

# Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass



Gender and  
Colonialism in a  
Yoruba Town

Lorelle D. Semley

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*For my grandmother,  
Olga Wanda Semley  
(1909–2005),  
as promised*



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# Preface

## *“You Must Be From Here”— An Intellectual and Personal Journey*

Félix Iroko, a history professor at the University of Bénin, who is originally from Kétu, liked to introduce me to his colleagues and friends in Bénin by asking where they thought I was from. Hearing my accented French and looking me over, they would guess that I was “definitely” from the north, or from the central part of the country, or maybe from Cameroon. Iroko would laugh heartily at their mounting uncertainty and say triumphantly, “She is an American.” There would be momentary surprise and then recognition, none of us thinking about the implications of my “universal” appearance as Béninois, Cameroonian, or American.

Though I was born in New York City, being mistaken for Nigerian, Senegalese, or Liberian had become normal to me and almost a source of comfort since my first trip to Ile-Ife, Nigeria, for a Yoruba language course in the summer of 1994. During one of our outings, to a blacksmith’s workshop, an elderly man was shocked and seemingly upset when he realized that I was not Yoruba after all. I became proud of my ability to blend in, and I made use of it; once I claimed to be Nigerian, rather than American, in Senegal, and Béninois, instead of American, in Brazil. Though I sometimes spoke French in France, rejecting my relationship with loud American tourists, I adamantly displayed my American passport upon arrival in Amsterdam on a flight from Lagos, Nigeria, to avoid harassment by the authorities. Drawing on Iroko’s guessing game, I sometimes asked people where they thought I was from, if they hesitantly asked whether I was from “around here.” My favorite was a French man in Aix-en-Provence, who was certain I was from the Indian Ocean island of Réunion. Early in my research in Kétu, Bénin, Akande Olofindji, head of a cultural insti-

tute and a Kétu royal minister, pronounced that I *must* be from Kétu. I politely demurred, but he insisted, “Otherwise, why would you have come home?”

Had I chosen to do research in Kétu because of some deep or undefined feeling of familiarity or longing? I certainly thought I had wandered into African studies in college at Georgetown University, and later into Yoruba studies in graduate school at Yale. After taking some French-speaking African courses because I found French literature uninspiring, I completed an African Studies Certificate program in college after someone in my dorm casually suggested it. Imagining that I would become an “international lawyer,” I took a job as a paralegal at the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., but eventually decided that law school was not for me. One day, during a lunch break, I visited the Smithsonian Museum of African Art for inspiration and, there, I decided to get a Ph.D. in African history. Following the advice of my college African history professor David Johnson, I studied for a Master’s in African Studies at Yale for proper training in historiography. At Yale, the only West African language offered was Yoruba and, though I wanted to study West African history, I was not sure I wanted Nigeria to be my focus. Yet when I began to learn Yoruba, I experienced moments of longing and familiarity. I became enamored with a language in which my chosen Yoruba name, Ìfétáyò, means “love is joy.” I felt connected to a language and culture where the literal translation for the word “happy,” *inú mi dún*, is “my stomach is sweet.” Hearing Yoruba and watching people converse in it tugged at my heart. I caught glimpses of gestures and facial expressions that reminded me of my grandmother, of an uncle, of a cousin. I experienced a new depth, never of pain, only of delight.

As for Kétu in Bénin, frankly I stumbled onto it when, at Northwestern University, I decided to continue my study of Yoruba history in that former French colony. A reference to a “queen” of Kétu who had commanded the town during the French colonial period piqued my interest. The story of that “queen,” Alaba Ida, took me down a complicated road. She remains a central figure in this history of the changing relationship between “public motherhood” (a concept I have borrowed from literary scholar Chikwenye Ogunyemi), kingship, and marriage in precolonial and colonial West Africa.

In this book, I talk of mothers, wives, fathers, and husbands, noting the power dynamic between these identities, as symbolic as they are “real.” Most often, I examine symbolic mother figures who held titled positions in West African kingdoms. I discovered that subordinate men could be viewed as “wives” and some women who were royal ministers were addressed as “Father.” West African kings, on the other hand, are an ultimate “father figure,” exercising a

“public fatherhood” not unlike the image of “public motherhood” that is at the center of this book. These different social positions exist in relationship to one another. During my fieldwork in West Africa, I myself was cast in social roles in relation to others I met. Thus, when people called me *iyàwó* (bride) in Kétu and even in Nigeria, they meant my youth and, potentially, junior status in a household. Often it was older women who called or greeted me in this way. On one occasion, at the house of a friend of my research assistant Alhaja Safouratou Mama, I was called upon to join other women in serving food to some visiting men. I wanted to protest, but I quickly realized that as a young woman I was expected to serve, and I complied. I regarded elderly titled women with much deference, fearing them on some level, because I was supposed to respect their power. In contrast, Alákétu Adétútù, the king of Kétu, acted like a benevolent father, one day giving me some coins and saying, “Buy something for yourself at the market.” For a split second, I was going to refuse, but he was the king and he was treating me as his “child.” Yet I was warned several times, with some humor, by people at the king’s palace to watch my step as I approached the king’s veranda. If I passed through a certain space in the courtyard, I would automatically become the king’s wife; it would be as though he had “put his foot on me,” so people said. The king had the power to choose any woman as his wife. It was only meant to tease me, but it had an effect; I understood the image of the king-as-husband as one of dominance rather than benevolence. These relationships into which I was drawn are not the usual data of a historian, but history overlaps the present. I came to view gender in a kaleidoscopic way, not in terms of binary opposition, as gender relationships are often expressed.

After a short summer visit in 1997, I lived in Kétu for ten months in 1998 and 1999, and for shorter stints in 2000 and 2006. Alhaja Safouratou Mama, my research assistant, helped me conduct interviews throughout the sixteen historically recognized quarters of the formerly walled center of Kétu. Each quarter, or *ita* (a square that was supposed to serve as the center of each neighborhood), had numerous lineages or extended families. The two of us would search out an elderly woman or elderly man to talk to about their lineage, the town’s history, and the relationship between Muslims and Christians. Later, I added questions about marriage practices, though asking people personal questions does not come easily to me. People were generous with their personal stories. I am reluctant to expose their lives to the world, and this tension plays out in the book. When I asked one retired man about marriage practices in Kétu, a look of utter anguish flashed across his face. He was a widower whose wife had died several years before, but in that moment he was reliving his grief. People’s voices are

present in my text, if often submerged. It would be trite to suggest that I saw people in Kétu as my family, but I did see their stories, to some extent, as personal “family business.”

Jeannette Hopkins, who worked with me on the manuscript before I submitted it to the press, insisted that I look up my genealogy because of my unusual name. Initially, I was nonchalant, perhaps protecting myself, knowing that as a black American there is often a point beyond which one cannot go. Imagine my surprise when I found out that my grandfather’s grandfather had migrated to the town of Middletown, Connecticut, where I am now living and teaching at Wesleyan University. I knew that years earlier, when I had told my grandmother I was moving to New Haven, Connecticut, to go to Yale, she had mentioned that my grandfather was from New Haven. Furthermore, I now learned that in the late nineteenth century, my grandfather’s grandfather came to Connecticut from the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area, where I had lived for several years after college at Georgetown and after graduate school at Yale and at Northwestern. Living in northern Virginia after college, I had once seen another Semley in the phonebook—a rare occurrence—and once tried to call, but I did not reach anyone. Though I was a budding historian, I had not thought to trace my own history in either place.

Yet now I realize that for years after my birth in Brooklyn, New York, I had been following my ancestors up and down the eastern coast of the United States without ever knowing it. Such coincidences are enough to make me think that maybe I *am* from Kétu, even though I never forgot or was allowed to forget that I was a stranger. An astute observer of Yoruba religion might tell me that the *òrìṣà* (deity) who rules my head has been leading me to these places. A number of years ago, when it was suggested that I had “come home” to Kétu, I was amused. Now I am more inclined to believe in larger forces ruling my head and my heart.

# Acknowledgments

I did not know that this was the book I would write when I began my research several years ago. Countless people influenced the direction of my research and writing in major and subtle ways, whether through discussion in graduate courses, chance meetings at archives, or casual conversation in coffee shops. Here I will try to do justice to the insight and encouragement so many people have given me over the years.

My professors and fellow graduate students in the Master's Program in African Studies at Yale University and the history department at Northwestern University reinforced the importance of a wide-angle view of the African continent, demonstrating to me how politics, art, history, literature, environmental, and agrarian studies all intersected in the study of African history. My scholarship continues to be shaped by the work of Robert Harms, Christopher Miller, and Robert Farris Thompson at Yale and Jonathon Glassman, Adam Green, and John Hunwick at Northwestern. Though time and distance have separated me from many members of my cohort, I still would like to thank Christopher Hayden, Christopher Manning, Gregory Mann, Jeremy Prestholdt, and, especially, Sarah Fenton.

Over the years, many institutions and programs funded the research at the core of this book, including a Foreign Languages and Area Studies Fellowship, a Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad Fellowship, a Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Research Fellowship, and a National Security Education Program Dissertation Fellowship. Once I began teaching at Wesleyan University, funding from Wesleyan University Academic Affairs and the Colonel Return Jonathan Meigs First (1740–1823) Fund supported follow-up research trips in 2006 to Bénin, France, and Brazil.

It is not enough to arrive at an archive or library; the knowledge and assistance of the staff are crucial. First and foremost, the women and men at the Ar-

chives Nationales du Bénin always speedily obtained documents and photocopies, and even when years had passed warmly greeted with me the French version of a common Yoruba phrase, “It has been three days.” In the Bibliothèque Nationale and former Institut de Recherche Appliqué du Dahomey (IRAD), librarians readily helped me locate some rare documents. At the Archives Nationales and Institut Fondamental de l’Afrique Noire (IFAN) in Senegal, I learned of the rich selection of rare manuscripts and journals in addition to colonial documents. I am also grateful for assistance I received at the Centre des Archives Outre-Mer (CAOM) [now the Archives Nationales Outre-Mer (ANOM)] in Aix-en-Provence, France; at the Archives de la Société de la Propagation de la Foi in Lyon, France; at the Church Missionary Society Archives (CMS) in Birmingham, Great Britain; at the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archive in Nashville, Tennessee; and at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York. It was also a pleasure to relive my graduate school days while conducting research with the help of librarians at the Yale University Divinity Library and at the Northwestern University Library Archives and Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies. Finally, in Salvador, Brazil, I deeply appreciated the guidance of Angela Lühning and Alex Baradel at the Fundação Pierre Verger. They graciously gave me access to Verger’s copious correspondence and hundreds of his stunning photographs of Kétu.

Reading groups, conferences, and courses I have taught at Wesleyan have been crucial during the transition from the dissertation to the book. Sara Berry, a long-time mentor and friend, kindly read many drafts of my work (some of them quite rough!) and, together with Pier Larson, invited me to participate in reading and writing workshops with other graduate students at Johns Hopkins University. As I began rewriting the book, a conference at the Université de Laval in Quebec, Canada, organized by Ana Lucia Araujo, helped me develop my concept of “Atlantic Africa.” A semester at the Wesleyan Center for the Humanities in spring 2006 allowed me to draft the book’s seventh chapter on Brazil. It had been spirited discussions with students in my Women’s and Gender History in Africa course in the fall of 2005 that inspired the overall theme of “public motherhood” at the core of the book. In many ways, those initial conversations around motherhood culminated with a Women’s Caucus-sponsored panel I organized for the African Studies Association meeting in 2008 on “New Perspectives on Motherhood, Gender, and Power in African History.” I also have been inspired by the work and guidance of many specialists in my field of West Africa, including Edna Bay, Toyin Falola, Robin

Law, Paul Lovejoy, John Peel, Mariza Soares, and especially Randy Matory, for his groundbreaking work on West Africa and Brazil. I have appreciated friendship and intellectual exchange with Rachel Jean-Baptiste, Hilary Jones, Emily Osborne, and Michele Reid Vazquez. At Wesleyan, I have been grateful for the encouragement of my colleagues in the history department, especially Rick Elphick, Tricia Hill, Vijay Pinch, Claire Potter, Magda Teter, and Ann Wightman.

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Several people have been especially important in these final stages of the writing process. Reader's reports from Misty Bastian and Edna Bay were generous and constructive and shaped the final revisions of the book. I appreciate the work of many people at Indiana University Press who have guided my book through the production process and I am grateful for Scott Taylor's diligent work on the maps that appear in this book. Most of all, Dee Mortensen of Indiana University Press has been an understanding and supportive editor, encouraging my sense of myself as an author. Finally, working with Jeannette



Hopkins helped me transform multiple strands of inquiry in the dissertation into a coherent text. Her probing questions, straightforward critiques, and thorough editing helped reveal to me the book that was there all along. I am solely responsible for any errors that occur in the pages that follow.

My deepest gratitude is for my friends and family. Kimberly Dixon, whom I met at Northwestern, has remained a friend despite the comments I make just to bother her. For many years, time spent with Kathleen Noonan and Jonathan Lipson has always meant sharing great food and even better conversation. I am grateful to the Robinson family for welcoming me as a daughter/niece/sister/friend. Finally, I have known Deidre Hinds for decades; we finish one another's sentences and remember things the other has completely forgotten. She is always in the background acting as one of my biggest cheerleaders, even when I don't realize it.

My mother, Ethel Semley, never asked too many questions about my work, but she listened. In her own way, she has always encouraged me and, in imperceptible ways, has shaped who I am. My father, Arnold Semley, still surprises me with an avid interest in history that I am only just discovering. The book is dedicated to my grandmother, Olga Wanda Semley. Her strong personality, humor, and style are still the subject of many stories shared among her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and I cannot help but picture her in my mind's eye as one of the "public mothers" that I write about in this book. It was because of her will and presence that I imagine her in this way.

Brian Robinson, my husband, has known this project from its humble beginnings. He has patiently watched it transform over time, tolerating me when I wanted to talk about it too much or too little. I love him more than he knows. Finally, our son, Elijah James Ayòdélé arrived very late in the process of my writing to teach me about the everyday forms of motherhood that are not discussed in great detail in the pages that follow. Through him, I also have learned of emotion for which I have no words.

# Note on Orthography and Language

I have written this book as a scholarly study accessible to students and readers who are not specialists in African history. The names of peoples and places in West Africa may have multiple spellings, sometimes influenced by a French or British presence. In most cases, I have opted for the most common usage, even if that usage comes from the French language. For example, for the port city of Ouidah I have adopted the French spelling rather than the English one, Whydah. However, for the town of Kétu, I have used the Yoruba rather than the French spelling, Kétou, except in quoted material.

Yoruba is a tonal language with high, middle, and low tones that change the meanings of words. The proper tonal markings for the word “Yoruba” itself would be Yorùbá. For Yoruba words appearing in the text, I have tried to indicate the proper Yoruba accent marks and have used letters with diacritical marks that do not appear in English, including ọ, pronounced “aw,” ẹ, pronounced “eh,” and ẹ, pronounced “sh.” While I have generally included these letters in proper nouns such as place names, I have omitted the tones. For consistency, I have not included letters with diacritical marks or tones in names of individuals, except when the usage and preference was known.



*Mother Is Gold,  
Father Is Glass*



# Prologue: “Mother is gold, father is glass”

## *Power and Vulnerability in Atlantic Africa*

During my third extended research trip in Kétu, Bénin, in the fall of 2006, when I asked people to explain the Yoruba proverb “mother is gold, father is glass” (*iyá ni wúrà, bàbá ni dígí*), they invariably told me a story.<sup>1</sup> An elderly woman explained that a mother would never let her child go hungry. “A mother’s love is different from a father’s love,” she said. “A mirror—that breaks. The father is for everyone. The mother is your mother and she doesn’t want to change you.”<sup>2</sup> I was specifically interested in the history of women’s influence in politics and society, but people told me about women, and men, in families, usually highlighting women’s sacrifices in bearing and raising children, in contrast to the limited parenting by men. My research assistant became bored with people’s repetitive responses and complained, “It’s always the same thing,” but the similar style and content underscored how central stories are to Yoruba history. While the common translation for the Yoruba word *itàn* is history or story, Yoruba literary scholar Olabiyi Babalola Yai argues that *itàn* encompasses far more: “the verb *tàn* (from which the noun *itàn* is derived) means to irradiate,

to illuminate, to spread, to relate, to investigate. The concept of *itàn* therefore encompasses history, geography, sociology, philosophy, and aesthetics.”<sup>3</sup>

Similar to the “multidirectional and multidisciplinary” ethos at the heart of Yai’s definition of *itàn* are several layers of meaning for the word *iyá* (mother). Any woman who has given birth to a child will become known thereafter as “mother of [child’s name]” and any woman of a certain age, whether or not she has had children, is addressed respectfully as *iyá* by those who are younger. But *iyá* often serves also as part of the official title of women priests and royal ministers, and it figures in the names of both “witches” and divine or sacred women, described to me as “women whom you can’t see.”<sup>4</sup> Though the phrase “mother is gold” conjured up the image of childbearing woman in the home, the flexibility of the term *iyá* allowed me to see references to “gold” and “glass” as part of a broader and complex metaphor about gender and history.

“Mother is gold, father is glass” is a popular Yoruba saying that cannot be dated with any certainty, gold and glass having long histories in West Africa. Gold, however, is not often associated directly with Yoruba towns and kingdoms. Most of the gold in mines in modern-day Senegal, Mali, and Ghana, as early as the seventh century, was destined for the trans-Saharan trade to North Africa, Europe, and Asia.<sup>5</sup> With the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade in West Africa dating from the fifteenth century, some of the West African gold trade became re-oriented to the coast, away from desert caravans and toward European ships. Once slaves became the primary export sought from West Africa, Brazilian merchants smuggled gold from Brazilian mines to trade for West African slaves during the early eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European merchants and travelers in West Africa would occasionally describe gold jewelry worn by kings, their women, and other people of wealth, the provenance of the gold unclear.<sup>7</sup>

While the trans-Saharan trade had extracted gold from West Africa, it brought glass in from Europe and the Islamic world, recycled as early as the ninth century into glass beads that held great economic and spiritual importance. The Yoruba town of Ile-Ife came to earn its distinction as the “cradle” of the Yoruba, partly because it was a center of production of glass beads used in trade and the arts, especially in beaded regalia. Centuries later, trade via the Atlantic coast brought greater prosperity to Ile-Ife, convincing some scholars that an association between bead production, wealth, and the female deity Olokun (Owner of the Sea) had a later origin related to the expansion of that coastal trade dating to the fifteenth century. Oral traditions claim that bead making began with Olokun, a childless, wealthy wife of the Yoruba progenitor and first

king, Oduduwa, thus tracing the origins of glass bead making, in Ile-Ifẹ at least, to a childless woman who nonetheless became a “mother figure” by virtue of her affluence and transformation into a deity.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the *itàn*, or history, of gold and glass in West Africa “illuminates” a complex story of kingship, trade, religion, and ideology in the sense that scholar Olabiyi Yai uses the term.

Alákétu (king; “owner of Kétu”) Aladé Ìfẹ interpreted the proverb “mother is gold, father is glass” to emphasize the role of fathers, saying, “Dígí (mirror) is also precious. Gold—it can become lost, you can buy another. But when the mirror breaks, it is finished. If the mother is not there, the child misses something; if the father is not there, it is worse.” When I asked him how an absent father was worse, he spoke about the money fathers must spend on their children, concluding that “paternal authority in Africa is vital.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the saying “Mother is gold, father is glass” embodies the contradiction of gender relations in Yoruba history and culture. “Mother is gold” implies that mothers are more important in a society in which women often are dominated by fathers, husbands, uncles, and older brothers. “Father is glass” is elusive and ambivalent, portraying the relationship with fathers as fragile or even as a reflection of oneself, with the word for glass (*dígí*) also translated as mirror. But no one speaking to me used the words “fragile” or “weak” to describe fathers or a child’s relationship to them, simply repeating that glass or mirrors “break.” Taken at its most cynical, the phrase suggests that a father’s presence is illusory or transitory even though Yoruba society itself generally subordinates women to men, especially in family relationships. Paradoxically, the proverb praises the value of women and challenges the image of patriarchal power in the household, the very setting where women potentially face the most control by men.<sup>10</sup>

There is tension between the power and vulnerability of mothers, fathers, wives, and husbands in politics, history, and in private relationships that plays out in Kétu, neighboring West African kingdoms, and in the Bahia region of Brazil, linked to Kétu through the Atlantic slave trade, religion, and travel. The *image* of women’s power in all these places has sometimes prevailed over examples of specific women with titles or political power, especially in the past. The current study traces relationships between actual and symbolic mothers and fathers during three transformative processes: the Atlantic slave trade, French colonialism, and transatlantic travel, specifically between West Africa and Brazil.

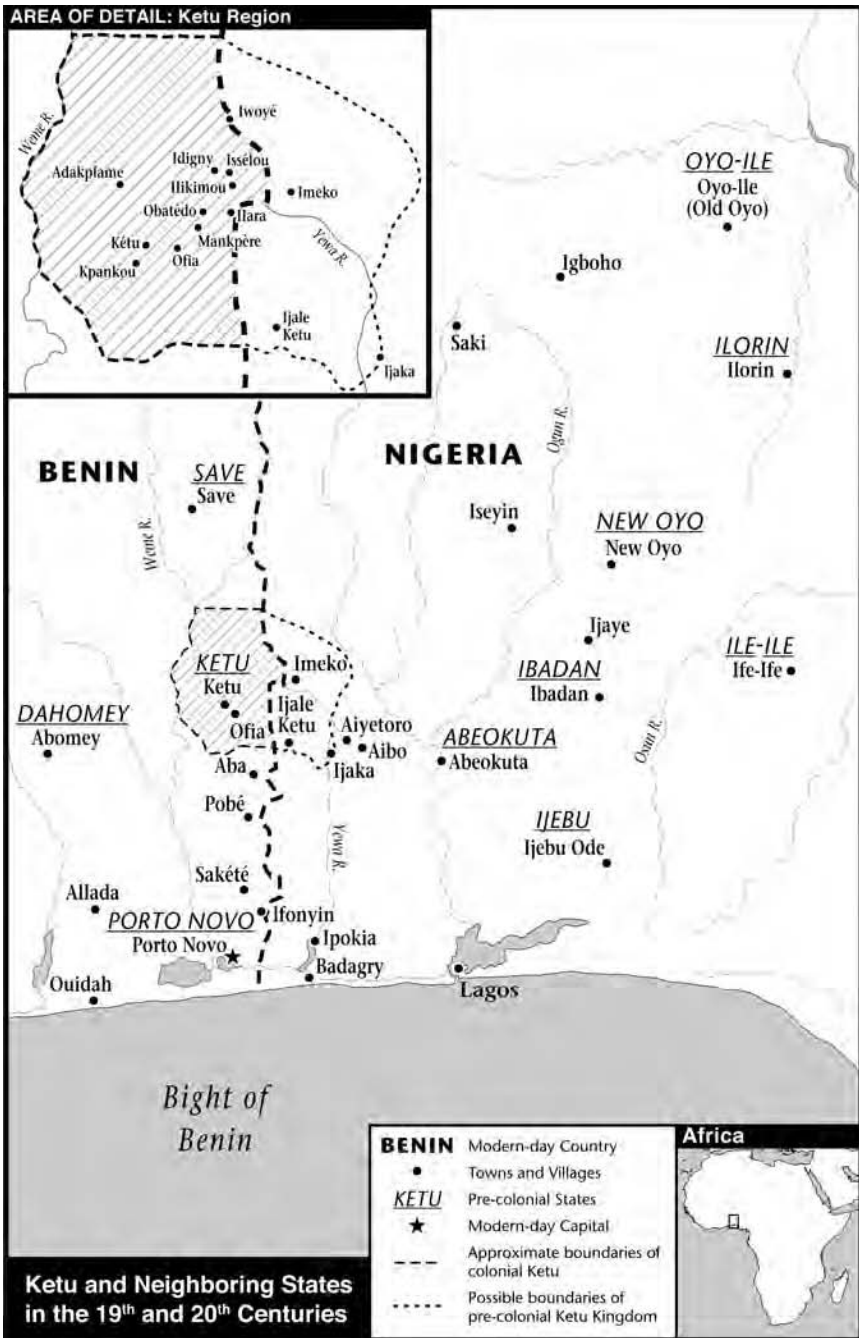
Brazilian diplomat and author Antônio Olinto uses “mother is gold, father is glass” as an epigraph for his novel, *The King of Kétu*, about a market woman



named Abionan who wants to give birth to the next king of Kétu. Symbolizing the maternal love and sacrifice of the phrase “mother is gold,” Abionan befriends other strong-willed women, with the honorable but transitory men in her life evoking the image of “father is glass.” But her aspirations go beyond motherhood; she muses about the power she would have when her unborn son became king: “transforming Kétu into a once more decisive place in the region, and as mother of the king of Kétu she would also be able to rule and change things.”<sup>11</sup> Abionan’s dreams of ruling the kingdom alongside her son reflected more Olinto’s own romantic notions about the origins of leading women of African descent in Brazil than the realities of women’s political power in West Africa. Still, the novel, the second in a trilogy, traces the struggles and triumphs of generations of mothers and daughters who moved between Brazil, West Africa, and Europe, recalling a history of the Atlantic slave trade and European colonialism in Africa shaped by gender relations.

By the last decades of the twentieth century, when the character of Abionan fantasized about restoring Kétu to a “decisive place in the region,” Kétu and its neighbors had survived three centuries of the Atlantic slave trade and seventy years of European colonial rule, which ended in the early 1960s. Between 1620 and 1860, more than one million people from the Bight of Benin—a shallow bay along the coasts of modern-day Bénin and western Nigeria—were forced onto slave ships bound for the Americas.<sup>12</sup> As was the case in most of Africa, West African men and boys were more likely to be shipped to the Americas, especially by the nineteenth century; the ratio of men and boys to women and girls was 3:2.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as thousands of men and women captured in wars and raids were stripped of their livelihoods, names, and families and sold on the coast, West African kings, royal ministers, and military leaders gained wealth and power, which they displayed by surrounding themselves with enslaved women and wives. The Atlantic slave trade did not create West African kingdoms or cultural concepts of gender, but the trade relationship between Africa, Europe, and the Americas allowed some West African kingdoms to expand, reorienting their political and economic relationships away from caravan trade routes crossing the Sahara Desert to European ships dotting the Atlantic coast.

The Kétu kingdom stood between two formidable states that expanded during the intensification of the Atlantic slave trade: the Yoruba-speaking Oyo empire to the east and the Gbe-speaking kingdom of Dahomey to the west. The Oyo empire had flourished between 1650 and 1800, imploding after it extended its reach to participate directly in slave trading on the Atlantic coast in the middle of the eighteenth century. In contrast, the Dahomey kingdom began a



**Ketu and Neighboring States in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

long period of expansion in the 1720s, conquering two major Atlantic slave trading ports and falling only in 1894 when defeated by imperialist French forces. The Atlantic slave trade had reinforced existing patterns of trade, migration, and war that had spread ideas and practices between Yoruba towns, like Kétu and Oyo, and between Yoruba peoples and others, including Gbe-speaking states like Dahomey. Yoruba communities and Dahomey came to share religious deities, political titles, and ceremonies, especially after the fall of Oyo by the nineteenth century, when Dahomey raided vulnerable Yoruba towns and brought countless women to the Dahomey capital and palace where, even as slaves, they influenced kings, princes, and other leading men and women.

The nefarious Atlantic slave trade also played an unlikely role in expanding the reach of Yoruba culture to the Americas, especially to Brazil, Haiti, and Cuba, where people today claim direct religious and cultural ties to the Yoruba region, though scholars disagree over the correlation between estimated numbers of ostensibly Yoruba-speaking enslaved Africans and the impact of Yoruba culture in the Americas.<sup>14</sup> Kétu itself is recognized as the birthplace of the women who founded Candomblé, an Afro-Brazilian religion that employs spirit possession, sacrifice, and divination to heal and protect its followers. This image of singular and powerful women priests of Candomblé was an inspiration for Olinto's series of novels that feature leading women characters who are defined not only by motherhood but also by power and influence.

The distinction between the image and reality of women's power is an important one in West Africa, where women and men occupy a range of gendered positions. Some elder women are still referred to as "husbands" and some men as "wives."<sup>15</sup> The term "wife" has been as much an expression of subordination to a superior as an expression of gender. Some men who are dependents, especially to a political or religious leader, have acted out their "wifely" role by actually dressing as women. The terms "husband" and "father" have defined a position of superiority, applied both to men and to women. A woman recognized as a "father" could defy cultural norms, refusing to kneel before men or donning men's clothing.<sup>16</sup>

Still, the symbolic power of husbands and fathers has not been exactly the same: thus the image of the husband denoting domination over a subordinate "wife," the image of the father sometimes incorporating the ideal of benevolence, and the practice of paternalism rather than simple patriarchy. The dominant position of husbands and fathers was not absolute; nor were all mothers and wives disempowered. West African kings, the ultimate "father figures," had long faced political challenges. Yoruba kings were sometimes forced to com-

mit suicide by discontented royal ministers and subjects. One Dahomey king was overthrown in a coup and officially erased from the historical record. Still, just as older women respectfully are referred to as *iyá*, so older men generally are referred to as *bàbá* (father). Some terms and titles incorporate the word for father; the word for diviner, *babaláwo*, translates literally as “father owns the secrets.” Whereas the contrast between the social status of biological mothers and wives and that of elderly titled mothers can be profound, men who are fathers in the literal sense and those who acquire titles later in life both exercise authority, whether in the household or over the wider community. Fatherhood is an important concept, yet it does not conjure up the same mystical allure or symbolic weight that motherhood does.

At the height of the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century, kings of Oyo were said to have several women royal ministers, many with the word *iyá* as part of their official title. During the era of the Atlantic slave trade, some favored royal wives were close confidants of kings. The personal power of royal wives and some women royal ministers was so defined by their relationship with the king that they committed suicide upon the king’s death, which raises questions about the true nature of their authority. By the middle of the nineteenth century, many of these titled women seem to have faded from prominence as kings performed their symbolic roles as “fathers” and “husbands” by increasing the numbers of dependents or “wives,” whether women or men. Numerous and visible, these dependents of the king appeared to displace women royal ministers and other “mother figures” involved in politics. Sources for this period, often imbued with the perspective of European traders and missionaries (some of them Western-educated Africans whose ideals were shaped by Western culture and Christianity), emphasized the image of women primarily as subordinate wives or mothers in the more literal sense. Yet in the early twentieth century, the French colonial administration appointed a Kétu royal wife and a woman priest as colonial agents, ostensibly a tribute to women’s power in the community, though the influence of both women in the community rapidly declined. Women’s power in West African societies was precarious and European colonial policies intensified the complex power dynamic between women and men.

With the advent of European colonial administrations in West Africa, kings too saw their fortunes change many times, with some kings deposed and others elevated to new levels.<sup>17</sup> French colonial policy, particularly, was inconsistent, weakening many West African kingdoms prior to World War I, only to try to re-establish traditional hierarchies during the interwar period. Kings of

Kétu saw their stature rise and fall, from that of provincial leader to that of a mere “village chief” by the final decade of colonial rule in the 1950s.

The French were concerned with more than the women they briefly named as “queens” of Kétu and the kings they did not always fully recognize. From the beginning of the colonial era, for example, the French declared an interest in “liberating” women from forced marriages, even though local histories and colonial documents tell of more complex marriage practices in which wives of ordinary men sometimes lived apart from their husbands or left their husbands for other men. Still, the French feared West African women who were too “free,” and that fear undercut colonial policies whose intent was to reform African marriage practices and bolster the status of African women within their own households. The French were more apprehensive about wives and childbearing women than about the power represented by elder “mothers.”

European colonial rule, in general, reoriented West African politics and economies toward Europe, impeding the travel and communication between West Africa and the Americas that dated to the era of the Atlantic slave trade, though scholars interested in the African roots of American cultures have continued to build upon these earlier links. The term “Black Atlantic,” coined by historian of African art Robert Farris Thompson, analyzed cultural borrowings from West Africa in the Americas, but Paul Gilroy’s well-known book of that title relegated Africa to a place of origin long left behind as a mythical homeland. Even Africanist scholars who seek to take Africa seriously as a part of a modern Atlantic world tend to examine the nineteenth century and diverse African coastal communities but not the relationship between Africa, Europe, and the Americas in the twentieth century, during Africa’s colonial period.<sup>18</sup>

To speak of Atlantic Africa is, however, to recognize a geographical and intellectual space covering West Africa, the Americas, and Europe and extending beyond the era of the Atlantic slave trade. The terms “Atlantic Africa” and “African Atlantic,” as employed by recent scholars, place differing emphases on African history or on the history of the Americas. Anthropologist Jane Guyer has used the term “Atlantic Africa” to describe the complex monetary culture in West Africa in a wholly Africa-centered geographical space between a largely Muslim North Africa and the West African coast during the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras. Historians, on the other hand, have written of an “African Atlantic” in which shared religious rituals, in particular, linked West Central Africa with the American South or colonial Brazil.<sup>19</sup> Kétu itself, the



center of this book, was physically and conceptually connected to neighboring West African kingdoms, was subject to French politics and economy, and, symbolically, was seen as part of the history and culture of Brazil. Women and men in multiple regions touching the Atlantic Ocean re-imagined their connections to one another through religious practice, politics, trade, and travel, but the attention paid to the scholars and other travelers who fostered these relationships often overshadows how mass populations in Africa and the Americas participated in these linkages between African, European, and American societies and nations.

Studies of the Atlantic world also have tended to underanalyze the multiple layers of gender relationships. Atlantic world travel has been viewed as the domain of men, young and single, as traders, sailors, and adventurers, even though wives, daughters, women traders, and women priests, too, traveled back and forth between Brazil and West Africa in the nineteenth century as the Atlantic slave trade began to wane. Indeed, two iconic images of travel between Kétu in West Africa and Bahia in Brazil are of both “mother” and “father” figures. Three almost mythical, elderly *iyá* (mothers), enslaved from Kétu, are said to have initiated the Candomblé religion in northeast Brazil in the nineteenth century, and the late king of Kétu, Alaketu Adetutu, traveled twice to Brazil in the 1990s as an honored guest.

Nigerian sociologist Oyèrónké Oyèwùmi, author of *The Invention of Women* and frequent critic of what she calls “biologism,” the equation of sex with gender, charges that a principal analytical weakness in Western feminism is that “the woman at the heart of feminism is a wife.” Oyèwùmi contends that women in African cultures think differently: “In all African family arrangements, the most important ties within the family flow from the mother. . . . These ties link the mother to the child and connect all children of the same mother in bonds that are conceived as natural and unbreakable. . . . the most important and enduring identity and name that African women claim for themselves is ‘mother.’” She adds, “However, motherhood is not constructed in tandem with fatherhood. The idea that mothers are powerful is very much a defining characteristic of the institution and its place in society.”<sup>20</sup> Oyèwùmi tends to generalize across all African societies, contributing to the “natural” appearance of motherhood rather than highlighting historical processes by which motherhood takes on cultural meanings. She does not clarify the ways in which fatherhood is defined socially; nevertheless, she captures the association between the reality and representation of motherhood. If the act of childbirth makes many

women mothers in the most physical sense, the powerful imagery associated with childbirth—an event at once awesome and mundane—is at the heart of the symbolism of the title “mother” bestowed on elderly women.

I draw on the concept of “public motherhood,” coined by Nigerian literary scholar Chikwenye Ogunyemi, to explain women’s political power. Illustrating the connection between the social experience of motherhood and what she calls the “politicoeconomic role of the mother without,” Ogunyemi uses as a point of departure the Yoruba title of the *Ìyálóde* (Mother Owns the Outside World), who is charged with managing conflict in the town and overseeing market trade. She contrasts the social and political power of older women with the subordination of younger wives, describing powerful women as those “who have ceased to function visibly as wives and are now utterly devoted to their sons, their daughters having left home for their husband’s houses. . . . While the younger woman writhes in the servility attached to wifedom, the older woman relishes the newfound power over her son’s household and the community.”<sup>21</sup> But the easy jump from “household” to “community” in Ogunyemi’s description illustrates that women’s titles may obscure the nature of women’s power as much as they define it. Indeed, for Ogunyemi, the power women exercise flows from their role as biological mothers; she ultimately sees women as “caretakers,” even in the public domain.<sup>22</sup>

Western feminists theorizing about motherhood have explored how it sustains patriarchy or male domination or how it functions as a lived experience to be celebrated. African American scholars, frequently challenging an idealized vision of a white, middle-class, nuclear, heterosexual household, have written about the role of “othermothers”—grandmothers, aunts, friends, lovers—in children’s upbringing and in women’s self-realization. But even black and white scholars who have incorporated race, class, sexuality, and also the implications of reproduction technologies in their analyses often have focused on the personal joys and traumas of motherhood, giving personal experience priority over historical and cultural settings that define motherhood.<sup>23</sup> Reliance on the literal experience of motherhood would make the presence of titled mothers in West Africa a function of women’s bodies and sexuality rather than a part of historical definitions of power and identity. The present study is not focused on the experience of biological motherhood and avoids both Oyèwùmi’s emphasis on the (perceived) “naturalness” of African motherhood and Ogunyemi’s focus on the nurturing work of “public mothers.” It seeks rather to emphasize the historical and changing symbolic power of motherhood that recognizes but also challenges men’s power in West African society.



One way to rethink gender and rewrite history is to analyze constructively manhood and masculinity in terms of authority, power, and vulnerability. In a 2003 volume, *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*, editors and contributors differentiate between local understandings of manhood, men's adulthood, and more abstract notions of masculinity.<sup>24</sup> Similar to the concept of "public motherhood," a term like "public fatherhood" can be used to analyze the real and symbolic nature of men's power. "Public fathers," such as kings and other leading men in society, assume a paternal and patriarchal role over extended family members and the broader community. Dispensing money and advice, the father in the household and in the public arena may appear detached and even benevolent, but either way, as a paternal figure he wields power over subordinate women, men, and children. Perhaps because the father can adopt a position of authority, commanding larger numbers of people in ways women and younger men cannot, and because he may abuse that power, paternal affection is perceived as fragile, as a possible façade, as breakable as "glass." Matching Oyěwùmi's concept of "wife" as a problematic persona in feminist analysis, the "husband," too, represents a dichotomous authority, with power limited to control over wives, not necessarily reaching to all other family members and/or to the broader community.<sup>25</sup> Analyzing gender in West Africa in terms of historical and cultural understandings of real and symbolic relationships between mothers and fathers as well as between wives and husbands, for example, is to avoid some of the limitations of feminist interpretation by Western and Africanist scholars.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the history of gender and power plays out in a variety of multifaceted relationships in the pages that follow: between women royal ministers, kings, and enslaved women; between Kétu's colonial "queens," French colonial administrators, and Kétu residents; between wives, husbands, and their extended families; and between researchers, Brazilian women priests of Candomblé, and men who were their partners and protégés.

# Founding Fathers and Metaphorical Mothers

*History, Myth, and the Making of a Kingdom*

It is said that a “witch” named Yá Mepere (literally Mother Mepere) gave her blessing to a group of migrants—among them a would-be king and a brave hunter—who founded the settlement that became Kétu. While trailblazing men—kings, hunters, and blacksmiths—are accepted as common protagonists in West African oral histories, women leaders, feminine divine beings, and “witches” who appear beside them are viewed as relics of a long-lost matriarchal order. Such interpretations make men part of the historical past and relegate women to a mythical one.<sup>1</sup>

The Yoruba word for history, *itàn*, defines many types of storytelling, but when understood as oral traditions, it claims to provide an accurate account of the origins of kingdoms, using common elements of African oral traditions such as migration, “witches,” and ritual sacrifice. Africanist historians who have long grappled with the tension between history and myth acknowledge that these oral traditions or histories, presumably passed down for generations, have been manipulated along the way. But rather than focusing on the unreliability and contradiction within oral sources, historians can embrace the very

mingling of fact and fiction in oral sources as a genuine reflection of Kétu's multicultural society, its links with neighboring communities, and its cultural ideologies about gender.<sup>2</sup> "Mothers" may serve as a metaphor in Kétu origin myths, and that captures how storytellers, their audience, and scholars who transcribe and analyze these stories have understood the actual relationships between women and men in the historical past and in the present.

