PART I

Spiritual Memories and Ancestors

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1. Spirited Choreographies: Embodied Memories and Domestic Enslavement in Togolese Mama Tchamba Rituals

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Coastal Ewe Vodun communities located along the Bight of Benin elaborate on memories of enslavement through mnemonic gestures complete with sacred offerings, embodied spirits, and evocative accoutrements.[1] In many Ewe communities, men, women, and children participate in Vodun practices to present and transmit collective memories of the domestic trade in enslaved persons. This chapter demonstrates how ritual movements, like stylized walking, complement oral histories while also diagnosing social disjuncture within local communities. Through events for specific pantheons of spirits, called Vodunwo (plural of Vodun), practitioners perform intersubjective choreographies. By identifying ritual performances as a type of intersubjectivity—the intersection of individual and collective experience—this chapter extends scholarship on collective memory and religious practice in West Africa (Baum 1999; Rosenthal 1998; Shaw 2002; Stoller 1994; Wendl 1999).

Theorizing ritual performances as dynamic, ongoing catalysts for understanding memories of domestic enslavement in West Africa, I examine practices honoring a dangerous pantheon of slave spirits called Mama Tchamba. This group of northern spirits of "bought [enslaved] people" (*amefleflewo*) commandeers ritual performances through spirit possession (Rosenthal 1998, 130). The spirits of bought persons advise and critique practitioners, who are typically the descendants of enslaved and enslaving ancestors. Since many of the enslaved were practicing Muslims captured in northern Togo, devotees exaggerate Muslim aesthetics as they dance adorned with fez hats and sparkling head

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ties understood to come from "the North."[2] Specialists reinvent choreographies framed as traditional as forms of ritual exchange with northern spirits.

By attending to the creation of choreographic cooperation through which devotees assert their religious, cultural, and historical group identities, I conjoin theories of embodied cultural transmission (Connerton 1989; Taylor 2003) with an investigation of the significance of spatialized memories. By *spatialized memories*, I indicate ways performers connect historical narratives to contemporary ritual gestures to bring memory into the spatiotemporal present and provide opportunities for collective historicizing through the use of the space to enact intergenerational transmission and embodied tellings. Few studies have explored ritual dance choreographies as tactics for interrogating histories of enslavement. My research on Mama Tchamba devotions traces ways ritual choreographies often structure and activate embodied memories and the transmission of historical knowledge to intergenerational communities.

Among practitioners, Ewe Vodun persists as a site of social commentary and historical discourse as well as an ecstatic collective experience. The words Vodun and *spirit* interchangeably indicate nonhuman persons with their own histories, personalities, whims, and desires. Vodun practitioners communicate and collaborate with intermediary pantheons of spirits to elicit healing and positive changes in their communities (Cosentino 1995, 29). The multivalent term *Vodun* also denotes ancestors, nature spirits, and the malicious spirits of the previously enslaved. For Ewe practitioners, Vodun is a way of seeing the world and weaving the presence of histories viewed as neither dead nor past into the seasonal rhythms, movements, and practices of the body and of community life.

During field research conducted in 2015, I apprenticed with a traditional association in Tsévié, Togo, to learn Ewe indigenous dances and observe rituals.[3] Tsévié is a semirural town located about forty-two minutes north of Togo's capital, Lomé, in the maritime region on the nation's southern coast. I trained with Mamissi Sofivi Dansso, a seasoned Vodun practitioner.[4] Mamissi Sofivi, like other Ewe practitioners, endows traditional practices with particular significance and selects them to represent collectively constructed views of the past interpreted for use in the present. Using choreographic analysis, personal interviews, and my own experiences learning and observing Ewe dances, I demonstrate how specific West African communities use ritual dance practices to inhabit and remap histories of enslavement.

Ewe rituals include formal parameters for the behavior of both performers and spectators. Those whose dancing was most commonly lauded by onlookers and participants were priests and priestesses, called *hounoun* and *mamissi*

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respectively, who are highly susceptible to spirit possession, skilled in the artistic practices preferred by the spirits they host, and trained to perform annual sacraments and rites to appease the spirits and reinforce relationships with them. By lifting their pointer and middle fingers in a *V* pointing toward the most proficient performers, Ewe spectators display approval of the arrangement or presentation of movements. Skilled performers maintain calm and coordinated body positions, bending forward at the hips with their elbows neatly bent and lifted just above waist level as their relaxed hands complement delicate arms swinging from side to side across their bodies, just in front of their flexing thighs. These dancers choose in the moment when to deepen the energy of the movements by slowing the motion of their hands or speeding up and thrusting their feet forward in ways that reveal the determination or playfulness of the dancer. In such cases, the doleful tip of the head—as if inclining one ear to the ground—may also indicate narratives of weariness or grief as accomplished dancers push rapidly syncopating and alternating feet across outdoor spaces. Individuals, especially initiated practitioners, train for their roles in such performances through codified processes, and each participant performs specific tasks within ritual proceedings and, furthermore, within their communities.

Though the performers do not claim the role of choreographer for themselves—since the term *choreography* includes all decisions made about performance, training, and the presentation of a dance (O'Shea 2007, 11)—their performances demonstrate the types of intellectual labor inherent to choreographic practice. Community members assess the choreographic labor of producing and adapting movement vocabularies based on religious efficacy. Since choreographers structure and select dance movements, I claim this terminology from dance studies to acknowledge the labor of Ewe ritual specialists, especially the women, who often access leadership positions in their communities through the frameworks of ritual events and masterful selection and placement of ritual gestures. A row of nine hounoun and mamissi—well-known priests and priestesses, including Mamissi Sofivi—who took the floor to dance for Tchamba exemplified this type of respected mastery. *Drummers, singers, and other dancers buzzed with anticipation. A flurry of motion ensued around the gathering row of initiated priests and priestesses, who serenely shifted their weight from foot to foot, as onlookers reacted to the preparatory movements of the dancers, embodying the crackling anticipation of the building performance by throwing colorful sparkling scarves across their heads and necks. When these dance masters bent into the triplicate steps of Tchamba, the movements of others toward them, peripheral to their performance, briefly intensified as others gleefully enshrouded them in additional scarves and literally fanned their rapidly intensifying steps with large colorful cloths*

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as the performers continued their collective progress across the dance space. Some practitioners began to fall behind the line as they emphasized the steps of the left or right foot, repeating rather than alternating. One dancer raised her knees high in a more strident and regal tread than her companions. Such Vodun ritual choreographers engage in presentations of histories that they perpetually reenvision, generating movements in response to drumming rhythms and overarching frameworks of acceptable innovations.

