

Foreword

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The chapters in this volume collectively observe that the body, as expressed in embodied practices, ways of knowing, and spiritualities, rightly warrants increasing amounts of scholarly attention. As Yolanda Covington-Ward and Jeanette S. Jouili remind us in their introduction, in African and African diaspora religions there is a new way of understanding that calls into question the mind-body dualisms inherited from Western models of interpretation, which have long influenced the way scholars construct religious realities.

Most impressively, the contributors to this work bring recent scholarship on embodiment to bear on a host of disciplines under current scholarly investigation in the humanities and the study of religion. I name only a few of the broader themes here. *Embodying Black Religion in Africa and Its Diasporas* addresses the ways in which conceptions of self and personhood are intricately caught up in ritual and bodily practices. A much-needed focus is given to embodied selves as relational beings and to the processes and factors that influence, give shape to, and constitute intersubjectivity. At several points in the volume, critical appraisals of the body and modes of bodily representation are set forth, including the radicalization of bodies and their presence in different religious, political, and cultural contexts.

The work also offers insightful reflections on the subjects of embodiment and the arts, communal formation, ethnicity, funerary rites, health, immigration, gender, sexuality, spiritual beliefs, and spirit possession. Consequently, it succeeds, as the title hints, in furthering a welcome discussion between African studies and African diaspora scholarship. The reader will pick up readily and

easily enough on these generous gleanings in the introduction and in the essays that make up this volume.

What I offer here is a reflection on the concerns of the various authors in this work, who agree with a central thesis: only by taking the body paradigm seriously will we be able to bring embodied practices into the understanding of the totality of religion, particularly practices that are often marginalized in Western traditions because they do not neatly fit into the models and modes of Western religious interpretation. By presenting African and African diaspora religious practices in a new way, this volume enables us to truly see ourselves! Consequently, the understanding of African indigenous religions as embodied traditions might turn out to be not an alternative but a central method of understanding African spirituality, cultures, and societies.

Throughout my career, my mindset and scholarly approach have led me to the understanding that there are multiple ways of being religious. While texts and myths are incredibly valuable, a significant entry into the understanding of African religion is through praxis—the lived traditions that are embodied in sacred festivals, ceremonies, and rituals, and the material culture that animates African spiritual traditions. Indeed, in the past decades, even scholars of the so-called world religions have turned to these ways of interpretation and genres to provide a more in-depth understanding of their respective traditions, demonstrating their recognition of the importance of embodied practices and relationships in religions.

The phenomenological interpretation of religious traditions with which I began my academic journey in the late 1970s—particularly the works of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty—recognized the pivotal importance of religious experience and practices, particularly as they relate to the body, intentionality, and relationality. Forms of African indigenous religions are deeply embedded in the imagery of the body, especially as revealed through many cultural expressions. The body provides the most cardinal metaphors and symbols for understanding how one encounters and relates to the multiple deities, devotees, and sacred persons and officiants of the religious community we encounter.

One way to observe and analyze this centrality of the body is through the study of oral traditions and histories, particularly proverbs, the wisdom texts of African elders and the *open sesame* to African worldviews and cultures. For example, when an elderly person has a faraway look and sighs deeply in the presence of a group, the Yoruba will quickly say as a response: “Oro gbe inu agba se hun!” Literally translated, this means “The word (or thought) is embedded in the deep stomach.” That is, the painful and joyful silences of the elders

as expressed in deep sighs are presumed to be kept in the stomach, which is conceived as the womb and the home of wisdom. In other words, it is the stomach, not only the brain as in the Western context, that houses our intellectual capacities. The Amharic word for “lover” is *hode*, which means the stomach—thus, in Ethiopia, interrelational experience is connected again to the stomach, not to the heart!

A major expression of embodied practice is the ritual of spirit possession. I agree with Paul Stoller’s (1995) critique of the Western fascination with and fixation on spirit possession, particularly on spirit possession as text. While this is an important dimension of embodiment, it is only one aspect of religious phenomena that not everyone necessarily has access to. Zones of contact between Islam and indigenous religion, for example, include subversive elements of possession with regard to gender and identity. For example, women in some African Muslim cultures are able to gain access to different sectors of society through possession. As such, there are elements of embodiment and relationality in the phenomenon of spirit possession that could be highlighted here, including in modern-day Pentecostal and evangelical traditions and Sufism. Similarly, we are reminded of the fascinating study conducted by Aisha Beliso-De Jesús (2015) on the centrality and pivotal role of possession in Orisha traditions.

Embodiment, as an object of study, cannot be divorced from the discussion of an individual’s relational connection with the human, animal, nonhuman, and natural world around them. In general, Africans frown upon a life of loneliness devoid of relational connection to others. There is a tree that grows in the western region of Africa that by nature stands alone in the forest without the benefit of sharing space with other trees. This loner tree, the opposite of other trees growing together in the forest, is referred to by the Yoruba as *oko*—that is, “the oko tree that grows alone.” Not having any connection with others, it is often employed to describe the relationship of avoidable loneliness that causes an individual to detach from his or her community and turn into an antisocial human being.