### **"Witches" and "Children Born To Die": Gendered Histories**

When people in Kétu told me fragments of the oral traditions of the town's origins, they emphasized that Kétu's founders came from somewhere else and on their arrival in Kétu encountered two elderly "mothers" with supernatural powers and resources for survival.<sup>3</sup> As with many other Yoruba towns, Kétu's origins are traced back to Ile-Ife, considered to be the "cradle" of the Yoruba. The migration from Ile-Ife was long and complicated, with a long sojourn in at least two other towns. The turning point came when would-be king Ede and his leading hunter Alalumon decided to establish a new settlement in Kétu. Yá Mepere, the first elderly "mother," entered the story when she struck dead a young male scout who surprised her while she was half-clothed. Alalumon then greeted her properly and she granted the migrants permission to pass and access to water; she also gave Alalumon a charm for his protection. A second elderly woman, from the nearby town of Panku, known as Yá Panku (Mother Panku), recognized Alalumon from his earlier hunting expeditions in the region, and she gave the migrants the gift of fire.<sup>4</sup> Women and young girls in the group used the water and fire to cook, establishing the camp that would become the town. Later, to celebrate the founding of the new settlement, sacrifices were made to the òrìṣà (deities). One such sacrifice was a hunchbacked weaver. The death of this humble man reputedly gave the town its name, Kétu, when the people exclaimed, "Kétu n ke?" "Who can straighten the hunchback's hump?" The customary rejoinder to "Kétu n ke?" was "Who can destroy the town?" The town was supposed to be as indestructible as the hump on the weaver's back. Though Kétu was founded centuries ago, these mythical episodes and the sites of these events are revisited by the people whenever a new king comes to power. The rituals remind people of the role of kings, hunters, and "mothers" in the origins of the town and of the connection between Kétu and a wider Yoruba world; one of the first acts of a newly enthroned king was to send a messenger to the kings of Ile-Ife and Oyo, who were expected to congratulate the king with a gift of luxurious fabric.<sup>5</sup>

Many Yoruba towns trace their origins to the legendary kingdom at Ile-Ife to justify claims of kingship. Kétu, however, enjoys a degree of distinction, generally recognized among dozens of Yoruba towns, as one of the original kingdoms descended from Ile-Ife. It is said that Oduduwa, the “progenitor” of the Yoruba people, descended to earth on a chain only to find it covered with water. After tossing a handful of dirt on the water, Oduduwa set down a rooster who spread the dirt, creating land that became the site of Ile-Ife. This myth explains the origins of the Yoruba, if not of all humanity, and describes how Oduduwa represented an extraordinary shift in political and social organization of Yoruba states, an “experiment” in kingship. During the Oduduwa “period,” kingship came to be represented by the ownership of a crown with strings of beads covering the face. It is said that six, seven, or sixteen kingdoms emerged from the sons of Oduduwa, but in the standard version, it was one of Oduduwa’s daughters who bore a son who became the king of Kétu. Indeed, Alákétu Adewori, who was king of Kétu from 1937 to 1967, told British scholar E. G. Parrinder that Oduduwa was actually a woman and wife to the prince who would lead the first wave of migrants to Kétu out of Ile-Ife.<sup>6</sup> While the image of the eminent Oduduwa as the ultimate “public mother” is an enticing one, as a myth it is symbolic, not definitive. Other stories supplant Ile-Ife’s predominance as a place of origin, especially stories from the once great empire at Oyo. In fact, the most cited work of Yoruba oral traditions was collected in Oyo by Christian Yoruba historian Samuel Johnson for his magisterial book *History of the Yorubas*. Oyo oral traditions portray Oduduwa as a migrant and claim that the Ife kingship was transferred to Oyo with descendants of a mere slave left to serve as king of Ile-Ife.<sup>7</sup> Other Yoruba towns assert direct ties to Ile-Ife or other nearby villages, rejecting Oyo oral traditions that declare that other towns descended from Oyo’s leadership or were conquered by Oyo.<sup>8</sup>

Men are the primary protagonists in most of these stories, but some women are powerful mythical figures with implications for religion and for politics, two areas closely linked in precolonial kingdoms. Given their outsider status, the founders of the Kétu kingdom, remembered as princes and hunters, had to negotiate with indigenous populations who were, in turn, represented by elderly “mothers” with supernatural powers or access to crucial resources. Partnering the “mother” with a hunter evokes the idea of African “complementarity,” whereby women and men have recognized, separate, gender-specific, yet interdependent, roles in society. The concept of “complementarity,” foundational to much Africanist feminist scholarship on gender in Africa (as well as in the African diaspora), has been described by Sierra Leonean-born scholar Filomina

Chioma Steady as “a total, rather than a dichotomous and exclusive, perspective. For women, the male is not ‘the other’ but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete. . . . Each has and needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own.”<sup>9</sup> Scholar Kamene Okonjo has theorized “complementarity” further into what she calls a dual-sex system in some Igbo communities in southeastern Nigeria. For Okonjo, the *omu* (mother) acts as an equal counterpart of *obi* (king), and women’s power and interests are represented at all levels of society, with the *omu* “acknowledged mother of the whole community but . . . charged with concern for the female section.” Theories of complementarity sometimes emphasize harmony between the feminine and the masculine, reinforcing the idea of “natural” sexual differences in what could be a range of gendered roles and social behaviors.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the symbolic relationship between the “mother” and the hunter featured in the Kétu origin story is more evocative than the more common one posited between the king and the “mother.” The idea that “mother figures” associated with West African kings were equal counterparts or that the women acted as “co-rulers” ignores the hierarchy and domination that characterize centralized kingdoms.

The relationship between the hunter and the “mother” in the Kétu oral tradition, in part, need not be as much about “complementarity” as about comparable forms of power. Both the “mother” and the hunter have specialized skills that can help and protect others. Together the migrant hunter and the indigenous “mother” clear the space for settlement by providing safety and the possibility of prosperity. The hunter’s power derives from his familiarity with the dangerous forest, his knowledge of medicine, and his role in policing and defending the community.<sup>11</sup> In the Yoruba case, to see elder women’s authority only in relation to biological motherhood obscures the important role of “occult power” that shrouds postmenopausal women in particular, which evokes fear as much as respect.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, along with the imagery of birth and nurturing embedded in the metaphor of “public motherhood” are the specters of infertility, death, and destruction. The Yoruba term *àjé* often translates as “witch,” though many dare not utter it, instead referring to elderly women with secret knowledge of the supernatural as *àwọn iyá wa* (our mothers). “Our mothers” are not purely a destructive force; they are believed to bring balance, to work wonders, and to maintain social order and morality in society. Henry and Margaret Drewal, in their study of *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, the Yoruba masquerade said to honor the power of mothers, remark that the link between women’s bodies and elderly

women's power is, literally, not only about women's fertility and some women's supposed supernatural power to take life away but also about the perception that women can live to be old and thereby possess knowledge of the "secret of life itself." Still, the social stigma associated with being deemed a "witch" in Yoruba and other African communities may lead to persecution and exile.<sup>13</sup> Elderly "mothers" are often portrayed as "witches," but their power comes not from indiscriminate performance of evil deeds but from their perceived ability to control the most important life function in the community: women's fertility.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the fact that West African society simultaneously reveres and fears elderly women and may ostracize otherwise empowered "mothers" undercuts the authority and influence of these same women. "Public mothers" do not simply "nurture" the broader society but also embody the complexities of power, its contradictions, and its limits.

Within myths of origin, existing communities and practices are frequently incorporated into a new social order through the creation of titles and offices, recognizing the power of the ancestors and deities that inhabit the land and demand respect. Thus, Yá Mepere offers the hunter Alalumon access to water and protective medicine or a charm and Yá Panku provides fire for cooking, representing their "secret" knowledge of the local land. Though the name of the hunchbacked weaver sacrificed to the deities to celebrate the founding of Kétu is not recorded, the name of the man he lived with, Akiniko, became a royal title, evoking the weaver's story.<sup>15</sup> Men linked to the founding of the kingdom (including the hunter Alalumon) are honored by titles established in their name. The two elderly "mothers," Yá Mepere and Yá Panku, are remembered almost as mythical figures, yet that does not invalidate women's symbolic power, and it captures well the common image of sometimes elusive elder "mother figures" working with leading men in West African kingdoms. Most of the other wives and daughters remain nameless and in the background in Kétu's origin story, but the relationships between women, men, children, "mothers," and "fathers," formed the foundation of a lasting community, especially as the town expanded and became part of larger social and economic networks.

Nigerian historian Biodun Adediran distinguishes between "pre-Oduduwa" and "Oduduwa elements" as communities shifted from smaller, lineage-based settlements to more diverse city-states. While Adediran assumes a progression from simple, monolithic communities to complex, "hybrid" ones, he reveals a long history of ethnic diversity in Kétu and other western Yoruba towns. He

understands the early history of the kingdom as a time of great political upheaval, physical migration, and political change.<sup>16</sup> The initial meeting between the would-be king Ede, Alalumon, his hunter, and the two elderly “mothers” represents conflict and submission, and the famous walls constructed around the town that protected Kétu from surrounding Gbe-speaking communities are attributed to mythical kings Sa and Epo. Yet if Kétu had always been diverse in its makeup, cooperation and cultural exchange would also have been central to the town’s history from its beginnings.

Political divisions of the more recent past between Kétu and Dahomey cannot, however, be traced readily to Kétu’s mythical and distant past. Scholars do consider the conflict between Kétu and the expanding Dahomey kingdom by the latter eighteenth century to be historical, rather than a projection of the present into the past. Alákétu Ande, who ruled approximately between 1760 and 1780, avoided an ambush by Dahomey during the ritual bath that was part of his enthronement ceremonies; Kétu oral traditions tell that the river ran red with the blood of Dahomey soldiers.<sup>17</sup> Dahomey mounted another attack against Alákétu Ande’s successor Akibiowu in 1789; contemporary Europeans and local oral traditions recorded its outcome differently, Kétu and Dahomey sources associating the battle with a solar eclipse, a dead elephant, and, so it is said, a kidnapped princess who founded a sect in the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé. Dahomey probably did not succeed in attacking or defeating Kétu itself, but an outlying village.<sup>18</sup> While these eighteenth-century battles recount the historical beginnings of modern conflict between Kétu and Dahomey, the dispute reflects the normal competition between states rather than an example of deep-seated ethnic hatred.

By the nineteenth century, the center of the Kétu kingdom was encased in a mud-brick wall more than twelve feet high, with ditches eight or nine feet deep and up to twenty feet wide; the enclosed center would have covered about two miles and encompassed about two hundred acres.<sup>19</sup> A single entryway, known as the Akaba Idena, famed for its own magical powers, marked the spot of the hunchbacked weaver’s sacrifice. Several distinct neighborhoods grew around communal squares within the walled enceinte; by the nineteenth century, there were sixteen squares, including two Muslim quarters.<sup>20</sup> But, as other anthropological and historical studies of specific Yoruba towns show, Kétu was not a timeless Yoruba town occupied by neatly defined extended families with singular identities. A closer look at Kétu reveals a settlement of waves of diverse migrants who arrived not only from Ile-Ife but from other Yoruba towns and from other ethnic groups.<sup>21</sup> Using *oríki*, complex and poetic praise



The Akaba Idena is the famed doorway to Kétu's central town, restored and shown with some of the surrounding ramparts. The entrance was not a sign of the town's isolation but its integration in regional networks, serving as the site of the main four-day market in the nineteenth century. Photograph by author.

songs (sometimes little understood by people today who are only able to recite fragments of them), people recount with pride their origins in other West African communities such as the Baatonu (Bariba) or Tapa to the north, Weme to the south, or Gbe speakers to the west.<sup>22</sup> Like other Yoruba kingdoms, Kétu had amorphous boundaries spreading beyond the walled center of the town into nearby Gbe villages and other settlements more than twenty miles away in what is now Nigeria. Though some villages took on a more autonomous outlook, challenging the control of the town and the king, the links between the town and peripheral villages were strong, with most families maintaining farmland in villages and living there for months at a time during the rainy season.<sup>23</sup> Scholars fascinated by the density and complexity of Yoruba towns have debated whether there was a precolonial form of Yoruba “urbanism” based on agricultural production rather than industry and composed of lineages or extended families.<sup>24</sup> To think of agriculturally based Yoruba towns as “urban” because of their population density does challenge assumptions about the definition of cities, but the concept of a process of “urbanization” does not necessarily



capture how towns actually formed, how local residents identified themselves, or how those processes of expansion reflected gender roles.

Despite the predominant theme of the independent prince or the trailblazing hunter as the iconic founder of Yoruba towns, Kétu's oral traditions subtly incorporate the image of families with wives and children as migrants and settlers. Because a bride was expected to relocate to the household of her husband with in-laws, her husband's brothers, and their families and younger siblings, women were the mobile members of the community, moving between households, villages, and towns. Like the oral traditions of the town, which emphasized migrating prince and hunter, the oral histories of individual Kétu families told of the migration, sometimes conspicuously from Ile-Ife, more often from other prominent or nearby Yoruba towns, of a grandfather, a great-grandfather or a more distant, almost mythical ancestor.<sup>25</sup> In these family stories, individual men, portrayed as lone settlers with little reference to wives, children, and families, founded communities. To see the understated role of women in expansion as one of reproduction, sexuality, and fertility is too simplistic. Indeed, a recurrent theme in the oral histories of individual families was men's fertility and their quest for fatherhood.

Echoing the oral tradition of the town, one man told me his ancestor arrived from Ile-Ife trying to escape from *àbíkú*, literally "children born to die." The ancestor, a hunter, had arrived from Ile-Ife with his wife and had rested his bag on a tree where his first healthy child was born and where the compound now stood.<sup>26</sup> The reference to Ile-Ife lends prestige and authenticity to the family's heritage, together with the familiar image of the hunter and the items associated with his work, a bag of supplies and the ability to track and scout landmarks like trees. The specter of *àbíkú* (children born to die), found too in modern Nigerian literature, appears in family histories that people tell about life-altering moments of hardship, such as displacement or religious conversion.<sup>27</sup> "Children born to die" may be seen not simply as a metaphor for personal anguish or modern-day angst but as defying the normal patterns of reproduction and expansion of the household by denying families children and a future. In contrast to the eighteenth century, when the Oyo empire, at its peak, added more royal wives and other palace dependents and politicized the symbols of procreation and marriage associated with the household, the image of the "child born to die" is linked to the itinerant club or band of men, as in the Yoruba towns that rose in the nineteenth century on the strength of their soldiers and slave raiding.<sup>28</sup> The story of the hunter from Ile-Ife who overcame

the death of his children to establish a home in Kétu is a broader metaphor for the triumph of procreation, household, and kingdom over death, mobility, and militarized states. Wives, mothers, and women's fertility may be the ultimate symbols of the household, while men suffering from "children born to die," as depicted in oral histories, link the household to men and fatherhood.

Women, wives, and even child-bearing mothers are often only secondary in family histories as in histories about the town. Though few guardians of family histories today tend to remember women as part of the founding story of a compound, there is a recurrent theme of "motherhood" in these histories, a theme less about child bearing than about age, power, and influence. Most women remembered in family histories came from more recent decades, powerful "mothers" who were most senior in the compound or women who had acquired a broader title in the community. Before I had learned of the title "Ìyá Ọba" (Mother of the King) in Kétu, a man who hinted at the prestige of his family said that one of his female ancestors, Şanibi, had been Ìyá Ọba during the 1920s or 1930s.<sup>29</sup> In one extraordinary case, an elderly Muslim man claimed that a woman blacksmith had established his family compound, extraordinary because women are seldom associated with smithing; still, blacksmiths, like elderly women, are perceived to have specialized knowledge and supernatural power.<sup>30</sup> Taken together, powerful mother figures and vulnerable fathers in oral traditions and family histories nonetheless do not completely subvert the gender relations in Yoruba society in which most men dominate most women.

In her study of Yoruba storytelling, Deirdre La Pin affirms that many oral forms of expression became formulaic, with stock characters, familiar hardships, and neat resolutions.<sup>31</sup> That oral forms can be manipulated and open to debate does not make them useless but *useful* for people who hear and tell them, who write them down or read them. Access to the oral source is seldom possible or translatable and the relationship between those who tell stories and those who write them down is lost. Whether recorded by a Christian Yoruba convert in 1853, by a local Kétu historian in the 1920s, a French administrator in the 1940s, or by me, an African American researcher, town and family histories take on diverse symbolic and historical meanings. People in Kétu may express their understanding of the past in their oral histories, may control some of the material available to researchers, and may influence the outcome, yet the writer's perspective shapes how stories about power, politics, and gender are written for a wider audience.

## The Politics of Making History out of Myth

A missionary of the British-based Church Missionary Society (CMS), Samuel Crowther, himself a Yoruba man, first wrote of Kétu's origins as he learned of them during a visit in 1853: "The king of Kétu is said to be the eldest of 3 brothers viz. the Alákétu, King of Kétu, Alake, King of the Egba nation, and the youngest King of Yorúbá. . . . The king of Ife is said to be the keeper of the house of Ife. The Alákétu is the rightful proprietor of Ife at the demise of their father."<sup>32</sup> About forty years later, in 1894, the French had defeated Dahomey, a neighboring kingdom that in 1886 had decimated Kétu, capturing and enslaving many survivors. A French navy lieutenant and amateur topographer named Aubé, who was escorting Kétu refugees from Dahomey back to Kétu, was told, "The town of Kétu was founded by Ede, an inhabitant of Ogoudo, a village between Save and Kétu."<sup>33</sup> Each account addressed a radically different perspective on political legitimacy, focusing on two figures in Kétu's oral traditions. The "older brother" of the king of Oyo refers to Şoipasan, sometimes portrayed as the "husband" of Oduduwa; the villager was Ede, the man who founded Kétu, with the help of the hunter Alalumon and the blessing of "Mother" Mepere. Crowther had heard that the founders of Kétu originated in the Yoruba "homeland," and the French navy lieutenant had heard that an ordinary person established the kingdom. Neither mentioned the presence of women.

When Samuel Crowther visited Kétu in 1853, he was not a stranger. For seven years, he had been exchanging messages with the king of Kétu, Alákétu Adebia, having first met the king's messengers when the king was organizing the rescue of some of his people captured during a slave raid on another town. Crowther later helped resolve a dispute between some Kétu traders and some soldiers from Abeokuta, where Crowther was stationed.<sup>34</sup> Crowther came to respect the king of Kétu early on, praising him via his messengers: "God has made him [the Alákétu] a father to his people, it was his duty to keep and protect them . . . and as long as he acts the part of a father to his people God would bless him."<sup>35</sup> The king himself came to see Crowther as an *awo* (intimate friend though known only from a distance), and Crowther was sheltered during much of his stay in Kétu, spending most of his time with a man named Asai, who he believed was the "prime minister" of Kétu. Asai, an apparent supporter of missionary activities in Kétu, was probably a lesser dignitary responsible for guiding visitors and probably provided the version of the oral history of the town origins that Crowther wrote down.<sup>36</sup>

Crowther had been rescued from a slave ship as a young boy and educated in Sierra Leone and London by the Church Missionary Society. Like other Yoruba intellectuals, including descendants of Yoruba slaves who returned from Brazil, he wished to portray a Yoruba “nation” connected by language and culture across diverse West African towns and reaching as far as resettlement communities in Sierra Leone. But Crowther had not shaped Kétu’s past to his own ends; he was recording its history from the perspective of the Alákétu (king of Kétu) and other leading men. By the nineteenth century, when the Ọyọ empire had been destroyed and several Yoruba towns vied to be a successor, Kétu’s leadership was making a statement about the town’s power and importance as the “rightful proprietor of Ife.”

How different the situation was in 1894 at the dawn of French colonialism. After a nominal presence along the African coast over two centuries, European nations, spurred on by economic competition and technological advances in weaponry in the 1890s, began to undertake military expeditions to seize interior African lands. The all-European Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 had guaranteed European traders and missionaries access to the continent, often based on dubious treaties between African leaders and European representatives. While soldiers in the service of France launched a military campaign against Dahomey in 1892, Great Britain used its base in the coastal port of Lagos to complete treaties and military strikes against Yoruba towns. Kétu, recognized as a kingdom by the French, initially enjoyed “protected” status with some rights and autonomy, though in 1908 it had lost its protectorate standing along with most other kingdoms in the Dahomey. In a few decades, Africans’ centuries-long relationship with Europe and the Americas shifted from one based on trade in goods and slaves to one in which French and British officials tried to shape African political and social life more closely.

When French lieutenant Aubé took down the story of Kétu’s origins, he had less knowledge and less personal investment in the history of the region than Crowther had had.<sup>37</sup> That the refugees described Kétu’s founder as neither a “prince” nor the “older brother” of another powerful king did not mean that the recent war had dampened political motivations of fifty years earlier, when Crowther collected his version of events. Aubé had been helped by a “little escort”; during the trek from Dahomey territory to Kétu’s overgrown capital, abandoned for eight years, his informant likely associated with one of Kétu’s five royal families that name a king to the throne on a rotating basis.<sup>38</sup> A man named Odu, who would take the name Onyegen as the next Alákétu, or king of Kétu, was among the refugees, as was a former wife of the previous king who

would become Onyegen's senior wife, or Ida. Known as Alaba Ida, she would become a notorious figure in her local community and to the French colonial administration over the next two decades. Fehetona, another refugee, speaking to a Catholic priest who visited at his settlement near the historical site of Kétu's walled center, had claimed to be the king of Kétu in 1891.<sup>39</sup> Anyone with the French commander's ear would have had an interest in highlighting Kétu's independent origins.

Odu (later Alákétu Onyegen), his future senior wife Alaba, or others may have omitted parts of oral histories when they recited them. So too the writer who transcribed an oral source participated in its retelling. Oral narrative that becomes public is subject to approval or critique by any audience and vulnerable to the whims of the narrator, who may reinterpret it for political or dramatic effect. A writer, in writing down an oral history, establishes a record that may become canonical, but the actual "oral historian" who spoke to Crowther or Aubé, whether a titleholder responsible for maintaining town histories or an informant granting an interview or engaging in casual conversation, remains unknown, as does the actual and entire content of the oral history. Decades later, when Father Thomas Moulero, a Catholic priest and local historian from Kétu, and Edouard Dunglas, a French colonial administrator, took down more detailed versions of Kétu's oral history, they obscured their sources and the settings where they had collected them. Moulero and Dunglas each became "oral historians" in their own right, engaging the style and method of storytelling to convey Kétu's oral histories in writing.<sup>40</sup>

In 1926 and 1927, Moulero wrote a twelve-part series on his hometown's history for the religious and scholarly journal *La Reconnaissance Africaine* (African Discovery). He had been taken into the Catholic mission in Kétu as a young boy, rose quickly in the teaching ranks to become, in 1928, the first ordained African Catholic priest in the French colony of Dahomey.<sup>41</sup> Serving his own religious and intellectual passions, he wrote a study of the Savé kingdom's history after teaching there from 1933 to 1958, and he began a long career as a consultant and guide to innumerable foreign researchers that lasted until his death in 1974. Brazilian diplomat and author Antônio Olinto was so inspired by Moulero that he incorporated him as a character in one of his books about Brazilians who migrated back to West Africa.<sup>42</sup>

The French colonial administrator Edouard Dunglas was living in Dahomey when Moulero was writing his series on Kétu history. Stationed in Kétu between 1939 and 1942, Dunglas hoped to complete a study of Kétu history, but, uncovering little source material on Kétu, he turned instead to a regional



Statue of Father Thomas Moulero, local Kétu historian and ordained priest, who greatly shaped the writing of Kétu history, publishing oral traditions in the 1920s and consulting with outside researchers until his death in 1974. Photograph by author.

study of “Central Dahomey.” His essay, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen Dahomey: Royaume de Kétou, d’Abomey, et de Ouidah” [Towards a History of Central Dahomey], appeared posthumously in 1957 and 1958. Several educated Kétu men were eager to show me hand-copied versions or excerpts of Dunglas’s original undated manuscript, “Legends and History of the Kétu Kingdom,” currently housed in the former Dahomey Institute for Applied Research (IRAD). The circulation (albeit limited) of the written-down oral histories within Kétu itself demonstrates how written history comes to bear on oral sources in the present.<sup>43</sup>

Moulero began his first article on Kétu’s history as a teller of popular tales: “Here are the stories that hunters tell about the origins of Kétou during the long nights as they watch and wait for a passing herd of elephants.”<sup>44</sup> Whether or not Moulero ever heard oral histories in such a setting, he did interview people such as an elderly woman captured in the 1886 attack by Dahomey, and some of his Savé oral histories were said to be collected from a teenage boy.<sup>45</sup> Many of the oral histories Moulero transcribed about Kétu were about kings, top ministers, and other wealthy male residents. Dunglas, too, sought information mainly from the Alákétu (king of Kétu), his ministers, the imam (Muslim religious leader), the French Catholic mission priest, and agents of the French administration.<sup>46</sup>

Moulero and Dunglas did not pretend to use only verified evidence. They both sprinkled supernatural events, songs, and aphorisms throughout their texts, in contrast to more typical modern Western historical accounts based in written evidence. Christian, Western-educated Yoruba historian Samuel Johnson also included similar magical events in his own famous *History of the Yorubas*. Literary scholar Ato Quayson explains that Johnson and his colleagues, writing in the era of rising Yoruba cultural nationalism in the face of European colonialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tried to represent Yoruba history in a Western mode while at the same time retaining the oral character of Yoruba culture. Moulero stated matter-of-factly that “witches” capable of powers over life and death, similar to those reputed of Yá Mepere, still existed in Kétu, and he told of a man of superhuman strength, a giant, who by himself erected the fortifications surrounding the town. He described how one side in a violent conflict in the nineteenth century protected themselves from bullets by wearing talismans. Indeed, recording a supernatural event as a historical event was not unusual for African elites writing at that time.<sup>47</sup> Though some of the elements Moulero and Johnson related would be dismissed by a Western reader, Moulero and Johnson attempted to transcend

the contrasts by combining Western and Yoruba cultural forms.<sup>48</sup> They joined storyteller to writer, and spoken to written word.

Dunglas himself mocked the famous story Moulero told of the giant who dug the trench around Kétu, noting that it was the men who repaired the mud walls who recreated the large thumbprints attributed to the giant.<sup>49</sup> Yet Dunglas ended a chapter on the king's ministers with the story of two "witches," not unlike Yá Mepere of the standard Kétu origin story. Yá Mefu (Mother Mefu), associated with the Mefu royal family, is celebrated for bringing rain, in the past the town's sole source of water. The other "witch" was an elderly woman known as Yá Bokolo or Na Bokolo ("Na" meaning "aunt"), who like Yá Mefu was noted for disappearing into the earth instead of dying, thus able to return from time to time.<sup>50</sup> Dunglas tried to rationalize the lore surrounding Na Bokolo with comments that stories of the disappearance of important and powerful people into the earth were not uncommon in Yoruba towns. Dunglas reprinted and translated sayings and several songs in Yoruba and Gbe languages that marked historical events in the town, including, as had Moulero, local stories that Western standards of evidence could not explain.

Moulero's status in the Kétu kingdom and in the French colonial state affected his stake as an author of Kétu's history as much as his racial and ethnic identity did. He had familial ties to the Magbo royal family and his Western education and Catholic beliefs tied him to the colonial apparatus and to the many Westerners who visited his country after independence. Thus Moulero was an insider with the potential to observe as an outsider. Citing the work of an eminent nineteenth-century French historian of the religion of ancient Greece and Rome, he defended oral sources as superior to others.<sup>51</sup> Dunglas, by contrast, consulted sources based on observation or hearsay, such as traveler accounts, missionary reports, and other historical texts. In keeping with his role as a French colonial administrator, he noted colonial structures such as the administrator's residence or the dispensary and referred to notorious Kétu personalities from the early colonial period, such as the two Kétu women who had served as French colonial agents from 1911 to 1917. Reiterating that Kétu was but a provincial capital and no longer formally recognized as a kingdom (even though kingship was not abolished as in other places), Dunglas commented how the Alákétu—no longer an awe-inspiring king but the mere head of a colonial province—was able to leave the palace dressed as a "regular person."<sup>52</sup>

As a French colonial administrator, Dunglas could not identify with Kétu and Yoruba culture in the same way Moulero or Johnson could, even though Dunglas's portrayal of "witches," songs, and local sayings resembled that of



Yoruba cultural nationalists. Dunglas belonged to a class of French colonial administrators who conducted research and wrote studies of African history and culture.<sup>53</sup> In quite different ways, Moulero and Dunglas used their privilege as elite men in the West African colonial setting to obtain sources for their histories from leading men, important women, and those associated with the French colonial regime. Dunglas, as a white European man associated with the power of the French colonial state, would have been considered a man of privilege when he asked questions of those persons he interviewed. It would be surprising if Dunglas had not consulted Moulero about his work, though he did not acknowledge doing so.<sup>54</sup>

With access to official histories that emphasize the deeds of kings, hunters, and religious leaders, both Moulero and Dunglas incorporated mythical women like Yá Mepere. Dunglas incorporated other women with unusual power, like Yá Mefu and Na Bokolo, and also mentioned historical female figures like Alaba Ida. Yá Mepere and others, who represented myth-like figures (as did all the characters in the origin and earliest history), were depicted as elderly women with powers of their own who supported and aided leading men. Such women were potentially dangerous and commanded respect. In acknowledging and conveying this position of “mothers” in Kétu history, Moulero exposed his insider outlook despite his European and missionary education. Dunglas, in some ways, did the opposite by dispassionately including “witches” in his account, revealing his outsider status despite his deep engagement with Yoruba history and culture.

Moulero and Dunglas straddled the style of a tragic Western epic and Yoruba *itàn* (histories or stories), which often feature a predicament at the center of a story, leading from crisis to resolution. Deirdre La Pin writes that the role of the storyteller is “not to show the listener what is familiar in human experience, but what is uncommon and irregular.”<sup>55</sup> During the period when Moulero and Dunglas collected Kétu oral histories about the nineteenth century, the freshest events in people’s minds were steeped in war with Dahomey, in other regional conflicts, and in European colonial conquest. Much of the history Moulero and Dunglas collected rationalized the conflict with Dahomey, tracing the conflict between the two states to Kétu’s original occupation of the land. Members of the Kétu community themselves even betrayed the town and helped Dahomey attack neighboring kingdoms, which led eventually to Dahomey’s assault of Kétu itself.<sup>56</sup> To the extent these stories reflect some version of actual events or simply were created to explain the debilitating war with Da-

homey, they explain the human foibles and profound crises in the style of the Yoruba *itàn* (history or story), while suiting Western literary modes.

Although a generation of Africanist scholars from the 1970s, drawing upon the theories of Africanist historian Jan Vansina, sought to “strip away” fabrications to get at the nugget of “truth,” Vansina himself expressed doubts about this approach:

Since a testimony is never an unbiased description of what actually happened, one must always try to check on a many sources of error . . . while at the same time avoiding a hypercritical attitude. . . . This is an attitude which could be adopted towards any kind of document—including written documents. . . . It is based on the hypothesis that it is possible to discover ‘the truth’ about history and the exact sequence of past events. But that is impossible. *One can only arrive at an approximation of the truth. . . . Every distortion is in itself a piece of documentary evidence, either about the past, or about present-day society, and should be treated as such.* (Emphasis added)<sup>57</sup>

Thus Africanist historians were challenged by three tasks: “reading” oral sources the way they read written documents, analyzing the meanings of symbolic imagery, and recognizing the role of performance.<sup>58</sup> Some have expressed less concern about recreating past events, or even about interpreting them, and have focused instead on process, on how oral sources are produced and preserved.<sup>59</sup> Although oral histories *comment* on actual events and contemporary problems, they rarely yield comprehensive or definitive answers about “what really happened” or “what it all means.” Interpreting the content *and* the context of oral sources probably provides the most likely “approximation of the truth.”

In their introduction to their edited volume on African oral history, historians Luise White, Stephen Meischer, and David William Cohen examine oral histories as part of the nationalist projects of the early 1960s, when many African nations were becoming independent from Europe. Writing between the 1920s and the 1940s, at the height of European colonialism in Africa, Moulero and Dunglas published their work after an even earlier period of Yoruba cultural nationalism of the 1890s, but still from a point of pride in African history and culture. Concerned about the present state of Kétu, which had not yet recovered from the war with Dahomey in 1886, Moulero hoped that a proposed

railroad would revitalize the “dead town” and make it an economic center for agricultural produce.<sup>60</sup> Dunglas complained that the indifference of many youths to the stories of their elders made the collection and transcription of oral histories important.<sup>61</sup> Moulero, Dunglas, and African writers like Johnson before them had discovered the power and defended the use of oral sources decades before Vansina and his students in the 1960s.<sup>62</sup> The desire to “discover” and “preserve” the past often is at the heart of research on oral sources, exposing the writer’s interests and bias.

The contradictions and engagement with the present in Moulero’s and Dunglas’s work do not detract from the historical or cultural importance of their texts, but make them more valuable sources. In a study of praise songs (*oriki*) in a Nigerian town, Karin Barber argues that the varied and sometimes contradictory information in oral sources express the town’s “inner diversity and its coherence.”<sup>63</sup> Much of the writing on Yoruba history, especially by Nigerian intellectuals, has sought to illustrate the “purity” of Yoruba culture, but many of the oral histories scholars find reflect borrowing, exchange, and intermarriage among Yoruba towns, with other ethnic groups, across religions, and even with returned descendants of slaves from Brazil. Oral histories have been a vital source for explaining a vibrant and increasingly diverse community.

To be a resident of a Yoruba town is to be an *omọ*, or child of that town. To use the relationship between parent and child to refer to citizenship need not imply a limited and small, family-oriented sense of the world, but it does express power and hierarchy. In such a metaphor, the most powerful women and men are “mothers” and “fathers”; others are elder or junior sisters, brothers, aunts, and uncles, all subject to the king or a higher power as “children.” Deirdre La Pin views *itàn* (histories and stories) not as mere anecdotes but as “repositories of cultural thought,” as potential explanations for how and why people came to be *omọ Kétu* (Kétu people; children of Kétu) rather than a chronicle of a series of real or imagined events.<sup>64</sup> Histories and stories that reinforce ideas about mobility, diversity, and gender illustrate how people in Kétu have come to see themselves. Oral histories and founding myths remain relevant precisely because timeless themes like “mother” and “father” figures are malleable symbols of power, potential danger, cooperation, and social order, whether during the mythical past or the postcolonial present.

Oral historical narratives, whether written down later or recorded orally, are crucial and multilayered sources in African history because they purport to tell the “real” story. Oral narratives can incorporate counter-discourses, challenging, for example, expected gender ideals and notions of identity. Thus,

women were not ignored as part of Kétu's oral history, and Kétu's own stories defy the idea of a "pure" Kétu Yoruba identity. European travel accounts, another vital if problematic source of African history, can similarly be read against the grain. Travel accounts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in West Africa and other collected oral histories did focus on local elites, but generally within the context of a broader Atlantic slave trade, West African wars, or European competition. Though these histories, like written and published ones, show a bias in favor of elite men, they reveal that power and influence resided not only with kings, male ministers, and wealthy male traders, but also with the women—"mothers," wives, slaves, priests, and soldiers—who surrounded them.

# How Kings Lost Their Mothers

## *Politics of the Atlantic Slave Trade*

In his account of the past glorious days of the Oyo empire, Yoruba historian Samuel Johnson wrote about a group of women close to the king whom he referred to as the “ladies of the palace.” There is scant historical information about these women, yet they had numerous counterparts in precolonial states across West Africa and in other parts of the continent.<sup>1</sup> Such women lived in and around the royal compound and performed critical duties, many bearing titles with the word “Ìyá” (mother). Women like the “mothers” of Oyo represented multiple relationships between gender and power. Two titled women in Oyo dressed as men and were greeted as Bábá (father). At the death of the king they had served, the most important among them were sentenced to die and be buried at his side. As close confidants of the king with ceremonial and ritual duties, the “mothers” in Oyo stood apart from the display of the king’s power that was embodied in the crowds of wives, slaves, and other dependents described in accounts of European traders and travelers.

As Oyo declined in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the culturally and linguistically different Dahomey kingdom rose to prominence with a unique set of powerful women in its royal household. Most no-

table among them was the “Mother of the Leopard,” said to reign alongside the Dahomey king. Other women carried titles as “mothers,” but wives of the Dada (king) of Dahomey, with special duties and a formidable army of women soldiers, called “Amazons” by nineteenth-century European visitors, are emphasized in the historical record. Indeed, men as well as women dependents of the king who supported the functioning of the state were seen as “wives” of the king of Dahomey. Women, whether designated as “mothers” or displayed as wives, were contradictory figures, serving as valuable followers yet exposing the king’s vulnerabilities.

This growing presence of “wives” and women slaves in Dahomey and in Ọyọ occurred in tandem with several forces: cultural contact between the two states; expansion in the Atlantic and local slave trades; and the peak and decline of both states. Women were not simply a possession or commodity, desired simply for their capacity to reproduce. Some women from within kingdoms and from other towns and ethnic groups could unite networks of families and states. Others brought profound religious and cultural knowledge useful to kings still considered religious and political leaders of their people. These connections across territories and cultures, facilitated by slave trading, could empower the state but weaken the king’s monopoly of power. Both Ọyọ and Dahomey began to decline internally before they were defeated by external military threats: Ọyọ by a West African Muslim jihadist state and Dahomey by the French colonial army.

Though much smaller and located between these more powerful states, Kétu would have witnessed the wealth and danger brought by the slave trade, the perils of state expansion, and the threat of internal political decline. Kétu shared in the language and culture of Ọyọ but had long-standing links to the Gbe-speaking Dahomey kingdom. Gender models prominent in Ọyọ and Dahomey were relevant to Kétu not only as a neighboring kingdom, but also as a territory threatened with slave raids and war from these more formidable states. Because Kétu was connected to Ọyọ and Dahomey through trade, marriage, diplomacy, and slavery, ideas about gender and power that made “mothers” and “wives” so important to the kings at Ọyọ and Dahomey were at work in Kétu, too, shaping its development and survival as an independent kingdom.

### **“Ladies of the Palace”: Religion and Power in the Ọyọ Empire**

Using local oral histories, secondhand information, and rumor, scholars have reconstructed the history of Ọyọ’s improbable rise during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries after conquest by a Nupe kingdom to the north.<sup>2</sup> The

period of external conquest has been considered to explain important cultural innovations in Ọyọ associated with men's activities, including a masquerade to honor ancestors and the use of mounted horses in warfare. Ironically, according to Ọyọ oral traditions, divination, a practice largely associated with men and since linked to the later expansion of Islam, is said to have been introduced during this early period by a woman from the south. Initially ignored by the king, divination was adopted after the invasion of the north, the defeat seen as a punishment for his rejection of the practice. This oral tradition representing a foreign woman bringing powerful knowledge and skills suggests more about how people saw the spread of information through women rendered mobile by marriage practices and local slave trading than it does about the actual origins of divination.<sup>3</sup> Thus, beginning in the early seventeenth century, not only warfare, but religion and culture contributed to Ọyọ's successful expansion and empire building in neighboring Yoruba towns. By the late part of the century, Europeans on the coast heard rumors of a "terrifying" and "warlike" kingdom in the interior. By the eighteenth century, Ọyọ's successful military campaigns had reduced Dahomey to tributary status and Europeans were learning of Ọyọ ambassadors being sent to Dahomey. Direct contact between Europeans and Ọyọ traders probably did not occur until the turn of the nineteenth century, when the once formidable state of Ọyọ was slowly beginning to come apart.<sup>4</sup>

Oral histories collected at the end of the nineteenth century by Samuel Johnson provide the most detail on Ọyọ's political organization, although by the 1830s the empire had completely fallen, its capital later relocated some eighty miles to the south. Johnson's discussion of the king and leading ministers in his *History of the Yorubas* mirrors the power structure of the empire, beginning with the king and palace at the center and fanning out from there to provinces and governors. Crucial to the king and his power were several layers of servants, priests, and slaves, who helped manage the state as guards, messengers, diviners, and entertainers. Among the individuals closest to the king were women who, apart from wives and slaves, held key positions as officials and priests.