In privately funded, small-scale community events hosted in home courtyards, like the ritual performance just described, Ewe Vodun adepts perform memories of their enslaved ancestors.[5] By the mid-eighteenth century, coastal ethnic groups looked to the northern regions of present-day Ghana and Togo for the majority of "bought persons." Possibly as many as a million captives came from northern polities between 1700 and 1850 at the height of the Atlantic slave trade (Akyeampong 2001 3; Piot 1999, 30; 2001, 160). During the transatlantic slave trade, some Ewe communities profited by participating in the expanding ivory trade and by buying and selling enslaved captives. Ewe society included both free persons (*ablodeto*) and enslaved persons (*amefleflewo*) (Wendl 1999, 111–112). Contemporary Vodun practitioners in Ghana, Togo, and Benin continue to integrate histories of involvement in the trade in enslaved persons through religious practices that connect these histories to contemporary social relations (Akyeampong 2001; Brivio 2016; Montgomery and Vannier 2017 Rosenthal 1998; Rush 2013; Venkatachalam 2015). Ewe ritual practices model experiencing and representing memories of enslavement in ways that question the boundaries between master and mastered, since Mama Tchamba devotees embrace the spirits of enslaved persons portrayed as "strangers" in order to reason through past and present shifts in power and authority.

This project advocates for expanding ethnographic tools to include choreographic and dance analysis as a means of understanding the submerged forms of communication through which women contribute to polyvocal histories of exploitation, wealth, and debt and the ways women use such histories-in-process to negotiate and comment on current political circumstances and hierarchies. To address silences and taboos around memories of enslaved ancestry, I explore memories of the domestic trade in bought persons through embodied forms, including ritual choreographies. Drawing on Black feminist frameworks that emphasize the "self-defined standpoint" (Collins 1989, 747) and interpretive strategies of Black women, I examine ways that West African women theorize and contextualize their own performances as a means of presenting themselves to outsiders and incorporating local youth into performances of partially forgotten family histories of enslaved women.

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Ewe communities see themselves as intricately entangled within rather than as either perpetrators or victims of domestic slave trading while pointing to ways women narrate and evaluate memories of domestic enslavement as intimate family histories. In Tsévié skilled practitioners choreograph dances in cooperation with one another and with nonhuman spirits called Vodunwo to remember the part played by their ancestors in histories of domestic enslavement. By focusing on how ritual choreographers present these histories through the linked steps of Tchamba dances, I underscore the local frameworks through which women remember domestic enslavement. To stage my own experience as witness to and participant in ritual choreographies while also designating ways that Vodunwo interrupt and inform ongoing narratives during spirit possession as they transform the movements of spirits' hosts, I use interruptive italicized segments in this essay. I argue that by calling on spirits of the dead to reorder current circumstances of wealth, debt, and illness, devotees use ritual performances to map the legacies of the capture and purchase of bought persons onto contemporary social relations and create a corpus of embodied women's histories that emphasize the influence of enslaved women ancestors on Ewe communities.

Embodied Memories of Enslaved Others

As a Vodun priestess descended from both purchasers of bought persons and their enslaved wives of northern origin, Mamissi Sofivi references local theoretical frameworks of the meanings of the body to signify such intimate family histories. In November 2015, toward the end of my yearlong research in Togo, I sat on the porch of Mamissi Sofivi's home compound in Tsévié. With her back to the door of her shrine for Mama Tchamba, she relaxed in a plastic chair. When I asked her why she dances for Tchamba, her voice pitched lower as she explained that worshipping Tchamba identifies her adepts, or "spirit wives," as people coming from historically very wealthy person-purchasing families. She recounted:

> In historical times there were very rich people among them. They were rich in cowries, and these rich people sold other Africans to the colonizers. In order to find the people that they would sell, they went up North to a town called Tchamba. From there they would take slaves to sell on the coast. They would take iron bars and use them to make shackles to bind their prisoners around their wrists and ankles. The bracelets and chains, these objects made of iron, we now call Tchamba, and they have

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become a symbol or sign of slavery. Tchamba has also become a Vodun that we worship. (Dansso, 2015)

Sofivi confirmed that Ewe families remember northerners captured and purchased during wars and interethnic raids through iron bars and shackles (represented by bracelets called *Tchambagan*, or Tchamba rings) and through rituals for the Vodunwo associated with such objects and histories (Rush 2013). Ewe raiders often sold captives from neighboring groups to European merchants or local intermediaries so that they could be resold into the transatlantic slave trade. Wealthy Ewe families like Sofivi's retained many of the northern captives within the domestic trade since they were far enough from home that the chances of escape or rescue were very low (Montgomery and Vannier 2017, 252–253; Wendl 1999, 113).[6] Sofivi and other Ewe Vodun practitioners typically broached discourses of domestic and transatlantic enslavement as discussions of wealth rather than confrontations of guilt, shame, and grievance. For many Ewe people, the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade by the British in 1807 started the global processes that resulted in the decline of the slave trade after the 1870s and corresponded with the end of a golden age of wealth and prosperity when Ewe chiefdoms had prospered from revenues obtained through the trade in human captives (Hochschild 2005, 307; Venkatachalam 2015, 4; Wendl 1999, 112). The descendants of enslaving families view such histories through the lens of their obligations to the spirits of the enslaved persons through which their families gained wealth, prosperity, and security.

Though Mamissi Sofivi identifies with her wealthy ancestors, through spirit possession the desires of enslaved people purchased by her family manifest in her body. Sofivi mentioned that she has experienced "manifestations" of Tchamba spirits in her body since she was "very, very small," when she started to fall into trances after the death of her aunt, who had been a devotee of Tchamba. Through familial narratives, Sofivi views her allegiance to Tchamba as an inheritance from her aunt. Such deductions and interpretations of the manifestations of spirits in the bodies of those who are both their descendants and the descendants of their captors illustrate how Ewe people continue to attach distant histories to lived realities.

