in were legitimate. Over the past thirty one years I have borne witness to hundreds of ceremonies, big and small, as well as to the transformative power of the Religion in people’s lives. As a priest I have also witnessed the struggles and accomplishments of a community who must constantly engage challenges to their right to practice this tradition and attacks against their
legitimacy. As an ethnographer, the nature of my role as a witness is at times in tension with the kind of witness I serve as a priest. As a priest I am to verify, but as an ethnographer I have consistently articulated my program as not a verificationist one as cautioned against by David Scott (1991). Scholars of the African Diaspora have often fallen into the role of verifying the claims to Africanity of various African American cultural forms, a project that has come under much criticism. As such throughout this dissertation I have argued that my aim is not to confirm the verity of certain claims, but to examine what kind of cultural, political, and social work certain claims do for those who launch them. So while claims to purity, origins, and authenticity are often part and parcel of the verificationist project (i.e. is this particular cultural form authentically “African” in its source or is it a New World construction?), I instead choose to see how claims to authenticity, purity, and origins are used in the context of power and religious authority.

In this dissertation I have examined claims to religious authenticity, purity, legitimacy and authority through the lens of a Black and African American Orisa community in Brooklyn, New York. Through these claims, made both internally and to a broader Orisa community within the United States and throughout different locales in the Black Atlantic, I have articulated how they are more often than not linked to very non-religious aspects of social life. Members of this community, and the broader Orisa Atlantic of which they are a part, do not practice this tradition in a social, cultural, or political vacuum. In fact, the very basis for the formation of this community lies in its response to the unrelenting racial and gender oppression they’ve experienced. As such the very way they have interpreted, internalized, and re-inscribed their religious practice is dictated by their worldview as an oppressed yet resilient and revolutionary people. Their religious self-identification within this context has encountered responses by other
practitioners whose own worldviews have been shaped by the social, political, economic, and cultural realities of their own locales. As members of this Black and African American Lucumí community engage in various dialogues with Cuban and Cuban American Lucumí practitioners, as well as with Brazilian and Nigerian devotees of Orisa tradition, what becomes apparent is a Black Atlantic politics of religion that is defined as much by issues of gender, racial, and ethnic/national struggles as it is by the dictates of purely religious doctrine.

As both a priestly and ethnographic witness of these dialogues I have outlined throughout this dissertation the distinct ways these broader issues come to impact religious practice. In chapter one I detailed the history of the formation of this Black and African American Lucumí community in a way that challenges the going narrative of non-Cuban Black involvement with the Religion. As I described in that chapter, the creation story of this community is always marked by their separation from their Cuban counterparts in their creation of a distinct yet related religious practice. In this chapter I illustrated how the community with which I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork in fact did not separate from their Cuban/Cuban-American religious mentors which led to the highly contentious process of how they wrestled the religious knowledge needed to establish themselves as a legitimate Lucumí community. In this process issues of race and ethnic identity were central in this contention. Cuban and Cuban-American practitioners took umbrage with non-Cuban Blacks identifying the religion as Black and African, as well with the aesthetic changes made to the religious practice in line with this characterization. It is in this history that we see the “origins” of challenges to the legitimacy of Black and African American Lucumí practice as well as the skepticism of the authenticity of this practice. In this chapter I also discussed how this community wrestled internally with definitions of authentic Africanity that lie outside of their experiences as Blacks living in the United States. These
competing definitions of authenticity—one defined in terms of Africanity, the other in terms of Lucumí identity—highlight how both Cuba and “Africa” by way of Yoruba-land in Nigeria became dueling poles for religious authority and authenticity.

In chapter two I analyzed the internal struggles around gender issues, specifically in terms of masculinity, that came to bear on the religious practices and identities of members of this community. I argued that definitions of masculinity held by many male members were heavily influenced by ideas of masculinity forged within the context of Black Nationalism, the Black Power movement and ideas around an Africanist cultural definition of what it means to be a man. Ideas of masculinity defined in conservative patriarchal terms came crashing against a gender dynamic in this community in which women ruled and dominated, causing for some a crisis. This crisis can be seen in the different reasons some became involved in the Yoruba Men’s Collective established by members in this community who were struggling with a woman-dominated practice in which some felt held no proper roles for men. These proper roles, as I argued, were ones in which masculine power and dominance over the predominantly women-led devotees could be witnessed in the semi-public sphere of the ocha room/igbodu.

Gender was also a central component to how ideas of religious authenticity and authority were determined in Orisa communities across the Black Atlantic, which I analyzed in chapter three. Beginning with the Black/African American community’s long-standing relationship with practitioners of Candomblé in Brazil, I detailed the historical process through which gender became a central component in how authentic Orisa practice was determined in this Black Atlantic locale. Within this process I illustrated how non-Candomblé entities, such as the state, national cultural and academic institutions, as well as capitalist entities were as important to solidifying women-led terreiros as the definition of authentic Orisa practice as religious
institutions were. The feedback loop between each of these institutions exhibit how religious
discourse is determined almost as much by secular concerns as they are by sacred ones. I then
highlighted the difference between the women-centered practice in Brazil to the male-centered
practice in Nigeria and Cuba by way of an historical analysis of how this came to be. In
highlighting the historical process my aim was to illustrate the process, aided in large part by
colonial missionaries in Nigeria and the state in Cuba, by which men came to be viewed as the
authentic leaders of these traditions.

With each of these points on the Orisa Atlantic map comes a complex history imbued
through and through with a gender and racial politics and a cultural and social politics as well.
These different histories meet and often clash when they come together in the diasporic space of
the United States. Whether in actual ritual space or in the non-ritual environment, either online
or in real time, diasporic devotees who carry these histories must continuously navigate the
friction that erupts when these histories meet. These meeting places, these moments of Black
Atlantic/Orisa Atlantic dialogue, are remarkably productive because they highlight the very
moments where diaspora gets made, unmade, and remade (Zeleza 2005: 41). These moments
point to diaspora as a dialogic process, a condition, an idea that often gets produced in moments
of tension as much as in moments of affinity. They point to the place where each locale and its
descendants express their agency in making reality and giving it meaning. And these different
meanings are what make a sacred tradition stand the test of time.
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