Samuel Johnson's "ladies of the palace" were the eight top women ministers, eight priests, and other women of high rank, many of whom served as guardians or "mothers" over people or over religious practices, overseeing certain sections of the palace and capital. The Ìyá Ọba (Mother of the King) was said to be closest to the king, though she was a representative from among the women in the palace and not his actual biological mother. The king was not

allowed to have a biological mother since the king was not to lower himself before anyone, and all children kneel before their mother. If the king's own mother was alive when he ascended to power, she was expected to commit suicide. It was an unspoken assumption that the king's biological father would have been deceased if his son had risen to the throne. On at least two occasions, biological mothers of the king were said to have ruled Ọyọ as regents for underaged sons. As the representative of the king's mother, the Mother of the King received great deference, accompanying the king during special times of worship and serving as the leader of the top noble families.<sup>5</sup>

It was the Ìyá Kéré (Little Mother), rather than the Mother of the King, however, who held the greater power. She was charged with guarding all the king's regalia and even with placing the crown on his head; she could register her displeasure with the king by withholding his royal trappings. She was the leader of all the king's guards and messengers, slaves known as *ilàrí*, a reference to their half-shaved heads. The Little Mother kept a statue in the likeness of each of the king's guards and messengers, with the small statues representing the king's messengers and guards' responsibility for the king's life; hence her ritual power over the king was great. As further proof of her power within the palace, the Little Mother controlled the Olosi, a top-ranking eunuch, and oversaw several governors in provinces near the heartland of Ọyọ.<sup>6</sup>

If the Mother of the King and Little Mother represented the highest forms of symbolic and political power held by senior women, the remaining female officials cultivated the king's religious and ceremonial authority. The third, fourth, and fifth key women in the palace supervised the worship of the deity Şango—the mythologized fourth king of Ọyọ who is associated with lightning. Led by the Ìyá Naso—a name that appears also in the origin stories of Afro-Brazilian religious practices known as Candomblé—these three women performed practical and symbolic duties of Şango worship. The Ìyá Naso maintained the king's personal Şango shrine, and her first lieutenant was responsible for the execution of any Şango worshipper who had been condemned to death. The second woman represented the child that the king, who, as a devotee of Şango, was required to dedicate to the worship of the deity. The sixth and seventh women Johnson described were linked to the king's eldest son and heir apparent as the son's mother or symbolic mother responsible for controlling a part of the capital city. The eighth woman served as the king's personal attendant. Like the other seven top women ministers, the king's personal attendant, though seemingly akin to a slave, headed a small compound of dependents on the palace grounds.<sup>7</sup> In 1826, Scottish traveler Hugh Clapperton, author of



the first eyewitness account of (Old) Oyo, may have actually met this eighth woman. He told of seeing, during his visit there, two women who never left the king's side, one carrying his kola nuts and a spittoon.<sup>8</sup>

Johnson listed eight women priests as the next level of women in the palace, but he described few in detail, noting simply of the rest that they had titles that indicated the *òrìṣà* (deity) they tended to, such as Yemaja or Oṣun, both important female deities associated with rivers. The first priest, Ìyá le Ori (Mother of the House of Ori), was responsible for the king's worship of the Ori, the deity of fate, worshipped generally by both women and men. The second priest, Ìyá le Mole (Mother of the House of *Ifá*), dealt with *ifá* divination, a practice associated primarily with men, *ifá* priests known as *babaláwo* (father owns the secrets). The Mother of the House of *Ifá* participated in *ifá* ceremonies and was the leader of the *ifá* priests, though she did not carry herself as a man. Among the remaining titled women, two women lower in rank than the priests did, however, "become" men in dress and stature.

One of these eight women priests was the Èni Ojà (Owner of the Market) and leader of the devotees of Eṣu, whom Yoruba Christians like Johnson referred to as the devil. Often portrayed as a "trickster" embodying all contradictions, Eṣu is the *òrìṣà* (deity) of the crossroads, his shrine placed at intersections and at public places like markets. Whenever the king prayed to Eṣu at the market, he was said to lean on the arms of the "Owner of the Market," who was dressed in a man's robes.<sup>9</sup> The "Owner of the Market" specifically oversaw the king's market, often situated in a square before the palace; she managed two male palace officials associated with the market, one of whom was the powerful eunuch, the Olosi. It was striking that a woman dressed as a man would supervise the market, since the market was often associated with women traders and, at night, with "witches."<sup>10</sup>

Next, the Ìyámódé led all the *Ṣango* worshippers, most of them women who lived around the royal burial ground. The Ìyámódé—whose name includes the words "mother" and "outside"—lived in a house on the royal grounds, though her responsibilities were not directly related to the palace. All the devotees living near the royal cemetery addressed her as Bábá (father), including the king, who knelt before her. Indeed, when the Ìyámódé responded in kind to the king, she did not fully recline as a woman would before a superior. Because the king had no father and no biological mother, he prostrated before no one but the Ìyámódé and devotees of *Ṣango*, addressing them as father, thus illustrating the supreme place of *Ṣango* in Oyo kingship.<sup>11</sup>

Anthropologist Randy Matory, in his study of religion and gender in Oyo, argues that the predominant place of *Ṣango* in Oyo specifically reinforced the

image of “wifeliness.” Beyond the hundreds of palace wives and female slaves, titled women, and certain priests, male slaves, known as *ilàrí*, cross-dressed and proclaimed themselves “wives of the king.”<sup>12</sup> Because *Şango* possesses or “mounts” his devotees and because most followers of *Şango* and other deities that “mount” worshippers are women, Matory analyzes this religious practice of possession and female submission—central to *Ọyọ* politics even after British colonialism—as a metaphor for political power. Matory groups titled women and priests with wives and slaves, noting, for example, that the *Ìyá Ọba* (Mother of the King) was in fact a wife in the royal family.<sup>13</sup> However, Johnson emphasized that the top titled women and priests were not simply wives and were distinct from slaves. Top titled women and priests used their appearance to distinguish themselves from lower-ranked palace residents by shaving their heads and braiding or adorning their hair with feathers, not unlike the way men styled themselves as women in Matory’s study.<sup>14</sup>

That the “mothers” in the *Ọyọ* palace were more than wives or slaves makes the two women who masqueraded as men more challenging to understand, though they are not the only examples of women “becoming” men in Yoruba oral histories. In addition to the *Kétu* oral histories that depict the first Yoruba ruler *Oduduwa* as a woman, some of the most powerful *òrìṣà* (deities), such as *Obatala*, are seen as androgynous.<sup>15</sup> In some oral traditions about *Ọyọ*’s earliest history, the king who reputedly introduced warfare on horses was a woman named *Orompoto*. Matory recorded two versions of a story explaining how *Orompoto*—whose name connoted “something soft”—physically changed herself into a man, appearing naked to prove it.<sup>16</sup> Among the “ladies of the palace,” neither of the “male mothers”—the *Ìyámódé* as leader of the *Şango* worshippers at the royal cemetery or the *Èni Ọjà* responsible for the king’s market—was one of the more important female religious or political figures who were close to the king. Their positions did not require them to work with many men as did the *Ìyá le Mole*, who met frequently with divination priests, or the *Obagunte*, a woman who represented the king in the male secret society known as *Ogboni*. Ironically and paradoxically, both the *Ìyá le Mole* and the *Obagunte*, who worked with powerful men outside the palace, were closer to slave status than were other female officials and priests.<sup>17</sup> The two “men” among the “mothers” in the palace reinforced the understanding that femininity and masculinity were part of the religious and political power structure at all levels of the state. Some “masculinized” mothers intervened in women’s spaces, as in the worship of *Şango*, or in the market, while other women ministers and priests participated in rituals dominated by men, such as *ifá* divination or male secret societies.

Proximity to the king came at a cost for some women and men in the palace. Seven women and six men with the most access to the king were required to commit suicide upon the king's death, apparently to discourage assassination attempts on the king by people closest to him.<sup>18</sup> The doomed women fell into three overlapping categories: political, religious, and personal. The *Ìyá Ọba* (Mother of the King) and the two titled women associated with the heir apparent occupied the most political positions in the palace. Great deference was paid to these women by the king, by palace residents, and by leading families of the town; they had great potential to advise the king and heir apparent on policies and decisions. Similarly, because the king's political power was so closely tied to his control over religious worship, the three priests of *Şango* arguably enjoyed influence beyond their stated role in the king's worship of *Şango*. Finally, the king's personal servant had the most access to the king's person, making her extremely loyal but dangerous to the king if she turned against him. However, the forced suicide of some of these "mothers" made women's political power in *Ọyọ* ambivalent. In addition, most of these women were limited to the palace, its grounds, and their ties to the king. While some of the men in the royal family who held titled positions as "fathers" explicitly advised the king, and the male heads of noble families acted as "kingmakers," not even the most powerful woman in the palace was officially described as a direct counselor to the king.

Distant provinces controlled by the king but far removed from the palace were placed in the hands of governors and provincial appointees, which means less is known about women's political roles in other regions and towns from Johnson's account, written from the perspective of the capital of the *Ọyọ* empire. As Clapperton made his way through the *Ọyọ* provinces nearest the coast inland to *Ọyọ* in 1825, he noticed, seated on the veranda of the appointed *Ọyọ* official, "an ancient gray-headed set of men and women—the latter were of the greater number and appeared to be the principal officers of the household and nearest the great personage."<sup>19</sup> Thus the patterns of political officers and titles may have been replicated in the outlying provinces, giving women ceremonial and advisory roles. Johnson wrote that the *Ìyálóde* (Mother Owns the Outside World), whose title Johnson liberally translated as "queen of the ladies," was a title in the provinces of *Ọyọ*. Described as capable of leading warriors and as having a voice in the council of local ministers, famous *Ìyálóde* in Yoruba history rose to power in other Yoruba towns such as Ibadan and Abẹokuta. While most of the women in the palace at *Ọyọ* were concerned with the king's office and religious worship, the Mother Owns the Outside World served as a repre-

sentative to whom ordinary women could express their views. But because this position became prominent during the mid-nineteenth-century wars between Yoruba towns as communities jockeyed for position in the absence of the dominant presence of Oyo, scholars have viewed the wealth and political power of the Ìyálóde as anomalous and “untraditional.” Thus the powerful nineteenth-century Ìyálóde have been “masculinized” in the academic literature rather than considered as they are here—as part of an innovation to the idea of “mothers” of Oyo and other forms of Oyo government.<sup>20</sup>

The significant place of women in Oyo’s palace and the potential influence of those patterns on neighboring towns did not lead to women being highlighted in the conventional history of Oyo’s impressive rise and ignominious slow decline over several decades. Instead, contemporary accounts emphasized power struggles between the king and the male advisory council known as the Oyo Mesi. The overthrow of the king in 1796 was followed by a series of weak monarchs and Afonja, a rebellious provincial leader, helped deliver the final blow to the floundering state in 1817 when he enlisted the help of Muslim jihadist fighters from the north of Oyo. Soon the situation spiraled out of Afonja’s control and his province became part of the expanding Muslim caliphate of Sokoto, leading to the destruction of the capital of Oyo by 1836. Though the king of Oyo managed to relocate the capital, other Yoruba towns, many of them home to waves of Oyo refugees, grew larger and more powerful than New Oyo. But the fall of Old Oyo and the rise of other Yoruba towns had important implications for gender relationships. Never able to replicate the grandeur of the Oyo empire from the previous century, new Yoruba towns emphasized military organization and personal wealth (of women and men) in contrast to the royal pomp and “wifeliness” of Old Oyo.<sup>21</sup>

But if “wifeliness” was an attribute of Old Oyo, so too was an ideology of “public motherhood.” Other scholars who equate women’s political activities primarily with “mothering” and caretaking present such skills as “natural,” thus obscuring women’s leadership and decision making in the ritual, religious, political, and economic well-being of the community. With different “mothers” in Oyo overseeing the king’s paraphernalia, household, markets, and men’s societies, they were not coddling and comforting society as though it was a child.<sup>22</sup> Yet the “public” aspect of the duties of the “mothers” was also very “private,” involving religion, the king’s person, divination, and secret societies. The situation was also delicate because while some women were purposefully masculinized, others, especially certain nineteenth-century Ìyálóde, were criticized for “becoming like men.” It is unclear how often some of these women’s titles

were even publicly acknowledged, especially given the fear of the supernatural power of “mothers.”

By contrast, in the rival kingdom of Dahomey, the highest-ranking woman was recorded in the local oral traditions, her memory honored by a representative of her office generations later. There was not the same coterie of explicit “mother” figures in Dahomey; the consummate “mother figure” in Dahomey was surrounded instead by wives, women soldiers, and slave women who exerted power and influence, if in quite different ways.

### **Mothers of the Leopard and the Rise of the Dahomey Kingdom**

In Edna Bay’s work about the precolonial period, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics, and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey*, powerful princesses, often sisters of the king, served as the model for the rise of the “mother figure.” A woman named Aligbonon, whose name could be translated to mean “mother of the long road,” was said to have been impregnated by a leopard, their descendant later founding Dahomey.<sup>23</sup> Bay writes that early in the kingdom’s history, princess Na Hangbe ruled Dahomey as a regent for her young nephew after her twin brother, the king, suddenly died. Na Hangbe was later defeated by her other brother, Agaja, whose wars of expansion extended Dahomey to the West African coast and into direct contact with European traders of the early eighteenth century.<sup>24</sup> It is said that in 1727 one of his daughters, princess Na Geze, used sabotage to help her father win control over the coastal kingdom of Ouidah.<sup>25</sup> Mythical and historical figures like Aligbonon, Na Hangbe, and Na Geze had no recorded titles, though “Na” itself is an honorific term for princess. Unlike “mother figures,” these early mythical women were portrayed not as postmenopausal women with supernatural powers, but as young adult women associated with biological motherhood and warfare. During the early history of the kingdom, young royal women close to the Dahomey king not only cultivated a commanding role for princesses in the royal household but also paved the way for empowered, elderly, commoner women in the palace.

Historian Edna Bay asserts that the title of *kpojito* (loosely translated as “Mother of the King” but literally “one who whelps the leopard,” translated as “Mother of the Leopard” hereafter) was probably created during the reign of King Agaja, from about 1716 to 1740. Adonon, the first to hold this title, was born in a village closely associated with Aligbonon, the mother of the “leopardson” who established Dahomey. Because the founders of Dahomey had probably been strangers to the area, they drew on the region’s imagery of the leopard

to reinforce their own political legitimacy. Using that symbolism, Aligbonon, the mythical royal princess, and her “leopard-son,” who founded the royal dynasty, embodied several overlapping relationships between mother and son, royalty and commoner, outsider/stranger and indigenous person. Beginning with Adonon, a commoner woman taken as a wife by an earlier king but acting as a “mother” to Agaja in the office of the Mother of the Leopard, these connections were re-enacted in multiple ways. Adonon, born in a territory that had been incorporated into the kingdom, represented the indigenous community drawn into a state that had been founded by outsiders.<sup>26</sup> Her power, influence, and historical existence has been attested to by dozens who claim to be her descendants. Into the present day, a woman is assigned to hold that title.<sup>27</sup> The Mother of the Leopard in Dahomey, like the Mother of the King in Oyo, was not a biological mother, but rather a religious and political figure embodied by an elderly woman with an ostensibly advisory role to the king but with her own wealth and followers.

After King Agaja conquered Ouidah in 1727, European traders who began to offer eyewitness accounts of his “court” noted the presence of wives and women slaves. William Snelgrave, a British slave trader, arrived in Ouidah some weeks after King Agaja attacked Ouidah and went to meet the king in the inland capital:

His majesty was in a large court palisadoed round, sitting (contrary to the custom of the country) on a fine gilt chair, which he had taken from the king of Whidaw [Ouidah]. *There were held over his head, by women, three large umbrellas, to shade him from the sun: And four other women stood behind the chair of state, with fusils [guns] on their shoulders. I observed, the women were finely dress'd from the middle downward, (the Custom of the country being not to cover the body upward, of either sex) moreover they had on their arms, many large manelloes, or rings of gold of great value, and round their necks and in their hair, abundance of their country jewels, which are a sort of beads of divers colours, brought from a far inland country, where they are dug out of the earth, and in the same esteem with the Negroes, as diamonds amongst the Europeans. The King had a gown on, flowered with gold, which reached as low as his ankles; and European embroidered hat on his head; with sandals on his feet.*<sup>28</sup> (Emphasis added)

King Agaja’s display of wealth in gold, imported fabrics, European goods, guns, and well-dressed women may have foretold Dahomey’s later use of women sol-

diers. Snelgrave mentioned too an elderly woman who was relaying messages between the king and the “principal men of the court”; the men, who sat within twenty feet of the king’s chair, “whispered into the ear of an old woman, who went to the King; and having received his answer, she returned with it to them.” Known as the *daklo*, this elderly woman, whose official duty was to convey messages to the king, had close proximity to the king and royal ministers, reflecting a political role different from the display of young, dependent women and riches.<sup>29</sup>

Other elderly women close to King Agaja included one who fell so out of favor that the king tried to sell her into the Atlantic slave trade. Women and men absorbed into the king’s household were seldom subjected to such enslavement. Nevertheless, sale to European slave traders was always a potential punishment. Snelgrave himself refused to buy the old woman presented to him, only to learn that she was to be “sacrificed to the sea.” Men from Snelgrave’s ship, anchored offshore, miraculously rescued her from the shark-infested waters, and despite his own wholehearted support of the slave trade, Snelgrave kept the woman secretly on board. He never learned how she had offended the king, though a Dahomey official told him she had “assist[ed] some of the King’s women in their amours.” The old woman surprised Snelgrave during the slave ship’s transatlantic voyage; “by her talking to and advising [the Negroes on board], [she] made them easy in their minds.” She calmed especially the enslaved women, who were “kept in such order and decorum by this woman, that [Snelgrave] had never the like in any voyage before.” To “repay” her, Snelgrave found her a “generous” master in Barbados.<sup>30</sup> Among the captives on the ship from Ouidah or elsewhere who probably did not know her, she commanded respect as an elder and perhaps conveyed to them her past position of influence in King Agaja’s palace.

Scholars have debated King Agaja’s motives in conquering the slave-trading coastal kingdoms of Allada and Ouidah in the period between 1724 and 1727. It is Nigerian historian I. A. Akinjogbin’s opinion that King Agaja actually sought to suppress the slave trade, but most have interpreted the same sources to argue that the king sought to gain control of the slave trade for himself.<sup>31</sup> Whatever King Agaja’s plans, he faced numerous challenges from the former Ouidah king, who was trying to reclaim his throne, and from regular attacks by Oyo, which sought to extend its power and influence in the region.<sup>32</sup> Many have ignored the gendered terms in which King Agaja discussed his views of the slave trade. When Snelgrave asked for assurances about the slave trade, King Agaja said he would favor Snelgrave over other traders by treating him as “a

young wife or bride, who must be denied nothing at first.” The king was amused when Snelgrave bristled at the language that compared the British trader to a young woman, but the king apparently considered European traders dependents and subordinates to whom he extended favors and from whom he expected loyalty.<sup>33</sup> In the end, beset by attacks by Oyo and insubordination by Ouidah refugees, the king was unable to maintain his European “wives,” and slave traders complained bitterly about the reduced supply of slaves.<sup>34</sup>

The coexistence of powerful “public mothers” and the proliferation of wives and women slaves reached a new height during the reign that followed, of Tegbesu and his *kpojito* (Mother of the Leopard), Hwanjile. As part of the new palace’s bureaucracy and opulence, the new king accumulated more wives, more women guards, and more women slaves. He apparently rearranged the palace based on what he had observed in Oyo, where he had been a prisoner in his youth. During Tegbesu’s long reign from 1740 to 1774, eunuchs, royal messengers, styled as *ilàrí* with half-shaved heads, and other titled officers associated with Oyo were observed in Dahomey.<sup>35</sup> He initiated religious change that has been associated with his *kpojito*, Hwanjile, portrayed in oral histories as a mature, foreign woman who had married Tegbesu’s father Agaja and served as a mentor to Tegbesu himself, teaching him of deities and the uses of medicines. After she was named *kpojito*, Hwanjile created two new supreme deities and a new category of deities linked to individual kings, and she encouraged the use of *fa* divination (derived from the Yoruba form of *ifá*). By tying religious worship more closely to kingship, tensions were reputedly lessened between local religious priests and the royal family.<sup>36</sup> Hwanjile had cultivated such power in the eighteenth century that in the 1970s, the woman designated to represent her name and title in a ceremonial position seems to have wielded enormous influence.<sup>37</sup>

As Hwanjile deftly used religion to cement royal control throughout the heartland of the kingdom, so Tegbesu continued to incorporate families into the palace through male officials, using the image of “wifeliness” broadly, beyond biological sex. Any dependent of the king, whether woman or man, was *ahosi* (“wife” of the king), including male titleholders, some of whom settled with their families near a palace, gaining control over land and revenue. Men who became eunuchs acted out the role as *ahosi* more actively by dressing as women. Antoine Pruneau de Pommegorge, a French trading company employee in Ouidah in the 1750s, wrote that eunuchs who dressed as women “incarnated the reverence of women.” King Tegbesu bestowed wives upon the eunuchs at twenty years of age, providing for each the beginnings of a house-



hold.<sup>38</sup> Richard Norris, a British slave trader who visited Dahomey in the 1770s, wrote of a powerful eunuch at Ouidah named “Tanga,” with numerous wives who enjoyed his riches and their freedom to take lovers and husbands from among his own slave men. In fact, “Tanga” was Norris’s misspelling of the title “Tegan,” which was a precursor to the position of Yovogan, “Minister of the Whites,” responsible for relations with European traders at Ouidah. According to Norris, after the Tegan failed in a disastrous 1745 bid to establish himself as king of Ouidah, his many wives committed suicide rather than face punishment for supporting his campaign.<sup>39</sup>

The relatively short reigns of the two kings immediately succeeding Tegbesu could not compare with Tegbesu’s; their “Mothers of the Leopard” also lacked Hwanjile’s long-term impact. The first king, Kpengla, served for only fifteen years; his Mother of the Leopard, Chai, is remembered for bringing the wars with the neighboring Mahi to an end because she was from the Mahi region.<sup>40</sup> Chai is portrayed as a passive figure, representing the ties to neighboring Mahi or symbolizing Dahomey’s vulnerability by dying in a battle in which the entire Dahomey community engaged. Archibald Dalzel, a British slave trader who in 1793 compiled the history of Dahomey in a pro-slave-trade tract, recorded that Kpengla’s “big mother” died during a community-wide retaliation against a recalcitrant enemy and that Kpengla visited “his mother’s” grave, pledging to defeat another enemy and prove himself worthy.<sup>41</sup>

In the even shorter reign of Kpengla’s successor Agonglo, who served for eight years as king of Dahomey until assassinated in 1797, Senume, the Mother of the Leopard, played a role even more ambivalent than Chai’s. Senume is remembered for her association with Christianity, then considered in Dahomey a new and possibly threatening “cult.” Vicente Pires, a Portuguese priest, visited Dahomey in 1797 in an attempt to convert King Agonglo to Catholicism. He was present during the succession struggle after Agonglo’s death and wrote that the most important woman in the palace was the *naie dada*, literally, “woman king.” This “woman king,” presumably Senume, the Mother of the Leopard, was associated with one of two women practicing Catholicism in the king’s palace, their presence perhaps contributing to rumors that the king himself would convert and hence hastening the plot that led to his murder. Pires reported that several groups of high-ranking women were linked with male counterparts in the palace.<sup>42</sup> It is difficult to know whether the other titled women Pires observed held ministerial positions like that of the Mother of the Leopard or whether they were closer in status to palace wives and other dependents with responsibilities in the palace. During the two reigns of Kpengla and Agonglo,

an increasing number of women began to take center stage in the palace and capital at Dahomey. King Tegbesu's successors continued the practice he had instituted, with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of royal wives participating in annual ceremonies to honor the royal ancestors.

Disruptions of the slave trade from Ouidah, provoked by recurring problems with Oyo and Ouidah refugees, were compounded in the 1780s. King Kpengla set out to attack competing ports, which encouraged African and European traders to concentrate their efforts at Porto-Novo, a port farther east, ostensibly under Oyo control. During the American Revolutionary War and the French Revolution, which briefly blocked French participation in the slave trade, European demand declined, and slave rebellion in Saint Domingue, which led to the founding of Haiti, shut off one of the largest markets for slaves transported out of Ouidah and the Bight of Benin region. Indirectly, these periodic declines in the Atlantic slave trade may have brought into the king's palace even more women who could not then be absorbed into overseas slave markets. The ostentatious presence of so many women compensated for the incipient socioeconomic decline of the kingdom.

When a protracted struggle between factions of women in the palace brought King Adandozan to power in 1797, he dealt a prompt blow to those who worked against him, so it is said, ordering princesses slain and sending hundreds who had opposed his ascent, many women among them, into slavery. Adandozan became known for his cruelty; so hostile was public opinion against him that once he was overthrown in a coup in 1818, he was effectively erased from Dahomey history, though Edna Bay writes that he lived for several more decades. Today, little is apparently known of his Mother of the Leopard, Kentobasin, though her name has been preserved.

In a profound reversal of fortune, Agontime, one of the many women forced into slavery in the Americas by Adandozan, was honored as the Mother of the Leopard by the next king, though it is doubtful that the actual Agontime was ever found.<sup>43</sup> Agontime's enslavement and attempted rescue echoed the story of the old woman expelled from King Agaja's palace who found her way onto William Snelgrave's slave ship, showing how the Atlantic slave trade continued to haunt the political landscape in Dahomey. The end of Adandozan's reign in 1818 marked the end of a century when "mother figures" were at their height of power and influence within these West African kingdoms. "Public motherhood" was integral to eighteenth-century West African kingship; so too the impact of Atlantic slave trade was vital to changing West African gender relations.

## **Mothers Become Wives: Silent Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade**

During the eighteenth century, while women like the Mother of the King in Ọyọ and the Mother of the Leopard in Dahomey exerted their influence in royal palaces increasingly populated by wives and slaves, hundreds of thousands of West Africans from the Bight of Benin—a bay area extending from modern Togo to western Nigeria—were forced onto slave ships. Almost 70 percent of the nearly one and a half million Africans enslaved in the Bight of Benin between 1620 and 1863 experienced the harrowing Atlantic crossing during the eighteenth century.<sup>44</sup> But to work with Atlantic slave trade data is to work with hypotheses, to try to give meaning to millions of anonymous lives. In a compiled database of now almost thirty-five thousand slave ship voyages, the origins of enslaved African women, men, and children, most unidentified by name, can be deduced only from piecemeal information on the circumstances of their enslavement. Neither the sex nor the age of enslaved Africans on the vast majority of these ships were recorded, and only about 10 percent of voyages noted female and male ratios during the height of the Bight of Benin trade in the eighteenth century.<sup>45</sup> But according to the data available, men in all periods tended to outnumber the women shipped as slaves to the Americas from the Bight of Benin. The average percentage of men hovered around 60 percent, with the slave trade itself increasing dramatically during the eighteenth century. In the first and last quarters of that century, wars of expansion ravaged the Bight of Benin region. In the early 1700s, when Dahomey was consolidating its control over Ouidah on the coast, and in the final quarter of the eighteenth century when Ọyọ was carving a path to the coast through occupied lands, the ports frequented by European slave traders shifted as Dahomey-controlled Ouidah became less popular and Ọyọ-controlled Porto-Novo more so. There is no reliable data on sex ratios of slaves sent to Brazil, where 60 percent of enslaved Africans from the Bight of Benin were shipped in the eighteenth century, but with the increased warfare and slave trading in the Bight of Benin region, more women and men could well have been captured.<sup>46</sup> With no evidence of a dramatic change in sex ratios of slaves sold in the Americas and given the periodic instability in the eighteenth-century Atlantic slave trade, more captured women could well have been absorbed into West African communities as slaves and wives.<sup>47</sup> The Americas were transformed by the influx of African slaves, but within Atlantic Africa itself potential population shifts, with increasing numbers of enslaved women held by kings and leading men, altered cultural practices and gender ideologies.

Edna Bay writes that the palace at Dahomey was a Gbe household “writ large,” the king of Dahomey the supreme example of a husband and father.<sup>48</sup> A king’s power, like that of a father in a household or extended family, depended on the presence of women not only for reproduction but for labor and prestige; the king was vulnerable if he could not maintain his wealth, followers, or dependents. Women residing in the royal palace represented the king’s links to the villages and families in his kingdom and even in vanquished territories. Bay comments that while captives, especially Yoruba captives, increasingly populated the palace in the nineteenth century, the recruitment of Dahomey women also intensified from the late eighteenth century. Rather than require one daughter from every family as tribute, by the nineteenth century a Dahomey official regularly traveled the countryside to demand daughters to serve the king.<sup>49</sup> As part of this process, the king also redistributed women to loyal followers and commoners to illustrate his power and wealth. William Snelgrave met a woman in Dahomey in 1727 “so white, equal to our English women” with “woolly hair,” who had been given as a wife to a racially mixed Portuguese “gentleman” captured by Dahomey and kept near the king’s residence.<sup>50</sup> In the 1750s, the French slave trader turned apologist Antoine Pruneau de Pomme-gerge wrote of daughters given as tribute to the king; in the 1770s, British slave trader Robert Norris explained that the hoarding of women by the king and high-ranking men left commoner men with little access to women, and he described the situation as a state-sponsored form of prostitution. Attending the annual 1772 ceremony at the Dahomey capital to honor the king’s ancestors, Norris reported that the king doled out women captives to commoner men in exchange for cowry shells, perhaps symbolizing the gifts exchanged between a prospective groom and the family of his future wife.<sup>51</sup> Thus the slave trade was a contributing factor to a changing ideology that placed more emphasis on drawing in and displaying women as wives, especially around the king.

Norris’s 1772 description of the annual ceremony to honor the king’s ancestors (referred to as “Customs” by Europeans) depicted groups of “ladies of pleasure,” a procession of seven hundred of the king’s “neatly dressed” wives and a parade of armed women. Fifteen young royal princesses marched with a retinue of women slaves. During one pageant, women who appeared to be favored wives marched at the head of armed groups of women. “She who led the van,” Norris wrote, “was so universally respected, as to be too sacred to be seen; in fact that secured her effectually from my sight. . . . in the last troop were four umbrellas, and four favorites, very fine women, who were said to be in higher esteem with the king than any, except the lady before mentioned.”<sup>52</sup>

It is unclear if the “sacred” woman represented the Mother of the Leopard, but these multiple processions illustrated the range of women associated with the palace, from “ladies of pleasure” to armed guards, princesses, ordinary slaves, and high-ranking wives. Many had been captives and carried various imported objects representing the military prowess and the great wealth of the king. The grand display was quite unlike the description that William Snelgrave gave of his meeting with King Agaja in 1727, when a few armed women guards and an elderly woman encircled the king’s throne:

The dresses and ornaments of the women were much more showy: the variety, and abundance of rich silks, silver bracelets, and other ornaments, coral, and a profusion of other valuable beads, exceed my expectation; besides there was added another troop of forty women, with silver helmets, and there was a display of the king’s furniture and trinkets, most of the women carrying something or other of his; some of them fine swords; other silver-mounted guns; above a hundred of them held either gold, or silver-headed canes, in their hands; and that none might be unprovided, some carried a candlestick, and other a lamp, perhaps fifty at least of each, with many other articles; which were all held up for the gaping multitude to admire.<sup>53</sup>

Norris, who himself took some time during the ceremonies to purchase slaves and ivory, noted that interspersed with these lavish processions of women and material wealth were human sacrifices. Described in graphic detail by European visitors, the sacrifices ordered by the kings of Dahomey were religious rituals and forms of ancestral worship.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, parading women were extensions of the government at the heart of the kingdom, hence crucial as symbols of its power.

There are no eyewitness accounts for Ọyọ for the same period of the eighteenth century, but by the early nineteenth century, the wives of the king of Ọyọ had so multiplied that they were found trading in many towns and working as porters. The king mused to the traveler Clapperton that if his wives stood hand to hand, they would reach as far as Ijanna, a town nearer the coast.<sup>55</sup> The metaphor of his wives’ outstretched arms was a powerful one, embodying the king’s wealth, influence, and territory. But Ọyọ itself was in deep decline, the king’s power more symbolic than real, perhaps, as was the wealth embodied in the many women surrounding him.

Troops and troupes of women also could be a liability. The king could be caught in intrigue, find his plans exposed to his enemies, or be thwarted by pal-

ace women in naming a successor to the throne. In Dahomey, King Tegbesu, angered by the praise showered on a general, planned to get rid of him. But the general's sister, living in the king's palace, learned of the plot, dispatched a secret message to her brother, and enabled him to escape.<sup>56</sup> During Kpengla's reign some of his wives, some known to take lovers, conspired against the king and, when discovered, falsely accused more than a hundred men, who were sent into slavery.<sup>57</sup> King Agonglo, who reigned for eight years, was felled by poison administered by a woman in the palace.<sup>58</sup> Yet hundreds of palace women were implicated in violent struggles to occupy the throne upon the death of the king. When Kpengla sought to take power in 1774, a large contingent of palace women supported him and almost three hundred were said to have died fighting. After Agonglo's demise, the battle between the female contingents of contenders led to the death of almost six hundred women.<sup>59</sup> To see the king's potential vulnerability simply as a manifestation of "fragility," of glass, would fail to capture the interdependent relationship between a ruler and his dependents, whether they were "mothers" or "wives."

Women, mobile and flexible symbols of religious and political power, were both vulnerable and valuable, easily sacrificed and highly praised. "Mothers" of the king, important women throughout the eighteenth century in both Oyo and Dahomey, for all the awe and sometimes fear they evoked, found their authority "behind the scenes" easily displaced by more amorphous crowds of wives who exercised even more ambivalent forms of power. Because the Mother of the Leopard and the cadre of "mothers" in Oyo were drawn from among wives and captives, increasing numbers of wives and women slaves overshadowed "mothers," some of whom had transformed their origins as slaves into positions of supreme power. The influence of "public mothers," like biological ones, subordinate at the same time to husbands and elders, could be undercut. As the "mothers" flanking the kings of Oyo and Dahomey seemed to decline in relationship to the sheer number of wives, the distinction between "mother" and "wife," already ambiguous, became more so. A wife of the king potentially could become an elderly "mother figure" by bearing children and/or by gaining respect and awe from those around her. Thus, by the nineteenth century, the accumulation of wives accentuated the contradictory position of "public mothers," who related to the experience of women's subordination while wielding power and authority.

Formally trained contingents of women soldiers of Dahomey organized by King Gezo in the nineteenth century occupied the gray area between "mothers" to "wives" in service of the king. The cadre of women palace guards in

Dahomey dated back to the eighteenth century, but a new women's standing army was drawn from the increasing numbers of women slaves and captives, the *ahosi* ("wives" of the king). Some *ahosi*, especially the women soldiers, enjoyed certain privileges, living in a special section of the palace and benefiting from the services of women slaves.<sup>60</sup> Some woman soldiers came to occupy positions similar to that of "public mothers," illustrating the slippage between the image of "wife" of the king and "mother."

A woman known as Lady Yewe, who commanded a regiment of several hundred women in the 1840s, served as the "English mother" responsible for providing British visitors with food and protection. Frederick Forbes, a British naval commander sent to Dahomey in 1850 to negotiate an end to Dahomey's role in the clandestine Atlantic slave trade, learned that Lady Yewe had personally led a battle against a town that had insulted one of her British guests.<sup>61</sup> Lady Yewe was part of the group of women observed by nineteenth-century European travelers who served as "mothers" to each of the ministers of Dahomey, from the highest- to the lowest-ranking. Ministerial titles for men in Dahomey had a woman counterpart carrying the suffix "*-non*" that translates as "owner of" or "mother of." Some scholars see these women either as performing the duties associated with their title within the palace or as serving as a check on the power of the male ministers who exercised their power "outside," in the kingdom itself.<sup>62</sup> But there seems to be a difference between this pairing of ministerial titles of women with men in Dahomey and the more singularly titled mothers in Oyo. Having the male counterpart underscores how doubling permeated the hierarchy in Dahomey palace organization to the point that the *kpojito* is seen as an actual reign-mate of the king.<sup>63</sup>

American anthropologist Melville Herskovits wrote that the "mothers" of the ministers reported to a mysterious group of women known as the *kposi* ("wives" of Kpo).<sup>64</sup> *Kpo* is the leopard deity associated with the royal lineage of Dahomey, making the *kposi* "wives" likely priests of the deity. While often described in nineteenth-century sources as favored by the king and superbly dressed, the role of the "leopard wives" was unclear. Edna Bay contends that as religious figures linked closely to the king and answering only to him, the *kposi* as "wives" of the leopard deity marked a profound shift from the more autonomous position of Mother of the Leopard to an emphasis on the king's personal power.<sup>65</sup> Though Herskovits alone asserted that in the nineteenth century the *ahosi* or "wives" who acted as "mothers" of the ministers answered to the "leopard wives," the symbolism in placing "mothers" below "wives" would be significant. Indeed, Edna Bay argues that during the same period when

the power of Dahomey “mothers” was being displaced in the nineteenth century, the long-held influence of sisters of the king, princesses, was also being challenged as sisters of the king increasingly became known as wives of high-ranking officials, thus as “wives” of the king (their own brother) himself. In assuming palace titles reserved for *ahosi*, princesses, after occupying such important roles in the lore of the founding of the kingdom, became “wives.”<sup>66</sup> Though with important duties and responsibilities in the palace, women who had in the past been more “equal” to the king as “mothers” and as “sisters” were becoming symbolically subordinate and dependent to the king by the nineteenth century.

To argue that the overlap between “public” mothers and “wives” had always been the case, even during the eighteenth-century heyday of *Ìyá* or “mothers” in *Oyo*, and the *kpojito* or Mother of the Leopard in Dahomey, would deny the complex and shifting meanings behind these terms. Johnson wrote that most of the titled “mothers” of *Oyo* commanded their own land and followers, indicating a degree of autonomy that belied one of the core tenets of “wifeliness”: dependence on the king. The *kpojito* or Mother of the Leopard in Dahomey controlled her own people and land, partly evident from preservation of each *kpojito*’s office and scores of descendants claiming each woman’s name. While it is more difficult to trace how the *Ìyá* in *Oyo* shifted from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century, it is said that by the nineteenth century the *kpojito* in Dahomey was the biological mother of the king, undermining the idea of autonomy and partnership at the heart of her office.<sup>67</sup>

Most scholars have paid less attention to the significance of “public motherhood” in many of the same published travel accounts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which I have found an alternate reading of gender and politics in *Oyo* and Dahomey. Both Edna Bay and Randy Matory have recognized how ritual, titles, and dress conferred a range of genders on women and men in *Oyo* and Dahomey: for example, male *Oyo* messengers who dressed as “wives” and, in Dahomey, cross-dressing eunuchs who married women. However, they both focus on the image of “wifeliness.” Considering the varied women and men who acted as “mothers,” “fathers,” “husbands,” and “wives” highlights the profound power of symbolism and culture in defining gender identities. Recognizing gender flexibility does not ignore the subordination experienced by many women wives and slaves. Even the role of “mother” in *Oyo* or Dahomey may have been a bittersweet one; to be a powerful woman in the palace may have meant first being subordinate wife, if not a slave.

By the nineteenth century, *Kétu* women were among the thousands of foreign women in the palace of the Dahomey kingdom. Before *Kétu* was defeated



by Dahomey in 1886, visitors to Kétu emphasized the ubiquitous presence of royal wives surrounding the king. Indeed, the only mention of potential “public mothers” in Kétu came in passing from Charles Gollmer, a German missionary of the British-based Church Missionary Society, who traveled to Kétu in 1859. During one of Gollmer’s final days in Kétu several delegations came to visit him, including a group of royal wives followed by three unassuming elderly women. After Gollmer gave a few pieces of cowry shell money to the old women for their greeting, he inquired who they were and was told that they were the “mothers of all Kétu.” Gollmer, assuming this meant heads of important families, did not enquire further.<sup>68</sup> With his several years of residence in West Africa and in Yoruba-speaking areas in particular, Gollmer had probably witnessed before the power and influence elderly women could wield in extended families, but he did not fully acknowledge the ways the king displayed his power and good will through women.

My attempts to find out which Kétu women may have been designated by such a vague phrase as “mothers of all Kétu” have been fruitless; people would only guess who the “mothers” may have been, and it is impossible to date many of the higher-ranking titles for women in Kétu. Like the “ladies of the palace” in Oyo, close confidants of the king of Kétu may have had religious authority with specific duties both inside the royal household and in the town. Several titled “mother” positions in Kétu in the latter twentieth century did involve such responsibilities, including the Ìyá Libara, Ìyá Oba and Ìyálóde. Therein lies the controversy: the Ìyálóde is a new title in Kétu and the origins of the position and meaning of Ìyá Libara—a title seemingly specific to Kétu and notably occupied by a sister of the king—are in dispute.

It would be easy to compare the displaced “mothers of all Kétu” to public mothers in Oyo and Dahomey, who also seemed to become overwhelmed by the presence of royal wives and other dependents of kings by the nineteenth century. But in Kétu, the story is not only of royal wives but also of *other* wives who, buried in the sources, tell another version of Kétu’s history, of a time when new religious practices expanded in the town and a destructive war marked the end of an era.

## Giving Away Kétu's Secret

### *Wives on the Eve of War*

When Scottish traveler Hugh Clapperton met the Aláàfin (king) of the declining Oyo empire in 1826, the crowd of women encircling the king seemed too dense to count.<sup>1</sup> By the nineteenth century, the kings of Oyo and Dahomey had surrounded themselves with hundreds of wives, staking their power and authority on the image and work of women. At mid-century, kings of Kétu dispatched groups of wives to greet visitors to the kingdom, and one king referred to his “favorite” wives as his closest confidants. But ordinary men, not only West African kings, displayed dependence on wives. Kétu oral histories tell of a Muslim named Sofo, meaning “old man” in Hausa, who arrived in Kétu and established a home outside the town fortifications. He received visits and gifts of food from the many Kétu women he married, the women actually and metaphorically giving birth to Kétu’s Muslim population.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the royal wives who appeared frequently in written sources, wives of Muslim men and enslaved women, some of whom became wives, were often invisible to outsiders who visited Kétu.