During our discussion my Togolese research assistant Richard and Sofivi described embodied dimensions through which local Ewe communities interpret histories of enslavement. I turned to Richard and asked, "Why does Sofivi have Tchamba?" He then relayed her answer: "Her ancestors were rich, so they bought slaves. From among these slaves that were bought by her family, one manifested in Sofivi." Wondering how this knowledge was passed on, I per-

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sisted, "But how will they know if their family owned slaves? Will they ask the Vodunwo? Or do they know from their families?" Richard turned to me, still listening as Sofivi continued to speak, then responded, "It is an oral history that people know through word of mouth to this day. In her family, for example, you will see that there are people who are very, very dark . . . because the people from the North were very, very dark." Though Richard mentions oral histories, both he and Sofivi assess the presence of histories of enslavement in their lives through embodied factors. Local people familiar with Tchamba worship interpret Sofivi's body as a visible indication of her northern heritage.

Ewe people view the bodies of the descendants of enslaved persons based on complex local concepts of skin tone, race, and ethnic difference. Though northern areas were ethnically heterogeneous, Ewe people referred to the entire region as *adonko*, or "the slave country," since they viewed people from those regions as potential captives.[7] Sofivi's and Richard's recognition of northern people based on their "very, very dark" skin exists within global frameworks of racial and cultural hierarchy that were historically formalized within global frameworks of European domination (Trouillot 1994, 148).[8] That Ewe communities evaluate and assess the bodies of the descendants of the enslaved based on skin tone further contributes to the unspoken narratives of identity at play within danced rituals for Mama Tchamba. These interpretations indicate the inversion of historical hierarchies since the incorporation of dark-skinned others, rather than those with light or fair skin, indicates proximity to power in Tchamba dances.

In Mama Tchamba performances, domestic enslavement is remembered by embracing otherness as an essential aspect of Ewe identity and many Ewe family structures. Since the vast majority of enslaved Africans sold through the domestic trade in Togo were brought from northern Togo, many from a place called Tchamba, Tchamba spirits often manifest as foreigners clothed in northern or Muslim clothing carrying objects imported from the imagined and resymbolized North (see figure 1.1). To attract these Vodunwo, performers dance wearing kufi hats and sparkling head ties and place bits of white chalk and bowls of kola nuts imported from the north in teetering piles on altars (Rosenthal 1998, 113). During events honoring Tchamba, devotees carnivalize and exaggerate imagined Muslim aesthetics by modeling their adornment after the dress and practices of Muslim Hausa traders and other groups understood to come from "the North."[9] These performances also indicate and embrace the ways that Ewe identity intertwines with the imported religious and cultural practices brought from the North by enslaved women, whom Ewe devotees frame as practicing Muslims.[10]

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FIGURE 1.1. The adornments of enslaved northerners, including kufi hats, sequined scarves, imported textiles, and Islamic prayer beads, called *misbaha*, in the left hand of the priestess on the far left (2015). Photograph by author.

Carnivalesque elaborations on histories of enslavement by Tchamba performers exhibit the tensions among what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995, 3) distinguishes as historical processes ("what happened") and the mechanisms of sharing knowledge, stories, and performances about "what happened" with others ("what is said to have happened"). These performances of scenarios from the past capture "what is said to have happened" and what Ewe communities judge as most important for understanding contemporary circumstances, rather than any positivist portrayal of "what happened."[11] The mechanisms through which Tchamba devotees remember and share histories present northern regions and peoples as historical sources of power and wealth that play a significant role in local concepts of ethnic identity and power dynamics in the present.

Sofivi provides one example of how devotees of Mama Tchamba incorporate narratives of domestic enslavement into family histories of prosperity. Tchamba devotees claim the historical legacies of the domestic trade as embodied memories passed down within families. In such ways, Ewe people incorporate and interpret the otherness of northerners—based on religion, dress, and embodied

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markers, like skin color—into narratives of personal identity and family history. After exploring how practitioners represent northern others, let us now turn to ways Tchamba performances depict power reversals, disputes, and complications among Ewe community members and northern spirits.

Dancing Mama Tchamba

Though choreographic practice functions differently within possession dance than in concert dances, Mama Tchamba devotees structure and prepare culturally legible and comprehensible movements.[12] As culturally decipherable patterns, symbols, and shapes (Browning 1995, 35), spirit possession dances are clearly choreographic, relating to the etymological root of the term *choreography*, which—when deconstructed in Greek into *choreo-*, meaning "dance" or "dancing," and *-graphy*, denoting "drawing" or "writing"—means "dance writing." Though performers improvise within culturally and collectively determined frameworks based on the movement patterns that best represent ancestors and nature Vodunwo, such "dance writings" (Browning 1995, 50) constitute forms of cultural literacy and unspoken communication.

In October 2015 Mamissi Sofivi held a ritual in Tsévié, Togo, to consult with Mama Tchamba. The ceremony was meant to address her loss and the implications of wrongdoing within the household since in a single year she had suffered the deaths of four close family members. Sofivi assumed that her family members had fallen sick and died owing to failures within the family to properly remember and honor the spirits, including those of their enslaved ancestors. She hosted a ritual that included performances for Tchamba as a means of navigating her own loss and communicating with her community, including her enslaved ancestors. Such performances are neither spontaneous nor unconscious. Practitioners performing in relationship with invisible spirits and power objects, like shackle bracelets and cowrie shells, use choreographic practices to reach into the past to preempt future difficulties.

Though the town of Tsévié is only an hour from the port city of Lomé by motorbike, the trip sometimes took me the better part of two hours. Riding in a shared van, crammed behind women holding babies and baskets of dried plantains and the "mate" sitting on the foldaway jump seat, I arrived at the gas station bus stop in Tsévié.[13] After choosing a motorcycle taxi, I sped toward Mamissi Sofivi's home compound, where ritual preparations had been underway since the dark of the morning.