So how should we understand African traditional and diasporic practices that Western epistemological theories have not been able to decipher and that do not fit within Western Protestant-centric conceptions of religion? These include empirical observation of such traditions and practices as in twin cultures (*Ibeji*), so-called magical practices (*Oogun*), born-to-die children, children of repeated birth (*abiku*), the display of medicinal power, and actively spoken words that alter our understanding that words not only have meaning but enforce a practical action and effect (the ritual specialist on his way to the farm uses his extrasensory gift to perceive danger in the forest; he faces a tree, and

like a prophet says, “This tree is harboring something negative” and then curses the tree, and by the evening, when he returns from the farm, the leaves of the tree have withered). Why is a tradition (such as African Christianity) willing and able to attest to such a miraculous event when cited in the biblical scriptures and yet either denies its authenticity in African religion or condemns it as purely diabolical? These are occurrences and activities that I grew up witnessing and experienced as a teenager living in African villages and towns. Western scholarship has come up with vocabularies to suggest that these are “magical” things, excluding them from the domain of proper religion. The epistemological violence done to the understanding of African ways of being religious by the Western mindset is immeasurable and reflects why today appointed texts, often termed *classic readings*, are chosen for the education of graduate students of color that do not have relevance to their lived experiences or to the realities of their lives.

When African studies was beginning to emerge as a credible field of knowledge, philosophy and religion focused on systems of thought and beliefs. Scholars paid very little or no attention to the significance of the practice of religion, and when they did, in the context of anthropological studies, they left out the centrality and importance of the body in ritual discourse. In fact, many books describing African belief systems were shaped by conversations in Europe, where religious worldview scholarship was tailored toward the understanding of God and belief in the Western philosophy of religion. The critical discipline of the philosophy of religion arose from this context and mindset. These trends resulted in the absence of embodiment-oriented analysis in the study of African indigenous religion and a disciplinary focus on myths and orature, which in turn reflected the text-oriented methodology employed for the study of Abrahamic traditions.

In the remaining section, I explore how Africans, particularly the Yoruba in West Africa, deploy messages of the body to explain religious sentiments, philosophies, and practices. I argue that the embodied practices of African religious traditions provide not only alternate modes of interpreting experiences of being religious but also central modes of being religious. The authors in this volume argue that only by taking them seriously will we be able to bring these practices into the picture, practices that are often marginalized in Western traditions because they do not neatly fit into the models and modes of Western religious interpretation.

In Yoruba cosmology, *ori*, often termed the source of wisdom in Western philosophy and primarily seen as an embodied spiritual part of humans, has the most important and influential presence. There are two forms of *ori*, the physical

ori, which is the outer head, and the spiritual ori, which is the inner head. In Yoruba oral tradition, both are regarded as relational, and, as such, both are spiritual. However, it is believed that the inner head acts as a conduit for the physical head. References like *ori mogunje* (“It is one’s ori that guarantees the potency of the ritual specialist’s/healer’s medicine”) and *ori l’onise* (“It’s one’s ori that assures one’s fortune in life”) illustrate that ori is central to determining one’s success in life.

In one of the Yoruba myths of creation, after Obatala, the Yoruba deity, molds human beings, they travel to the home of Ajala on their way to the earth, where they pick their ori. It is assumed that one’s choice of ori will determine one’s fortune in the world. Similarly, in a situation of stiff competition among the group, the one with the strongest ori will win. This, of course, touches on the question of predestination and choice. Consequently, diviners pay a lot of attention to how one’s ori dictates one’s fortune in the world. Even in naming ceremonies, ori forms prefixes in names such as Orimolade (“ori is the one that knows who will be the king”), Orire (“good ori”), and Orimolusi (“ori knows the future”).

In fact, it could be argued that ori, also a deity in the Yoruba pantheon, is regarded as more sacred than the rest of the deities (*Orisha*), and that is because the ori is a true physical manifestation, more visible and tangible than the other orisa. While the orisa may reveal themselves via images and material objects and sometimes in human representations of kings and twins, they are not humans but rather superhumans who are above human temporalities. The significance of the ori suggests that the Yoruba cosmology posits that humans are potential gods, which in turn reflects divinization of the human body.

That Matter matters is a truism in African religious traditions—in fact, matter is central to religious experience. Material practices are not a manipulation of the sacred, but the sacred itself. The so-called taboos are a worthy illustration of this point. Food taboos are very common in the African context; different individuals, as well as communities and settlements, have to follow certain food restrictions. As Lawrence E. Sullivan rightly puts it, “Because the mouth controls contact with the cosmic powers that order one’s shape and meaning, the symbolism of diet distinguishes groups and qualities of relations within a given society” (1988, 295). Beliefs surrounding food and dietary restrictions clearly demonstrate the materiality of religion, where food is understood not simply as a source of sustenance in a physical sense but rather also in a spiritual sense. Moreover, food taboos are linked to totemic concepts and ideas and therefore are not to be overlooked in religious practice. As Émile Durkheim explains in his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1961), totems are the symbols of

god and the symbols of the clan; hence, obeying totemic restrictions is an expression of utter respect.