In addition to ubiquitous royal wives and hidden wives of Muslim men were women from Kétu captured during the devastating 1886 war with Dahomey who became part of the Dahomey king's contingents of wives and dependents. The nineteenth century was a time of profound change when wars and raids moved large numbers of women about the region as captives. The Atlantic slave trade was in decline at the time, but many women found themselves in an ambiguous position between marriage and slavery. As wives of Muslim men or as captives in foreign towns, or as women seemingly isolated in royal households, women appeared as marginal figures. And yet through their relationships and sometimes their own actions, they illuminated the dynamics of power and vulnerability during a pivotal era when gender ideologies were both reinforced and profoundly challenged by intensifying Muslim conversion, by the new presence of Christian missionaries, and by the realities of war.

### **Knowing Islam, Meeting Christianity: Gender and the Politics of Religion**

A popular Yoruba proverb says that the Yoruba met or knew *ifá* divination and Islam “*ní ayé*” (“in the world”) but that Christianity arrived at “*òsán gangan*” (“high noon”).<sup>3</sup> More than a simple chronology, the saying is a commentary on the nature of religious encounter. In it, *ifá* divination and Islam appear comparable, both religions part of “the world.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Muslim divination practices dating back centuries relate to *ifá* divination, with the reading of signs etched in sawdust on a sacred board. Yoruba language exhibits an initial Muslim influence from the more distant Mali empire to the northwest, though Muslim Hausa practices just north of Yoruba towns became a dominating influence on Yoruba Muslims.<sup>5</sup> The conquest of the Fulani-led jihad state of Sokoto over the Hausa states at the turn of the century had ironic effects on Yoruba religions practices: Hausa slaves in Yoruba towns spread their Muslim religion, and Yoruba who were enslaved in Sokoto raids after the 1810s were liberated in Sierra Leone and became educated Christian converts. Some, like Samuel Crowther, returned years later to the Yoruba region as missionaries—figuratively at “high noon.”

Even “*ayé*” (“the world”), where the Yoruba reputedly “met” *ifá* divination and Islam, encompasses more than a physical location or time. Referring to the past, present, and future, including the ancestors, “the world” is also a metaphysical space, sometimes translated as “humankind” or “life.” In fact, the first

line of the proverb about the relationship between *ifá* divination, Islam, and Christianity may be translated to say that *ifá* divination and Islam are both “as old as life.”<sup>6</sup> By comparison, portraying Christianity as arriving late on the scene suggests that Christians forged a particular relationship with Yoruba communities, especially with the advent of European colonialism. During a brief period of the nineteenth century when direct “competition” existed between Muslims and Christian missionaries in Kétu, the ensuing dialogue raised questions not only about gender relationships but also about Kétu identity itself.

Oral histories of Islam’s arrival in Kétu link kinship to politics, supplementing the image of Sofo—as an almost mythical Muslim progenitor—with stories of itinerant traders and personal stories of religious conversion. A group of Muslim men known as Kanike, a name associated with the Hausa to the north, reputedly brought better Muslim practices to the town.<sup>7</sup> Another story claims that itinerant traders who were Oyo Yoruba Muslims brought Islam to Kétu.<sup>8</sup> Yet many indications suggest that the majority of Muslim families in Kétu today are descendants of women and men who converted before and after the war with Dahomey.<sup>9</sup> Like many other Yoruba towns, Kétu probably received its first Muslim visitors by the latter eighteenth century. The origins of Islam’s establishment in Yoruba towns remain murky; while many nineteenth-century sources do not record the arrival of Islam, they do record established Muslim quarters in Yoruba towns. By mid-century, Muslims regularly visited and resided in Kétu. A Muslim quarter known as Masafe existed; its reputed meaning, shortened from “Masafejo,” was “do not involve me (in your stories).”<sup>10</sup> The name of a later offshoot of the Muslim Masafe quarter known as Yawomi, meaning “come and see,” appears to project a more welcoming stance.

The contrasting images of isolation and invitation well characterize the Muslim community in Kétu. Regardless of the probable descent of Kétu Muslims from Kétu converts, Kétu Muslims are sometimes cast more readily as *àlejò*, or strangers, and only begrudgingly as *omọ Kétu* (“children of Kétu”/members of the community). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Kétu Muslim community of missionary accounts is portrayed in stories of men who were advisors, military leaders, and traders, not stories of families with wives, children, and in-laws.<sup>11</sup>

When Thomas Bowen, a white American Southern Baptist from Georgia, reached Kétu in 1851, he lived as a virtual hostage for several weeks because some royal ministers feared that the “white man’s” visit would lead to the de-



My research assistant Alhaja Safouratou Mama with two Muslim men at Jingiri Mosque in Kétu in October 2006. Said to be the site of the oldest mosque in Kétu, the original building would have dated to at least the nineteenth century. Photograph by author.

struction of the town.<sup>12</sup> Yet the few times when Bowen dared to venture out, he publicly insulted the Muslim men he happened upon, calling them “slave-traders” who were willing and capable of selling off townspeople into slavery.<sup>13</sup> Bowen had come to West Africa to search in the interior of Nigeria for a region he erroneously called “Central Africa,” hoping to find “Hamites,” a mythical race of “white” Africans, associated in West Africa with cattle-herding and with Islam.<sup>14</sup> Because Yoruba communities were familiar with Islam, a monotheistic religion based on sacred texts, Bowen considered them more “civilized” and more likely (and better) converts than people on the coast.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Yoruba language and culture fascinated Bowen during his six years in West Africa; he took such an avid interest in the language that he published a Yoruba-English dictionary and later, on assignment in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, planned to use his knowledge of the language to gain Baptist converts and recruit missionaries among the slave and free black populations.<sup>16</sup> But earlier, during his stay in

Kétu, he showed little understanding of the complexities of Kétu society and the place of Muslims there.

Samuel Crowther, famed Yoruba of the Church Missionary Society who traveled to Kétu in 1853, was also suspicious of the Muslim presence in Kétu. His relationship with Islam, however, was more personal and more ambiguous. Crowther himself had been enslaved as a boy by Muslim jihadists and as an adult married the daughter of a Muslim man.<sup>17</sup> Crowther assumed Muslims in Kétu were among the “adherents to the king of Dahomey” who had caused problems for the king, Alákétu (meaning literally “owner of Kétu”) Adebias; the king’s palace had burned down and Crowther was aware of threats to Bowen himself two years earlier. So when two Muslim dignitaries, along with some other royal ministers, visited Crowther, he took joy in making them uncomfortable by preaching at length from the Bible.<sup>18</sup> His assumption that the king of Kétu had “Muslim” difficulties ignored the complexities of Kétu society that Crowther himself had chronicled. In one long passage, Crowther described the vibrant market day that attracted traders from up to two weeks’ caravan travel from to the north, from the coast and from various Yoruba towns to the east, and from Dahomey only a day and a half away.<sup>19</sup> Some periodic visitors to Kétu’s market day, like a Muslim man named Ali, a caravan leader, became quasi-residents, and some Gbe-speaking people from Dahomey settled within the boundaries of the Kétu kingdom, itself encompassing some Gbe villages.<sup>20</sup> Kétu’s population and relationship with the outside world was thus multifaceted, making any threat of war, as one from Dahomey, a trade partner, more complex than a dispute based on ethnicity or religion.

Whatever the Muslim presence in Kétu in the early 1850s, Crowther, like Bowen, did little active proselytizing, both men preaching on few occasions and with small groups and merely suggesting what Christianity and “the Book” had to offer. Only when Crowther sent his protégé James Barber, a West African catechist named to Kétu to follow up on his own choice of a mission site, did Kétu residents experience an earnest, albeit short-lived, attempt to spread the “Word.” And because Barber was received coolly by Alákétu Adebias, who had expected the return of his friend Crowther, Barber spent most of his three-week visit preaching to, and debating religion with, the Kétu women, men, and children who attended his services sporadically. He did not meet extensively with the king nor was he greeted by dignitaries or Muslim residents.<sup>21</sup> Barber’s quick return visit to Kétu after the king’s sudden death revealed that the king had acted alone in inviting Bowen and, especially, Crowther. The royal min-

isters said they knew nothing of a planned Christian mission station, though they appreciated his explanation. In the light of early Christian missionaries' uneven efforts in Kétu in the 1850s, it is difficult to imagine that these sporadic visits rivaled the presence of Islam in Kétu.<sup>22</sup>

Charles Gollmer of the Church Missionary Society, a German by birth, traveled to Kétu in 1859, and his encounters with Muslims aroused no such suspicion or rancor. Unlike Bowen, he had no quest to find "white" Africans among Muslims in the interior and no personal history with Islam like Crowther's. Muslims offered greetings and help, and Gollmer was mostly gracious in response. A man described as the Muslim chief, "a wealthy and influential man," offered a gift of sheep and cowries and visited Gollmer several times; another Muslim man provided him and his entourage with fresh drinking water.<sup>23</sup> Gollmer also met Muslims in villages outside the central town; "twenty young Mahomedan men" visited him in one town on his journey home.<sup>24</sup> Despite his more cordial relations with Muslims in Kétu, Gollmer offered no more insight into their community and, like his predecessors, only described Muslim men as individuals or in groups, but never with wives, children, or families.

Nigerian historian Biodun Adediran speculates that an uneasy anti-Christian missionary alliance between Muslims and senior Kétu royal ministers that broke down by 1858 accounted for Gollmer's "positive" encounter with Muslims there. In 1858, a man from an outlying Kétu village accidentally killed the king of Dahomey, increasing the threat of an attack from Dahomey and even leading to the forced suicide of Alákétu Adebias's successor, Alákétu Adegbede, soon afterward. Alákétu Adegbede had been besieged and weakened by factions in the town from the beginning of his reign in 1853, and forced suicide was not uncommon in the history of Yoruba kingdoms.<sup>25</sup> With an increasing threat from Dahomey, many in Kétu looked to missionaries as new allies who could offer political, military, and perhaps even spiritual protection.<sup>26</sup>

While Adediran appropriately emphasizes the instability of the times, it is unclear whether the fundamental interests of the king, of Muslims, of senior royal ministers, women traders, or Kétu farmers would have varied greatly on matters of trade and insecurity. In 1853, the missionary, Barber, described civil unrest unleashed by the king's death as political strife between allies of the king, outlying villages, and royal ministers.<sup>27</sup> In extended interviews between CMS missionary Crowther and Alákétu Adebias in 1853 and CMS missionary Gollmer and Alákétu Adiro Olumaja in 1859, neither king spoke of a specific Muslim threat. Indeed, the missionary accounts, coupled with oral histories

about the nineteenth century, show Muslims embedded within the Kétu community, even though the wives and children that linked individuals and families remained obscured.

Given the fateful war with Dahomey that destroyed Kétu in 1886, many oral histories of the nineteenth century, whether transcribed or not, relate to that war directly or indirectly, foreshadowing in retrospect the treachery and mistakes that led to Kétu's defeat. Muslims who appear in such stories have contradictory roles as members and as strangers of the town. For example, both Father Thomas Moulero, a Kétu historian and ordained priest, and Edouard Dunglas, a French administrator, collected stories about a wealthy Muslim man who became a favorite counselor of the king. His name, Arigba, referred to personal prosperity, and translated from Yoruba it means "he saw two hundred (bundles of cloth)." According to Moulero, in an elaborate downfall marked by intrigue, sex, and war, his enemies hatched a plot against him; Arigba fled with the wife of a top military official, then initiated an armed battle in Kétu with the help of allies from a rebellious outlying village of the kingdom. He was executed by fellow members of the Kétu Muslim community.<sup>28</sup> Dunglas's version did not identify Arigba explicitly as a Muslim but noted that he was head of a local *ẹgbé* (club) of wealthy town residents and Muslim traders, the larger rival club composed of farmers and royal ministers, led by the top military leader. According to Dunglas, the armed conflict began after Arigba seduced the wife of a leading royal minister and after his club organized a festival where derisive songs mocked his cuckolded rival. Arigba later died at the hands of his enemies.<sup>29</sup> His story provides insight not only into the nineteenth-century history of Islam, but also on the role of women and marriage in that history.

Arigba straddled Yoruba and Muslim identities and practices, with ties to the Kétu king and outlying villages, as well as to the Muslim quarter in the walled town.<sup>30</sup> The story of the Muslim club's dance festival, one of the best examples of this intersection, showed Muslims as part of local singing and dance, ordinarily prohibited by the Muslim faith. Tales of seduction point to another important feature of the relationship between the local and Muslim communities; marriages, controversial or not, incorporated Muslim men into Yoruba families and could expand the Muslim community through conversion and the birth of children. Such stories of marriage present women in a contradictory light. Women seem passive, married off to Sofo or seduced by Arigba. But their actions could have been more provocative. The story of Sofo's many wives may be about women who were seeking out the powerful foreigner as a



suitors; it was not said that Arigba kidnapped the general's or royal minister's wife, but that she ran off with him. Still, women remain ambiguous in these images of treacherous seduction versus consented marriage. This distinction mirrors an underlying theme in Kétu's history of Islam: the contrast between the celebration of Muslim loyalty and the threat of Muslim betrayal.

Such contrary imagery was especially acute during the war with Dahomey that occurred in two phases in approximately 1884 and 1886, during which some Muslims participated as soldiers on behalf of Kétu, with some, such as a general named Pakoyi, mourned as fallen heroes.<sup>31</sup> The story of someone like Pakoyi has been thoroughly overshadowed by the opposite image embodied by the more infamous Kétu Muslim cleric Arepa. Arepa, known for making *òdògùn* (medicine, amulets) for Kétu's royal ministers and military leaders, is remembered as a close advisor to the king of Dahomey and for "giving away Kétu's secret." With the Dahomey army ready to abandon a blockade at the lone entrance to the walled town during its second attack on Kétu in 1886, Arepa told them that Kétu's food and water would be running out. Dahomey officers lured Kétu's top military leaders out of the protected enceinte with false promises of a truce, killed the Kétu leaders, then entered the defenseless town. Arepa performed ablutions at all the town's sacred sites after its destruction to calm the fears of the king of Dahomey that angered spirits and deities of Kétu would exact revenge.<sup>32</sup> Not until Dahomey and Kétu had become part of the French colony was Arepa able to return to Kétu; he was greeted with derisive songs blaming him for Kétu's destruction and died soon afterward, mysteriously, in a fire.<sup>33</sup>

Some portrayed Arepa's involvement in the war quite differently to me, emphasizing that Arepa had been kidnapped and forced to serve the king of Dahomey, unaware that his advice was used to mount a war against Kétu. They credit him with "saving" many captured Kétu women from slavery by taking them as "wives" when they were brought to Dahomey.<sup>34</sup> In a variation of that story, the great-grandmother of my research assistant reputedly rejected Arepa's offer of marriage. In retaliation, Arepa later sent the woman's daughter (perhaps with a Dahomean prince because the daughter was said to have ties to the royal family of Dahomey) to Kétu, where the girl was raised by a Muslim family and later married a Kétu Muslim.<sup>35</sup> This alternative vision of Arepa's role in the war highlights another, perhaps underemphasized, aspect of Kétu Muslim community: regardless of the story of Arepa and his reputed role in the war, Muslim families were part of the rebirth of the town after the war.

Indeed, Sofo, Arigba, and Arepa are remembered, to varying degrees, as “husbands,” illustrating the tenuous power some men wielded over their wives. Though stereotyped as prolific “fathers” and “wife stealers,” these men sought to marry local women to establish kinship links in a town where they were strangers. A Muslim man, as a stranger and as a husband, tried to establish himself as the founder of a family and compound by attracting wives and keeping control over his children. Since marriage involved entire extended families, especially elder men and women, Kétu families ideally would have had to sanction these unions. With marriage came the possibility of women’s conversion and the rearing of children as Muslim, since children traced their kinship principally, though not exclusively, through their fathers.<sup>36</sup> The invisibility and silence of the wives of these Muslim men may suggest, however, that Muslim men did not also succeed in converting their wives or maintaining control over their children.

Rare memories of nineteenth-century marriages between Muslim men and Kétu women tell the complex history of Islam and of marriage across religious faiths in the town. Two elderly Muslim Kétu men shared with me their stories of female ancestors who married Muslim men before the war with Dahomey and who converted when they married. During the war, one woman, from a family that worshipped Şango, the *òrişà* (deity), escaped to Porto-Novo carrying her infant son on her back. Years later, her Muslim relatives paid visits to their in-laws to acknowledge ceremonies celebrating Şango.<sup>37</sup> Another Muslim man told me that his great-grandmother had begged her family to allow her to marry a Muslim man; she gave birth to a daughter before the war. The man was uncertain whether his great-grandmother had converted and he did not provide her Muslim name; the man himself had built a home in the compound of his Kétu relatives, who were not identified as Muslim.<sup>38</sup>

Even with scant evidence of interfaith marriages in nineteenth-century Kétu, the town appeared to be diverse, with resident traders from distant communities, including Yoruba migrants, Baatonu (Bariba) traders, and Gbe speakers from Dahomey and other towns. Bowen estimated that between 10,000 and 15,000 people lived in the walled town with perhaps 60,000 in outlying villages.<sup>39</sup> All Kétu residents, including Muslims, established multiple links across a heterogeneous community threatened by war. Fluidity and instability in Kétu and across the region made it possible for Muslim men to have local women as wives. Uncertain times reinforced local residents’ suspicion of “strangers,” forged alliances, and encouraged efforts to seek out assistance and

information from visitors. One Muslim man told me that as a show of hospitality, a Kétu man might offer his daughter as a wife to a visitor or temporary resident, even if the stranger was a Muslim man. Such a story evoked the one told so often about Sofo.

Nevertheless, marriages across religious faiths may well be the best-kept secret in Kétu's history. Contemporary Christian missionaries and later scholars generally ignore West African women's conversion and participation in Muslim communities. Christian emissaries' notes about Muslim traders, chiefs, and clerics are detached from any reference to dependents, spouses, or kin, yet Kétu residents knew Islam in their own homes, in their celebrations, through friends, and through their children's spouses and their grandchildren. The oral histories that survive suggest that marriage and political intrigue accompanied the expansion of Islam into Kétu daily life. By contrast, the initial fleeting introduction to Christianity at mid-century has been largely forgotten. The origins of Christianity in Kétu, specifically of Catholicism, have been traced instead to the 1890s, after Dahomey's defeat by French forces and the start of the return of Kétu captives from Dahomey and refugees from other neighboring towns.<sup>40</sup>

### **Royal Wives: Secrets of the King's House**

Among the survivors and returnees after the war with Dahomey were former women slaves in Dahomey who witnessed the war and aftermath and also the lives of royal wives in Dahomey at the end of the century. Assétou Ayouba, a Kétu woman taken captive during the war, gave such an account to Kétu priest and local historian Father Moulero, though she did not make clear her specific situation as an *ahosi* (dependent, "wife" of the king) in Dahomey. Instead she spoke in general terms about older women who were sent to labor on the king's farms (presumably closer to the palace) while younger women were sent to cultivate crops on farms in other villages. Other women, perhaps Ayouba among them, were kept at the palace to perform in music and dance groups.<sup>41</sup> Another unnamed Kétu woman, interviewed by a French scholar and by two American anthropologists in the 1950s, served as a slave to two royal wives in Dahomey; she was a slave to women who were themselves "dependents" of the king. She explained the hierarchy of wives from the most senior to the mere "wives in the yard." Some wives received permission to attend ceremonies and others accompanied the king of Dahomey onto the battlefield.<sup>42</sup> By the end of the century, royal wives at Dahomey were part of a complex bureaucratic system de-

veloped over the course of two centuries whereby women came to serve the king of Dahomey and the operation of the kingdom as a whole.<sup>43</sup>

Certainly, the scale of the royal palace in Dahomey in the 1890s contrasted with the situation described by missionaries who visited Kétu in the 1850s. All the missionaries did not personally encounter royal wives; the American, Bowen, was sequestered in his quarters and the West African catechist, Barber, was largely ignored by Alákétu Adebia. Bowen, rather than meet royal wives during his 1851 visit, encountered vulnerable West African women who were slaves or war captives, inadvertently providing insight into interrelated experiences of West African women as slaves and wives. Bowen wrote about one woman he met, originally from Kétu, who had been captured and incorporated into the Dahomey army; she was discovered wandering in Kétu territory after Dahomey's unsuccessful attack on the Yoruba town of Abẹkuta, to the east of Kétu. When she was brought to the Kétu market to be ransomed to Dahomey traders, the woman's Kétu family recognized her and tried desperately to pay her ransom, but she declared that she would "go back to her master."<sup>44</sup> As a soldier in the Dahomey army, she was an *ahosi* (dependent, "wife" of the king). Historian Edna Bay denies that women in the palace were either simply wives or slaves. Women who were "wives" of the king could not divorce him as women of ordinary men could, and in the palace, some slave women could attain power and rank that could "overshadow" their slave status.<sup>45</sup> When the captured woman soldier from Kétu declined to stay with kin in Kétu who sought to ransom her, she demonstrated the position of privilege or deep loyalty (perhaps induced by fear) generated by her role in the Dahomey army.

Bowen wrote in his missionary journal of another woman trader who had been captured at work in a market outside of Oyo and passed from one slave owner and market to another before finding herself in Kétu, where she appealed to Bowen to purchase her. Slaves were not sold openly in the market in Kétu, but she feared she would be sold again and forced onto one of the few slave ships that still plied the West African coast. Having had several owners and with no attachment to a household, she was particularly vulnerable.<sup>46</sup> Several historians, writing in the volume *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, have examined slavery as an "institution of marginality," with slaves employing various forms of social mobility to alter the "degrees of marginality" and gain fuller "incorporation" in the slaveowner's society. Many who were slaves in Africa, rather than experience the utter "social death" described later in Orlando Patterson's study of slavery in the Americas, found

some flexibility in their status.<sup>47</sup> The woman trader who asked Bowen to purchase her may have been trying to control her destiny by choosing her own patron/master/“husband.”

Bowen’s indirect comments on wives and gender relationships contrasted with Crowther’s very direct discussion of the king of Kétu’s royal wives. Crowther, unlike Bowen, was an honored guest of Alákétu Adebia, who had contacted him years earlier, and he was able to circulate freely in the town and receive numerous visitors, including the king’s ministers, royal wives, and Muslim residents. His first comments were approving observations of women traders in the town doing their washing in the trenches that surrounded the town; as itinerant traders they had no access to the limited water supply, which was chiefly rain water people collected at their homes.<sup>48</sup> He praised the freedom with which women walked freely in the town, even at night, and he remarked on the absence of certain indigenous religious ceremonies that restricted women’s movement.<sup>49</sup> Yet when several dozen royal wives paid Crowther a visit, he noted their impoverished dress and limited mobility, and learned that they earned money from tolls collected on market day, amused themselves by dancing (as long as they had no contact with men), and farmed a small plot near the king’s palace.<sup>50</sup> They had limited independent income and saw virtually no one except other royal wives. His sense of them as the most “wretched” and pitiful he had seen ran counter to, perhaps, Western assumptions about women who were called “royal wives,” and it contrasted with his other observations of women in the town.

In the past, women and men could take refuge at the palace, becoming a wife or servant to the king. To this day, there is a fabled spot in front of the palace of the king of Kétu that if traversed by a woman or man compels the man to become a servant of the king and the woman to become a wife. As in Dahomey, where Edna Bay argues against the idea that royal wives and other dependents of the king were slaves, Kétu royal wives were not portrayed as slaves. Indeed, Crowther said that the king of Kétu, unlike most other kings he had met, kept no slaves. He was told that royal slaves were an “annoyance” to the rest of the population, implying that even as slaves, they might use their association with the king to exert influence and make demands on the king’s behalf.<sup>51</sup>

Royal wives lived in a household that exaggerated the practice of polygyny, men with multiple wives—a practice at the center of debates in Church Missionary Society policy. Crowther, who disapproved deeply of polygyny, accepted it as a reality, believing that through education, men and women eventually would abandon such practices. He wrote that monogamy was not a “minimum

requirement for salvation” and that women in such marriages, as “involuntary victims of a social institution,” should not be denied baptism. Nigerian historian Jacob Ade Ajayi points out that Christian missionaries who attacked the practice of polygyny forced converts to reject African household organization in the family compound of extended families, including multiple wives, and their children—all of them potential converts. Despite some of Crowther’s other harsh statements on polygyny, he, like many other educated elite converts of his time, took a more practical and a more generous view, that “sinful” social practices did not preclude an invitation to religious salvation. In 1891, Crowther was replaced as the head of the Niger Mission for being perceived as a defender of the lax Christian practices of African members of the mission.<sup>52</sup>

Crowther had written of the day of his own enslavement as a “blessed” day because it led him from the “land of heathenism, superstition, and vice,” despite his profound pain at separation from his mother and sisters after they too were captured. He later revealed that his own father had five wives before he was killed soon after Crowther’s enslavement. But in that polygynous household and extended family, women had not been “wretched”; his grandmother claimed descent from an Oyo king and his mother from an important priest.<sup>53</sup> In a most improbable reunion in Abeokuta in 1846, Crowther’s mother and a half-brother found Crowther. His mother was living with her daughters and grandchildren in a nearby town, and the extended family had gone to great lengths to protect one another. Relatives had bribed slave traders to rescue his mother and sister from slavery, and his sister had paid a large sum to free his mother, re-enslaved three times during the twenty-five years before Crowther returned home. With Crowther’s triumphant homecoming, his family spoke of his assuming his rightful place as the “father” of the family. Crowther welcomed his mother into his home and she soon converted and lived for nearly another forty more years as a Christian.<sup>54</sup> Crowther’s personal relationship to powerful and resilient women in his life embodied the tension between his connection to, and rejection of, Yoruba culture and religion; yet, in Kétu’s royal wives, he only saw “victims” and the sin of the Yoruba culture he had largely forsaken for Christianity.

When West African catechist James Barber traveled to Kétu a few months later, he met none of the royal wives formally, though one quietly attended one of his services alone, an unusual event in that she was apparently not there to represent or send greetings on behalf of the king.<sup>55</sup> Only when Barber returned suddenly to Kétu months later upon learning of the death of the king did he learn anything of the royal wives, their symbolic power, and their vulnerability.

Kétu was in an uproar after Alákétu Adebida died, with some groups demanding the death of certain allies of the king. Barber learned that two royal wives had accompanied the king in death to serve him in the afterlife, one, according to later sources, the *ida* (senior wife) and the other the *ramu* (favorite wife). Barber was told that the two women—one of whom was the mother of an infant—had consumed large amounts of rum and danced around the town declaring their fearlessness before death, then had taken poison. Three men named to accompany the king in death fled, were exiled, or had their titles taken away in order to avoid submitting to the ritual death. Barber attributed the town's change of heart about the ritual death of the three men to the influence of missionary visits, but he described how the condemned royal wives embodied the king's power in death as in life.<sup>56</sup>

In fact, when Adebida's successor, Alákétu Adegbede, was forced to commit suicide after his short-lived and tragic reign from 1853 to 1858, the senior wife and favorite wife were also to accompany him in death and again the favorite wife, so it is said, was the mother of an infant. Before her death, the young mother pronounced a curse on Kétu that was later taken as a foreshadowing of the town's destruction by Dahomey decades later. Her defiant action as the young royal wife challenged Crowther's portrayal of such women as "wretched" and as wholly submissive.<sup>57</sup>

The only other nineteenth-century missionary to have met with Kétu's royal wives was the German Charles Gollmer, who, as a well-known member of the Church Missionary Society, was invited in 1859 to come to Kétu by Alákétu Adiro Olumaja. Gollmer had been living in Yoruba areas for more than ten years and was fluent in Yoruba language, and the sight of royal wives did not affect him in the same way that it had Crowther.<sup>58</sup> Gollmer remarked on Kétu royal wives before he even reached the town, having encountered them in small villages on his travels to Kétu. Once at the walled capital town of Kétu, Gollmer one morning received twenty young royal wives as visitors. When the king asked Gollmer later that day to choose one stick among twenty laid before him, Gollmer refused, perhaps suspicious at the question. He learned that the king had heard that Gollmer had "eyed" one of the twenty wives who visited him—a woman believed to be a troublemaker. The wives themselves had devised the scheme to get Gollmer to use his "supernatural power to read the heart and tell the good and evil thereof." Gollmer quoted the Bible to dismiss the idea that any human could read the heart of another and defused the situation, somewhat to the amusement of the king.<sup>59</sup>

Alákétu Adiro Olumaja bared his fears and desires to Gollmer, sharing his concerns about war, prosperity, and his own reign as king and pledging to open his town fully to CMS missionaries. He hoped to avoid the plague of war, fire, and “sudden death” and was adamant that Gollmer must help him attain a crown befitting a king. With increased production of cotton, the king planned to revitalize Kétu’s trade networks.<sup>60</sup> The king recounted his special relationship with two of his royal wives, probably his senior wife and favorite wife: “They never leave me and there is no secret I keep from them or they from me and on the day of my death they follow me. . . . I show you all that is in my heart and all the secrets of my house.” Gollmer instructed the king on the sins of human sacrifice, to which the king replied, “Manners and customs religious and social are like stupendous mountains, not to be removed in a day, except by the grace of God.”<sup>61</sup> The exchange between Alákétu Adiro Olumaja and Gollmer captured the complex negotiations at hand between African communities and Christian missionaries who sought to reconcile divergent ideals and expectations about the Christian missionary enterprise in West Africa. With the king seeking assurances for the safety and prosperity of his town, and Gollmer himself more concerned with the sin and with morality according to Christian doctrine, the mutual misunderstanding of the missionary and the king was profound.

The night before his departure, Gollmer discovered that the king planned to give him a slave girl as a parting gift! He was outraged, whereupon the king gave him a large gift of cowry shell money instead.<sup>62</sup> The next day the king, presumably, arranged for Gollmer to meet the three elderly women described to him as the “mothers of all Kétu.” Alákétu Adiro Olumaja had truly shared with Gollmer the “secrets of his house,” through candid discussion and meetings with delegations of royal wives and because Gollmer was the only European traveler to Kétu to meet the official or unofficial “public mothers” of the town.<sup>63</sup> Thus, missionary accounts permit a glimpse of Kétu before the 1886 defeat by Dahomey, which marked a key break with the past.

## **Wives of War**

When I interviewed people in Kétu in the late 1990s and early 2000s, “before” and “after” the war was still a salient way of demarcating eras, even if knowledge of the late nineteenth century was extremely remote. Though men’s exploits ordinarily dominate histories of war, images of wives, slaves, and even



“mothers” surface repeatedly in oral and written histories of the period. French accounts of the war with Dahomey and of the flight of Behanzin, king of Dahomey, in 1892 estimate that the soldiers, wives, ministers, and prisoners, including several Brazilians Behanzin took with him, numbered in the hundreds, if not thousands, before 1893, when they began to desert him or died of smallpox.<sup>64</sup> Kétu historian Thomas Moulero’s informant, Assétou Ayouba, recounted Behanzin’s strange rituals meant to forestall the advancing French army. In a speech to his entourage, Behanzin said, “I traveled to Goho with one of my wives to see the general and ask for amnesty because two great men cannot catch each other. Then I disappeared from before his eyes and returned before you. But in three days I will return with a coffin.” Three days later in that coffin he placed the head of his mother, whom he had sacrificed.<sup>65</sup> This most desperate act was to no avail; he surrendered to the French and with the one wife he had kept at his side, he was deported with several other family members to Senegal, to Martinique, and finally to Algeria, where he died ten years later.<sup>66</sup>

In addition to the historical roles accorded to public mothers and royal wives, Dahomey had been known for its unique army of women soldiers, composed of “wives” of the king, such as the Kétu woman American missionary Thomas Bowen met in 1851 trying to find her way back to Dahomey. Another woman soldier of Dahomey, originally from the Oho region to the south of Kétu, told Dahomean historian Paul Hazoumé in 1917 that she too had served the king and one of his royal wives. The king rewarded her fearless fighting in a battle by “marrying” her. She became pregnant, but pregnancy by a member of the women’s army was forbidden, and when she gave birth, she kept the identity of the father a secret, though she could not hide the infant. She was beaten and forced to do hard labor as a punishment for her transgression, whereupon the king admitted his role and commissioned a series of inlaid sculptures to be placed in the wall of a newly built palace in honor of her bravery on the battlefield. He formally recognized her as a wife and bestowed upon her the honorary title of Queen Ajashe (the Yoruba name for the town of Porto-Novo).<sup>67</sup> Although other royal wives scorned her humble origins, she felt vindicated both by the king’s lavish, if late, attention and by the successful birth of a son.

Despite the earlier enslaved status of Queen Ajashe, Assétou Ayouba, and the third unnamed Kétu woman who served at the Dahomey palace, their stories were told from each one’s perspective as an elderly woman who came to command respect. In Thomas Moulero’s photograph of Assétou Ayouba, she is seated, dressed in multiple layers of fabric and in sandals as a woman of some rank. The unnamed woman who had been as a slave to a royal wife of Da-

homey had a son who served as an informant and interpreter to several visiting Western scholars in the 1950s. Hazoumé was so intimidated by Queen Ajashe, the former soldier, that he did not have the courage to ask her life story until he had visited her several times. Of the three women, indeed, only Queen Ajashe revealed details of her own personal experience.

It is fitting that Kétu women's accounts of the war with Dahomey should have been published; the actions of young women and mothers during and after the war are among the few stories people tell about the conflict today. Many of these stories resemble the one a Muslim man told about his grandmother who fled toward Nigeria with her infant on her back. Young women escaped, as Father Thomas Moulero's own mother did; some were married to men in other towns and many had children in the years between the time of Kétu's destruction and its rebuilding. Moulero's mother's family took care of him before he was forced into the Catholic mission; later he went of his own accord. One of the stories most repeated about the war and survivors in Kétu is that of Agiri, an important man close to the Alákétu who lived well into the colonial period. Many say he survived after being buried alive for several days by the Dahomeans, but in fact he was hidden by his own parents in a shallow hole in the earth during the Dahomean attack and later rescued.<sup>68</sup>

Because most Kétu women captured during the war were taken to Dahomey, many became slaves and wives of Dahomean men and mothers to their children. Some had been given as slaves to leading men in the port of Ouidah, which Dahomey conquered in the 1720s, gaining direct access to the Atlantic trade. Because a husband and the husband's family had primary rights over children, some in Kétu said that, for that reason, women were slower to return to Kétu in 1894, when the reconstruction of Kétu began.<sup>69</sup> As late as 1904, a French colonial administrator was alarmed to find that Kétu messengers went to Ouidah to beg the many Kétu women there, some faring well as traders, to return to help rebuild Kétu. One woman told me that one of her ancestors, fearing that her husband, a powerful Ouidah merchant, would track her down if she left with his children, changed the markings scarred on the child's face to match those of the people of Kétu.<sup>70</sup> Thus, not unlike the exceptional trajectory of three women who recounted their experiences in Dahomey, other Kétu women who traveled that slippery slope from slave to wife redefined themselves as traders in their new homes or attempted to shed their status of slave/wife.

Besides those captured and enslaved, there were Kétu refugees like those encountered in 1891 by a French Catholic priest named Pied, who was trav-

eling in the general vicinity of Kétu, in search of the destroyed town. Pied came across a group of women and men led by a man named Fehetona, who had proclaimed himself Alákétu. Other Kétu residents became refugees in other Yoruba towns and villages and some were sold into slavery as far as the island of São Tomé, off the coast of West Central Africa.<sup>71</sup>

In 1893, those who were able to return found a town in ruins, overgrown with vegetation. A French Catholic priest who traveled to Kétu in 1897 found the community still encamped in makeshift abodes on the market square outside the town.<sup>72</sup> These earliest days of rebuilding coincident with French colonial rule were extremely slow yet heady with change. It was a time when women and men in Kétu first opened their hearts and minds to Christianity, though more extensive conversions would happen later over the course of the twentieth century. Many of the dependent villages that constituted the larger Kétu polity in the nineteenth century would become part of British-controlled Nigeria, raising questions about people's identity as Kétu, about their link to the king of Kétu, who was recognized by the French colonial regime, and about their relationship to wives and "public mothers" linked to the Kétu king.

Thus, in a turbulent century that culminated in Kétu's downfall, women as wives, refugees, and slaves played important roles. This same flexibility allowed certain women to exercise power as "mothers" and permitted some wives to enjoy influential positions despite the realities of their inferior "wifely" status. So, too, when Kétu emerged from ruin, royal wives, as well as "public mothers," took on new and controversial roles in both a reborn Kétu kingdom and a new French colonial administration.

## “Where women really matter”

### *The “Queens” of Kétu and the Challenge to French Imperialism*

On April 20, 1911, after a disgruntled man in Kétu shot and killed a visiting African translator, town residents steeled themselves for a severe reprisal by the French colonial regime. Instead, a small force of police guards arrived, and a local French administrator made an unprecedented decision, naming two Kétu women as colonial intermediaries. The appointment was a startling step for several reasons. At the time, in France’s federated colonies of French West Africa, not a single French colonial official or African agent was a woman. The French generally believed that African women occupied only lowly positions in African society and women were subordinate in France itself.<sup>1</sup>

The administrator who appointed Alaba Ida and Yá Şégén, the two “queens,” as the French called them, explained to his superiors that “these measures should not cause alarm in the Nago [French term for Yoruba] region where women really matter.”<sup>2</sup> Within four years, the French governor of Dahomey declared that “rule by a woman went against Nago traditions,” and by 1917 both women, who had been compelled to issue unpopular demands that turned their own people against them, were deposed.<sup>3</sup> Elderly Kétu residents today

who have heard of the two women often refer to Alaba Ida, the more infamous of the two, as an *aya õba* (royal wife), but rarely as a “queen.”<sup>4</sup> Alaba Ida is immortalized, but in derisive songs. The second “queen,” Yá Şègén, faded from colonial reports and many people’s memories, though her priestly title persisted after her death. As elderly women, both Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén had evoked the image of the “public mother,” but they did not fulfill that role in similar ways. Local Kétu society came to emphasize Alaba Ida’s subordinate status as a royal wife. On the other hand Yá Şègén, as a priest, was actually a titled “mother” but of a lesser known *òrişà* (deity), one more popular in outlying villages than in the central town. From their unusual positions within Kétu, each was affected differently by the changing nature of the king of Kétu’s role as a “father figure” under French colonial rule.

The “reigns” of both Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén “were possible because in the period before the shock of World War I, the French believed that certain women could assist them in implementing colonial policies, though as the war stoked fears of anarchy and “emasculated hierarchies” in Africa, if not back home in France, both “queens” quickly fell from grace. The stories of Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén illustrate the shifting roles of “mothers” and wives in early colonial Kétu while shedding light on French imperialism itself.

### **“Life itself is rendered completely incomprehensible”: The Rise and Fall of Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén**

Alaba Aduké was born around 1854 in Kétu. She became an *aya õba* (royal wife) of Alákétu Ojeku and had a daughter and a son with him.<sup>5</sup> When the Alákétu (king; “owner of Kétu”) was slain in the war with Dahomey in 1886, Alaba Aduké, like many others, was captured and brought to the Dahomey capital, Abomey. Seven years later, France defeated Dahomey, whereupon Alaba Aduké agitated for a return to Kétu and may have been among the first group of refugees to accompany the victorious French army officers to Kétu.<sup>6</sup> According to a British scholar, Alaba Aduké was about forty years old at the beginning of French colonial rule and still a “fine-looking woman.”<sup>7</sup> Some residents of Kétu said that because she was beautiful, Ojeku, the king, had “put his foot on her,” demanding that she become his wife.<sup>8</sup> By tradition, the new king, who took the name Onyegen, inherited all the wives of his predecessor, and during Onyegen’s reign Alaba assumed the influential position of *ida* (senior wife) and was known thereafter as Alaba Ida.<sup>9</sup>

Alaba Ida became an outspoken supporter of the French during the time of the 1906 Anglo-French Boundary Commission that drew up the borders between French-controlled Dahomey and British-controlled Nigeria, perhaps out of loyalty to the French for defeating Dahomey and supporting Kétu's reconstruction. Two years later, the king began to lose power as he became blind and more infirm and as France reorganized its West African colonies. In the restructuring of the colonies, most kings, Alákétu Onyegen among them, were demoted, first to *chef supérieur* (superior chief) and then to *chef du canton* (district head or "chief"). William Ponty, the new governor general and director of the federation of French West African colonies based in Dakar, Senegal, was convinced that local elites, particularly kings and royals, were corrupt and dictatorial, and hence promoted a policy that elevated non-elites to "district chief," assigning them the tasks of collecting taxes and recruiting labor and soldiers.<sup>10</sup> Because of Ponty's policy and Onyegen's illness, an additional *sous-chef* (assistant chief), Abimbọla Otupepe, was appointed. Alákétu Onyegen's physical and political weakness and Otupepe's ineffectiveness paved the way for Alaba Ida's recognition within the French colonial administration.