The drummers were assembling when I arrived. The other devotees were reposed, the children circling from one area of the courtyard to another. The

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children arrived eager to learn, training both mind and memory by imitating their elders and disciplining their bodies to perform within the frameworks of the dances. When the drumming began in earnest, the trickles of laughter, experimentally struck drums, and the shifting of performers on the edge of Mamissi Sofivi's home courtyard coalesced into the multilayered crescendos of *brekete* drumming.[14] A group of women holding percussion sticks, seated across the courtyard from the drummers, joined the polyrhythms of the initial songs of the event.

The structure of dances for Tchamba necessitates three main stages: preparation, engagement, and conclusion. Performers prepare themselves to traverse the dance space with slower, calmer movements that hint at the short journey to come as they wait for the call of the lead drummer, marking the music by smoothly shifting their weight onto their right and then left feet while remaining in place. Following the signal of the drummers, dancers launch into the faster, energetic marching steps of Tchamba (see figure 1.2). Finally, each performer closes the dance with their own version of a short concluding motion, in which they stop marching as the body pitches forward and their arms slacken wearily as if dropping something at their feet.

Mamissi Sofivi's courtyard bustled with the efforts of dancers, singers, instrumentalists, and onlookers. As the music and the prompting of friends moved them, performers rose and lined themselves up shoulder to shoulder. The dances for Tchamba are all variations of walking. With downcast eyes, participants crouch low until their elbows seem able to brush their knees. Their feet shuffle forward as slightly bent arms slide across the frame of the body to bring balance to the swaying of the hips and the pumping motion of the lower legs that shoot out and come back together in alternation, moving the performers across the dirt-packed surface of the courtyard to face the drummers. After concluding their first pass of the dance, performers then return to their original spots with the same movements. A number of dancers traced a path from the onlookers on one side of the courtyard to the drummers on the other. One dancer shifted her weight in preparation, her movements easy and almost distracted as she waited for the music. She launched into the dance, her arms waving with languid grace as her simultaneously fluid and frenetic feet pumped purposeful steps away from the drummers. When she reached another pair of dancers, she released both arms forward as a type of punctuation and casually returned to her seat.

With soft hands and rigid feet, speedy steps and brushing arms, performers position themselves within ritually framed spaces in order to dramatize their relationships with enslaved spirits. In these cases, specialists perform to materialize the foot travels implied in oral histories of slave raiding. By moving repeatedly across the dance space, performers literally retrace their own steps

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FIGURE 1.2. Performers launch into exaggerated Tchamba walking steps, setting imported scarves in motion with their hands. Their feet part only slightly as they advance (2015). Photograph by author.

and those of their fellow dancers while figuratively reinscribing the histories of their ancestors and revisiting the historical paths that led to current situations of need or illness. Through the "act of stylization" (DeFrantz 2004, 73), a process of personal invention, performers manipulate set movement patterns, like simple walking, to invite Vodun spirits through physical changes in gesture, pace, and demeanor. As in Sofivi's ritual to inquire about the deaths in her family, individuals employ embodied techniques to trace the sources of contemporary circumstances of illness, poverty, and death to distant pasts by acknowledging obscured relationships among persons living and dead.

Reversals of Power in Tchamba Performance

Tchamba rituals reverse the power relationships between dominant and exploited parties so that practitioners must serve, appease, and please the spirits of the bought persons who inhabit their bodies and take control of their sacred spaces. By welcoming Tchamba spirits to command and orchestrate the lives of practitioners, rituals honoring bought persons also destabilize binary notions of the location of power and mastery by blurring the lines between masters and those mastered. Ewe categories of enslaved persons trouble and redefine easy distinctions between "us" and "them" and between foreigners and family.[15]

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Ewe danced enactments of journeys between the north and the south of Togo portray many narratives of the movements of enslaved northerners, who often became children and wives to the Ewe families they served (Rosenthal 1998, 131). For Tchamba devotees, reanimating the perspective of enslaved persons cannot be decoupled from the perspectives and subjectivities of the families who purchased them.[16] These stories of the descendants of enslaved and enslaving persons hosting the spirits of the enslaved in their bodies complicate the dichotomies through which many define the roles played by West Africans in the domestic and transatlantic slave trade. When the other is a part of the self, the process of dancing narratives of enslavement becomes a process of contending with the hegemony in the fibers of the self (Rushdy 1999, 227).

During Sofivi's ritual, initiated practitioners became possessed by the wild spirits of previously enslaved persons. They moved in distinctive ways that interrupted and recomposed their previous movements honoring Tchamba. At such times, practitioners abandoned the shuffling, stylized tread of the second phase of Mama Tchamba's walking dance step in favor of more variation, demonstrating the fusion of the worshipper with the spirit. The escalation of the dances and the transformations from the baseline of stylized steps to more grandiose gestures—through which the possessed make demands on all those present—demonstrate social, political, and historical transformations in status and authority.

In the midst of performing her own version of Tchamba's stylized step, a possessed priestess began to trail behind the others, dancing backward as her movements transitioned into the drunken quality of a danced spirit host. As the others continued to march forward, she relished a small area, returning to a limited patch of dirt and gliding backward on bobbing knees and backpedaling feet. Her feet began to cross, her arms to raise, the movements taking on a separate personality and intention. An attendant rose from the onlookers, running to her aid as if surprised by the sudden change in the movements of the dancer. She began to adjust the sequined scarves adorning the possessed priestess even as other initiated performers gathered to care for the priestess and the spirit of the bought person dancing her limbs. By the time four other women had gathered around her, the Tchamba spirit had modified the motion of the spirit host's arms and legs into commanding marching steps. Her movements sped into a rapid stomping triple step. As two women placed firm hands on her back, she stiffened in a half crouch with her knees bent. A priest dancing beside her seemed to challenge the drummer to play faster, beating out quick stomping rhythms on the ground and delaying the alternation of his legs. He tapped his feet frolicsomely, as if insisting on his way. He arrived at a point where libation had been poured and moved no further. An attendant came to his side. He initially resisted, causing a disruption in the dancing as two women tried to lead him to his seat. He lifted his foot

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high off the ground as if preparing to step onto a high platform. He stretched his body erect, pivoting on one foot as if off balance. Then, suddenly complying with the attendants surrounding him, with a vague smile on his face, he was led to his seat to receive offerings of libation and cooling perfume. Others, surrounding the first dancer in a tight huddle, poured libations of water from a plastic kettle before the woman's feet to appease the spirit visitor animating her body.