For example, as a twin in Yoruba traditions, I am forbidden from eating the flesh of a monkey, partially because of the religious affinity between twins and the colobus monkey. Twins and monkeys are both held sacred by certain Yoruba, and twin lineages represent multiple births, which are revered in Yoruba traditions. Among the BaKongo, twins could not eat the double-spotted leopard, which was considered to mediate between the visible realm of humans and the invisible realm of spirits. To speak more broadly about communities, in the city of Ile Oluji, Nigeria, the inhabitants are forbidden from eating buffalo meat because of the belief that the buffalo led the inhabitants of the city to safety in the past.

Beliefs regarding food function both in a direct sense (i.e., food taboos) and in an allegorical sense. As James Aho argues in *The Orifice as Sacrificial Site*, “The experience of our personal bodies reflects the workings of our social arrangements.” Private entry and exit zones, that is, our orifices, are “doorways out of and penetration routes into the social bodies of which we are members” (2002, 10). In the Yoruba context, the proverb “ona ofun, ona orun” (the way to the belly is also the way to heaven/death) teaches that gluttony can lead to physical and social death. The idea here is that one should fend for what one eats, since gluttony can lead the consumer to betray their community. When a pot of porridge is accepted by an individual in exchange for the group interest, it is interpreted as not only a betrayal of the whole but also a form of social death. In short, as Aho explains, “the personal body . . . is a metaphor of the social body; orifices in particular stand for a group’s weak spots. The more defensive and exclusionary a group is, the more pressure is placed on its members to police what goes into and what comes out of the bodies” (11).

The Body and Ritual Process

The ritual process can be entirely reimagined as an embodied practice. African rites of passage, the ideology and rituals of sacred kingship, festivals and the ceremonial calendar, and worship of the deities are all tied to the signification of the body. The body becomes a special agent through which those performances and ritual actions take place. Given what we now know through empirical research, we can boldly construct a new paradigm that we could label as the “spirituality of the body.”

Embodied deities run through the entire African cosmology. In the cosmogonic myths of many African societies, we come across assemblies of deities who

not only are represented as human-like—they eat, dance, and fornicate—but also manifest deep meanings and metaphors through their embodied imagery. If we take the example of Obatala, the most senior deity in the Yoruba pantheon of 201 gods, we can see that the deity is represented as the epitome of purity, as revealed in the use of white clothes among members of his household. More significantly, Obatala honors those with disabilities and physical differences—who are collectively regarded as *eni orisa*, that is, “people of the deity,” meaning that they are beloved and protected by Obatala. As a Yoruba proverb says, “Owo orisa lafi nwo afin” (It is the honor given to Obatala that we extend to the al-bino). Albinos, for instance, are regarded in many African societies as spiritual agents of the deities. Among the Yoruba in Nigeria, these individuals are given so much freedom that if they show up in traditional marketplaces, they will be showered with gifts because it is believed that they are a good omen for a successful business. Obatala is praised as a perfect fashioner of human beings—“eni soju, eni semu, orisa ni ma sin” (he who fashions eyes and the nose, it is the orisa that I will worship)—and thus the Yoruba are careful not to make fun of individuals with disabilities or peculiar physical traits such as protruding teeth, because those individuals are fashioned by the orisa. If we take this point further, we could even argue that a significant relational role of Obatala and the disabled in the Yoruba divine economy is providing the theological rationale for protecting these individuals.

But in the ideology and rituals of sacred kingship, we see the strongest evidence of embodied beliefs and practices. Among the Baganda of Uganda and the Akan people of Ghana, the king is regarded as sacred, and his sacred body is held in reverence. From his hair to his toes, all segments of his body are sacred and therefore tabooed against profanity. In a number of cultures such as the Benin, Fon, and Yoruba, one must keep an informed distance from the king—one relates to the king not like a human being but like a deity. Greetings and interactions must reflect these relationships. As such, the Yoruba say, “Mo sun m’oba egbeje, mo jina s’oba, egbee fa, enit o ba ri oba fin, ni oba npa.” (I move close to the king, two hundred times six times, I keep a distance from the king, two hundred and seven times. He who disrespects the king, the king kills.) In other words, it is crucial to keep an informed distance from the Yoruba sacred kings if one wants to live long. As the example illustrates, in this context, relationality is an ontological process—the need and ability to maintain ritual distance, while at the same time having secular interactions, emphasizes the importance of the body in ritual and relationship. The king covers his head at all times (also, in Ghana, the kings cannot touch the ground with their feet); in ritual, the king dips his left toe in the blood of the sacrifice, which represents

the continuity and maintenance of the ancestral relationships from which he derives his authority and power once he has ascended the throne of his father.

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