Though Alaba Ida took on most of the duties of the "district chief," including military and labor recruitment, taxation, and supervision of subordinate village heads, she was never formally given the title of *chef du canton*.<sup>11</sup> The French instead referred to her by her title "Ida," meaning senior wife, which the French translated as "queen," often rendering her name "Queen Ida" in the colonial records. From the beginning, the French were reticent about the power they had accorded to Alaba Ida, but, whether or not people in Kétu acknowledged that she held an official position in the colonial administration, today they allude to her special relationship with the French. "Alákétu Onyegen went blind," one man told me, "and did not notice when the European held out his hand [in greeting]. Alaba Ida shook hands with the European instead and became very powerful."<sup>12</sup>

The second "queen," whose given name was Akanké Owebeyi Aduké, lived in a village about ten miles northeast of the former walled center and heart of the Kétu kingdom.<sup>13</sup> As a priest, she was an *iyáloriṣà* (mother-in-deity) of the *òriṣà* (deity) named Ondo, and in that role, apparently at around twenty-eight years of age, assumed the title "Yá Ṣègén" (probably a shortened version of *Ìyá Ṣègén* or "Mother Ṣègén"). The *òriṣà* are believed to have been women or men worthy of praise and worship because of remarkable lives in earlier times. Ondo and his wife Are, for example, are celebrated as founders of Pobé,

a town outside the Kétu region and the original home of Yá Şègén and her fellow Ọbatẹdo villagers. Ọrişà have particular dispositions and favorite foods, and some, like Ondo, “mount” or possess priests and initiates. It is said that Yá Şègén took her title in Pobé in 1868. Several decades later, in 1902, when she and her followers tried to resettle in Kétu, Onyegen, the king, allowed them to stay, but on land outside the town; the name of their new village, Ọbatẹdo, meant “the king built this.”<sup>14</sup>

Yá Şègén does not appear in the French colonial record until 1906, when the French colonial administrator speaks of her as “almost a divinity.”<sup>15</sup> Her religious duties remained paramount even though she was filling a political role in working for the French. Because ọrişà (deities) dictate certain taboos for people initiated into the group and because followers of Ondo are forbidden to ride in a hammock, Yá Şègén, unlike Alaba Ida, never journeyed to meet French colonial administrators. Instead, French officials came to her in Ọbatẹdo or nearby.<sup>16</sup> She was assigned specific responsibility for eastern villages in addition to Ọbatẹdo, several of them—Ilikimu, Issélou, and Idigne—recalcitrant and troublesome ones. Therefore, Yá Şègén was not simply a “village chief” but almost an “assistant district head.” But, as with Alaba Ida, her formal administrative title was never stated.<sup>17</sup> The French at first admired Yá Şègén’s influence as a religious leader, but in the end they were not impressed with her ability to carry out orders on their behalf.

The precipitating event that led to the appointments of both Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén was the murder in 1911 of a visiting African interpreter named Georges Mensah, a murder remembered in Kétu as the “one-gunshot war” because witnesses had heard only a single shot. A man named Fagbité, who was accused of the translator’s murder, explained that his gun had misfired, causing him to shoot the wrong man; he had intended to kill Abimbọla Otupepe, the assistant chief appointed after Alákétu Onyegen lost his sight. His motive was to avenge a male relative who had been fined and jailed by Otupepe for insubordination.<sup>18</sup> He and an accomplice had planned the shooting to occur in the presence of a visiting French colonial official and a French Catholic priest to “really show the whites that we were unhappy.”<sup>19</sup> Alaba Ida spearheaded the investigation and, years later, was considered a key witness in the case against the accomplice.<sup>20</sup> Fagbité was imprisoned and sentenced to death, his sentence carried out in a spectacular fashion—he was compelled to walk a distance with nails pressed into the soles of his feet and then executed on the spot where he had fired his gun.<sup>21</sup>

The "one-gunshot-war" contrasts with the much longer "war" between areas neighboring the Kétu region and the French, underway since the 1894 founding of Dahomey colony. Fagbité's misbegotten revenge was an incident in a broader pattern of disorder and resentment in Kétu and other villages populated by Yoruba-related subgroups, known as Ohori and Adja Ouéré. Kétu, Ohori, and Adja Ouéré villages, linguistically and ethnically related in varying degrees to the Yoruba, fell within a *cercle* (circle) based at Zagnanado, about thirty miles away. Circles, the largest French colonial administrative unit, were headed by European officers. The circle could be divided into subdivisions, provinces, cantons (districts), and villages. In the circle of Zagnanado, most of the other towns and villages were ethnically and linguistically Gbe-speaking and had been part of the former Dahomey kingdom. But with insufficient administrative personnel to cover the entire territory and with the French colonial emphasis on the region of the former Dahomey kingdom, Kétu and the Ohori and Adja Ouéré villages were out of the range of immediate oversight of the French colonial administration. As a result, additional loyal African intermediaries like Alaba Ida and Yá Šègén were needed.

In the first years of French colonial rule, tax evasion, illicit cross-border trade, and general insubordination were rife in Ohori and Adja Ouéré villages and in Kétu itself. Yet by 1909, the French governor of Dahomey was still reporting to his superiors that in Dahomey "peace has never been disturbed since 1893."<sup>22</sup> French policymakers before World War I concentrated on the use of railroads and trade to gain support and cooperation from African populations and otherwise claimed to respect African practices as long they were not offensive. But gradually, French administrators began to be troubled by a growing threat of "anarchy," and the shooting of the interpreter was seen as an ominous climax to the growing disorder. The governor of Dahomey and other French colonials higher up in the bureaucracy forbade outright force in response, and interim governor Raphaël Antonetti deployed sixty-five guards in Kétu, only to discover that people outside Kétu were saying, "The people in Kétu [had] killed a white man. They [the French] sent guards there but there is no need to be afraid of them because the guards don't have the right to burn villages or even kill the shooter."<sup>23</sup>

In this sprawling and hostile environment, French colonial administrators decided that the two women leaders, Alaba Ida and Yá Šègén, would serve as crucial allies. An undated, unsigned colonial document of the 1910s described Alaba Ida as "alert, despite her age, very authoritarian, with an intelligent and



lively spirit . . . a precious resource for the administration of this unusual Nago [Yoruba] race whose distance from Zagnanado gives them a bit of independence."<sup>24</sup> An earlier French administrator, in contrast, had criticized the king and Kétu's senior leadership for a lack of "paternal power," and this perceived weakness in male leadership could have contributed to the conviction that "women really mattered," cited to explain the 1911 appointment of Alaba Ida and Yá Sègén.<sup>25</sup> French treatment of Kétu was consistent with its broader colonial intent to "respect" African customs and to bring "civilization" through colonialism, and by insisting that women's power was integral to Kétu culture, French administrators justified placing women in positions of power, ignoring the fact that French society itself, and colonial policy generally, had historically denied women overt political power.

Both of the two "queens" brought strengths to their new role. At first, terms like "intelligence" and "devotion" appear in French documents praising Alaba Ida, while the French valued Yá Sègén for her power as a priest.<sup>26</sup> And yet from the beginning, the rebellious setting and the power dynamic between the population and the French challenged and eventually undermined both women's exercise of power. When one village complained that a 1912 French redrawing of the boundary with British-controlled Nigeria had relocated its sacred shrine in British territory, and its residents moved over to the Nigerian side of the border, Yá Sègén pleaded with the community, "Consult your deity and see what he says. You are children of Kétu and you cannot abandon your ancestors."<sup>27</sup> French administrator Louis Duboscq gave the villagers an ultimatum: return and enjoy exemption from taxes and labor demands for three years or leave permanently and face confiscation of fields that remained within French territory. The village leaders responded defiantly but coolly that since all their farmland was actually in Nigeria, they had no reason to stay in French territory. A second village abandoned or burned its houses on the French side of the border and rebuilt on the British side. Unperturbed by the presence of the French administrator, villagers told his guide that after that year's harvest, they would no longer cultivate French soil and therefore would owe no more taxes.<sup>28</sup> The population of a third village, two months later, replaced the local leader the French had appointed in preparation for relocation across the border.

Duboscq, well aware that other populations were watching to see if villagers would succeed in such plans, took a strong line. On a journey with a guide and a few guards, he arrested several men and put them on public display, threatening to "make gunpowder talk" if defiance of the French continued.<sup>29</sup>

Local populations, despite his threats, blamed the demands for taxes and laborers on Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén. Kétu villagers complained of orders from messengers of the "queens" to report to hearings or pay fines. Duboscq affirmed that those orders came from the French, yet in his tour he neither traveled with Alaba Ida or Yá Şègén nor explicitly and publicly backed them (or, indeed, the Alákétu earlier) with the threat of the French military.<sup>30</sup> Hence, Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén had to impose their demands on the population on behalf of the French colonial administration in person or through messengers, and as a consequence, both became targets of growing resentment.

A major grievance was the military recruitment drives. Even before the crisis of World War I, and soon after the appointment of the two "queens" in 1911, young men emptied Kétu and nearby villages when news of military recruitment campaigns came. Alaba Ida warned the French that continued demands for recruits would prompt flight across the border, but the French colonial administrator simply threatened her with fines. Village leaders ignored new demands for volunteers, and the French rejected, citing age or poor health, the handful of men Alaba Ida managed to press into service over the next two years. Not until the defeat of the German colony of Cameroon in 1914 did Kétu supply men to serve as porters, and even then the twenty-six provided were far fewer than Kétu's prorated share.<sup>31</sup> By the following year, in the midst of the war effort, the French colonial administration threatened to abduct recruits or force Kétu village representatives to appear at the colonial offices in Zagnanado. Guards transporting two village leaders back to Zagnanado were confronted by armed men from Kétu who in turn freed the village leaders and fled to Nigeria, accompanied by three entire villages. Within two weeks, Alaba Ida reported to the French that the leaders of the deserted villages were calling for her dismissal and for the return of her husband, Alákétu Onyegen, the infirm king, as head of the district.<sup>32</sup> Her precipitous decline as a colonial agent had begun.

In August 1915, when two to three hundred hunters gathered near Kétu under the pretense of a ceremony to honor their patron *òrişà*, the deity Ogun, Alaba Ida fled to the French colonial station in Zagnanado, declaring that her life was in imminent danger.<sup>33</sup> When the governor of Dahomey, Charles Noufflard, went to Kétu to investigate, Alaba Ida retracted her story. Her infirm husband, Alákétu Onyegen, and other prominent village leaders allied with the French denied the existence of a plot against her and Onyegen explained that the ceremony was simply to encourage the return of villagers who had fled to Nigeria. The governor, unconvinced, ordered dozens of rifles confiscated and

destroyed, arrested forty-eight men, imposed fines and work orders, and, in a town meeting, reprimanded the population for ignoring its “debt” to the French by refusing to supply recruits. Fully revealing the limits of French support for their “queen,” the French governor spoke dismissively to the community of Alaba Ida as a mere “agent” for her husband; she was not an independent leader—as he heard villagers believed—trying to “free herself of her husband’s oversight.”<sup>34</sup>

After the governor departed, both Alaba Ida and Alákétu Onyegen admitted to the local French administrator their ignorance of the reason why the hunters had gathered. Only later had Alaba Ida and Alákétu Onyegen learned that a man, who believed that the king had “lived too long,” had prodded the hunters to act, promising to take Onyegen’s place and remove his wife from her position of authority. Alaba Ida said she fled when the hunters demanded that the Alákétu commit suicide; she knew her own life depended on her husband’s since, as the king’s *ida* (senior wife), she would be expected to “disappear” upon his death and be buried with him.<sup>35</sup> The hunters, fearful of French reaction, had appealed to Onyegen for protection and he in turn had concocted the story of the peaceful ceremony.<sup>36</sup> Alaba Ida, defying her husband, now forced him to join her in admitting the truth, confirming her continuing loyalty to the French.

It was too late; Alaba Ida’s loyalty no longer mattered. The French had decided that neither Alaba Ida nor Yá Šègén had made effective colonial intermediaries. By 1915, with World War I underway, the French changed leadership and shifted policy on colonial intermediaries. Local French administrators now rejected the premise of female rule, calling it “untraditional” and unacceptable for Kétu. For two years, however, no direct action was taken to remove either woman, though French authorities in Dahomey were interested in finding an “energetic” and “devoted” replacement for Onyegen after the events in 1915, showing that they still considered the king a *chef du canton*, a “chief” or “head of district.”<sup>37</sup> The two “queens” had stayed in power for six years.

Today, people in Kétu speak less of Alaba Ida’s relationship with the French colonial administration and more of her position as a royal wife. Though the wives of the Kétu king had been described as impoverished and “wretched” by Yoruba missionary Samuel Crowther some sixty years earlier, one nineteenth-century Kétu king had spoken of sharing much with his two special wives, presumably his senior (*ida*) and his favorite (*ramu*) wives.<sup>38</sup> Today, most in Kétu deny that wives of the king ever advised the king in any official or unofficial capacity. Those who say Alaba Ida “governed” explain that she did so in place of

her husband. (The term for "govern," *jɔba*, has at its root the term *ɔba*, technically meaning "ruler" but often translated as "king.") Some in Kétu do use the term "queen," but one brusque man insisted to me that she was *not* a queen at all but an *aya ɔba* or royal wife who gave orders simply because her husband, the Alákétu, was blind.<sup>39</sup> An elderly woman noted that in the past, wives of the king were supposed to help govern but "they have changed everything now."<sup>40</sup> Some deny that Alaba Ida could ever have left the *ààfin*, the king's palace, since as a royal wife she was secluded so that men could not see her or relate to her freely.<sup>41</sup> A man caught looking at the wife of the Alákétu was said to be subject to corporal punishment, even death; royal wives' shaven heads and plain clothes were intended to discourage the advances of other men. Also, royal wives carried calabashes or large dried gourds in public so they could sit on them apart from others.<sup>42</sup> In the past, even the Alákétu themselves, like other Yoruba kings, had been shrouded in mystery and rarely seen in public.<sup>43</sup> Alaba Ida had disregarded this expectation of seclusion, frequently visiting the lone French officer posted to Kétu, accompanying Administrator Duboscq to visit Yá Şégén, and fleeing all the way to Zagnanado when she feared for her life. She may even have attempted to appropriate the hammock, shoes, and drums associated with the office of the Alákétu himself, perhaps in an effort to take on his stature by association.<sup>44</sup> An elderly woman insisted to me that as a small child she had seen Alaba Ida fall out of a hammock and drop her medicines at the daily market in a failed effort to adopt these symbols of the king's office.<sup>45</sup>

Most in Kétu who are willing to talk about Alaba Ida describe her as "severe." Some say she killed many people. In the late 1960s, some fifty years after Alaba Ida's "reign," Nigerian historian A. I. Asiwaju collected Gèlèdè songs about events of the colonial period. In Gèlèdè ceremonies, male dancers wearing elaborate sculpted masks on their heads don the shirt, skirt, and headtie of a woman, ostensibly to honor "mothers" or to placate "witches." One song Asiwaju recorded portrayed Alaba Ida's leadership as disastrous, bringing death and disease:

Ida expelled us into the forest hideouts  
 And brought smallpox epidemics on the community  
 And this led to the death of several persons  
 Many were kidnapped and sold into slavery all in the reign of  
     Onyegen-Asakaisha  
 Life itself is rendered completely incomprehensible.<sup>46</sup>

More telling is people's association of Alaba Ida and Alákétu Onyegen with the continued slave raiding and displacement of the nineteenth century. The threat of kidnapping, coupled with the French demands for labor, had put great pressure on a population still recovering from a destructive war and experiences of captivity.

To associate Alaba Ida with death is to portray her as a "witch," a common accusation against elderly women seen as "public mothers" with some knowledge of religious ritual and other secrets. Some today scorn Alaba Ida's origins or her femininity; she was not really from Kétu, they say, or she was barren and childless. Some even hesitate to utter her name. History is particularly harsh to Alaba Ida because of her final act as *ida* (senior wife). Upon Alákétu Onyegen's death in 1918, as the senior wife, she and the *ramu* (favorite wife) were expected to be buried with him to serve him in the afterlife.<sup>47</sup> It is unclear whether Alákétu Onyegen had named a "favorite wife," but the French colonial administration refused to permit the sacrifice of anyone and tried to send Alaba Ida to Obatędo for safety. There the villagers refused to help, saying that they were unable to acknowledge Alaba Ida's existence after the Alákétu's death. Alaba Ida was brought back to Kétu and installed in a building on the outskirts of town, and is said to have called out to passersby, "It is because of the French that I could not disappear." Ordered from there to Pobé, rumored as the home of her son, a former *tirailleur* (African soldier), Alaba Ida fled to a French military outpost within two months after her guards in Pobé, so she said, tried to harm her.<sup>48</sup> She wandered many days in the forest with nothing to eat but wild birds she had carried with her, and some said she emerged from the brush to take food from cast iron pots outside of people's homes.<sup>49</sup> Eating birds and roaming in the forest at night symbolize witchcraft in Yoruba culture, especially when practiced by old women. Stories of wandering and paranoia allude to senility, a state Alaba Ida is said to have exhibited late in life. She died ignominiously some twenty years later in a garbage heap, a death captured in a song a young man in Kétu sang to me.<sup>50</sup>

It was fear that turned the town against Alaba Ida, several people explained to me, denying that she had been rejected because she was a woman. Some said they would have accepted her as a replacement for her husband had she done "good things."<sup>51</sup> Still, one woman said to me of the concept of a woman Alákétu: "Who ever heard of such a thing?"<sup>52</sup> According to Karin Barber's study of oral poetry in a Yoruba town in Nigeria, the achievements of "big men" or powerful males, even the violent and tyrannical, were celebrated in *oriki* (praise songs), but women who achieved notable success and wealth were never so honored;

they were instead accused of "going too far."<sup>53</sup> An infamous example was Efunsetan Aniwura, the *Ìyálóde* (Mother Owns the Outside World) of the late nineteenth-century Yoruba kingdom of Ibadan, one of several Yoruba towns that vied for a supreme position in the region after the fall of the Oyo empire a century earlier. As *Ìyálóde*, Aniwura had solved disputes between women and overseen certain ritual ceremonies for the kingdom. She also was a slave trader and arms dealer, like many leading men in Ibadan, including the ruler himself. After her only daughter died while trying to give birth, Aniwura was said to have become—in a noted play on her life by Akinwumi Isola—bitter, sinister, and brutal toward her pregnant slaves. Aniwura fell out of favor with the leader of Ibadan and was assassinated.<sup>54</sup> Though Aniwura's *oriki* (praise song) likened her brazen strength to that of a military leader who "owns horses she doesn't ride" and "instills fear in her equals," her story makes a play on her status as a "mother."<sup>55</sup> By threatening the life and fertility of her pregnant slaves, Aniwura became like a "witch" or *àjé*, a woman with supernatural powers to whom people can only refer as "our mothers," *àwọn iyá wa*. While "mothers" generally were seen as elderly women who displayed wealth, influence, wisdom, character, or some combination thereof, as in the case of Alaba Ida and others such as Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura, attaining power brought charges of witchcraft and of "going too far."

A figure comparable to Alaba Ida outside of the Yoruba-speaking and French colonial setting might be Ahebi Ugbabe of the southeastern Igbo-speaking area of Nigeria, described by historian Nwando Achebe as a woman who "became a man" and a "king." Ugbabe's rise to power and fall from grace has important similarities to and differences from the story of Alaba Ida. Ugbabe was exiled from her own town and forced to live in a foreign West African community, only returning to her homeland with British colonizers in the 1910s. Soon taking on the duties of a "warrant chief" or intermediary between the local population and the British, she displaced the council of male elders who were recognized by the people as communal leaders. In an unprecedented move, Ugbabe assumed the title of *eze* (king) for herself, though kings had never existed in her town. Playing on her position as a colonial intermediary and a "king," she settled disputes, enforced colonial policies, and cultivated an even larger image of supernatural power. She took dependents, "marrying" wives for the men in her household and claiming their children as her own descendants. Only when she attempted to create her own masked spirit—the masquerade being considered a domain solely of men—did her people reject her and the British sanction her. She stayed in power, but she was weakened; a song mocking her

spoke of how in trying to bring out a mask to enter into the realm of men, she was reduced to a mere woman.<sup>56</sup>

Ugbabe's relationship with the British, her aura of power, and her sudden demise mirrored Alaba Ida's trajectory in some ways. Still, Ugbabe seems to have been attempting a different route to power—expressedly as a man, “husband,” and “father” before her own community and before the British. Neither Alaba Ida nor Ahebi Ugbabe was rejected simply for being a woman—otherwise they would have never has gotten as far as they did. The issue for them both was how, acting as “mothers,” “wives,” or even “men,” women could use and expand the available channels for women's power in politics, the economy, or religion.

The collective silence about Yá Şègén stands in contrast to the vivid stories and contemptuous songs about Alaba Ida (or even Ahebi Ugbabe). If the Alákétu and Alaba Ida had been expected to be secluded, priests like Yá Şègén were to move about in public, conduct rituals, and acquire followers.<sup>57</sup> Though Yá Şègén had migrated with her *òrişà* (deity) from Pobé to Qbatèdo, she was limited in her movement, especially as she aged, because traveling in a hammock was a taboo named by her *òrişà*. Thus, as an agent of the French colonial administration, she was unable to travel extensively and perform her expected duties. That French officials visited her instead may have enhanced her prestige.<sup>58</sup> And yet Yá Şègén has not survived well as an individual in the oral historical record. Even in her hometown, where she acted as the primary colonial official, she is referred to as an *iyálorişà* (mother-in-deity). Yá Şègén, the “queen,” is merged with others who succeeded her and also bore the title “Yá Şègén.” Thus, in the oral historical record, her service to the French colonial regime is not mentioned or perhaps not even remembered.<sup>59</sup>

The images of Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén—as “queen,” “mother-in-deity,” or “witch”—did evoke the power of their womanhood, and yet both were severely constrained by their status as colonial intermediaries. People resented the orders Alaba Ida was compelled to give on behalf of the French and disappointed by her repeated attempts to fulfill the demands the French required of her.<sup>60</sup> The first call for her dismissal came from hunters and villagers who had fled from military recruitment into Nigeria. In Kétu and elsewhere, colonial intermediaries who were not from ruling families, like Abimbọla Otupepe and Alaba Ida, and later in the 1930s like Bankole Okanleke, became objects of popular hostility, linked closely with their colonial contacts.<sup>61</sup> In contrast, Alákétu Onyegen and the kings who succeeded him managed to distance themselves from the colonial administration while still retaining their local title and the respect of the people.

Also, both Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén were defined by their relationship to male figures, Alaba Ida to her husband the Alákétu, Yá Şègén to her *òrişà* (deity), Ondo. Although both tried to establish an independent base of power by retaining messengers, giving commands, advising, and administering punishments, neither was able to build an autonomous base of wealth or support. One man maintained that the king's ministers and chiefs had become Alaba Ida's, but in fact as a royal wife, she had no personal wealth. Though royal wives sometimes conducted trade at the market, they could not set up the personal networks other established women traders could. Alaba Ida, without brothers, land, or livestock, had to depend wholly on government subsidies and gifts. Yá Şègén, with access to some income and resources through a small piece of land cultivated by her followers, had more opportunity to generate wealth, but priests redistribute their wealth for ceremonies and dependents. Moreover, Yá Şègén's *òrişà* probably was not popular throughout Kétu, linked as it was to the history and identity of the town of Pobé and its immigrant community in Qbatèdo.<sup>62</sup>

One woman minister insisted to me, in defining her own political office in Kétu, that Alaba Ida was not charged with official duties but simply served as the wife of the king.<sup>63</sup> Because neither Alaba Ida nor Yá Şègén was an official titled minister of the kingdom, holding recognized authority over the general population, the power delegated by the French colonial administration was easily called into question by the local population. Of the two, Alaba Ida was more vulnerable to criticism because her influence derived almost solely from her association with the king and the French colonial administration, while Yá Şègén commanded authority primarily from her religious role. Yá Şègén's religious office drew upon the concept of *iyá* as a "public mother," while the designation of *ida*, senior wife, emphasized Alaba Ida's ambivalent position in the palace and the community. In the end, Alaba Ida may have enjoyed important standing among the king's wives, but to Kétu residents she appeared as the epitome of subordination, a wife of the king, who was that much easier to renounce in the historical record.

Though a nineteenth-century Kétu king had spoken of his most important royal wives as close confidants, their relationship would have been hidden from public view. At best, any political influence exercised privately by royal wives was an "open" secret, perhaps known, but not acknowledged. French officials could not know all the nuances of gender and power in Kétu, and they probably did not care if they undermined Alaba Ida's influence in the palace or Yá Şègén's role in religion. They had selected women as "queens" not as a tribute to their gender but as an instrument of exploitation by colonial authorities.



That both women in turn may have consciously tried to expand their position in society by working for the French tested gender norms but did not overturn local practices. What made life under Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén “completely incomprehensible” in the eyes of the people was not simply their challenge to gender relationships but how and in what context they defied idealized hierarchies and customs. The insult to the Kétu community was not the image of a woman giving orders but that of a royal wife publicly uttering commands.

Also, with the “reign” of Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén came a critical historical moment of rebuilding, when French colonial demands conjured up recent experiences of war, enslavement, and displacement. The French, recognizing that West African practices allowed power to certain women based on age and gender, had simply tried to appoint women who could serve French interests best. As the French grew more anxious about women and gender at home in France, they concluded that the image of powerful African women did not safeguard French imperial authority, but undermined it.

### **Emasculated Hierarchies as Threat to Empire and Republic**

As elderly African women, the “queens” of Kétu deviated from concepts cultivated in France of womanhood, domesticity, and motherhood, steeped as they were in rhetoric about rights and based in policies on women’s reproduction. During the Third Republic—spanning the seven decades from 1870 to 1940, much of the period of France’s overseas colonial empire in Africa—kings, emperors, and parliaments had ruled France, and even during the first decade of the Third Republic, it was uncertain that democracy would prevail. By the turn of the twentieth century, France’s new African empire exposed how the French Republic, both at home and in its empire, was unable to reconcile racial and gender difference with its own image as an exclusively white- and male-dominated nation. “Universal suffrage” and “brotherhood” were not intended to embrace women even in France; women did not get the vote in France until 1944 during the provisional government following the liberation of Paris and the end of World War II. Politicians and activists had sought to define womanhood and regulate motherhood according to the concept of the duty of women as mothers and procreators of the strength of the nation, dating back to the eighteenth century’s revolutionary ideal of the “virtuous” mother of the republic who bore citizens for the state. Although the nineteenth century’s “cult of domesticity” provided status to middle-class French women searching for a role in society, and women gained limited rights in education, legal status, and control over

wages, many fundamental rights—especially women's right to control their own bodies—were suppressed in the interest of the state to stimulate population rates and thus improve the general strength of the nation.<sup>64</sup>

To historian Joan Scott, the history of women and Western feminism within republican democracy is a "paradox," with republican democracy centered on the rights of the individual but the individual assumed to be, and idealized as, a man. French feminists who claimed political rights as individuals had to acknowledge that male-dominated society viewed them as women and hence as inferior. Scott writes that French feminists "refused to be women in the terms their society dictated, and at the same time spoke in the name of those women," exposing the limits of republican concepts of the individual and rights while ensnaring feminism in the same trap.<sup>65</sup>

Further, from the inception of republican democracy, the individual has been not only male but white or European, and the French "civilizing mission" for the most part denied freedom and equality to colonized people largely on the basis of race.<sup>66</sup> In his book *French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530–1880*, William Cohen argues that French ideas about race were remarkably static between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, with negative imagery toward blackness and African culture remaining constant, though the specific explanations for African inferiority changed over the centuries. Thus, writers from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries blamed the lack of Christianity or the environment for what they saw as African inferiority; by the nineteenth century science and biology were used to demean Africans and people of African descent and to help justify the enslavement of Africans in the Americas.<sup>67</sup> Although the French Revolution of 1789 marked a pivotal moment in the formation of the French republic and the idealization of individual rights, the slaves of the French colony of Saint Domingue rose up in rebellion in 1791, claiming the same ideals of liberty and equality. The independent state of Haiti, established in 1804 with a population largely descended from African slaves, also exposed the contradictions between French revolutionary ideals and French imperialism and racism.

By the time Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén had been chosen as French colonial agents, French ideals about imperialism, gender difference, and racial hierarchy had been adapted to the colonial situation in Africa, where fewer European settlers and no official system of slavery existed. Governor General William Ponty, head of the French West African federation from 1908 to 1915, made important political decisions that allowed Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén to rise to prominence. In 1909, he distributed an important tract on the "*politique des races*," or "racial

policy," a directive promoting more "direct contact" between the French colonial administrator and African communities, thus protecting African populations from exploitation by local African leaders.<sup>68</sup> Still, Ponty's "racial policy" assumed the continued use of African agents, with French administrators encouraged to select African intermediaries who had no birthright to positions of authority. Instead, some literacy in French or demonstrated loyalty to the French colonial regime was prized. Alaba Ida, Yá Şègén, and their contemporary, Abimbòla Otupepe, all allies of the French, fit the definition of "new men" because none of them descended from royal families and because they supported the French colonial administration and its policies. But before long these "new men" were displaced by the return of "old elites."<sup>69</sup>

Ponty had stressed another central element of France's "civilizing mission," that Africans be permitted to progress according to their own practices and beliefs.<sup>70</sup> Ponty's concern with the difference between West Africans and the French was reflected in his modification of the court system, education, and administration in the colonies, each reform revealing his prejudice. Thus, of his education policy Ponty noted, "it has not occurred to me to give anything other than simple, primary instruction. It is necessary to take into account the stage our populations are in their development."<sup>71</sup> When Ponty admonished French courts involved in disputes between Africans for interference with "the guarantee of justice based on their customs," his "racial policy" assumed that African communities were made up of small, isolated units, not of states, kingdoms, or empires.<sup>72</sup> That women, such as Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén, could occupy a position as "new men" was never simply an observation that "women really mattered" in Kétu but implied the West African town's backwardness in comparison to the French republic.

Until the bitter end, however, Ponty had confidence in the eventual triumph of the "civilizing mission," despite hostility to French policies within its African colonies. In the final months before his death in 1915 came an uprising in 1913 and 1914 in the Ohoi region, to the south of Kétu, provoked, so Ponty wrote to the minister of colonies, by "superstitious fear of the European rather than irrational hatred." His advice was to "leave the population with the impression of our force in order to demonstrate that firmness does not exclude good will. . . . patient penetration and a policy that is both energetic and humane have become classic in West Africa."<sup>73</sup>

After World War I, French confidence in the "civilizing mission" was never quite the same; the new colonial leadership doubted the value of rule by "new men." While Ponty's immediate successors as governor general confronted harsh

realities of war at home and widespread revolt in West Africa, his policies were pushed aside, particularly his approach to local African agents. The first of the two successors, François Clozel, author of two books on Côte d'Ivoire and an amateur ethnographer, was convinced that African kings and elites made better colonial intermediaries than "new men," who would not have been "traditional" authority figures.<sup>74</sup> In his previous assignment in Upper Senegal-Niger (modern Mali), Clozel had developed a favorable relationship with France's Muslim allies, and he gave a speech to the Colonial Government Council praising their loyalty and quoting a qur'anic verse he had learned from a Senegalese Muslim leader.<sup>75</sup> Yet his sympathy for African culture did not keep him from taking a hard line against rebellions spreading across Dahomey; he explained "sporadic troubles" there as caused by the most "pagan, ignorant, and estranged" populations in the colonies.<sup>76</sup>

By July 1917, with the disastrous socioeconomic effects of the war felt deeply in France and its colonies, the new governor of Dahomey, Gaston-Léon Fourn, sent a letter of alarm to the new governor general, Van Vollenhoven, warning of "the intentional destruction of indigenous hierarchies." "We need hierarchies," he wrote, "but respected, honest ones controlled by our Administrators."<sup>77</sup> About a month later, Van Vollenhoven issued a circular on "indigenous chiefs," effectively repealing Ponty's "racial policy" and opening the way for the return of male elites and kings to positions of power. Echoing Dahomey governor Fourn's appeal for hierarchies, he wrote that African communities needed indigenous chiefs as a child needed parents, because of their "infantile" status. Indigenous local leaders were "indispensable" as intermediaries to the French colonial administration. However, a local leader was not a "legendary black king," but an "instrument" of the French administrator.<sup>78</sup> Van Vollenhoven's policy continued to disparage leaders like the Alákétu, who identified themselves and were viewed by others as kings. The shift in colonial policy was about underlying French notions of racial difference and about the practical difficulty of controlling populations in an area nine times the size of France itself.

Following Van Vollenhoven's policy paper, the governor of Dahomey explained Alaba Ida's dismissal in his next report. Alaba Ida had been able to "impose her authority over the population thanks to her energy, intelligence, and action," but her severe attitude and "venality" had caused hostility in the town. According to local custom, the king himself, her husband, could not be replaced before his death, so the governor had installed the top minister to serve as the *chef supérieur du canton* (superior district head).<sup>79</sup> (Yá Sègén, the

second “queen,” was not mentioned explicitly in the report and was probably replaced around the same time as Alaba Ida.)

The dismissals of the two women did not mark a simple retreat back to a French colonial policy that emphasized the role of local elites and royals, since concern about women and gender had taken on new significance during the war and was affecting French colonial policymaking in Africa. Women were at the center of larger political debates in France itself, debates about the family—especially mothers, but also about fathers and “endangered” children—debates that dated to the beginning of the Third Republic. Concern about depopulation in France had led to legislation in Paris to encourage and regulate motherhood by laws on, for example, wet nurses, the length of the workday, and maternity leaves. The war had affected women’s identities—as mothers of recruits, as victims of rape by German soldiers, and as workers—encouraging a reconsideration of the recognition and protection of women, but particularly of mothers.<sup>80</sup> Mary Louise Roberts writes that the emergence of the “modern woman” and the “single woman” represented the traumatic change wrought by the war, but that the “mother” remained an enduring and comforting icon.<sup>81</sup> Underlying concerns with the health of infants, the education of school-age children, and protection against child labor were assumptions about the centrality of paternal power and fatherhood to the rebuilding of France.<sup>82</sup>

French colonials grafted rhetoric and anxieties about family and morality in France onto their African policy while at the same time preserving the sense of distance and difference in race and culture. In 1917, Governor General Van Vollenhoven wrote to the minister of colonies in Paris:

*Social discipline and the family were respected everywhere, moreover there were ruthless sanctions against those who disobeyed. We created civil justice but native society was frightened by the rights accorded to individuals, especially rights given to women and youths, boldly defying marital and paternal authority, traditional bases of the African family. We got rid of the large, feared and respected African forces but in doing so we deprived people of a certain degree of tyranny that provided a secure foundation. . . . the rigorous hierarchy of the past has been replaced with a benevolent but emasculated one.*<sup>83</sup> (Emphasis added)

Van Vollenhoven saw the same elements of the family, rights, and paternalism in West Africa that were at issue in France, but he emphasized a different remedy. The “well-intentioned” French imperial regime had, unwittingly, weakened the family and paternal power in the colonies. Male dominance in

the African household had been threatened, with women and children exercising too many rights—a power that was presumed unnatural in the traditional hierarchical and patriarchal family in Africa. Traditional authority was oppressive, perhaps, but it was an authority that discouraged dissent and disorder. African women, like French women, needed to be put “in their place,” in France with the “protection” of motherhood, and in West Africa with the reinstatement of “a certain degree of tyranny.”<sup>84</sup>

Governors General Clozel and Van Vollenhoven and Governor Fourn of Dahomey were, in effect, seeking the return of a “masculine” hierarchy headed by a male elite figure, ideally a “father” or, more precisely, a patriarch. Once the French had adopted language that bolstered masculinity, patriarchy, and the old hierarchies of their African colonies, neither Alaba Ida nor Yá Şègén could continue as colonial intermediaries. In France and in its colonies, politicians hoped fathers and husbands and, especially after World War I, the image of women as mothers—child-bearing mothers rather than the elderly “mothers” of leadership represented by Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén—would help restore order and stem the threatening tide of precipitous social change.

In response to perceived social upheaval at home and in its French empire, the French government turned to more “rational” and technical forms of government that shifted the government to the right in the late 1930s and early 1940s and culminated in the fascist Vichy regime under the German occupation of World War II. By the 1920s, French colonial policy too, under the framework of *mise en valeur* or “rational development,” encouraged forced labor and emphasized “chiefly authority” to improve the “material and moral situation” of the colonies. Governor Fourn’s 1925 annual report predicted the “disappearance of local customs” and “profoundly modified social practices,” in contrast with earlier reports’ language about respecting African culture.<sup>85</sup> Local customs and practices did not disappear. In response to changing gender ideals in France and in the colonies, a shift in French rhetoric was the significant change.

The reasons the French appointed Alaba Ida and Yá Şègén as intermediaries in the first place remain unclear. Both women seem to have given the impression that they could give orders and gain compliance from women and men throughout the community. Were the French inadvertently, and unwittingly, placing themselves as “father figures,” with “mother figures” beside them, or were they displaying their own power by placing women in their service as so many kings and leading men had done before them? The French appeared to understand neither the symbolism in West Africa of having “mothers” work

on their behalf nor the controversial sight of a royal wife commanding men. As the situation in Kétu deteriorated, the French fell back on what they continued to believe about women, both French and West African: that they were inferior and subordinate to men. If French administrators wanted to control women as mothers and wives, people in Kétu wanted royal wives to act properly and kings and elders to be able to rule. Too easily the desire for order, in both places, translated into calls for more control over women.

## “Without family . . . there is no true colonization”

### *Perspectives on Marriage*

In 1902, Monseigneur Alexandre Le Roy, an archbishop in the French Catholic order of the Holy Ghost Fathers Congregation, published a provocative essay about the importance of stable African families to French imperial policies: “without morality, there is no family; without family, there is no society; and without a productive society that works, consumes, and produces, there is no true colonization, the peaceful and fecund colonization that we would want.”<sup>1</sup> Le Roy was probably the key figure behind a 1910 survey on marriage and the family in Africa distributed by the French Antislavery Society (of which Le Roy was a prominent member) in France’s West and Central African colonies. Authors of the survey intended to reveal the immorality and social disorder caused by French colonialism and also to boost support for civil marriages between African women and men as a remedy to perceived depopulation. But two decades passed before the results of the survey were published in 1930, and by that time the French colonial administration was promoting its own strategies to quell disorder and increase productivity through legal reforms that also focused on marriage.



The French Antislavery Society survey on African marriage and families tapped into dual aspects of French colonial legal reform: the court system and research on local African customs. From very early on, as the French sought to define the parameters of courts in its West African colonies, repeated efforts to obtain ethnographic information on marriage, kinship, and property as the basis for African “civil law” courts proved inadequate. French colonial administrators at various levels were frustrated by their inability to control, influence, and understand African cultural practices that shaped legal cases, especially those on women, marriage, and families.

Le Roy’s alarmist language at the turn of the century had been prescient in its focus on the “disorganization” of families, a term increasingly used to describe French and African societies after World War I. By the interwar period, related concerns arose about birth rates and economic productivity, especially the physical and social health of African families, which resembled similar debates in France. Ineffectual laws in France were encouraging French women to serve the state by having babies. In Yoruba culture, on the other hand, the idealized image of the subordinate wife had long been complicated by the role of elder women and by the changing nature of marriage itself. Yoruba marriages were open to debate and variation in ways that dismayed French officials devising and enforcing laws for the colonies.

### **“Mitigated by Matriarchy”: Yoruba Marriage and Families**

The goals and role of the French Antislavery Society itself differed significantly from earlier abolitionist movements, partly because its first chapter was not founded until 1888, after the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas had been abolished. Slavery and slave trading persisted in Africa and the Middle East as European nations began to establish new overseas empires. The eighteenth-century abolitionist movement had been linked to Protestantism; the new antislavery societies were linked to the Catholic Church. The French Antislavery Society maintained close ties to the Catholic missions and to the French colonial administration in France’s new West African colonies. Governor General Ponty distributed the society’s survey in 1910 via the *Journal Officiel de l’Afrique occidentale française* (Official Journal of French West Africa).<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, full emancipation of all former slaves in West Africa had no support in the French Antislavery Society. A speaker at an Antislavery Congress in 1901 frankly declared, “I am not partisan to the mass liberation of

slaves. . . . That would ruin the country and cast most slaves into the ultimate misery."<sup>3</sup> Catholic missionaries in West Africa focused their attention instead on trying to form families among the young Africans who came to live at their mission in search of refuge or opportunity. French missionaries, writing in the journal of the French Antislavery Society, told of their efforts to attract women to the mission, framing the antislavery movement in a context of morality, women, and marriage. Le Roy, in particular, who described the plight of the African woman who "belong[s] to her husband who paid for her," proposed the untenable idea of civil marriages to resolve the "disorganization" of the African family.<sup>4</sup> Given the small communities of converts in some French African colonies and French colonial rhetoric that vowed to help Africans "progress" only at their own pace, widespread African civil marriages may have seemed as "untenable" as the idea of the mass emancipation of slaves within Africa.