In the choreographic moment presented here, attending initiates called *senterua* cared for those dancers who became possessed by Tchamba spirits.[17] Before the moment when the spirit arrived, the two ritual choreographers, a hounoun and a mamissi, had interpreted the music based on their own stylistic requirements as a form of invitation and offering to the spirits. The man and woman had moved in line with a long row of other priests and priestesses, performing the same basic advancing, foot-thrusting steps. The surprise and sudden speed of the helper who came to the aid of the priestess indicated a recognizable change in the ways she was moving. The Vodunwo appropriated and transformed the movements of both dancers, slowing down those of the hounoun and prompting more insistent gestures by the mamissi, who stomped out a buoyant, crossing triple step as she raised her arms with a loose-limbed, "drunken" ease of movement. Entranced performers emphasize the weightiness of their bodies by taking up larger swaths of space or by cutting the lines of the dance when they cross their feet. These dances emphasize shifts in control and the need for the enslaved to reorder and challenge dangerous consumption. By illustrating the need for collective voices and including even stigmatized ancestors within the social fabric of Ewe communities, practitioners navigate complex shifts in social hierarchies.

Through embodied shifts of tempo, Tchamba spirits take control of the pace of the ritual and force Tchamba devotees to modify their behavior and movements. The hounoun and mamissi who fell into trance abandoned the small, concatenated steps necessitated by movements inviting Mama Tchamba. As Tchamba arrived, the priestess crossed her feet and intensified her tempo; the priest, by contrast, took gaping steps and slowed his movements until he was slowly pivoting on one foot, as if suspended mid-movement, rather than stepping forward into the rhythms of Tchamba (see figure 1.3). Ewe people interpret movements like the abrupt disruption of prevailing choreographic patterns seen in the ritual I described as the work of Tchamba spirits who take control of the pace of the ritual, often by intensifying or interrupting the dancing to demand that those present perform in new ways or offer additional gifts, like the libation poured for the priestess. Especially at moments when the enslaved arrive and wish to demonstrate their presence and dominance, performers

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FIGURE 1.3. Entranced Tchamba devotees break the rhythm and defy the patterns of the Tchamba steps and drumming rhythms by changing the pace. The priest's feet stretch wide apart in opposition to the usual parameters of movements for Tchamba (2015). Photograph by author.

intentionally defy and displace the rhythmic structure of Tchamba dances by accelerating and retarding movements to indicate their control of the space and the ways that debts to the enslaved take precedence over previous power structures. The descendants of enslaving families view such rituals in terms of their obligations to the spirits of enslaved persons, through whom their families gained wealth and security.

The role reversal of Islamic others controlling the lives and bodies of Ewe performers, rather than wealthy Ewe people exploiting and controlling the labor of northerners, represents understandings of the tenuousness of power and affluence. Mamissi Sofivi later identified these shifts in movements as demonstrations of power, claiming that "once Tchamba arrives, the [spirits] unveil everything and impose rituals [on us] to arrest misfortune. The Tchamba spirits will show us these rituals through the movements of their entranced adepts" (Dansso 2017). These unfolding encounters with the spirits of previously enslaved people demonstrate that Tchamba practitioners question nineteenth-century (European) notions of memory as a fixed record of past experience (Gyatso 1992). The ongoing negotiation of these ritual gestures suggests that memories constitute a "system of categorization in which the past is recreated in ways appropriate for the present" (Lopez 1992, 36). Through performances of hierarchical tensions, Ewe people present their bodies, including skin tones,

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as indicators of kinship with enslaved strangers from the North whose spirits return to take control of sacred places.

Ewe people interpret histories of enslavement in relation to current political tensions between north and south that Togolese are also loath to speak of aloud. President Faure Gnassingbé and his father, Eyadéma, belong to another minority group from northern Togo, called Kabre people (not to be confused with people from Tchamba), who have held power in the neocolonial nation of Togo since 1967 (Piot 1999, 3).[18] Even as tensions mount between northern groups and Ewe people in response to Gnassingbé's stranglehold on the presidency, Vodun practitioners continue to perform dances through which they embody northerners and stage opportunities for metaphysical exchanges with northern "others."[19] Relations between the north and south were amicable before the bloody conflicts between Ewe people and northerners over control of the government in the 1990s (Piot 1999, 159). Since performers intentionally avoid making rigid historical connections that would exclude further interpretation and accumulations of meanings and complexities, these performances remain flexible enough to evoke current political tensions and danger as well as past exploitative relationships.

Ewe Vodun practitioners simultaneously communicate about slavery and contemporary politics through tactile, acoustic, and visual means. They do so by compounding signifiers through adornments affiliated with northerners, movements hinting at bondage and migration, and performances of dramatized tensions and danced ritual communication occurring between Ewe people and the embodied spirits of ethnic others. Even the fear of economic decline and resulting poverty and illness as repercussions of unpaid debts of remembrance to Tchamba pantheons may house memories not only of the financial downturn experienced soon after the decline of the transatlantic slave trade in the 1880s but also of the ways that the economy suffered during the political turmoil from 1991 to 1994 that was inflamed, in part, by violent Ewe opposition to Eyadéma's regime (Piot 1999, 47; Venkatachalam 2015, 4). During this historical moment, "development money fled, expatriates returned to Europe, [and] shops were closed for months" (Piot 1999, 47–48). Using a processual approach to indexing histories, Ewe devotees claim past hegemony over northern spirits (see Brivio 2016, 63) while also performing their experience of the current political power of Kabre politicians and the spiritual power of enslaved persons—all originating from northern regions—over their economic and physical well-being.