The story of Antoinette, a Kétu woman, published in the journal of the French Antislavery Society, bridged the antislavery mission with the Catholic mission's purpose of gaining converts and forming Christian families. Antoinette had been captured during the war with Dahomey in 1886 and incorporated into the royal household. She was among the enslaved children and women whom Dahomey's king Behanzin took with him in exile into Martinique in 1892. "Overwhelmed by homesickness," Antoinette was brought back to the new French colony of Dahomey after interventions by a priest; she came to live at the Catholic mission in Porto-Novo, marrying a formerly enslaved, converted Kétu man there. Returning to Kétu, she helped convert her mother and siblings and they all came to live at the *village de liberté* (freedom village), the Catholic mission set up at Zagnanado for former slaves. Antoinette supported herself as a laundress and through small-scale commerce that allowed her to "live easily." She took in two young girls who had been seized from a slave trader and who were to be married to "Rough Tom" and "Peaceful Jacques," Christian men in the compound.<sup>5</sup> Thus Antoinette, once a slave, then a Christian, had expanded the Christian community by converting her family and by becoming a "mother" to young women who would be wives of converted men.

The inspiring news of Antoinette's redemption through work, religion, and family contrasted with the image of the African family projected by the Antislavery Society's survey. The seventy-three questions of the survey assumed the limitless power and rule of an autocratic male head of household. Thus question twelve asked, "Doesn't the head of household abuse his authority in order to divert the family wealth to himself and in order to acquire women whom he must later send off into prostitution?" Several of the questions focused on

the age and consent of the bride, taking exploitation of wives and depravity of African marriage practices as a matter of course. Question twenty inquired, "Does the wife's family regularly seize the woman on certain occasions under various pretexts, refusing to return her to her husband unless he pays them? Is this abuse authorized by local custom?" The survey invited the respondent to muse on useful reforms to "prevent the exploitation of the husband, wife, and child and how to bring more dignity, morality, and freedom to families."<sup>6</sup>

Catholic missionaries themselves wrote many of the responses to the questionnaires, with the editors of the volume that appeared two decades later condensing information or combining it with other reports, including some material prepared by colonial administrators.<sup>7</sup> Most likely it was Father J. Vallée, a priest stationed in Kétu between 1907 and 1914, who provided the commentary on Kétu. Yet despite the leading questions, the descriptions of marriage practices in Kétu and neighboring regions do provide insight into the changing situation of young wives and elder women at the turn of the century, and they foreshadow shifts in French colonial policy in the 1930s.

Of the role of patriarchy or control by men in the household, the survey's description of Kétu acknowledged that "the most senior woman also plays an important role in relation to all the women and girls [in the family], in terms of women's labor. The senior male has nothing to do with this issue. Thus it generally is a patriarchal family organization mitigated by matriarchy. . . . The head male rules autocratically. . . . But before ordering anything from the women, when the need arises, he must consult first with the senior woman."<sup>8</sup> Thus, patriarchal authority was one of several, sometimes overlapping, hierarchical family relationships. If a man had more than one wife, the first wife exerted power over those who came after. Widows became the wives of younger brothers or nephews of the deceased husband. Motherhood and child care hinged on these multiple family relationships; young daughters were entrusted to a matron, ordinarily a senior woman in the paternal family, who became her "mother," responsible for arranging her marriage. A grandfather or an uncle frequently mentored young male relatives who assisted them in their work. Age, rank, and gender guided all relationships within the household.

Still, patriarchal control was not wholly unchecked; in Kétu, for example, husbands could not pawn their wives or give them away as gifts, though children, including young girls, could be given as pawns to pay back debts.<sup>9</sup> According to the French author of the report on Kétu, a woman could obtain a divorce without difficulty: "No woman getting married has the idea that it will last a lifetime." Indeed, two years earlier, Father Vallée had reported that

within Kétu's fledgling Christian community, one young wife, encouraged by her mother, who had wanted her to marry a different man, left her husband.<sup>10</sup> Women left their husbands, so it was said, under various pretexts and returned to their parents' home, leaving children with the husband. Of one woman's visit to the homes of her several ex-husbands, the French writer declared acerbically, "Thus, polyandry combines with polygamy," a suggestion that women could have several husbands in one lifetime, not unlike men who married multiple women. The mother/ex-wife maintained an interest in the children she left behind, particularly her sons, and used her own savings to help pay their bride-wealth, a series of gifts, money, and labor paid by the groom and his family. Negatively portrayed by the same writer as "buying [her son] a wife," the mother was actually investing in future labor and wealth for herself as the paternal grandmother, since she would have access to her son's children. Women like these elderly "divorcées" gave outside observers the impression that many wielded "matriarchal" influence and challenged the overall male dominance in the household.<sup>11</sup>

By the early twentieth century, local marriage practices were changing in Kétu. Young couples were both affirming and undermining men's established control over women. Although parents still arranged marriages and received gifts or bride-wealth on behalf of their daughters—portrayed as "merchandise" by many European observers—the society's survey reported that some young women refused the man chosen for them and convinced family members to accept bride-wealth from preferred suitors instead. Some couples were running off together, challenging male privilege and elder authority even more audaciously.<sup>12</sup>

The tension between patriarchy and so-called polyandry, that is, women with multiple husbands, had less to do with an actual "matriarchate," a group of ruling women, than with a drawn-out marriage process involving entire extended families. On engagement and the marriage process, so the report said, the "genesis" of marriage in Kétu began with the birth of a child, already a prospective bride or groom, and with initial negotiations for marriage, involving several consultations with a diviner, between two families. Hence the formal engagement ideally occurred when the future bride was a young girl who could hardly refuse her parents. Over the years between childhood and the appropriate age for the marriage itself, the fiancé's family provided gifts of local food and drink, labor, and resources. If the woman broke the engagement, the fiancé was entitled to the return of the money he and his parents had spent. Again, local practices were now shifting, with greater tolerance of broken engagements,

though sometimes with demands for interest on the money spent during the engagement process. The actual marriage ceremony itself still established the young woman's incorporation into her new household; the new wife promptly demonstrated her subordinate status by ritually sweeping the courtyard and cooking food for her in-laws.<sup>13</sup>

The writer or writers of the questionnaire responses reflected his or their own affiliation with the Catholic Church, describing the plight of "our missions" and critiquing the French colonial administration for discouraging what Catholic missionaries would have defined as "social and familial reform." In attempting to change local practices, Catholic missionaries in Kétu and neighboring towns found themselves fulfilling roles of the extended family in the marriage process, finding prospective brides, paying bridewealth, and trying to reconcile estranged couples.<sup>14</sup> Christians in Kétu were wary of performing Christian marriage ceremonies out of fear of reprisals from others or from local deities. Thus, the civil Christian-based marriages proposed by the French Anti-slavery Society to remedy what French observers saw as moral decline would not have enhanced the situation for Kétu's small Christian community.<sup>15</sup>

Court cases like the 1915 custody battle between a Muslim Kétu man named Souleymane Adekambi and his Gbe wife Adogbonu exposed this gap between French colonial (if not also missionaries') understanding of African practices and their desire to control these relationships through legal reform.<sup>16</sup> The couple—notably of different ethnic and religious backgrounds—had married in the wife's hometown near Zagnanado after her father consented to the marriage because she would continue to live with him and raise her three children. When, after her father died, Adogbonu refused to move in with her husband Adekambi, he cut off financial support for their children and demanded custody of their daughter, who had begun schooling at a Catholic mission. To the dismay of the Catholic mission and to the confusion of the French colonial administration, Adekambi successfully argued for custody before a colonially appointed court of elder local men.

The French administrator, Louis Duboscq, not understanding how a married woman could live apart from her husband, assumed mistakenly that the couple was divorced.<sup>17</sup> Elders appointed as advisors for the local court informed Duboscq that married couples in fact did not always live together. One elder explained, "Frequently, married women live with their children outside of the conjugal home, in their father's house if he is living or at the mother's house." Husbands were to provide financial support to wives who lived separately.<sup>18</sup> The governor of Dahomey had suggested that marriage and child custody prac-

tices from other regions of the colony might apply to the case, suggesting that the couple had entered into *ha dido*, or "free union," as practiced only by princesses in the former Dahomey kingdom; he proposed the use of child custody practices prevalent in Savé, a Yoruba kingdom north of Kétu. But the governor's ideas of "free unions" and custody rights were misguided because Adogbonu's father had consented to her marriage; theirs was not a "free union." If it had been, the mother would have retained custody of her children.<sup>19</sup>

When Duboscq questioned Adekambi, he insisted that spouses in Kétu could live apart and that women could end marriages, especially if a husband did not provide material support for his wife and children. According to Nago (Yoruba) practices, men nevertheless retained custody over their children after a marital relationship ended.<sup>20</sup> Like the elders in his wife's hometown, Adekambi was defining marriage broadly, citing comparisons with other Yoruba towns in British-controlled Nigeria and considering local practices negotiable and full of possibilities. French authorities, taking a much more narrow view, suspected that "immoral speculation" was at the heart of the matter; they assumed that the parents sought custody of the daughter to profit from gifts and labor from a future fiancé. But the daughter could have entered into a marriage in which elaborate gifts were not exchanged, as her parents themselves seemed to have done. A Catholic priest accused the colonial administration of being "pro-Muslim" in allowing Adekambi to remove all his children from the mission school.<sup>21</sup> As with the documentation of many court cases in colonial Africa, the final outcome of this case was uncertain; French officials were never quite clear about the motives underlying the case or the practices shaping it.

Basing their decision on Gbe customs, which the wife shared, rather than on the husband's foreign Nago (Yoruba) practices the local elders could not be expected to know, the elders in the Adekambi case failed to honor a 1912 colonial decree that ordered African women to submit to the "customary law" of their husbands, even though the case was still decided in the husband Adekambi's favor. Not long after, in a similar dispute in which wife and husband were from different ethnic groups, the wife was forced to return to her husband's household because his cultural practices did not allow women to seek separation or divorce. French officials ignored whether the woman was acting according to the norms within her own community.<sup>22</sup>

A lawyer by training, Governor General Ponty would have known of a similar recent law in France that stated that women automatically adopted the nationality of their husband; the law was repealed in 1927 after more French women began to marry European men who were not French.<sup>23</sup> Thus, French

policymakers' decision to try to monitor formally the processes of marriage and divorce in the West African colonies was not a sudden change in the 1910s or the 1930s, but part of long-standing concerns about women, marriage, and families, connecting policies in France with those of its colonies.

Nigerian scholars who published studies of Yoruba society in the same period, between the turn of the century and the 1930s, were reporting on changing marriage practices, but with interests and in styles quite different from French colonial administrators and Catholic missionaries. Reverend Samuel Johnson, A. K. Ajisafe, and N. A. Fadipe were more concerned with establishing the historical and cultural record of Yoruba society than with proposing ways to alter it by applying practices and standards of Western (Protestant) religion. They showed respect for Yoruba practices while hinting at changes underway under British colonial rule, thus portraying more broadly how the image of women as wives and mothers had evolved across Yoruba communities by the early twentieth century.

Samuel Johnson's foundational six-hundred-page tome *History of the Yorubas*, completed in 1897, was not published until 1921, twenty years after the author's death. It portrayed a grand Yoruba "nation" that originated at the town of Ile-Ife and flourished in the kingdom of Oyo before decades of war and the onset of British colonial rule. In this comprehensive political history, only a few pages were devoted to marriage practices. Johnson discussed the role of extended families in finding spouses and the array of gifts marking the engagement process over the years before the formal marriage ceremony, the *igbéyàwó* (carrying of the bride), during which the new bride was escorted to her new home in her husband's family compound. On the formal day of marriage, the young bride would be directed to the "head lady" of husband's house, reminiscent of the "matriarch" in the Kétu survey. Johnson described how female members of a family chose wives for young men in the household, echoing the stories of Kétu's Catholic missionaries about the strong intervention of mothers in the marriage of sons. Johnson denied the existence of divorce except in rare cases, asserting that a divorced woman could never remarry legally. Sometimes, however, a young girl refused her parents' choice and, if recognized by her own chosen suitor's family, she might become the man's lawful wife.<sup>24</sup> Although other elite Yoruba Christian converts of the late nineteenth century criticized the recently arrived British, who increasingly discriminated against them, Johnson, a Protestant minister, praised the end of warfare and the spread of Christianity under the British. To him Christian conversion was a solution to certain social ills. Still, proud of Yoruba culture and history, he main-

tained that the Yoruba were actually reclaiming a Christian faith lost in the distant past.<sup>25</sup>

A. K. Ajisafe's *Law and Customs of the Yoruba*, published in 1924, originated with research in 1906 among the Egba Yoruba around Abẹokuta, Nigeria. Its spare text of just more than eighty pages reads like a legal code but with insightful descriptive passages. Overall, it has little analysis of the impact of British colonialism and Christianity. Ajisafe explained how, out of respect, the fiancée hid her face before her husband's family or friends until she was acknowledged or had given birth to their first child.<sup>26</sup> Pampered with cooked meals in the first days after the wedding ceremony by the senior woman of the compound, a younger wife would thereafter assume a larger share of the most onerous domestic chores.<sup>27</sup> Over time, she could gain access to resources or build her own wealth through inheritance from paternal or maternal relatives; even a husband could not seize land his wife inherited. Though Ajisafe denied divorce as a traditional legal practice among the Yoruba, he took care to explain the procedure that followed after a woman left her fiancé or husband for another man.<sup>28</sup> Some elder women could play intermediary roles in the marriage process as the *alárenà* (one who opens the way), receiving presents for their advice and their intervention on behalf of the future groom. Some might rise to importance as the *Ìyálé* (Mother of the House), opposite the male head of household, or might become leader of a club (*egbé*).<sup>29</sup> Johnson himself had written of several titled royal women, specifically in the Oyo kingdom through the nineteenth century, but Asijafe recognized only one powerful, titled woman in Yoruba society, the *Ìyálóde* (Mother Owns the Outside World), leader of all the town's women.<sup>30</sup> Still, in all, Ajisafe captured the vulnerable position of the young wife, whom he classified as "movable property" along with furniture, cattle, and slaves, and contrasted it to the more secure position of senior women.<sup>31</sup>

N. A. Fadipe's thousand-page dissertation was completed in 1939 and edited and published in 1970, long after his premature death in 1944, in an abbreviated form as *The Sociology of the Yoruba*. Fadipe revisited Johnson's broad and comprehensive study. A student of sociology at Columbia University and the University of London, he had conducted several fieldwork trips to Nigeria between 1932 and 1935. He considered both Islam and Christianity more fundamental than the fact of imposition of British colonial rule to the changes in Yoruba society. If Le Roy and others warned of "disintegration" in African communities, Fadipe saw Yoruba society as "integrated" and as a "compromise" between cultures.<sup>32</sup> In the 1930s, sociologists studied "complex" industri-



alized societies; only non-Western sites, deemed more simplistic, were considered the proper domain of anthropology. Fadipe, in presenting Yoruba society as “complex” and as a product of “diffusion” or cultural exchange rather than as a “primitive” society devastated by contact with the outside world, made a deeply theoretical and political point.

Fadipe considered shifts in marriage practices at the center of overall social change, the mutual consent of the woman and the man and increased divorce rates being especially important. Like Johnson and Ajisafe, he described the marriage process in terms of engagement, payment of bridewealth, and the “carrying of the bride,” but he also explicitly addressed the mundane and emotional aspects of marriage over a lifetime. When a young woman left her own family to assume a low status as a wife in another household of not only her husband but also probably of his parents, brothers, aunts and uncles, and their wives and children, almost every other woman there (including the wives of brothers and uncles) was senior to her.<sup>33</sup> She could form alliances with other “wives of the compound,” who arranged themselves according to age and status, and also would rank higher than any woman who married into the household after she did. In her latter years an elder woman, by then the actual and figurative “mother” to many, could speak more freely and exercise some authority in the compound.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, both the model of the subservient wife and that of the powerful mother and elder persisted in Yoruba society.

Johnson, Ajisafe, and Fadipe all took care to discuss Muslim marriage practices as well, which were important in Kétu in the early twentieth century though ignored by Catholic priests in their correspondence with the French Antislavery Society. In the Muslim marriage ceremony, *yigi*, derived from the Hausa term for marriage, *igiyar arme* (the Hausa to the north had a large influence on Yoruba Muslim practices), Muslim fathers sometimes gave daughters in marriage as *sàràà*, a sort of almsgiving, instead of exchanging the elaborate series of gifts over a long engagement.<sup>35</sup> But the household organization of Muslim families would have mirrored those who practiced indigenous religion and even Christianity, despite the restriction on multiple wives. Islam was both integrated with and segregated from the rest of the Kétu community through marriage practices and broader political relationships. Kétu, with its seasonal roads and a population as small as two thousand at the turn of the century, did not share the same colonial experience as Nigerian cities like Lagos, Ibadan, and Abẹokuta, which were subject to intense British colonial activity through missions, railways, and schools. That Kétu exhibited the same complexity of powerful elder women, divorce, and Muslim influence as larger Yo-

ruba towns under British colonial rule meant that the presence of Europeans or Christianity was not the sole factor bringing about change in marriage practices in Yoruba communities.<sup>36</sup>

Every aspect of the marriage process in Yoruba society—the art of negotiation, the involvement of extended family, and ongoing exchange in gifts—invited change and modification. Although written accounts from both French observers and Nigerian scholars were biased and politicized, sometimes an author, perhaps unwittingly, portrayed an image quite different from the model West African family of subordinate wife and young mother in recounting elopements and divorces that challenged the power of elders, especially of senior men. Young married women did not always conform to expectations and older women sometimes exercised privilege and authority. As a result, French colonial administrators, though claiming to act on behalf of oppressed West African women, engaged in confused and short-lived efforts to reform marriage practices, undertaken precisely because West African wives and mothers deviated from French expectations of womanhood based on the image and reality of French women's lives.

### **Custom-Made: "Manufacturing" Blackness for France's African Empire**

When Monseigneur Le Roy stated, in a 1902 speech about African society, that "the indigenous family is so disorganized that it no longer exists," he was drawing on fears about depopulation in France stoked by a growing natalist or pro-birth movement at the turn of the century.<sup>37</sup> Le Roy's reference to the need for a more "fecund" colonization in Africa echoed concerns over the lack of *fécondité* (fertility) in France itself. Émile Zola published a novel with that title in 1899. Celebrating family and child rearing within a large extended family, Zola's novel contrasted a woman expecting her fifth child with a woman who abhorred the idea of childbirth. Zola highlighted women's responsibility for ending the French population crisis and applauded men's virility. His story takes a remarkable twist near the end with the return of a long-lost relative who had been living in West Africa with a large family of his own. The young man speaks at length of the "father" Niger River "impregnating" the soil and of the "creation of another France." The elaborate metaphor cast the perceived fertility of Africa's very soil as a solution to France's population crisis.<sup>38</sup>

With a social hygiene movement also spreading in France around the same time, concerns about birth rates and public health in France was translated

into policies concerned with family life in West Africa. Initial measures to contain contagious disease, to improve sanitation, and to instruct in personal hygiene, based as they were on the more urban context of France, failed in West Africa.<sup>39</sup> After World War I, concerns over both birth rates and public health began to converge with racial ideologies. French eugenicists, believing not only in increasing the birth rate, as natalists did, but also in improving the racial “stock” of the nation, spoke of increasing the number of births in “quality and quantity” and promoted theories on *puériculture* (child rearing).<sup>40</sup> In 1924, the French colonial government established the National Office of Social Hygiene, the principal goals of which, borrowing from the language of social hygienists and eugenicists in France, were “the establishment in France and in the colonies of a continuous and methodical propaganda to the public . . . necessary for the maintenance of health, the fight against social diseases, and the preservation of the race.”<sup>41</sup> In a 1926 circular to the governors of the French West African colonies, Governor General Jules Carde wrote of “develop[ing] the native races in quality and quantity” and of “educat[ing] mothers and increasing diffusion [*pénétration*] of child-rearing skills [*puériculture*] into households.”<sup>42</sup> In a 1929 report on the medical assistance program in Dahomey, an inspector echoed Carde’s policies, summarizing the goals of French initiatives: “protection of public health,” “education of the native in matters of personal hygiene,” “improvement and increase of indigenous races.”<sup>43</sup>

In 1931, a top colonial administrator, Dr. Sévérin Abbattucci, head of the office of social hygiene, explicitly connected perceived low birth rates in France’s African colonies to the health and social situation of African women. Abbattucci restated bluntly what Le Roy had warned decades earlier about productivity and labor. African women were to “manufacture blackness [*fabriquer du noir*] . . . in the same way that we must enforce the manufacture of whiteness in the metropole.”<sup>44</sup> French colonial authorities sought to boost their budget for health reform in the late 1930s and outlined plans to build hundreds of medical units, birthing centers (*maternités*), and other treatment facilities.<sup>45</sup> While French politicians were seeking in vain to control French women’s bodies, French colonial policymakers, less familiar with the circumstances of diverse populations of African women, tried to redirect African women’s social experience within families and households as daughters, wives, and mothers.<sup>46</sup>

The same year that Dr. Abbattucci wrote about African women’s duty to “manufacture blackness,” Governor General Jules Brévié (later to serve under the fascist Vichy regime) distributed a circular to the governors of all French West Africa colonies announcing his plan for sweeping changes to African

"customary" law, which defined legal procedures based on local African practices. "Customary" law had been an integral part of French colonial policy since the beginning of the French West Africa federation in 1895. While citing France's long-standing avowed respect for local African practices, Brévié argued that a new "complete" inventory of African customs was now necessary. "Customs and legal institutions," he wrote, "especially the organization of the family and property, are directly linked to society, beliefs, and religion." Pronouncing ignorance and preconceived notions about local practices dangerous, he encouraged colonial administrators to develop new codes from a "strictly indigenous" point of view and not from a French one, suggesting that the legal codes would not be "eternal" but that they would be "flexible enough to adapt to the diverse stages of evolution of our subjects."<sup>47</sup> Yet when Brévié proposed his significant changes to customary law in 1931, he simply attached as a guideline a 1901 questionnaire on family and property, ironically reflecting the same lack of imagination he cautioned against in his own circular.<sup>48</sup>

Since the early years of French colonial rule, administrators had expressed an interest in documenting West African customs, working within the two underlying French ideologies: "assimilation" and "association." To assimilate Africans was to bring them "civilization" and get them to conform to French cultural ideals. The principle of "association" promised to "respect" local practices and permit colonial subjects to evolve within their own cultures, often under the leadership of traditional elites. For much of the colonial period, these two approaches coexisted. Africans exposed to education and training were more likely to experience, and even to welcome, assimilationist policies, but mass populations were expected to change only as the broader society changed around them. After the upheaval of World War I, French colonial policymakers touted association even more vocally over assimilation, concerned about the rising demands of some educated elite Africans for citizenship and other rights.<sup>49</sup>

But to "associate" with African society—manipulating and encouraging even slow change within it—French colonial administrators had to understand local practices. Some French officials had compiled distinguished monographs based on African practices in specific regions, but many efforts to gather information and to implement reforms systematically across all of French West Africa fell short.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Dahomey was the only colony to complete a law book in response to Brévié's 1931 circular. Published in 1933, the *Coutumier du Dahomey* (Customary Law Book of Dahomey) reads like a legal code with more than three hundred articles and only intermittent references to specific ethnic groups. With its sparse ethnographic detail, the book apparently did not cap-

ture what Brévié had in mind, and it was six years before customary law guides for each of France's West African colonies were available.<sup>51</sup>

Kétu itself was not mentioned as a specific research site in the 1933 or 1939 questionnaire, yet descriptions of the broader region of southern Dahomey, where Kétu is located, echoed what French observers had written about Kétu in response to the 1910 Antislavery Society's questionnaire.<sup>52</sup> In the 1933 customary law book, published in response to Brévié's 1931 circular, Yoruba communities were portrayed as politically unstable, with the *chef de famille* (family head), the most senior man of an extended family, said to have more power because Yoruba communities were "disorganized." But the family head could share his power with "old women with good advice," conjuring the image of "patriarchy mitigated by matriarchy," as expressed in the Antislavery Society survey response.<sup>53</sup> Among the Yoruba, it was said that the approval of the family head made a marriage "regular" and therefore that the consent of the couple was only a "formality," with the future husband consulted and the bride not, except among some elites.<sup>54</sup> As wives, women had no legal status, each living with her husband but maintaining a role in her own family. A Yoruba woman was said to maintain a position in her natal family, inheriting from either parent and exercising influence once she became an aged women with a "reputation for wisdom."<sup>55</sup>

Whatever the actual content of French sources on African customary law, within all of these publications the subordinate position of African women, specifically wives, was incidental and assumed by French policymakers. French colonial administrators themselves were unwilling to take any far-reaching action that might threaten existing social hierarchies in Africa. Governor General Brévié thought the "delicate tasks," required by a 1932 decree that compelled French officials to hear any cases involving marriage, divorce, or child custody in the customary courts, should be presided over by French authorities to demonstrate intense French interest in African family life and the need for customary law guidebooks to aid officials.<sup>56</sup> Enacting policies first proposed by Brévié, Marcel de Coppet, governor of French West Africa during the short-lived, leftist Front Populaire regime of 1936 to 1938, announced changes to colonial policy on indigenous marriage, establishing minimum ages of fourteen for girls and sixteen for boys, requiring the consent of the couple to marry, and defending the woman's right to seek divorce. Still, he reminded his colleagues, "What we have promised our natives, is not to brutally substitute our laws to their ancient institutions, we are also not opposed to their free development because of concern with rigid conformity to outdated customs. . . . But we must

not put more at risk the current structure of the native family."<sup>57</sup> In much of the colonial record and legislation, African wives and young mothers are the "unfortunate victims" of "native customs" for whom the French could do little, even through legal reforms. By relegating women to discussion of marriage and the family, French authorities denied the impact of women and gender in shaping their policies and West African society in general.

In the 1930s and 1940s, two unusual French women, Denise Moran Savineau and Sister Marie-André du Sacré-Cœur, published studies on West African women, offering perspectives outside those expressed by French men with their vested interest in maintaining white European colonial power in Africa and male dominance in French African colonies. Savineau, who had worked several years in Chad before an assignment as an educational consultant to the French colonial administration in Dakar, was appointed by Governor General de Coppet to lead an inquiry into African women's roles in the family, education, and work. She traveled for seven months in 1937 and 1938, visiting the French Soudan (Mali), Niger, Dahomey, and the Côte d'Ivoire, and produced reports on each colony as well as a comprehensive general summary.<sup>58</sup> She examined women outside of the home, as well as on farms, in courtrooms, and in prisons, considering them as part of the cultural and social "evolution" in France's West African colonies.

Savineau's final report began by dismissing the Europeans' search for "authentic native custom." "There is no 'true' custom," she wrote, "but, witnessing shifting traditions, a collection of practices constantly in the process of becoming," with French colonization an important part of this process of change and discovery.<sup>59</sup> She coupled her discussion of local practices with that of reform of colonial courts, outlining general aspects of marriage and family life, followed by an overview of the prison system. Bridewealth payments, forced marriage, polygamy, and childbirth were part of the civil justice system, while the operation of prisons was part of the criminal justice system. While Savineau presented many local practices in a negative light, she was ambivalent about the power of French policy to change them. On men taking more than one wife, she wrote, "It will not be a question of fighting against polygamy, neither by force nor by persuasion. . . . But if fairly recent practices of polygamy seem to prevail over monogamy, here or there, almost everywhere, the demands of fathers for bridewealth and those of women who want to free themselves of it, will end by bringing about monogamy."<sup>60</sup>

Though Savineau believed that African culture, with its "vast masculine authority," would modify itself, as it always had, she thought the colonial ad-

ministration played an important role in the outcome. She concluded, "All native society, evolving on its own, tends to reinforce the power of men over women and fathers over children. These dominators wait for us to help them maintain or bolster their supremacy. But we are not inclined to follow them blindly, we want to preserve individual liberty, sometimes increasing it. The oppressed know it. . . . They run the risk of overstatement, of provoking a kind of anarchy. We have pointed out that it is in our interest to clarify our doctrine, in order to avoid a double failure."<sup>61</sup> Savineau's vision was far-reaching: "These new households that we are going to form, households of leaders, but also of students, we must prepare them for a new family life and society. . . . We are raising individuals, pushing them toward a profession, we are not preparing them to be husbands and wives." As an educational advisor, she advocated the use of schools to advance French policies, and she perhaps identified more with educated elites and with wives of functionaries in a well-maintained home with a salon, dining room, and maids. "And why not tell them that to take good care of your husband is a way of keeping him?" she asked, suggesting that good housewives could enjoy a monogamous relationship. Meanwhile, she described the masses of African women as an "obstacle to evolution," portraying them as traditional and religious.<sup>62</sup> She saw most African women as victims in need of guidance, but she considered them responsible for changing their own lives.

Also in 1939, Sister Marie-André du Sacré-Cœur, born Jeanne Dorge, published her book *La Femme noire en Afrique Occidentale* (The Black Woman in West Africa). Sister Marie-André had completed law and doctoral degrees before becoming a nun in Algeria in 1927 at age twenty-eight. Her subsequent work as a nurse in mission clinics in North and then West Africa exposed her to the lives of African women and encouraged her to become an advocate for women's rights. She applied her knowledge of legal institutions to examine the role of customary law in improving women's lives. She later served in international organizations and in 1959 addressed the UN Commission on the Status of Women. She always maintained the link between her legal, medical, and advocacy backgrounds and a relationship with the French colonial administration.<sup>63</sup>

Sister Marie-André believed that African women were being ignored even as colonialists wrote studies and reports on African culture and society. She based *La Femme noire en Afrique Occidentale* on several ethnic groups with whom she had extensive experience in French Sudan (Mali), Guinée, Côte d'Ivoire, and Gold Coast (Ghana), and she argued that there were certain similarities in their family organizations and marriage practices. Unlike Savineau,

who was interested in highlighting change, Sister Marie-André emphasized continuity, noting that these communities distant from the coast had not experienced European influence until the late nineteenth century and that the women in particular had lived much as had their "very distant ancestors."<sup>64</sup> A supporter of French colonialism in Africa, she praised policies on public health and education, though she admitted that masses of African women did not benefit from them. She focused on the plight of the educated elite woman subject to customary law and criticized the "respect for custom" the French applied to avoid conflict with African local practices and religious beliefs.<sup>65</sup> Her deep disapproval of the "fearfulness" of the colonial administrator faced with familial questions stemmed from her belief that the French colonial administration was responsible for changing existing practices. "When civil law recognizes all 'matrimonial freedoms,'" she wrote, "European domination will really be for them [women], a liberation."<sup>66</sup>

Sister Marie-André's confidence in the potential of colonial legal reform and education was manifest in her work with the United Nations after most African nations became independent in the 1960s. In a 1962 book, *The House Stands Firm: Family Life in Africa*, she wrote of "women of the new Africa," by whom she tended to mean educated Christian activists. Like the increasing numbers of European women participating in international organizations after the interwar period, Sister Marie-André expected women, including African women, to serve in a variety of positions outside the home and, by the 1960s, to have "new responsibilities—social, civic, and political." After independence from European rule in much of Africa in the 1960s, African women continued to fight to reform marriage practices such as minimum age, consent, and bride-wealth payments, which called into question whether French and other colonialists were ever truly interested in, or indeed had the power to affect, social change and thereby "liberate" women.<sup>67</sup>

It is worth considering the work of Savineau and Sister Marie-André within the longer trajectory of Western feminist writing because American and European feminists have examined gender relationships in their own and in other countries through the prism of Western society, politics, and family.<sup>68</sup> Though feminists in the United States, Great Britain, and France, for example, have generated multiple theoretical approaches to wifeness and motherhood, all three bodies of literature have encouraged some form of "sisterhood" that ignored race, class, culture, and sexuality. In the United States, black, Latina, Asian, Native American, and poor white women had critiqued the dominant middle-class, white, heterosexual narrative in the literature, especially by the twentieth cen-



tury.<sup>69</sup> Nineteenth- and twentieth-century British feminists tended to focus on class, but their work did not extend to the experiences of African, West Indian, and Asian women living in the British colonial empire and in Great Britain itself.<sup>70</sup> The French feminist movement, contrary to both the North American and British movements, actively evoked the image of motherhood and sexual difference between women and men in the struggle for rights, beginning in the early twentieth century and continuing in the postwar welfare state, focused as it was on social programs. When French feminists addressed the situation of Arab, African, Asian, and West Indian women in the French empire, they too were likely to evoke solidarity that glossed over racism and power, engaging in what several authors have termed “imperial feminism” or “feminist imperialism.”<sup>71</sup> Even with their attention to African culture and their sharp critiques of French colonial policy, Savineau and Sister Marie-André made assumptions about African society based on their Western experiences. Much like the French colonialists who hoped to manipulate cultural change in Africa to suit their own vision of empire, both women hoped that certain colonial policies would, one day, bring their vision of modern womanhood to Africa.

Legal reforms on marriage, health, and education never had the heart or the francs behind them to work. French colonialists did not want to spur dramatic change; rather, they were interested in African marriage practices and family life in order to monitor and control them through courts and customary law. Already by the 1910s, and still in the 1930s, various marriage practices in Kétu did not conform to French assumptions; some wives lived apart from husbands and a number of women gained influence in their households with old age. As Savineau had reported, African women and men themselves modified their customs with or without French intervention. This social change has been recorded and remembered differently by those with African and those with European perspectives.

### When Marriage Became “Spoiled” in Kétu

The stories people told me about marriage practices in Kétu in the past corroborated information in written sources, while adding a new layer of emotional complexity. Elderly Kétu residents today are ambivalent about the past, disparaging it as a time of ignorance or *ojú dúdú* (eyes closed black), yet nostalgic for the way children used to “obey their parents.” Marriage has become “spoiled” since the coming of “civilization” or *òlájú* (the opening of the eyes), with “civilization” generally dated from the final decades of colonial rule in the

1940s and 1950s, not to the beginning of French administration at the turn of the twentieth century. As in the written accounts of marriage in the early twentieth century, contradictions are embedded in people's stories. "In the time of my older sister," one Catholic woman explained to me, "the family of the boy would go to the family of the girl and ask for her in marriage. It is not like today where the boy goes and sits in the girl's house, chats with her, and she does whatever she wants with him."<sup>72</sup>

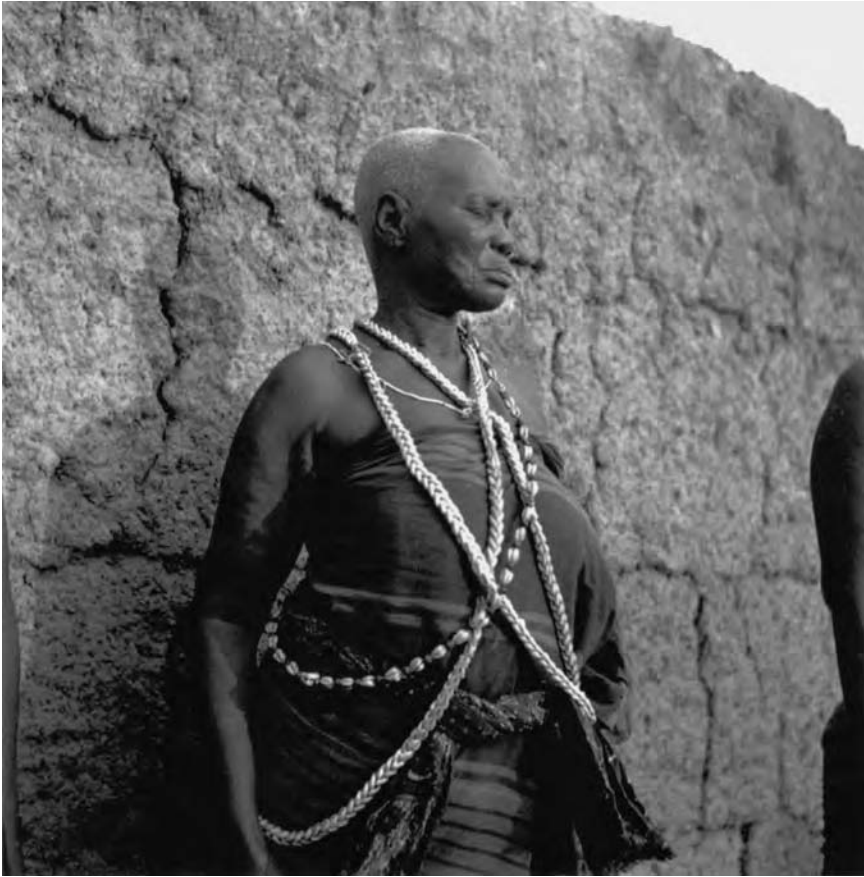
Many elderly people distinguish between the way their older siblings or parents married and the way they met their own spouses. Before the 1930s, a recurrent image was of an elder male approaching a neighbor to say, "I would like someone to draw water for my child," a reference to a wife (especially a junior wife), charged with hauling water and with other domestic duties. In contrast, those who married in the 1940s and 1950s talked of meeting their spouses at the night market and courting without any involvement of family members. They spoke to me of *owó ifẹ* (love money) or *owó orí* (head money) to celebrate their engagements. Changes in the form of "love money" occurred during the pivotal period when the French were trying to devise their customary law books. In the 1930s, "love money" increased substantially, from about 100 to 1,000 francs, some claim, with a new type of "secret" gift, called *ètepélòdrù* (tiptoe in the night gift). Secret gift giving may always have been part of the marriage negotiation process, but often the "tiptoe in the night gift" was imported alcoholic beverages, which people ordinarily shared and consumed publicly. The presence of imported drinks indicated socioeconomic change; since Kétu did not have easy access to overseas imports, liquor was either carried over the Nigerian border illegally or obtained from the coast via Abomey.<sup>73</sup>

By the late 1930s and 1940s, an increase in the Kétu population brought more stability and more opportunity to marry. Competition for spouses may have spurred the introduction of new and expensive or rare gifts and clandestine gift exchanges. Repeatedly, elderly women and men in Kétu spoke of the difficulty in earning money in the past through selling produce or small-scale trading. Thus, elder men with resources controlled the marriage process, though in the decades that followed, some young men pooled their own resources to pay bridewealth themselves. The potentially higher stakes in marriage may have encouraged young women and men to assert their desires, though the French Antislavery Society survey, the Adekambi-Adogbonu case, and the customary law books all suggest that some couples had already done so. One remarkable woman said in an interview that she had chosen her own husband when she married in the late 1910s and that her daughter did the same in

the 1930s.<sup>74</sup> But these two women were not the norm. Even in the 1930s, one woman who refused two men her parents suggested was forced to choose one of the two.<sup>75</sup>

The prevalence of marriages between women and men of different religious faiths—indigenous, Muslim, or Christian—also challenged the image of a past when “children obeyed parents.” People in Kétu today who relate across religious faiths as friends and neighbors still bristle at the suggestion that people of different religious faiths married in the past when marriages were expected to occur only with the approval of parents and other elders. Yet marriages between Muslim men and women who practiced indigenous religion are part of the lore and oral history of the Muslim community in Kétu, including the popular story of the Muslim Hausa man, “Sofu,” who married multiple Kétu women, who in turn gave birth, literally, to the Kétu Muslim community.<sup>76</sup> Sofu’s story assumes that the children were Muslim and may even imply that the wives converted. Muslim law requires that a woman who does not practice a “religion of the book,” meaning Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, become a Muslim before marriage, but some wives and mothers neither moved into their husband’s household nor converted.

Sitting in the shadow of the Catholic mission in Kétu, one elderly woman spoke to me of an aunt who married a Muslim man in the 1920s or 1930s and never converted; she stayed in her natal compound and raised her Muslim children there.<sup>77</sup> Another Catholic woman who married a Muslim man in the 1920s and went to stay in the Muslim quarter despite her family’s fierce disapproval continued to attend the Catholic church, though all of her children were raised as Muslim.<sup>78</sup> The religious identity of the child of such marriages was not always clear-cut. A Muslim woman whose mother was a Catholic spoke of her Muslim grandmother who had married a Muslim man but later had children with a Catholic man. Each of the woman’s siblings took up different religious practices.<sup>79</sup> In the 1940s or 1950s, the French photographer Pierre Verger took a picture of a Kétu woman named Koyato, a powerful *iyáloriṣà* (mother-in-deity) of the local *òriṣà* Buku. As “Ìyá Buku,” Koyato married a Muslim man, had two sons, and continued as a leading figure in indigenous religion. She converted late in life, taking the name Awaou and offering many sacrifices to her *òriṣà* so that the *òriṣà* would release her and allow her a proper Muslim burial.<sup>80</sup> Thus Koyato’s story and her image captures not only the symbolism of “public motherhood” but also the complex history of marriage and religious identity in Kétu.