These interpretations represent the "potentiality" (Rush 1999, 61) through which practitioners use Tchamba performances to remember and reinterpret

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countless circumstances, themes, and histories, as they express views displaced from political discourses. In other words, owing to the multivalence of Tchamba dances, performers can interpret multiple time periods and contemporary circumstances through ritualized narratives of shifts in control and the tensions among dominance, service, and cooperation. Tchamba performers weave histories together in order to apply them to circumstances of illness, death, and debt faced by the descendants of enslaved people. They supplement and reinforce oral histories of enslavement through personal experiences of ongoing arbitration and shifts in "movement dialectic[s]" (A. Roberts 2013, 60, 84). Performers also make space for interpretations of political changes, while refusing to assert rigid applications and meanings for each movement. They also demonstrate the instability of power and the plasticity of identity through carnivalesque excess and exaggeration (Bakhtin [1965] 1984, 18–19). By offering gifts of libation, dance, music, and delicacies imported from the northern regions, practitioners seek to please Tchamba spirits and to allay fears of harmful repercussions for neglecting to honor them. Entranced adepts of Mama Tchamba demonstrate shifts in power and dramatize unvoiced fears of the generational consequences of the sale and purchase of bought persons while also reversing sociopolitical hierarchies in the space of the dance.

Unspeakable Fears

During our interview Mamissi Sofivi grew increasingly nervous. The small group of visitors who had gathered to listen and comment gradually left as I continued to ask about Tchamba. Sofivi expressed a sense of impending danger. When I asked Sofivi about the importance of Tchamba, she began to answer, paused, and then picked up a plastic water kettle. She poured libation for Tchamba as she said a soft prayer, then admitted:

> Tchamba is . . . very, very powerful. So powerful that it is making everyone afraid. . . . I am afraid for myself when I speak of these things. . . . That is why everyone else has returned to their homes, because they were becoming afraid when we started to speak of these things. It is because of this that I poured the libation. . . . I will explain it to you since I know that you are doing your research, but usually we would not explain. They are things that we do not commonly speak of.[20] This is a very dangerous Vodun. To make sacrifices for them, you must just put your hand on the animal, and it will suddenly die. If Tchamba becomes angry with you, you will just begin to bleed out and die. (Dansso 2015)

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Though Ewe people carefully retain histories of domestic enslavement, they often convey them through unwritten, embodied forms of communication rather than discussing them openly. They do so in part because Ewe people historically buried bought persons as "bad dead" outside of the village in "the wilderness" (Wendl 1999, 114). Since these northern spirits could not return as proper ancestors, they became malicious, vengeful spirits.[21] Even the fact that Mama Tchamba spirits do not allow the use of knives for animal sacrifices to them (Dansso 2015) may reference ways enslaved persons were forced to give lifetimes of service, bloodless deaths for which the spirits now require person-purchasing families to show gratitude through memory performances (Rush 2013, 116).

Tchamba spirits attack the bodies and economic prosperity of their own descendants as well as the descendants of the families who purchased them. They punish those who neglect the necessary rituals. Performing rituals incorrectly may also result in Tchamba's wrath, expressed through illness or sudden death. Mamissi Sofivi once reasoned that many people in Tsévié who were "born to the Vodunwo" could not stop practicing Vodun because "if you neglect them, they will harm you" (Dansso 2015). Devotees conceive of memories of Tchamba as realities that can animate their limbs in new ways and as insidious forces that threaten their lives and livelihoods.

By demonstrating shifts of power and the interconnectivity between bought persons and their devotees, Tchamba dances mold silences as foundations for new narratives. Despite Tobias Wendl's (1999, 114) suggestion that the chaining of enslaved people to prevent escape became one of the major symbolic attributes of enslaved status, I saw no chains represented in any of the dances for Tchamba. The shackle bracelets that Vodun practitioners call *Tchambagan*, the "metal of Tchamba" (Rush 2013, 116), and the cowries that Sofivi mentioned as the currency of her wealthy ancestors were often evident on Tchamba altars. Such elements of ritual remembrance of enslavement were also included in ritual choreographies for Tchamba as adornments and jewelry. Through the inclusion of objects assembled on the body rather than on a stationary altar, Tchamba dances offer different and complementary perspectives on enslavement compared with Tchamba altars. Where Tchamba altars present objects in an arrangement intended to represent the body of the enslaved prepared for burial, spirit possession presents the living, dissenting, and commanding bodies of the enslaved as part of the social fabric of Ewe communities. By unfolding interactions between spirits and spirit hosts in ways that redefine sacred spaces choreographically, practitioners acknowledge their participation in and contributions to such systems as a means of repositioning themselves within interpreted and localized elements of foreign cultures through the walking of

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the body. By performing memories in multivalent ways that link certain types of recollection to specific, though imagined, landscapes, practitioners conjoin place and memory through lived experience. Since Ewe community members often choose not to give voice to fraught histories of the slave trade, choosing instead to perform and convey them through unspoken forms of communication, choreographies, and gestures that display the internal conflicts of slave-holding West Africans serves as a pathway through which community members communicate about these histories to outsiders and young people.

Intersubjectivity and Intergenerational Transmission

Tchamba performances enact a version of intersubjectivity, the consolidation of personal and collective concern, as a tool for communication across difference. I follow literary scholar Ashraf Rushdy in defining *intersubjectivity* as the intersection between individual and collective experience, essentially, the ability of individuals to see others as parts of the self (Rushdy 1994, 129, 132). Tchamba choreographies fusing northern spirits with southern worshippers demonstrate that "memory always lies on the border between self and other. The body constitutes the frontier of difference and sameness, a sieve through which historical facts are negotiated through remembrance, oblivescence, and signifying games of representation" (M. Roberts and A. Roberts 1996, 41). At moments when Tchamba spirits break prevailing patterns, their movements open paths for multiple interpretations of the behavior of the spirit. Such intersubjective choreographies involve the ability to recognize other persons as extensions of one's own body and consciousness and to acknowledge individuals as contiguous with larger communities, including both human and nonhuman persons.

Through structured improvisational movements, including dramatic breaks or pauses in brisk, stylized walking steps meant to portray the experiences and communicate the perspectives of enslaved ancestors, Ewe Vodun practitioners question the importance of the self and the notion of individuality. Communities use structured improvisation, ritual choreographies developed within culturally determined frameworks, to foster collectivity and extend its limits. Practitioners employ processes of embodied utterance to collapse the barriers between the self and others, between northern spirits and Ewe bodies, and between various time periods and locations. They posit ways the actions of an ancestor are not separate from the actions of their children and how inherited debts transform the lives of entire families and communities, rather than merely the individual. In this way, Vodun practice treats the full life text of the individual, including mental, physical, economic, and spiritual ailments, with-

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out "teasing apart . . . the body from the mind or from the numerous souls that make up an individual in all his or her overlapping with totemic plants, animals, deities and ancestors" (Rosenthal 1998, 42). Ewe Vodun practitioners examine the bonds of violence and exchange between themselves and those they identify as northerners by using the past as a lens for the present. Tchamba performers present techniques through which intersubjectivity serves as a means of constructing territories of memories and mapping internalized mnemonic geographies of enslavement. Practitioners place their own situations in dialogue with the plights, triumphs, travels, and exchanges of their forebears. Through such efforts Tchamba performers participate in the maintenance of spiritual legacies that reframe understandings of distant places. Communities foster social cohesion and intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge through ongoing intersubjective performances.

Performers also use their bodies to activate sites and convey difficult histories to young initiates and the uninitiated alike through various realms of experience. In Vodun rituals, past and present narratives are layered to construct new interpretations of the past that build on and reframe past narratives. Many competing versions of historical events accumulate, displace one another, overlap, and merge depending on the social usefulness of various versions of histories. These debates—often taking place in Ewe contexts in the form of ritual performances—are the fertile ground on which groups adapt historical imaginaries. Yet Tchamba dances, as evidenced by the multiplicity of danced and spoken interpretations of music and movement by Ewe community members, constitute evocative mnemonic processes, rather than direct representations of events. These movements reveal the bare bones of historical narratives in the moment of creation, reinterpretation, and debate. During Sofivi's ritual for Tchamba, the young uninitiated girls joined the dancing from the slightly removed refuge of the porch as the adult dancers occupied the courtyard, dancing toward and away from the drummers.

Two girls stood side by side across the porch from me as I watched avidly, hoping to internalize the steps before my turn to dance. Eva, a girl of nine who danced with sophisticated grace, and Sophie, a jokester of seven often in trouble for not taking the dances seriously enough for the sensibilities of her instructors and elders, stood side by side across the porch from me. The drummer stood, while the other participants sat on wooden benches on either side of the porch. Many sang or played small percussion sticks as they watched the two young girls traverse the space. Their bodies bent far over as they inched their feet slowly forward. Eva's hands hung below her knees, her head cocked as if in grief, pain, or exhaustion. Her feet shot forward as her legs straightened at intervals. When her feet left the ground, she carefully flexed them,

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showing the whole sole of her foot. The girls' feet never moved far from each other as they sustained a syncopated gallop forward, alternating their feet as if they were enchained by invisible threads. Their arms continued to wave across their bodies as the movements of both arms and legs wove between the rhythm as if evading the downbeats. At times they appeared to dance to music that I could not hear, or perhaps as if their bodies—feet, hands, knees, elbows, and arms—made their own whispering music as they wound their way across, a melody hidden beneath the rhythms of Tchamba. Their heels slapped down in dialogue with the sounds of the percussion sticks and the hollow, jarring clang of a rusty metal barrel.

Through whispering gestures and familiar rhythms, uninitiated girls learn the movements through which practitioners invite Tchamba spirits to join the celebrations of the living (see figure 1.4). Through the symbolism of stylized walking and implied ties to northern regions through adornment, ritual choreographies provide a path into histories of enslavement and entice observers and performers to learn more. Yet, by participating in such performances, these young performers also add the motion of their bodies—their foibles, missteps, personalities, and individual heritage—to the histories being woven within dances honoring the spirits of ancestors purchased as bought persons and transported from homes and villages in northern Togo to foreign southern coastlands. Even as apprentices, the youngest members of the association—the uninitiated young girls—actually coproduce histories about their communities and encounters with outsiders and participate in lived and vibrantly enfleshed history lessons.

While I was attending Mamissi Sofivi's Tchamba ritual, Sofivi invited me to join the dances along with some of the young girls: *My feet pounded out an insistent shuffling triple step next to five young girls. Though we all danced with elbows akimbo and forearms crossing in front of our bodies, each of us danced in our own style. Some moved their arms as if gently waving a skirt in front of their legs, others as if rhythmically brushing something from their thighs. I labored to keep time, my heels hitching on shallow depressions, as my feet moved over the uneven surface of the porch.* The danced theories promoting the necessity of acknowledging inheritance from masters and mastered alike in Tchamba movements apply to my own personal identity as a Liberian American. As a descendant of both the native Liberian Gola people, who inhabited Liberia's capital, Monrovia, and the African American freedpersons who drove them from the area when they established Liberia as an independent African republic in 1847, my identity and heritage hinge on a series of transatlantic passages and hierarchical inversions.[22] As I perform Tchamba, I dance and stumble toward my own understandings of the paths through which Ewe religious practices forge connections between histo-

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FIGURE 1.4. The author and other uninitiated apprentices demonstrate the small, enchained steps of Tchamba (2015). Photograph by Dodou Njie. Used by permission.

ries of enslavement and present realities. I add my own embodied harmony to the chorus of enacted assertions of kinship, hegemony, and passage inherent to Tchamba ritual choreographies.

Conclusion

Ewe Vodun communities use spirited choreographies to assuage debts to the spirits of enslaved persons. Within dance spaces and through the interplay between performing and interpreting those performances, devotees overturn and question political and economic hierarchies. Tchamba practitioners also navigate fears that reprisals by the uneasy spirits of the previously enslaved might manifest as an economic downturn owing to political conflicts in their small, neocolonial nation. Ewe women dance their narratives from positions as ritual specialists, dance masters, skilled choreographers, and local historians. Emphasizing these roles, this study illustrates how attention to embodied communication can broaden ethnographic practice. The combined testimonies and ritual performances of the women ritual specialists reveal the bare bones of grassroots historical narratives in the moment of creation and reinterpretation. The danced crossing and marking of the space constitute culturally specific gestures that imply and unearth often-unspoken narratives of enslaved women. By performing these movements, dancers train their bodies to remember the narratives that their gestures invoke and participate in processes of interpretation

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through which they continue to fashion personalized narratives of enslavement. In short, Ewe Vodun communities engage with obscured legacies of slavery and with incompletely forgotten women's histories by creating sites for healing through performances of memory.