Described by photographer Pierre Verger simply by the term “orishas” (deities), several people in Kétu identified this woman as Koyato, the former Ìyá Buku of Kétu. Her *òriṣà* or deity may have been similar to Nana Buku, who is said to control birth and death. As Ìyá Buku, Koyato embodies the symbolic power associated with “public mothers.” Foto Pierre Verger © Fundação Pierre Verger.

Elders, with an air of resignation, told me dramatically how people handled disobedient youth who married outside the family’s religion: “If you don’t let them marry, they will throw themselves into a well.” But there were consequences. Marriage into Islam or Christianity meant, in principle, that a child could no longer participate in the *ifá* (divination) or *òriṣà* (deity) worship, which was central to family ceremonies and even to the identity of families of diviners or *òriṣà* priests. Inability to take part in rituals and practices chal-

lenged the authority of elders and threatened the well-being of relatives and their relationship with ancestors. Difficult to accept as they were, such marriages and conversions nevertheless occurred, with women and men relating across the religious boundaries in everyday life. One man said that his wife's family, known for their *babaláwo* (father owns secrets) or *ifá* diviners, allowed her to convert after she married him. The man's own father, known for drumming in religious ceremonies, had been introduced to Islam by a Muslim friend and business partner. On his conversion, he had to appease family members and friends with gifts.<sup>81</sup>

Women often are placed at the center of so-called "syncretic" or mixed religious practices in Africa, with wives and mothers still connected to indigenous religious practices or marginalized by the general predominance of male leadership in both Islam and Christianity. John Peel posits, in his study of Christian conversion among the Yoruba, that women in the nineteenth century were reluctant to convert to Christianity out of concern for their own fertility, which they protected through worship of *òrìṣà* (deities) and consultation of *ifá* divination.<sup>82</sup> But, in the different setting of Lagos, Nigeria, so Kristin Mann's study of urban elite Christian couples reports, elite Christian women in particular were drawn to the monogamy of Christianity, a doctrine their educated Christian husbands disregarded when convenient.<sup>83</sup> Other factors, such as threats to family and health, challenged the faith of both Muslim and Christian converts. In 1908, Father Vallée wrote of a Catholic convert who, upon the death of his young child, pledged repentance for resorting to *ifá* (divination) when the child became ill. One Muslim woman explained to me how her father's repeated experience with infant deaths, *àbíkú* (children born to die), led him to seek out indigenous medicine and religious intervention, until he came to trust fully in the power of Muslim prayer.<sup>84</sup> Women and men of various religious backgrounds looked to religion to aid them in times of profound distress, allowing them to move between, and occasionally to marry across, religions. Ignored or misrepresented simply as lax religious practices by French officials and missionaries, cultural "diffusion," as the term is used by Nigerian sociologist N. A. Fadipe, was fitting for Yoruba communities, even in a smaller town like Kétu.

While Monseigneur Le Roy blamed social disorder on the repression of women, he would hardly have approved of the increasing "freedom" of women in the 1940s and 1950s that marked, for some, the era of "spoiled" marriages. Some women became engaged only after they were pregnant, forgoing bride-wealth gifts and money. Men talked of marrying second or third wives for

whom they paid no bridewealth because the women were pregnant or had been married previously. Other women and their families demanded more exorbitant amounts for bridewealth, and some women abandoned their fiancés for other men. These young wives did not gain newfound freedom or power suddenly as marriage practices began to challenge the model of power enjoyed by the most elder members in families; even women who chose their own spouses or stayed in their parents' compound continued to be subject to hierarchies based on age and rank that constricted their own choices and duties. Nor did shifts in the marriage practices emerge out of thin air. Rather, decades earlier, in the time of “eyes closed black,” local processes that included the introduction of European goods and Christianity made change possible. Still, though the relationship between youth and elders on marriage choices had begun to change, husbands and fathers continued to exercise authority over wives, buttressed by half-hearted French legal reforms that were not designed to transform social norms even when they appeared to serve the interests of women.

The language of health and population growth, resembling that current at the time in France, was altered to mesh with French views of West Africa during a time when French policymakers prescribed the colonial program of “development” in the colonies that began in the 1920s. Such policies implicitly required a robust population of workers, and marriage and motherhood was thus integral to the policies. In France, women were encouraged to rescue the nation from the crisis of depopulation and degeneration by having babies, specifically French babies. The low birth rate, disease, and moral decay were viewed as symptoms of overall social and biological decline, and after the war, immigration, even of other Europeans, threatened to lower the “quality” of children born in France.<sup>85</sup> New laws regulated the work day and maternity leave. Medals were awarded to mothers of large families to encourage a boost in population rates. With European immigration and the presence of mixed-race children in African colonies, French lawmakers pondered laws about French citizenship, about whiteness, and about whether French “blood” was passed by mother to child.<sup>86</sup> In West Africa after World War I, there was newfound interest in birthing hospitals and child care, despite little funding. The minister of colonies, in Paris, expressed concern about the effect of “hygiene” and “moral decay” on the “development of the native races.” Historian Alice Conklin writes that the interest in “regeneration of the races” in Africa was linked directly to rational development policies and forced labor practices in the colonies.<sup>87</sup> To “save” Africans from further “degeneration” meant emphasizing African women’s roles as mothers who bore children—not as elderly women who ruled.

After World War II, French colonialists, while never fully abandoning their concern about women's fertility as wives and mothers, began emphasizing the roles of men in new ways, especially those called *évolués* (evolved men), that is, educated elites, by extending voting rights and changing labor laws. By the 1950s, France, like other major colonizing European nations, was trying to shed responsibility for its colonies, but without entirely losing influence over them. Men from all walks of life in Kétu—traders, husbands, Muslims, youth, fathers, and traditional elites—while distant from the centers of French colonial politics and power, at the same time were initiating their own forms of social and cultural change, ultimately redefining what it meant to be men.

## “The Opening of the Eyes”

### *The Politics of Manhood on the Eve of Independence*

A Muslim man named Alhaji Moussa Mama, commonly known as Moussa Laurent, is often credited with ushering in the period of *òlájú* (the opening of the eyes) in Kétu. Working with a couple of Muslim friends, Alhaji Moussa Laurent began to travel to Lagos, Nigeria, in the 1940s to buy gunpowder and later bicycle parts to sell in Dahomey. Others who approached Alhaji Moussa Laurent and his friends to hear about their newfound success were soon trading or working as apprentices and transporters.<sup>1</sup> With access to such new goods and revenue, a young man could purchase a gift for his girlfriend and save money for marriage ceremonies rather than have to depend on the assistance of older male relatives and patrons to pay these expenses. Young men, as a consequence, could gain more control over how they became husbands and fathers.

But French colonial authorities considered the cross-border trade that circumvented markets in Dahomey to be smuggling, especially since these traders rarely declared their goods at customs checkpoints. To evade customs officers and their fees, transporters hired by the traders took circuitous routes at unusual hours, a practice that became known as *fàyàwò* (literally “pulling chest



to ground”; translated here as cross-border trade). People today remember and talk about these new opportunities to make money, about diverse modes of transportation, and about changes in marriage practices as evidence of the coming of *òlájú*, a term often translated as “civilization.”

That “civilization” or even modernity came to Kétu via men who carried bits and pieces of it on their backs contrasts with the narrative of a French “civilizing” mission under the guise of French imperialism. By the post–World War II period, when cross-border trade was increasing in Kétu, the French colonial administration had instituted major political reforms that ostensibly opened the door to modern representative politics across its African colonies. Initially, however, the idea behind the political reform was not to decolonize but to shift responsibilities onto the colonies and African representatives. Unlike the interwar period, when French colonial policy sought to deepen control over African communities through legal reforms aimed at the household and women, as colonialism began to wane, the French turned to politics and to the men to whom they expected to hand over control. Convinced that newly formed elected councils would reduce the remaining influence of any local kings or ministers, including the king of Kétu, who had retained recognition in the colony, the French played closer attention to the political climate among *évolués*, or “evolved Africans,” often men who were educated or had been exposed to French culture.

Whereas French policymakers had thought of West African women and French women in similar ways, as wives and childbearing mothers responsible for boosting the population, African husbands and fathers were not viewed in quite the same way as their French counterparts. In postwar France, the men at the center of political debates had shifted away from an idealized vision of fathers of large families, the model patriarch, to French families and social welfare. Some African men were trying to assert their identities as workers, but French laws in the changing French empire required that African men be defined first as fathers of families in order to collect worker’s benefits. Such debates, taking place among labor unions, African politicians, and French policymakers, did not necessarily resonate with men in rural areas who were involved in cross-border trade or working as apprentices and transporters in order to become husbands and fathers. Yet elder and younger men in Kétu did participate in the broader political reforms sweeping France’s West African colonies in the postwar era, blurring the distinctions the French wanted to make between the “evolved” Africans who would lead and the “masses” who would follow. Thus, the vectors for “the opening of the eyes” in Kétu were multiple; Kétu

traders, politicians, kings, and young men were redefining their relationships with women, wives, and mothers, while directly and indirectly engaging with a waning French colonial empire.

### **Self-Made Men: Cross-Border Trade and the Redefinition of Marriage, Family, and Community**

In his study of the Yoruba Ijeṣa region of Nigeria, John Peel defines *òlájú* as an indigenous concept of "development," considering "the opening of the eyes" as opening land for cultivation, opening minds through (mostly Christian) education, and opening outlooks through personal mobility/trade and political participation.<sup>2</sup> Kétu residents themselves associate *òlájú* with similar external markers, such as long-distance trade and Islam, emphasizing the personal experience of exposure to change and innovation. Whether "civilization" or "development," broad examples of social change in Kétu itself were defined in local terms of new trading networks, in changing marriage practices, and in the appearance of new mosques and Arabic-language learning.

But evidence of long-distance Kétu trading appears in mid-nineteenth-century sources from Christian missionaries based in Abẹkuta (now Nigeria) who regularly met and received messages from Kétu traders. Though the Kétu traders were not named or described in any detail, they did travel frequently between the towns and to the coast. By the 1890s, French colonial documents described Kétu traders as Muslims and/or foreigners; a French official complained in 1894 that "foreign" Muslim traders or *aloufa* (scholars), primarily from Lagos, constantly crisscrossed the border and refused to declare their "nationality."<sup>3</sup> The problem was "contraband" from Nigeria, which included imported fabrics and ammunition, and Muslim merchants threatening to entice local products away from the port of Porto-Novo in Dahomey to the Nigerian port of Lagos. At the turn of the twentieth century, at the onset of colonial rule, the French were well aware of long-standing trading patterns that spanned the arbitrary boundaries between French-controlled Dahomey and British-controlled Nigeria.<sup>4</sup>

As early as 1901, the governor of Dahomey mentioned that Yoruba populations (Nago in French documents) on both sides of the border were participating in illegal cross-border trade. Muslims "without a nation" from the Lagos region were infiltrating communities in Dahomey to establish links to interior markets to the north. The governor warned that Muslim Nigerians readily gained converts and allies among the Yoruba populations. Cross-border trad-

ing practices, described decades later in Kétu, had already surfaced to the south at the turn of the century:

One must note the connection between the frequent incidents of fraud in the region and the activities of Muslim Nago who constantly cross the British border between Badagry and Kétu. Muslims know that they must hide their goods as they reach the border so they are not alone in this activity. Certainly by the Muslims' initiative British imported fabric is purchased at a low price at the moment of liquidation. *Fetishist Nago residing in the country transport the items.* In Sakété in particular, every house becomes a warehouse for contraband. Recently established *customs agents reap benefits from this illicit activity* but this does not happen without angering the inhabitants who are incited by Muslims to arm themselves and fight arrest by Customs agents. They even attack the customs posts at night with the support of groups of individuals who make up the floating population on the frontier.<sup>5</sup> (Emphasis added)

From the description, the key perpetrators in this earlier period of cross-border trade appear to be outsiders, but Kétu residents too engaged in regional trade. In a rare case from 1916, French authorities arrested an array of Kétu traders and Muslims from Lagos and charged them with smuggling ivory from Dahomey to Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> Still, the distance and cost of transport of bulky agricultural products, such as corn and cocoyams, were likely to discourage Kétu traders from venturing into Nigerian territory with such trade items. Instead, Kétu women engaged in a local regional trade to the south in the Oho region, Sakété, and Pobé, selling lightweight agricultural products such as *gari* (manioc flour), calabashes (dried, decorated gourds), and indigo dye.<sup>7</sup> Kétu men had not set up the extensive networks of transporters and customs contacts that the governor of Dahomey remarked upon in towns further south.

In 1915, after hunters in Kétu threatened to overthrow the senior royal wife and French colonial agent Alaba Ida, soldiers sent to the region seized contraband and guns found at a local customs office that had only been created the year before. Kétu residents told Nigerian historian A. I. Asiwaju in the 1960s that the office was later closed because of abuses by the customs agents. It is unclear if these "abuses" involved the bribery or confrontation between agents and the population as described in 1901 further south of Kétu. A 1935 colonial decree that officially closed the customs post did not mention whether funding

or popular opposition was the reason. But when I asked people myself about customs offices near Kétu before the 1940s, they denied that any existed, so strong was their belief that there had been no cross-border trade before the 1940s or 1950s. "There were no roads," several people insisted.<sup>8</sup>

Yet a Catholic Kétu woman said her husband's older brother paid for her wedding gifts in 1933 by purchasing white fabric in Abẹokuta and selling it to women to dye. Though her husband became a man of some means, his older brother did not appear to work with others in this business.<sup>9</sup> Another Catholic man said that his father traveled by foot to sell palm nuts in Nigeria (an unusual practice, considering that Kétu was too far north to produce palm oil). By purchasing palm oil products further south and selling them on the coast, he tapped into a vibrant palm oil trade.<sup>10</sup> With his profits, the man's father was able to do in the 1930s what few in Kétu could do for a decade or so: purchase a bicycle; with his new transport, he traded contraband over the border.<sup>11</sup> He even went to Lagos to obtain gifts for his *iyàwó kékeré* (junior wife).<sup>12</sup> By the 1940s and 1950s, trade patterns increasingly involved a hierarchy of traders, intermediaries, and transporters rather than individual men.

Thus a great deal of forgetting shapes the stories people tell about the coming of "civilization" in Kétu. People easily recall Alhaji Moussa Laurent and his Muslim friends as the leading figures in this cross-border trade, while often overlooking other men and women who were not Muslim but who also participated. Only leading figures in the Kétu trade network—not all of them Muslims—knew the pertinent contacts in Nigeria. A leading figure of *fàyàwó* (pulling chest to ground; cross-border trade) was a Catholic man named Sylvain, and some of the trade companions of Chitou, Alhaji Moussa Laurent's eldest son, were Catholic.<sup>13</sup> "Everyone did *fàyàwó*," one Catholic man remarked to me. "Since it was a Muslim that began it, people say that Muslims do it."<sup>14</sup> Though Alhaji Moussa Laurent came from a well-established Muslim family, as a young boy he had insisted on attending the Catholic mission school, hence his more common name, Moussa Laurent. Before he became involved in cross-border trade, he worked as a weaver, and, with his education and growing stature in the town, he served as an impromptu translator when French officials arrived.<sup>15</sup> His son Chitou and others expanded the enterprise, taking goods to various interior markets in central and western Dahomey. Others began moving goods across the border on bicycles.

Forgotten traders who preceded the celebrated pioneers of *fàyàwó* (pulling chest to ground; cross-border trade) and those who followed the example

of Alhaji Moussa Laurent shared a key characteristic: they traded their goods to help with major life expenses, like marriage. Cross-border trade also gave them access to earnings of their own, in contrast with laboring on their fathers' farms or on farms of other male patrons. With this new independent source of income, these young men accumulated resources to pay *owó ifé* (bridewealth, literally "love money") themselves. The man who exclaimed that everyone, not just Muslims, did *fàyàwó* told me he had earned 2,500 francs working as a transporter for Alhaji Moussa Laurent in 1958 and had given the money to the family of his fiancée.<sup>16</sup> Some who married in the 1940s and 1950s and engaged in cross-border trade did not want to farm, and others believed they could earn money faster. Sometimes men worked in cross-border trade for a few years or used it, over the long term, to supplement their work as farmers.<sup>17</sup>

Women, too, were caught up in the new trading networks, building on existing markets for produce and prepared foods, such as the alum and potash used in dyeing and soap making, acquired from markets in Meko, Nigeria. When these women encountered customs agents, they covered the goods on their heads and pretended to be returning from work in the fields. A Muslim woman named Sekinatou (the first Kétu woman to complete the pilgrimage to Mecca) is remembered as one of the first to engage in this new form of trade. Some Muslim and Kétu women began to sell fabric known as *bogi*, obtained from Nigeria.<sup>18</sup> By the 1960s, customers were buying manufactured bowls, pots, and serving trays from Lagos as wedding gifts. Women supplemented items bought in Nigeria with similar items purchased in the coastal cities of Porto-Novo and Cotonou in Dahomey, so that if customs agents caught them illegally moving Nigerian goods across the border, the women could still profit by selling the products from Dahomey.<sup>19</sup> They took a career path different from that of men, who might begin, as young unmarried men, as transporters to avoid labor as a farmer; young women saved or skimmed money from their work as apprentices to their mothers or other female patrons to save up enough to begin commerce of their own after their marriage.<sup>20</sup> Cross-border trade did not necessarily replace farming, but it altered young men's and women's perspectives about livelihoods, opportunities, and responsibilities to parents and guardians; the promise of goods and revenue from *fàyàwó* (pulling chest to ground; cross-border trade) was changing the expectations of young women and young men.

A small number of court cases from 1963 and 1964 indicate the larger sums of money and gifts that changed hands when women and men became for-

mally engaged in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Initial gifts to the family of a bride could total more than ten thousand francs, with contributions to ceremonies, food, drink, and other miscellaneous expenses perhaps doubling or tripling that amount.<sup>21</sup> Testimony in the court cases also recount stories of wives who refused to live with their husbands or became pregnant by other men, thus brazenly defying custom and their own families, future spouses, and in-laws. One man requested the return of his *owó ifé* (love money; bridewealth) and other gifts after his wife had three children with another man.<sup>22</sup> Another man's mother brought a complaint against the family of a wife who refused to move into her husband's compound, with the woman's family responding that the husband had not presented money and gifts for the marriage in a timely manner and, as the family of the bride, they had loaned money to his family for part of the marriage ceremonies.<sup>23</sup> Another woman appeared in her husband's household pregnant by another man, and, although her husband accepted her as his wife, she fled to the home of the father of her child, and her family defended her actions on the grounds that her husband had offended her and refused to apologize.<sup>24</sup> Though men could earn their own money through cross-border trade to pay for wedding expenses—a husband in one of the cases was a trader who traveled to Lagos—extended families were still heavily involved in marriage disputes.

If new trade earnings affected marriage relationships between Kétu residents, money and travel also changed how Kétu Muslims in particular were seen as "strangers" within the town and how they related to the outside Muslim world. Muslims, as well as those who practiced indigenous religion or Catholicism, associated *òlájú* (the opening of the eyes) with Muslims and their religion, some believing that Muslims possessed worldliness and business acumen because they were "strangers." The same Catholic man who reminisced about working with Alhaji Moussa Laurent to earn money for bridewealth said, "He [Alhaji Moussa Laurent] was civilized since he had done Mecca by foot. He understood how to do commerce."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, that Alhaji Moussa Laurent was one of the first Muslims from Kétu to complete the *haji* to Mecca, then an arduous overland route, only added to the lore surrounding him.<sup>26</sup> Such reactions about Muslims built upon stereotypes, still prevalent in some academic literature, that define Muslims as the quintessential long-distance merchants, thus tying exposure to trade and travel to Muslim religious conversion. Muslims in Kétu today often talk of their own lack of familiarity with Muslim religious practices, laws, and texts in the past.<sup>27</sup> In 1914, when a Muslim visiting

from Nigeria preached reform of certain religious practices, local Muslims assured the French colonial administrator that they would continue to participate in local dances, ordinarily prohibited by Muslim faith.<sup>28</sup>

None of the stories people tell to explain how Islam arrived in Kétu—of Sofo, the famed progenitor of the Muslim community, or of the Kanike, who reputedly instructed existing Muslims in Kétu on Islam—suggest that the first migrants brought Arabic learning with them. During the first decades of the twentieth century, however, Kétu Muslims had increasing contact with learned Muslims in Nigeria, either through relatives or visiting Muslim clerics. Moussa Olokoto, a Muslim man from Kétu who had resettled in Abẹokuta, is said to have returned to Kétu sometime in the 1920s to serve as imam, religious leader of the Muslim community.<sup>29</sup> After the 1940s, Muslim visitors were invited to speak, particularly during the holy fast of Ramadan, which contributed to the idea that a new period of “reform” of Muslim religious practices had begun in Kétu.<sup>30</sup> New mosques were being built and more clerics were setting up qur’anic schools where young children learned to memorize the Qur’an. Until about the 1960s, two qur’anic schools dominated in Kétu; several men set up other, short-lived schools, usually headed by Kétu Muslims rather than outsiders, that used the method that simplified Arabic pronunciation and spelling rather than the more standard Arabic.<sup>31</sup> Alhaji Nassirou Raji, who served as imam in the 1990s, remembered learning actual Arabic language from a visiting Nigerian cleric sometime during the reign of Alákétu Adewori, which lasted from 1937 to 1963. In the 1950s, a Nigerian cleric took a group of students from Kétu to Lagos to learn Arabic.<sup>32</sup>

Access to more Islamic schooling and knowledge brought more opportunities to women. The Ìyá Sunna (Mother of Muslim Customs) may have been recognized from the 1920s; she is the one who is primarily responsible for preparing deceased women for burial. In the past, the Ìyá Sunna may have repeated memorized verses; in more recent decades, women, like men, study the Qur’an and learn Arabic.<sup>33</sup> The first woman to complete the holy pilgrimage to Mecca was known to have participated in cross-border trade, demonstrating how access to goods and revenue allowed some Muslims to deepen ties to their religious practices. Muslim women in Kétu today, in groups known as *asalatu* (from Arabic *salat*, meaning “prayer”), learn Arabic verses from the Qur’an. People in Kétu recognize women’s involvement in cross-border trade, their increasing role in Muslim institutions and education, and their participation in the pilgrimage to Mecca as part of the coming of “civilization.”

In other Yoruba towns, particularly in Nigeria, elite status came with knowledge of English and work within the British administration. In Kétu, residents identify the coming of "civilization" during the colonial period with Muslims, seen as the more worldly and cosmopolitan members of the community.<sup>34</sup> The exposure to "civilization" that came through contact with Nigeria had a special significance for Kétu Muslims seeking religious knowledge from other Yoruba who shared their language and culture. But Muslims in Kétu did not form a separate or exclusive community; residents worked, married, and socialized across religious boundaries. What it meant to be Muslim changed in Kétu as the town as a whole was transformed through new relationships, ideas, and experiences.

Today, when one hears talk of the coming of "civilization" to Kétu, one might gather that the French had little to do with it. French officials were wary of the transnational nature of cross-border trade and of the involvement of Muslims on both sides of the border. *Òlájú* (the opening of the eyes) occurred through the initiative and innovation of men like Alhaji Moussa Laurent, who helped create a complex network of traders, transporters, and apprentices. Contrary to the image common in both scholarly and popular accounts of long-distance trade as dominated by Muslims and men, Kétu men and women of varied backgrounds had been involved in such activity since before the colonial period. By participating in cross-border trade after the 1940s, men in Kétu were beginning to redefine how they became husbands and fathers, altering relationships with their own parents and wives.

### **The Decline of the French Father and the Rise of the African Worker in the Postwar French Empire**

In France itself the image of the powerful *père de famille* (father of a family) was in decline after the aggressively masculine and pronatalist rhetoric of the fascist Vichy regime of World War II. Postwar policies in France that began to focus on the family and labor were translated in turn into colonial policies in West Africa centering on working men and their families. Anxieties over depopulation and "degeneration" in France and France's African colonies had implicated not only women, wives, and mothers, but men and fathers as well. Kristen Childers's study of the changing meanings of fatherhood in interwar France argues that the iconic image of the *père de famille* inspired political debates on citizenship, masculinity, and the family. Like women and mothers, fa-



thers were expected to lead France out of decline by producing and being responsible for children. Politicians and activists debated a range of policies to support fathers, including a forty-hour workweek and a family vote that would give a father one vote for himself, one for his wife, and one for his children. To recognize the greater responsibilities of men of large families not only extolled fatherhood but also permitted a pointed critique of men who were single or childless. Not unlike women and mothers who were at once honored and cajoled by policies that provided subsidies and medals for having children and ostracized for having none or not enough, men and fathers were looked upon as a cause of, and a solution to, France's social woes of the 1920s and 1930s. The image of the father with three or more children and a wife at home was an ideal; there was great disdain for alternative male figures, such as the *célibataire* (single, childless man), the alcoholic and negligent father, and men who "morally endangered" children.<sup>35</sup>

By the 1930s, the emphasis in France was shifting to a "politics of the family," with increasing concern for the rights of children and families, addressed partly by legislation establishing family allowances for working men, beginning in 1932. Susan Pedersen mentions, in her comparative study of the origins of the welfare state in France and Britain, that family allowances, seemingly a boon to fathers, especially those who received a larger bonus for having more than three children, at first were a means for large industrial employers to control workers.<sup>36</sup> A longer history of family associations dating to the late nineteenth century, the Family Code of 1939, and the family politics of the fascist Vichy regime contributed to the shift in focus to the family itself and the state's role in the welfare of society in general. Family allowances came to incorporate the father into the family, if not into society, rather than setting him apart as patriarch. France's national family policy, especially the development of state control over family allowances, redistributed the cost of raising children across the entire French population.<sup>37</sup> With postwar political reforms, including the right to vote for French women, granted in 1944, the special position of fathers was even more compromised. Childers remarks that the end of the war brought the era of the *père de famille* to an end.

During the early postwar years, however, West Africans began pushing for their rights both as workers and as fathers of families in the new French Union of 1946. The devastating losses of the war had led France to reconsider its relationship with its colonies and to propose a new arrangement that offered political reform in the form of voting and representation within the framework of French empire.<sup>38</sup> The constitution adopted in 1946 was more conservative than

initially proposed; it granted voting rights only to groups of Africans who met certain criteria. The limits within the new constitution prompted African nationalist leaders in the French Assembly to look to their own trade union backgrounds to push for social reform for workers. The practice of forced labor, unpaid and compulsory labor in France's African colonies, was officially declared illegal in 1946. There was an attempt to pass a worker code with separate sections for European and African workers, but the measure failed as strikes organized by African workers effectively challenged the idea of separate codes and launched a decade-long debate on a unified worker code in the French parliament. French officials were most opposed to including family allowances in the new code, refusing to apply the image of worker and family to Africans in the terms that had been applied in France.<sup>39</sup>

The language of "family" used by French officials was striking in contrast to the language of universalism and citizenship used by African activists and politicians themselves. In a council meeting on the unified worker code, Senegalese deputy Lamine Guèye asserted that "the Frenchman of Brest or of Lille will not be considered more French than the Frenchman of Africa." In similar language, a trade union paper from the French Soudan (Mali) drew broad similarities between the Frenchman born on the banks of the Seine and the Frenchman born near the Senegal River.<sup>40</sup> There were vociferous debates over family allocations, with the French expressing doubt that they could apply family allocations to African families with multiple wives and numerous children. Leopold Senghor, African deputy and future prime minister of Senegal, asserted that many African workers were single or childless; they were men and workers, not fathers of a family. His comment is intriguing and could be interpreted in various ways. On one hand, it was the symbol and the right to a family allowance that inspired Africans to act and argue for equal status as workers and as men. If, on the other hand, most men would not immediately qualify for a family allowance as married men with children, it is unclear whether some men were thinking more broadly about how the family allowance could apply to parents, siblings, and dependents other than one's biological children.

Fred Cooper's magisterial study of labor and the decolonization policies of France and Great Britain emphasizes that by the time family allowances were implemented in 1956, French policymakers had come to see them as a means of reproducing desirable, nuclear, and monogamous European-style families, verified by marriage certificates, prenatal doctor visits, and payment of school fees.<sup>41</sup> By focusing the debate over family allowances on a certain type of family—and policing those families—French policymakers tried to mini-

mize the broader implications of social and political equality between African and French communities. But most African households could not replicate the European ideal of the nuclear family, especially one where only the husband worked and the wife stayed at home with the children. With most Africans unable to attain that European standard, the French came to compartmentalize Africans as “evolved,” as workers, as peasants, or as uneducated masses, while claiming to have incorporated its colonies into a French Union after 1946 and thereby to have recognized all Africans’ rights and privileges as citizens.

Because maintaining the boundaries between “proper” African families and other categories of Africans was important, the shifts in a place like Kétu, in terms of Muslim identity or in terms of the coming of “civilization” through cross-border trade, were problematic. For the French, Africans either went to school, worked, and developed a “modern” lifestyle or were part of rural communities that transformed at a pace amenable to indigenous beliefs and local social organization. The way educated elites, traditional leaders, farmers, and young people were participating together in a changing and already modern society was lost on a French colonial administration struggling to maintain control over African territories that, as late as the early 1950s, the French did not imagine they would lose.

### **Modern Men: Politicians, Kings, and Youth**

In his 1954 book *Réactions Dahoméennes* (Dahomean Reactions), René Grivot, a former administrator in Dahomey, outlined Dahomean responses to “modern life.” For him, all the trappings of modernity came from the French, the “tutoring power,” whether it was education, economic opportunity, or judicial reform.<sup>42</sup> Africans, Grivot said, simply accepted, rejected, or misunderstood French policies, without any power to redefine social and economic changes in local terms. He contrasted the educated elite with a general population still mired in indigenous beliefs. Elites were inevitably male, and though the term “masses” was not gendered, it conjures up crowds of men, perhaps dangerous men. So important was the distinction between the *évolués* (evolved ones/men) and the masses that Grivot believed the elites formed “a weak minority that the masses are still a long way from following,” which threatened the stability of the country.<sup>43</sup>

Grivot saw a crisis within the indigenous leadership, particularly among kings, referred to as “chiefs” by the French. Hereditary leaders had been ignored and replaced by favorites of the administration during some periods,

especially before World War I, with kings rehabilitated during the interwar period, only to earn the ire of the local population because of the forced production and heavy taxation of World War II. Postwar political reforms called for the election of members of the Council of Notables, diminishing the little authority and prestige kings still enjoyed through their birthright. Grivot wrote how these "chiefs" bristled at the changes, one of them remarking, "It is useless to introduce European ways, let us name kings [*chefs*] according to our own ways."<sup>44</sup> This local ruler spoke of "traditional" ways in contrast to colonial policies, but African customs, rituals, and hierarchies had always been a part of the French colonial project, even when radical change was introduced, including the broad political reforms of the postwar period.

A few months before the liberation of Paris in June 1944, General Charles de Gaulle, leader of the Free French, convened a conference in Brazzaville, Congo, in West Central Africa, to propose landmark changes in the relationship between France and its colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Echoing an opening speech that promised to consider "the incorporation of the indigenous masses into the French world," General de Gaulle proposed that the measure of true progress was a man's ability to participate in the management of his own country.<sup>45</sup> The idea that France needed to guide Africans through this process explained the contradictions embedded in the conference's recommendations. While the French empire would remain intact, with local African leaders providing counsel through "traditional institutions" and assemblies, the true power to legislate and make decisions would remain with the French governor and other administrators.<sup>46</sup> The changes were still profound; eligible Africans would eventually elect their own "traditional" leaders at home and gain limited representation in the National Assembly in France. French colonial administrators, like René Grivot, continued to presume a great chasm between the masses and elites, which led the French to encourage both democratic reform and kingship, leading to modified forms of each.

All West Africans did not suddenly become citizens of France. At the constitutional conference of 1946 to found the Fourth French Republic, participants voted on whether to grant all Africans citizenship in the French Union.<sup>47</sup> The initial constitution was rejected, and a second, more conservative assembly adopted a constitution that reaffirmed Africans' lesser status as colonial subjects rather than as French citizens. There were two electoral colleges—one for French and naturalized citizens, a second for subjects. The voting rights of African subjects changed continuously thereafter to permit more individuals the right to vote as veterans: civil servants, people literate in French or Arabic,

property owners, and pensioners. Few African women would have met these requirements. Only after 1951 could a woman vote, and only if she was the mother of two war veterans.<sup>48</sup> Though more than 330,000 people lived in Dahomey by 1951, only about a fifth of the adult population was eligible to vote for the representative to the French National Assembly. Kétu residents could more effectively voice their opinions in local contests for heads of *canton* (districts) and villages, affecting the real and symbolic power of the man recognized as the king of Kétu.<sup>49</sup>

It was in response to World War I-era uprisings and rebellions across French West Africa, including several in Dahomey, that the governor general for French West Africa reinstated “chiefs” like the king of Kétu; many kings had been divested of titles or supplanted by French colonial administrators or their appointed agents under early colonial policies.<sup>50</sup> This restoration of “chiefs” reinforced what the French saw as a patriarchal order threatened by women and youth. While such a policy appeared to echo concerns about fathers in France during the same period, the French were talking not as much about the heads of families as about bolstering political hierarchies to regain order. But the power of these kings would be controlled in terms of French interests. Governor General Joost Van Vollenhoven, for example, made it clear that “chiefs” served under the firm authority of French officials. By 1932, Governor General Jules Brévié envisioned that “chiefs” would “again become, in some degree, what most of them were before our arrival, namely chiefs; but chiefs animated by our ideas, imbued with our desire to assure the natives a better future.” In an attempt to create these modern and loyal intermediaries, ones legitimate in the eyes of local populations, he called for re-establishment of the “Commissions of Notables” in which the opinions of these men would “carry more weight.”<sup>51</sup>

In Dahomey itself, a year or so before Brévié’s declaration on the new roles of “chiefs,” the governor reorganized the indigenous administration, with the responsibilities of village leaders supervised by regional heads.<sup>52</sup> A few years later, an interim governor fretted over the strains placed on indigenous leaders, who also were paid by the French colonial administration but could not legally receive the types of gifts and services from the local community that would legitimize their authority.<sup>53</sup> The colonial administration’s rhetoric spoke of “chiefs” sharing in French “ideas” and “desires” while demonstrating how much the French expected that African politics would take place under the cloak of local rituals and beliefs.

The resurrection of African "chiefs" in Dahomey angered educated elites, especially those working in the lively local press in the capital, Porto-Novo. *Évolués* resented the power these authorities wielded and the exactions they demanded, precisely in the forms of those gifts and services that the French authorities recognized as so central to indigenous power. Fearing that traditional authorities were being severely undermined by elites, Governor General Brévié met with editors of the local press to discourage propaganda campaigns against named "chiefs."<sup>54</sup> Thus the debate over "chiefs" in Dahomey responded specifically to years of fierce antichief rhetoric that elites wrote of in their newspapers. Once electoral reform began in 1946, the French governor of Dahomey, considering "chiefs" less relevant, shifted attention to the actions of *évolués* on the coast, those more likely to have the right to vote and voice their opinion.

Alákétu Adewori experienced these shifts in French policy personally; he was a king not initially recognized as a *chef du canton* (district head) by the French colonial government. His two predecessors had been weakened but not deposed brusquely as other kings in French West Africa had been. The infirm and blind Alákétu Onyegen, whose senior wife Alaba Ida had played such a controversial role as a colonial agent in the French administration, had been officially replaced by his most senior minister one year before he died. Though Onyegen's successor Alákétu Odemufekun, who reigned from 1918 to 1936, was recognized as *chef du canton*, French officials often wrote in their correspondence of unseating him. Following the reign of Odemufekun, a returned World War I veteran, Bankole Okanleke, usurped the local leadership position as *chef du canton*, normally held by the king, and it was said that he tried to be named as Alákétu, or at least to halt the naming of the new king. Alákétu Adewori was named in 1937, but a territorial reorganization that made Kétu a part of the subdivision based at Zagnanado demoted his status to *chef du village* (village chief). Alákétu Adewori, not officially recognized as a *chef du canton* for about ten years, won that distinction by popular vote in 1947, and Kétu even became its own subdivision.<sup>55</sup>

The French governor of Dahomey subsidized the installation ceremonies for Alákétu Adewori two years later to ensure Adewori's prestige among fellow leaders in Nigeria.<sup>56</sup> Pierre Verger, a visiting French photographer and researcher of Afro-Brazilian culture, captured stately images of Alákétu Adewori in full regalia in 1949 on a throne, parading with his entourage and greeting French colonial administrators. Alákétu Adewori seemed to be living up to his full chosen name, "crown is now too securely placed on the head to be re-

moved by anyone.”<sup>57</sup> But the rehabilitation of the throne and the town declined, ironically, with the electoral reforms adopted in 1958, two years before independence. The town ceased to be a subdivision or even a *canton* (district) and was referred to as a village, with the king again becoming *chef de village* (village chief). Alákétu Adewori was formally recognized as king by the French only to see his town’s status and his own prestige decline with democratic reform.<sup>58</sup>

While there was talk of “chiefs” and kings in Kétu, some Dahomean men were politicking on a national and international scale, seemingly contrasting the experience of modern elites with the “traditional” masses. African leaders based in Paris, Senegal, and the Côte d’Ivoire pushed for more rights, especially around labor issues. The three men who rose to prominence in Dahomey itself, however, seemed to embody a backward-looking ethnic regionalism. Yet the first political party founded in Dahomey, the Union Progressiste Dahoméenne (Progressive Union of Dahomey) (UPD), originally presented itself in 1947 as a “party of the masses that joined together all the people of Dahomey regardless of ethnicity, region, religion or class.”<sup>59</sup> Sourou Migan Apithy, originally from Porto-Novo, a member of the Progressive Union and the first deputy to the French National Assembly from Dahomey, founded his own party in 1951. The Parti Républicain du Dahomey (Republican Party of Dahomey) (PRD) came to be associated mainly with the southeastern and coastal region of the country. At the same time, members of the Progressive Union from the northern regions of the country clamored for a candidate from the north to run for a second deputy position from Dahomey. When their demands were ignored by the Progressive Union, they started a party called the Groupement Éthnique du Nord (Ethnic Groups of the North) (GEN), nominated Hubert Maga as their candidate, and won the second deputy position. Rivalries within the Progressive Union brought the brief era of the nationwide “party of the masses” to an end, leaving a dangerous north-south divide in its wake. Though a third party, the Union Démocratique du Dahomey (Democratic Union of Dahomey) (UDD), formed in 1955 to appeal to young Dahomeans with a “pan-African” vision, managed to organize throughout Dahomey and later won seats in the southwest, southeast, and north, its party leader, Justin Ahomadegbé, was associated with the central region of the former Dahomey kingdom.<sup>60</sup> Though for a time Ahomadegbé’s party brought together laborers, farmers, government functionaries, and small business owners, the political map in Dahomey remained tripartite, with the Republican Party in the southeast, the Democratic Union in the center, and the Ethnic Groups Party in the north.



Alákétu Adewori, pictured here greeting French colonial authorities, was king of Kétu from 1937 to 1963, but only recognized by French colonial authorities in 1947. The French administration later sponsored these ceremonies for his enthronement, only to later demote his status (again) to that of “village chief.” Alákétu Adewori was both vulnerable to French colonial policy and able to exist as a king outside of recognized colonial hierarchies. Foto Pierre Verger © Fundação Pierre Verger.

The French West African federation of colonies was decentralized in 1956, making self-government inevitable and increasing the stakes for the three political parties in Dahomey. Just prior to independence, Africans in France’s colonies were granted universal suffrage, and by 1960, Dahomey and the other former French West African colonies celebrated the end of colonial rule. Using tactics that merged the interests of kings and politicians, Apithy and Maga increasingly depended upon regional heads to influence votes for Apithy in the south and Maga in the north. Ahomadegbé’s Democratic Union Party would engage in local politics that linked politicians and kings, though these tactics could backfire. Indeed, Alákétu Adewori lost his government title in the 1960 election as a member of Ahomadegbé’s party, which people associated



with Gbe-speaking Dahomey and the devastating war that had destroyed Kétu in 1886. The candidate from Apithy's party won, though Alákétu Adewori remained king.<sup>61</sup> Rather than simply dividing the nation between "traditional" masses and urban elite, national politics created cross-cutting alliances between men the French courted as future leaders of the nation and masses of men and women who elected them into office. Elites may have controlled political parties, but the general population could still influence national and local politics.