NOTES

1. Ewe people primarily reside between the Volta region of Ghana on the east and the Mono River on the western side of the Republic of Benin. On an orthographic note, the terms *Vodun* and *Vodou* indicate separate but related bodies of knowledge and religious practice. Vodou commonly refers to Haitian Vodou, while Vodun is associated with the Bight of Benin, especially coastal indigenous religious practices in present-day Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria.

2. *North* with a capital *N* indicates the imagined place of authority that Tchamba devotees create within rituals.

3. Though scholars have problematized the term *tradition* as relating African practices to a static past (Barber 1997, 1; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, xii; Drewal 1992, xiv), I use the term because the "traditionalization" (Gilman 2004; Hymes 1975, 353–354) of religious dance practices continues among Ewe people. Communities rhetorically affix the term *traditional* to certain practices as a means of lending them credence and authority (Gilman 2004, 33). Yet boundaries between "traditional," "modern," and "popular" practices are "fluid, permeable, and historically contingent" (Reed 2003, 10).

4. "Mamissi" is a Vodun title meaning "Mami priestess" or "wife of Mami." Communities also use the word *Tchambasi* (wife of Tchamba spirits) to specifically designate devotees of Mama Tchamba (Montgomery 2019, 60).

5. Though there are no clear records to indicate when practices honoring Mama Tchamba spirits emerged in their present form, ritual practices associated with spirits understood to originate from the north of Togo continue to grow in popularity.

6. Anthropologist Charles Piot (2001, 159) notes that Kabre people in northern Togo still have cultural memories of slave raids by many groups, including the ancestors of present-day Ewe people, and that some villages even paid human tributes to keep raiders at bay.

7. Though the majority of Africans enslaved by Ewe families were of Kabre and Tchamba (or Tamberma) origin, enslaved people purchased from northern Togo included Tem, Bassar, Mossi, Hausa, and Moba as well (Rosenthal 1998, 44, 110; Wendl 1999, 113–114).

8. Anthropologists Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1994, 170) and Jemima Pierre (2008) both frame colorism in predominantly Black nations as an important aspect of local ways of classifying social strata based on race.

9. I use the word *carnivalize* to encompass the imaginative excesses theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin in which "all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable" ([1965] 1984, 5, 18–19).

10. Alessandra Brivio (2016, 169–170) notes that although not all northern enslaved persons were practicing Muslims, Ewe people affiliate all of them with Muslim practices and dress as signs of enslavement and northern origin.

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11. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor defines such scenarios as "meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behavior, and potential outcomes" (2003, 28).

12. Dance studies scholar Anthea Kraut argues that Western audiences and scholars of staged concert dances often create a distinction between cultural traditions that they present as the product of anonymous performers and Western artists with "intellect" and "intellectual property." Drawing from anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku (2001, 35), Kraut (2009, 77) observes that traditionalized dance contexts still boast dance patrons, masters, choreographers, and performers.

13. The mate is an employee who collects the cash paid for journeys and returns change to passengers to avoid distractions for the driver.

14. Brekete drumming ensembles require rusty metal barrels and the *gon gon* drum borrowed from Dagbamba people in northern Ghana to produce the distinctive sound of the musical style, which entered Ewe music styles in the 1930s (Friedson 2009, 26). Drummers secure gon gon with a shoulder band and often move among the dancers to interact with the performers and contribute to the efficacy of ritual petitions for healing from northern spirits.

15. In Ewe there is no clear or direct word for "enslave," and even bought persons referred to those who purchased them as *afeto* and *afeno*, father and mother of the house, the Ewe equivalent of "sir" and "ma'am" (Rosenthal 1998, 130).

16. These complex paradigms are also at play in Octavia Butler's 1979 novel *Kindred*, in which an African American woman's body becomes a historical anchor through which she is forced back in time to rescue the slave master who is also her distant ancestor. Yet, in Tchamba performances, these dynamics between master and mastered play out based on markers of ethnicity and religious differences rather than through clear racial distinctions. Both the novel and Tchamba spirit possession rituals resist and confound neat binaries in favor of processes of coping with and assuaging debt.

17. The senterua support priests and priestesses and care for Vodun adepts once they fall into a trance. Such assistants may pour white powder, water, or liquor over the entranced performer; lead enraptured devotees into the shrine; or change them into appropriate clothing to please and represent whichever Vodun manifests (Rosenthal 1998, 265).

18. Although ethnically distinct from groups originating in the town of Tchamba, Kabre people were also enslaved by coastal families, and the term *kableto* ("person from Kabre") was sometimes used as a synonym for the term *adonko*, meaning "slave country" (Wendl 1999, 114).

19. On September 6, 2017, BBC News reported how, since the summer of 2017, Togolese protesters have called for an end to what they call the "Gnassingbé Dynasty." "Togo Protests against Faure Gnassingbé," *BBC News*, September 6, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-41174005.

20. Owing to the social taboos around publicly acknowledging the heritage from enslaved persons, festival planning committees in Togo typically exclude dances for Mama Tchamba from government-funded festivities meant to portray regional diversity and celebrate local migration histories (Brivio 2016, 159).

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21. Of the burial practices of enslaved Africans in Jamaica, historian Vincent Brown (2008, 65) notes that *duppies*, spirits of the dead, could harm or aid the living and that proper burial was necessary to send the spirits on their way and to ensure their benevolence toward the living. Since neither of these conditions was met in the case of domestically enslaved northerners in Togo, devotees continue to pacify and negotiate with these powerful spirits to avoid physical and financial ruin.

22. My Americo-Liberian ancestors first became Americans through Middle Passage journeys that brought them from various parts of the African continent. Many returned to West Africa between 1820 and 1867 through the American Colonization Society to reclaim national ties to Africa through conquest and colonial ambition (Ciment 2016). My parents left Liberia for the United States as teenagers in the 1970s to seek asylum from the Liberian Civil War.

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