The French had tried to manipulate who gained political power and influence as "modern" men by extending specific political reforms step by step during the 1950s and by organizing *conseils de la jeunesse* (youth councils) across French West Africa in 1952. Described by scholar Tony Chafer as a "rising generation of 'Young Turks,'" these younger (though not necessarily young) men, educated and involved in newspaper publishing in Dahomey, soon joined in the debates between pro-French Union nationalists and more radical voices, some of the latter Marxist-influenced.<sup>62</sup> These "young turks," many of whom were civil servants, fit the mold of the "modern" man, yet they challenged the political reform process the French sought to control. The movement for creation of youth organizations, which continued after independence, posed a threat to the new independent nation, spiraling into new directions probably not envisioned by the French.

The many regional youth organizations forming between 1960 and 1964 were to engage in more revolutionary and pan-Africanist rhetoric under the umbrella student organization, the Union Général des étudiants et des élèves du Dahomey (General Union of Students of Dahomey). Béninois historian Sylvain Anignikin writes that the group declared plans to "integrate the working masses and peasants and educate them to participate . . . in the revitalization of avant-garde organizations, essential supports for an anti-imperialist front for the liberation and true unification of Africa."<sup>63</sup> Because of their strike activities, the General Union of Students was banned by the government and resurrected, more than once, between 1961 and 1971. When Kétu's youth association, the Association des Jeunes de Kétou (Youth Association of Kétou), formed in 1967, Dahomey had been independent for seven years and had experienced several civilian and military regimes. For elections organized by the military regime in 1970, the Kétu youth association put forth an independent candidate who won the local election, with the results later annulled. After two years came the military dictatorship of Major Mathieu Kérékou; Kérékou tried to use the General Union of Students to legitimize his takeover until he

himself in 1974 accused them of "verbalism and infantile Left-Wingism" and banned the group.<sup>64</sup>

In his book *Birth of a Black State*, Béninois scholar Maurice Glélé concludes that expanding trade to urban centers and the proliferation of radios emancipated rural populations from traditional authorities, who also lost influence in the face of political parties, especially after independence in 1960. Yet at the same time, Glélé cites a general lack of political consciousness and a certain passivity instilled by tradition that lasted through the first few years of Dahomey's independence.<sup>65</sup> In contrasting the image of "modernity"—in the form of trade, cities, and radios—to "tradition," Glélé obscures more complex relationships between rural and urban; between educated elite and farmer; between politician and king; between youth and elder. Many of these categories were gendered male in an era when French policymakers and Dahomean nationalists were envisioning the leaders of a new nation whom they could only imagine as "modern" men. Other men, younger, less educated, rural, or associated with "traditional" power, did not disappear. In a place like Kétu, it is likely that a man involved in local youth organizations perceived as a threat to the fledging, independent state could, at the same time, have traveled dirt paths, "pulling chest to ground," to transport goods that would help buy a gift for his girlfriend or the family of his fiancée.

Post-World War II French colonial policy seemed a reversal of much that had just come before it: African women and men (technically) enjoyed political rights; "traditional" rulers were repudiated; and men, explicitly and implicitly, were at the center of French colonial ideologies and programs. But the changes were not as stark and revolutionary as they appeared. For example, there had been a time, just before World War I, when African kings were displaced by more educated intermediaries. So, too, men had always figured in French colonial concepts of the idealized head of household and patriarch in its African colonies. While there was a qualitative shift in the French rhetoric around "modern" men as African independence loomed nearer, "traditional" kings and women did not vanish as objects of colonial or postcolonial policies or as political actors in their own right. Thirty years after independence, when the king of Kétu re-emerged in local and national politics with "public mothers" at his side, another historical force played an unexpected role in the resurgence: research and travel linking this part of West Africa to the Bahia region of Brazil. Again the relationship was not a new one, but one that had been transforming societies connected by the Atlantic Ocean since the era of the Atlantic slave trade.

## Mothers and Fathers of an Atlantic World

When French photographer Pierre Verger left Brazil for his research trip in Kétu in late 1948, he could not have known the significance of that year or of his own eventual relationship with the image of public motherhood” and kingship in the Atlantic world. While in Kétu, Verger witnessed and photographed the king of Kétu’s long-delayed enthronement ceremonies, marking the beginning of an erratic rehabilitation of kingship in Kétu. In Brazil, some months earlier, journalist Edison Carneiro’s publication of the book *Candomblés da Bahia* (Candomblés of Bahia), on the Brazilian African-based religion of Candomblé, declared that women or “mothers” were the predominant and preferred priests in the religion. Carneiro’s text and other studies, including the 1947 ethnography *The City of Women* by American anthropologist Ruth Landes, would foster the image of matriarchy in the religion and the renown of women priests like Maria Bibiana do Espírito Santo, also known as Mãe Senhora (“Mother Madame”), a Candomblé priest who was a spiritual “mother” to Verger. Both Verger and Mãe Senhora benefited from their ongoing relationship that was not unlike the interdependent one between West African “public mothers” and the

king as “father figure.” Thus the historical relationship between “public motherhood” and kingship in West Africa not only illuminates gender and power relationship on the continent but also provides a new way of understanding the links between Kétu and Brazil and the power dynamic between “mothers” and “fathers” in Brazil’s Candomblé religion.

Many followers and scholars of Candomblé emphasize the Yoruba influences in the religion, accepting as true the ethnic labels associated with different Candomblé groups, especially those who identify as “Kétu” or “Nagô-Jeje” (Yoruba-Gbe).<sup>1</sup> In fact, Brazil’s Candomblé religion blends rituals from diverse African groups as well as from Catholicism and Native American cultures. Its members engage in divination, spirit possession, veneration of saints, ancestor worship, and healing. They are led by women and men priests known as *mãe-de-santo* (mother-in-saint) and *pãe-de-santo* (father-in-saint), but, partly because of the scholarship, the emphasis is on women priests.<sup>2</sup> Analyzing the image of women in Candomblé as part of the concept of “public motherhood”—the recognized social and political power of elder women within (African) communities—establishes what anthropologist Randy Matory calls an “Afro-Atlantic dialogue”: “interacting and changing sets of participants in a conversation.”<sup>3</sup> Often the African side of the exchange has been viewed only in terms of the transatlantic slave trade rather than in terms of other forms of trade and contact.

Verger’s research and travel experience followed in the footsteps of Brazilians of African descent who regularly, over the centuries, returned to West Africa as traders, priests, and immigrants, carrying with them information and ideas. European and American scholars (both North American and Latin American) interested in the origins of black culture in the Americas have followed similar routes between West Africa and Brazil, some of them, like Verger, revitalizing these exchanges. Both West African and Brazilian communities were transformed by Atlantic world travelers, “mothers” and “fathers” who altered the nature of gender, religion, ethnicity, and nation on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

### **“We Brazilians, we come, yes”: Atlantic Travelogues and Dialogues**

In a conversation recorded by African American linguist Lorenzo Turner, Martiniano do Bonfim and Anna Santos recalled a song heard in the port of Lagos in modern-day Nigeria in the nineteenth century when arriving Brazilians of African descent, also known as *agudás*, caught sight of West Africa:

We come, yes. People, come, see the sailboat, yes.  
 We Brazilians, we come, yes. We come, yes. People, come,  
 See the sailboat, yes. We Brazilians, we come, yes.  
 We come yes. People, come, see the sailboat, yes.  
 We Brazilians, we come, yes.<sup>4</sup>

Martiniano do Bonfim, a renowned diviner born in Brazil, had spent eleven years in Lagos where, in his words, he “reached the age of understanding.” Anna Santos, born in Lagos, traveled in the other direction when she was twenty years old, migrating to Salvador, Brazil, with her father and siblings in 1908. Their stories reflected centuries of forced and voluntary travel between an area of West Africa that now encompasses Bénin, Nigeria, and Togo and the north-eastern Bahia region of Brazil.

Martiniano do Bonfim himself, with Candomblé priest Anna dos Santos, also known as Mãe Aninha (no relation to Anna Santos), engaged in an important collaboration during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Randy Matory writes that the two created a narrative about African purity through innovative titles and rituals within the Brazilian religion of Candomblé.<sup>5</sup> Bonfim assumed a role as teacher, if not “father,” in their relationship. Arriving in the British colony of Lagos in 1875 at age thirteen, Bonfim learned English and *ifá* divination. His knowledge of English would bring him prestige and fame among Western researchers, and his training in Africa as a *babaláwo* (father owns the secrets) gave him power and influence in the Brazilian Candomblé religious community as well as in the Western academic world.<sup>6</sup> In 1938, he expressed concern about the direction of Candomblé to American anthropologist Ruth Landes, reminiscing about Mãe Aninha, who had just died the year before: “She really tried to study the ancient religion and establish it in its African purity.”<sup>7</sup>

Bonfim’s narrative of purity was as much about race as about ritual, ironically, at a time when Gilberto Freyre’s influential *Masters and the Slaves* (1933) was celebrating racial mixing in Brazil and obscuring the realities of prejudice and inequality. Bonfim told Ruth Landes that before emancipation in 1888 in Brazil, slaves and freed blacks known as “old Africans” had lived in his neighborhood in “a whole village of blacks.” Landes reported not only what Bonfim said but tried to convey his attitude and tone: “Both slaves and freedmen . . . stayed in town to do special work for their masters living in the country. . . . the stevedores used to congregate on certain corners on Sundays and holi-

days, the free ones wearing frock coats and silk hats!’ He laughed. ‘But they were true Africans,’ he said seriously. ‘No white was mixed with them, and they knew their religion.’”<sup>8</sup> For Bonfim and other Atlantic world travelers like him, even though being black could mean doing “special work for masters,” being black also could mean being modern, traveling, or sporting European dress. American anthropologist Donald Pierson, studying “race contact” in the region of Bahia, found black Brazilians who kept copies of Nigerian newspapers or photos of a Lagos school, and one with a biography of Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey and a copy of *Negro World*, Garvey’s publication.<sup>9</sup> But in early twentieth-century Brazil, “whiteness” meant higher status and “blackness” conveyed a stigma of inferiority.

In the 1890s, Martiniano do Bonfim had participated in interviews with a physician, Raimundo Nina Rodrigues, whose pioneering study of African-based religion in Brazil concluded that blacks, because of their deep connection to African culture, were not properly integrated into Brazilian society.<sup>10</sup> Later students of Brazilian race relations would highlight Brazilian “exceptionalism” in comparison to segregationist policies and racial tensions in the United States. A student of Nina Rodrigues, Arthur Ramos, declared that “the Negro participated fully in the social life of Brazil, and no laws restricted participating in the exercise of the legitimate function of Negro citizenship.”<sup>11</sup> American anthropologist Donald Pierson deemed ideas of white superiority prevalent in Brazil “cultural” and not “racial,” yet his own statistics showed that whites tended to be of higher economic status and blacks on the lowest rungs of society.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, in the 1930s, when Martiniano do Bonfim referred to himself in a mocking tone as a “poor black,” he identified with several communities he portrayed as modern: black/African, Candomblé, and Brazilian.<sup>13</sup>

Many other scholars have examined male immigrants and traders who traveled between the Bight of Benin and Bahia, in particular, in the nineteenth century, but families and couples were also an important part of this travel and dialogue into the early twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> In an article, “Some Contacts of Brazilian Ex-Slaves with Nigeria, West Africa,” Lorenzo Turner told of several women traveling from Brazil with husbands or parents. One such woman was Isadora Maria Hamus, born in Brazil in 1888, the year of emancipation there; much like Martiniano do Bonfim, she had lived in Lagos, Nigeria, for several years before returning to Bahia to become a leading figure in the Candomblé religion. Another Brazilian woman from Rio de Janeiro had traveled with her family to Lagos and met and married a Brazilian man there. Their son later re-

turned to Bahia to trade in African agricultural products, such as kola nuts, pepper, and cowry shells used in Candomblé ceremonies. Anna Santos's father and mother, who had been born in Brazil, emigrated as teenagers with their families to Lagos. They married in Lagos and had nine children. Anna Santos's father, Marcos Cardoso, was a successful carpenter who designed several churches and schools in Nigeria and Dahomey; after his wife died, he brought seven of his nine children back to Brazil. Anna Santos's siblings had lived in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro; an elder brother stayed in West Africa in the Gold Coast (Ghana). She married a Nigerian man with a Portuguese name, though she said that he frequented "the cult of the idol worshippers."<sup>15</sup>

This intense travel of Brazilians between the Bight of Benin and Bahia had slowed by the time many scholars came to study Candomblé in the late 1930s, but researchers themselves now traveled between Africa and the Americas, seeking to trace the origins of the African-based religion and culture they had found in the Americas. Anthropologist Melville Herskovits, the leading figure in this field, conducted fieldwork between 1928 and 1942 in the Americas in Suriname, Haiti, Trinidad, and Brazil, and in Dahomey in West Africa.<sup>16</sup> Originally a proponent of the idea of assimilation and trained at Columbia University by Franz Boas, a leading figure in the study of American anthropology and race relations, Herskovits came to adopt the concept of "acculturation," that contact between cultural groups results in changes to both.<sup>17</sup> Herskovits's theory of contact and change could be seen as a precursor of the metaphor of "dialogue," borrowed from Matory and employed here. But Herskovits himself, like many of his students and others influenced by his work, focused instead on degrees of "acculturation," used as a near-synonym for "assimilation" for people of African descent in the Americas. His *Myth of the Negro Past*, published in 1941, saw African cultures as an unchanging "baseline" against which to examine the degree of change in the Americas; his interest, ultimately, was less in ongoing change and interaction between Africa and the Americas and more in the ideal of "retentions" or "survivals" in the Americas.<sup>18</sup> In such a formulation, Afro-American cultural forms change in relation to their contact with modern Euro-American society. Cultural change in Africa or in the Americas becomes a "loss" of African culture rather than part of dynamic change to Atlantic world societies, combining African, European, Native American, and Asian elements.

French photographer Pierre Verger was a scholar who affected the cultural and intellectual exchange between West Africa and Brazil; a documentary

honoring his life refers to him as a “messenger between two worlds.”<sup>19</sup> Verger was an inveterate wanderer. He visited several continents, including Africa, before arriving in Salvador, Brazil, in 1946. It became his home base for the next fifty years. He said that in Paris in the 1930s he had frequented the Bal Nègre, a fashionable night spot known for “beguine,” a form of Martinican music and dance.<sup>20</sup> A club popular with blacks not only from the Caribbean but from West Africa and the United States, the Bal Nègre was known as a place where artists and writers went to “dance with blacks.” Verger later commented that the “hot and exotic nights” there influenced his interest in West Indian, Brazilian, and African culture.<sup>21</sup> Becoming a prolific researcher of Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, Yoruba *ifá* divination, and trade relations between West Africa and Bahia, he went beyond the “hot and exotic” to the historical and the intellectual.

Verger navigated “between two worlds” with the help of a longtime friend, Maria Bibiana do Espírito Santo, known as Mãe Senhora (“Mother Madame”), powerful *mãe-de-santo* (mother-in-saint) in the Candomblé religion. Verger had become intrigued with Candomblé soon after his arrival in Salvador in the Bahia region of Brazil. He received a research grant to West Africa to study, as he put it, “the origins of what is going on still in Brazil and West Indies,” especially in “regions ‘broken’ by the kings of Abomey—‘Ketou’ in particular.”<sup>22</sup> Verger depended heavily on references and guidance from contacts in the Candomblé religion in Brazil. Though he met Mãe Senhora for the first time not long before he left Salvador, she, in a ceremony, consecrated his head to the *òrìṣà* (deity) Xango (Portuguese spelling of *Ṣango*) for his protection.<sup>23</sup> Later she bestowed an honorary title upon Verger, who referred to her as his “mother,” honored to be one of her “spiritual sons.”<sup>24</sup>

While deferring to Mãe Senhora, Verger, in shifting his attention from Kétu alone to the broader coast and interior of Atlantic Africa, began to recreate and reinvigorate the very transnational exchanges he was studying through his own research, photography, and correspondence. He wrote in a letter to American anthropologist Melville Herskovits that people in Kétu responded well to pictures of their “cousins” from the Bahia region of Brazil.<sup>25</sup> Upon his return from West Africa, Verger told Herskovits, “It was I believe the first time in this century that somebody came to give them information on their own people sent abroad in the past.”<sup>26</sup> His book *Flux et reflux de la traité des nègres entre le Golfe de Bénin et Bahia de Todos os Santos, du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (Trade Relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia) was based on the intense



nineteenth-century communication and travel across the Atlantic; the more descriptive, original French title used the terms “flow” (*flux*) and “counterflow” (*reflux*). His own relationships recaptured the broader sense of the Atlantic world, encompassing Europe and involving exchanges within Atlantic Africa and within the Americas.

Some of Verger’s closest confidants indeed were a trio of French researchers: anthropologist Alfred Métraux, who conducted important work in Hawai’i and in Haiti with South American indigenous populations; sociologist Roger Bastide, whose research included Candomblé in Bahia, Brazil; and Gilbert Rouget, an ethnomusicologist who accompanied Verger on several of his trips to West Africa.<sup>27</sup> In 1948, Métraux showed pictures Verger had sent him of Brazilian Candomblé to a local man he was working with in Haiti and was amazed how his informant “identifie[d] without blinking the *loas* [deities] that possess the people in the photographs” and “discover[ed] all sorts of parallels with Haiti that have escaped me.”<sup>28</sup> In 1953, after Verger, in Kétu, was initiated into *ifá* divination as a *babaláwo* (father owns the secrets), he exclaimed in a letter to Roger Bastide that he had taken the name “Fatumbi,” which he translated as “Ifá gives birth to me again.” He added, “What is interesting from the point of view of Brazil is that I have discovered several stories that are found in the notebook on divination by cowry shell that our mother Senhora gave me.”<sup>29</sup> Religious and cultural knowledge flowed in multiple directions and forms between Verger, his friends, and those who supplied stories and information to them. Verger became more than a “father” of the secrets of *ifá*; he emerged as a “father figure” in the study of the “flow” and “counterflow” of scholars and information across the Atlantic.

Verger held fast to the belief that the association of Kétu with Candomblé in the Bahia region of Brazil was a literal connection that continued through priests like Mãe Senhora. He escorted Mãe Senhora’s biological son Deoscóredes Maximiliano dos Santos (also known as Mestre Didi) to Kétu in 1967, while the son was on a research grant to compare sacred art in Nigeria and Bénin. Mestre Didi said he had always heard that he was descended from a royal family in Kétu, but when he met Alákétu Adetutu, who had come to power in 1964, he realized he could not converse too long in the Kétu dialect and instead sang a song. The king and his ministers apparently recognized some of the words in the melody. Coaxed by Verger and his wife, Mestre Didi then recited a short series of words known as an *oríki* (praise name) he had learned from his mother, Mãe Senhora. One term, “Aşipa,” was recognized by the king; he associated it, he said, with a family in Kétu and told Mestre Didi, “Your family lives

over there.” The king arranged for Mestre Didi to be led to a household whose residents welcomed him. Mestre Didi recalled feeling too overwhelmed to respond. He came to view himself as a descendant of the Aşipa-Alapini family and returned to Kétu in 1983 to receive from Alákétu Adetutu the honorary title of Baba Mogba Oga Oni Şango. Aşipa is a high-ranking title associated with the hunter’s association in Kétu, and Alapini, a Yoruba title associated with the Egungun masquerade, a dance of reincarnations of the ancestors. Alapini is also the name of one of the five recognized royal families in Kétu. The name Aşipa is known in other Yoruba towns in Nigeria as well; Samuel Johnson listed it, alternately, as a military title found in Oyo and as a title used among the Ogboni secret society in Abeokuta.<sup>30</sup> Three years after receiving the honorary title in Kétu, Mestre Didi founded a cultural center, Ilê Axipá (House of Aşipa) in Salvador, Brazil.

Despite the alterations to African “tradition” he chronicled in his own research and despite his participation in conversations and movements that contributed to change, Verger ended his book on trade relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia with the remarkable story of Mestre Didi’s return “home.” He claimed, in language reminiscent of Herskovits, that Mestre Didi’s experience reflected the “fidelity with which certain African traditions were conserved in Bahia.” Hopeful, he asked if Mestre Didi’s discovery meant that the old ties between the Bight of Benin and Bahia could be restored.<sup>31</sup> Mestre Didi’s revelation was a fateful moment that reinforced Verger’s belief in Kétu’s special place in Bahian Candomblé and deepened his own unique relationship with Kétu on both sides of the Atlantic through Candomblé and *ifá* divination. As a biological and symbolic mother, Mãe Senhora had mentored both men, bolstering the claims of each to African and Afro-Brazilian culture, while she herself was part of a larger dialogue about gender, race, and power.

## Rethinking Black Atlantic Motherhood

The trilogy of novels by Brazilian diplomat turned author Antônio Olinto, set mostly in West Africa, *Casa da agua* (The Water House, 1969), *Rei do Keto* (The King of Kétu, 1980), and *Trono de vidro* (The Glass Throne, 1987), begins with the return of an African-born former Brazilian slave, her free daughter, and granddaughter to Lagos, Nigeria. His part history/part memoir, *Brasileiros na África* (Brazilians in Africa), that preceded and inspired his trilogy, had been based on a period from 1962 to 1964, when, as the cultural attaché for the Brazilian embassy in Lagos, Olinto had been drawn into the local Afro-

Brazilian community.<sup>32</sup> In his memoir, Olinto wrote of a returned Brazilian woman named Maria Romana de Conceição, who had arrived from Brazil in 1900, surviving an outbreak of yellow fever on a ship stalled at sea. In *The Water House*, Olinto told this story through the eyes of the character Mariana Silva, who, though widowed with young children, became a successful entrepreneur, buying up property on the West African coast; her son was elected president of the newly independent fictional West African nation of Zorei. Mariana became like a “public mother” in the young nation, known as the First Lady of Zorei to her son, also as widower before he himself was assassinated.<sup>33</sup> By the third novel, *The Glass Throne*, written in the 1980s, her granddaughter and namesake is seeking the presidency of Zorei.<sup>34</sup> Olinto drew upon what he saw in West Africa and on his experience with “mothers,” the women priests of Candomblé, and Kétu’s mythical role in Afro-Brazilian religion and culture.

Indeed, the Kétu Candomblé of Bahia became the most studied and renowned of the Candomblé houses. A *mãe-de-santo* (mother-in-saint) or *pãe-de-santo* (father-in-saint) heads each house or *terreiro* (literally yard), presiding over officers, sponsors, and initiates known as *filhas-* or *filhos-de-santo* (daughters- or sons-in-saint). Daughters- or sons-in-saint are also known as *iaô*, from the Yoruba *iyàwó*, meaning wife or dependent, demonstrating their subservience to their deity. Women and men join Candomblé houses because they are drawn to the *òriṣà* (deity, saint) and take part in rituals and festivals where they offer sacrifices and gifts to *òriṣà*, who sometimes possess or “mount” participants. Initiates hope that by serving the *òriṣà*, the deity will provide protection and help with life’s difficulties. Although Candomblé houses have long claimed links to diverse African and Native American “nations” or ethnic identities, Kétu, Angola, and Jeje (Gbe), among others, Candomblé is often associated with Yoruba religious practices. In the 1930s, journalist Edison Carneiro, who identified seventeen nations among the sixty-seven houses he had studied in Bahia, asserted that the oldest was a Kétu house founded a century earlier.<sup>35</sup>

Carneiro wrote that three black women from “the coast,” Iyá Adêtá, Iyá Kalá, and Iyá Nassô, established this first Candomblé house, also known as Ilê Iyá Nassô (House of Iyá Nassô), after one of the women.<sup>36</sup> The links to West Africa and (Ọyọ) Yoruba culture are tempting; Ìyá Naso was a title in the Ọyọ kingdom for the woman priest of the Şango worshippers in the king’s palace.<sup>37</sup> Forms of these names, collected in oral histories, appear in a Yoruba prayer song Melville and Jean Herskovits recorded during fieldwork in 1941 and 1942. The song’s recurrent phrase, *mojuba* or *mojubare*, “I bow down before you,” pays

deference to “mothers” and “fathers” who were ancestors and founders of these early Candomblé houses, specifically referred to as Kétu Candomblé.<sup>38</sup>

Verger wrote that the two founding women of Engenho Velho had traveled to West Africa, one dying there and the other, Iyá Nassô, returning after spending seven years there (Verger assumes in Kétu) with her daughter and granddaughter. The granddaughter was pregnant with a third daughter on the return voyage and that third great-granddaughter, named Claudiana, was the mother of Mãe Senhora. A Yoruba man named Bamgboşe was said to have accompanied the women back to Brazil, his “Africanness” lending authenticity to the women’s religious practices.<sup>39</sup> Others spoke of a man named Babá Asika, who helped Iya Nassô found the Candomblé house; his name was recorded in the song Herskovits collected. After Iya Nassô’s successor died, two women competed to be the *mãe-de-santo* of Engenho Velho; the one who was denied the post founded her own, Gantois, after the French landlord who rented them space. The successor of Gantois, Mãe Menininha, who served a long term from 1926 to 1986, was perceived as a gatekeeper of the Kétu tradition. Another dispute at Engenho Velho in 1890 led to the rise of Eugenia Anna dos Santos, known as Mãe Aninha; twenty years later, she founded her own Candomblé house, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, with the help of a man named Joaquim Vieira.<sup>40</sup> She was an outsider to Yoruba language and culture but adopted Yoruba (Nago) practices.<sup>41</sup> Years later, Mãe Senhora became mother-in-saint at Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, which had by then, in some respects, transferred the Kétu lineage away from Engenho Velho.

Another Kétu Candomblé house, one known as Alaketo (title of the king of Kétu), claims a long tradition and direct ties to Kétu, its oral histories saying that its founder, Otampê Ojarô, had been kidnapped from the Kétu kingdom in the late eighteenth century and was freed by a kind stranger, the personification of an *òriṣà*. Otampê Ojarô, who traveled back to Kétu as a young woman, married a man there named Babá Laji, who returned to Bahia with her to found a Candomblé house, Ilê Maroiálaji, or Alaketo. In anthropologist Vivaldo da Costa Lima’s interviews with Alákétu Adewori in 1963 in Kétu, the king verified a late eighteenth-century Dahomey attack when members of the Aro royal family were kidnapped; one of the captives was a young girl named Ojarô.<sup>42</sup> However, tracing the founders of Candomblé to Kétu is still an extraordinary feat and one scholar associates the term “Kétu” less with an ethnic identity than with the forms of worship and ritual.<sup>43</sup> Whether or not Iyá Nassô or Otampê Ojarô actually came from Kétu, they embody important cultural symbols of

the Bight of Benin and Brazil, as “mothers” and as travelers in the Atlantic world. The long-time priest of Alaketo, known as Olga do Alaketo, was famous for her frequent travel back and forth to West Africa during more than a half-century while she headed the house of Alaketo until her death in 2005.<sup>44</sup>

Scholars and the tourist industry in Bahia have played heavily on the image of “mothers” in Candomblé, obscuring the role of men. So, too, women and men in West Africa and the Americas have debated and transformed the concept of “public motherhood” in the Bahian context. Though the popular image of Bahian culture is the *mãe-de-santo* or, at least, the Bahiana, a Bahian black woman in flowing skirt and headwrap, the founding of all the famed Kétu Candomblé houses involved men, Bamgboşe and Babá Asika for Engenho Velho, Joaquim Vieira for Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, and Babá Laji for Alaketo. Their names are preserved in the oral traditions of Candomblé houses as honored ancestors. Within Candomblé ritual itself, men serve as diviners, drummers, and sponsors. Indeed, by the 1930s, the white and mixed-race intellectuals who studied Candomblé and participated as *ogã* (sponsor, literally, “priest who is not possessed”) provided support and helped portray Candomblé for public consumption. As Matory shows in his study of Candomblé, *Black Atlantic Religion*, there has always been a “dialogue,” but it is important to recognize that these are conversations between women and men, between elites and Candomblé priests, and within a network of West Africans and black Brazilians.<sup>45</sup>

*Candomblés da Bahia*, the key 1948 publication by Brazilian journalist Edison Carneiro, was released one year after American anthropologist Ruth Landes referred to Salvador, the capital of the state of Bahia, as the “City of Women.” Carneiro and Landes collaborated during Landes’s fieldwork in the late 1930s. Carneiro’s slim volume mentions that women priests were influential in Candomblé religion, but the central theme of Landes’s entire book is the “cult matriarchate” or “ruling women” of Candomblé. Her focus on women priests was taken up by other scholars, notably women, from the impressionistic description of Candomblé by French feminist Simone de Beauvoir in the 1960s to the more recent scholarship by Kim Butler and Rachel Harding.<sup>46</sup> Black feminists working primarily in the United States also have been intrigued by the idea of continuity between West African women’s economic independence in marriage and the image of dominant black mothers in African American families. Many scholars have eschewed “retentions” of African practices in the Americas for socioeconomic explanations, recognizing that racism and poverty contribute to the prevalence of single women as heads of households.<sup>47</sup>

Still, Candomblé women are viewed in isolation from men, and some scholars harbor an ideal of the West African motherhood and family life that does not incorporate cultural change in West Africa or ongoing communication between West Africa and the Americas.

Matory argues that the collaboration between Carneiro and Landes in the late 1930s completely redefined Candomblé religion. Their writings played up the power and influence of women priests at the expense of male priests, denigrated as “passive homosexuals,” who let themselves be penetrated by men and “mounted” by the gods. Tracing how Carneiro’s discussion of male priests changed after Landes published her writings, especially her *City of Women* in 1947, Matory blames the emphasis on “mothers” in Candomblé almost entirely on Landes’s white, Western, feminist project.<sup>48</sup> Focusing on Carneiro and Landes’s relationship denies a role to Candomblé priests and followers who were Carneiro’s friends or also provided information to him. Participants in Candomblé religion and ritual asserted the authority of women Candomblé priests as religious leaders and “mothers.” Donald Pierson, writing before Landes published her work, noted that “several of the more prominent and influential *candomblés* in Bahia now have women leaders.” But Pierson attributed the positions of the women to their tendency to be “traditional” in contrast to black men’s increasing social mobility and contact with whites.<sup>49</sup> Ironically, Melville Herskovits, highly critical of Landes and Carneiro’s emphasis on the role of women in Candomblé, viewed the economic independence of black Bahian women as a “survival” from West Africa. Of the Afro-Brazilian household, he wrote, “The man’s role is one of co-operation rather than of dominance . . . the woman knows that freedom is hers for the taking.”<sup>50</sup> While Pierson’s comments may today be considered sexist because he assumed women were “traditional” or even “backward,” and Herskovits’s ideas presumptive and outmoded in his search for “survivals,” the strong presence of women in Candomblé and in Afro-Brazilian society was observed by others who did not share Landes’s “matriarchy” thesis.

Even if male Candomblé priests dominated in the nineteenth century, not unlike “fathers” and kings in West Africa, they were surrounded by and dependent upon women as evidence of their authority; many of the followers and organizers in Candomblé have been women.<sup>51</sup> Rather than see women’s and men’s power in Candomblé as a zero-sum game, where women *or* men must dominate, Candomblé can be seen in terms of the dialogues and partnerships emphasized in the oral histories and structure of the religion itself. Partnerships between women and men and between Africans and Brazilians

existed not only in the oral traditions about the founding mothers of Engenho Velho and their transatlantic voyages, but also in the examples of men like Martiniano do Bonfim and Pierre Verger.

Verger cultivated multiple partnerships, with Mãe Senhora, with West African kings, and with Western and West African scholars. Each of his relationships illustrated the “unequal exchanges,” “imagined communities,” and “human agency” Matory emphasizes as defining aspects of a “dialogue.”<sup>52</sup> As a white European man, Verger could use his “whiteness” to gain access to rituals and interviews for his writings and photographs, but he depended on his Brazilian and West African contacts for information and guidance. Verger was deeply reverential towards Mãe Senhora. He helped her make contact with West African kings, such as the Aláàfin (king of Oyo) Adeyemi, who bestowed a profound honor on Mãe Senhora when he repeatedly referred to her as Ìyá Naso (known in Oyo as the priest of the Şango shrine) in his letters to her.<sup>53</sup> Maria Stella de Azevedo Santos, known as Mãe Stella, head of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá since 1976, said in an interview in the 1998 documentary film “Pierre Verger: Messenger between Two Worlds” that Verger had come to Bahia because “Xango (Şango) ruled his head,” that is, he was born to serve the *òrişà* (deity) Xango and was led to Mãe Senhora’s Candomblé house, where Xango is a primary deity.<sup>54</sup>

The shifting power dynamic between black Candomblé women priests and white and mixed-race elite men is part of the racial tension that permeates Brazilian society and history even today, most acutely expressed in the image of the “Black Mother” in Brazilian lore and modern politics. Gilberto Freyre’s *Masters and the Slaves* (1933), celebrating the image of racial mixing at the heart of Brazil’s history, established the myth of “racial democracy.” Freyre presented the romanticized image of the “Black Mother” and other gendered and sexualized images of race: “we almost all of us bear the mark of that [Negro] influence. Of the female slave or ‘mammy’ who rocked us to sleep. Who suckled us. Who fed us, mashing our food with her own hands. The influence of the old woman who told us our first tales of ghost and beast. Of the mulatto girl who . . . initiated us into physical love and, to the creaking of the canvas cot, gave us our first complete sensation of being a man. Of the Negro lad who was our first playmate.”<sup>55</sup> In Freyre’s ideal world, the elderly black woman served as a veritable “mammy” or submissive matron and the mixed-race woman fulfilled sexual desire, with black men passive allies in an idealized patriarchal order dominated by white men.

In the late 1920s, journalists, politicians, black political organizations, and eventually Candomblé groups took up this image of the Black Mother [Mãe Preta], calling for a commemorative day, statues, and honorees. Black activists in Sao Paulo first promoted “The Day of the Black Mother” to mark the anniversary of the 1871 Law of the Free Womb that automatically freed children born to enslaved women. The figure of the Black Mother also literally and figuratively honored the long history of black women who had served as nursemaids to white children, evoking both the dominance and intimacy embedded in the practice of slavery. The shared experience by black and white (men) of the black woman as “mother” created a bond of “brotherhood,” palatable to white intellectuals and to the Brazilian nation as a whole.<sup>56</sup> Thus the image of the Black Mother was fraught with symbolism of “racial democracy,” with black women’s submission and sacrifice, and—with the repeated references to a Brazilian nation suckling at the breasts of black women—sexuality. It was in 1955 that the first statue of the “Black Mother” was erected in Sao Paulo, and a decade later Mãe Senhora was celebrated as the “Black Mother of Brazil” in Rio de Janeiro. A statue in her likeness was erected in Rio de Janeiro after her death.<sup>57</sup> Still, Afro-Brazilian activists and white intellectuals, by themselves, did not dictate the transition of the Black Mother’s image from a slave woman and wet nurse to a Candomblé priest; black women leaders of Candomblé also contributed to the charged imagery that surrounded them.

In 1938, American anthropologist Ruth Landes interviewed Mãe Menininha and found quite a different image of her as a “mother figure”:

“My deceased aunt”—she [Mãe Menininha] touched the ground again—“inherited her position from her mother, the great deceased named Julia”—she touched the ground—“and Julia founded the temple after she arrived in Brazil. First she served as a priestess in Engenho Velho—mother and daughter served together. . . . *You know how it is in Europe, my lady. We mothers are like royal houses, we pass our offices to kinsfolk only, usually women.*” She shook her head and sighed. “The candomblé is a great responsibility. Often I wonder where I can get the strength to go on with it, and whether I have the right to burden my daughters with it.”

“Why is that?”

“*I have no time for myself! I am a slave of my people, two hundred of them who depend upon me absolutely! Imagine!*” She shrugged, but her look was not really troubled.



"There is a great deal I need to learn, my mother," I [Ruth Landes] said, sighing to think of the tremendous imponderables of life in Bahia. "You see, we have no *candomblés* in North America."

"No?" She was surprised and disapproving, "Don't your people believe in God?"

"Oh, yes, but we show it in other ways. Still, we have much to learn."

"You want to learn from us?" Her tone was cold.

"Yes," I ventured.

"But there are secrets here you may not learn."

"It is not the secrets I want, my mother. I want only to understand your beliefs. I want to learn more about God, and about men because they are my brothers."

Menininha did not answer.<sup>58</sup> (Emphasis added)

Mãe Menininha portrayed herself as a servant of her people, but she touted her privilege and compared herself and her ancestors to a royal family of women. That Mãe Menininha received coldly and with suspicion Landes's thinly veiled submissive posture belied the accommodation and openness implied by the image of the Black Mother associated with *Candomblé* priests.

Mãe Stella of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, one of the most popular and well-known *Candomblé* priests since the 1990s, projected a contradictory image of women's predominance in *Candomblé* in a 1995 interview with a Brazilian newspaper:

*It is a matriarchy.* This is due to the fact that when *Candomblé* came to Brazil, this practice we know today, began with three Ladies. . . . This does not mean that men have no capacity to be a *Babalorixá* [father-in-saint, priest], *but the woman is the maternal figure, and when people come to Candomblé, they often look for a sort of maternal comfort and kindness [aconchego].* The woman is more able to give this. That is the only reason. Suddenly there is the fact that women follow the African tradition that, *at Xango's house or Xango's cult, he is the boss, but there is a predominance of women because they have the title of Iyá Nassô: the woman is the main Ayaba [royal wife; queen] of Xango's house and she is the one who gives orders.* But men and women have the same capacity.<sup>59</sup> (Emphasis added)

Mãe Stella evokes "maternal comfort and kindness" yet speaks of women "giving orders" and as having the "same capacity" as men. In fact, she does not deny men a role in *Candomblé*, noting that they can become *babalorixá*, the Portuguese version of the Yoruba (Nago) word for *pãe-de-santo* or father-in-saint. In

an interview for a documentary film released in 2005 called *A Cidade das Mulheres* (City of Women), which pays explicit tribute to Ruth Landes's work, Mãe Stella and other priests and scholars make even stronger statements about the role of men in Candomblé. Mãe Stella jokes at one point, "I think a matriarchy is wonderful. But what is a temple that only has women? What a bore, right? It has to have men. The men have their own functions in Candomblé. . . . There are posts that only men can hold just as there are so many others that women hold and men can't." An ethnolinguist interviewed in the same documentary analyzed the situation further: "Candomblé is a great example of innovation of an alternative lifestyle within a patriarchal society. . . . In Candomblé women have power without being matriarchal per se in the sense of oppressing or excluding men. Women have power . . . but without negating the male (masculine) principle."<sup>60</sup>

In both interviews Mãe Stella implied that African traditions require that men be "the boss" in the worship of the *òriṣà* (deity) Xango but that male authority is countered by the title Iyá Nassô. But by describing the Iyá Nassô as an *aya òba* (royal wife) rather than an *iyá* (mother) in the newspaper interview, which she seems to interpret more as a "queen" with the power to command, Mãe Stella provides a contradictory image of Iyá Nassô's mythical and symbolic power. In the kingdom of Oyo, the Iyá Naso was responsible for the king's Šango shrine, and the name Iyá Nassô is recorded in the founding of Candomblé in Salvador. Drawing on the historical image of the founding "ladies" of Candomblé and the title of Iyá Naso, Mãe Stella asserts the image of independent women leaders. But her consistent reference to an ideal of "maternal kindness," embodied by the Black Mother, can merge easily with the submissive image of the "mammy" described by Freyre. The continued importance of the perverse Black Mother image shows that black women try to redefine racial and sexual images associated with them. But the image of the Black Mother distorts biological motherhood and obscures the concept of "public motherhood," associating the mature, postmenopausal woman with child rearing and turning "mother figures" into "queens," technically wives defined by their relationship with "kings."<sup>61</sup>

It is tempting to see simple parallels between the Bight of Benin and Bahia, as expressed in the work of Pierre Verger, which places images of rituals, architecture, and bodies from West Africa and Brazil side by side to stress the shared style, pose, and expression.<sup>62</sup> His most extensive book of juxtaposed photographs, *Òriṣà: Les Dieux Yorouba en Afrique et au Nouveau Monde* (Orishas: Yoruba Gods in Africa and the New World), intrigued my research assistant

as she waited for me at the Bénin National Archives; she said that she wanted to go to Brazil to see “all the things that we have here.” Several months earlier, at the Pierre Verger Foundation in Salvador, Brazil, I had been struck by the similarity between photographs of Alákétu Adewori that Verger took in Kétu in early 1949 and others of Mãe Senhora taken sometime later. In both series, the king and priest are seated outdoors in flowing robes, their rich fabric glistening in the sunlight in almost the same way. In several shots, Mãe Senhora is even wearing her beaded crown, modeled after the headdress worn in West Africa only by Yoruba kings. The photography archivist suggested that the resemblance was not an accident, but that Verger had been inspired by the regal bearing of Alákétu Adewori and had placed Mãe Senhora in a similar pose.<sup>63</sup> Thus Verger linked the West African king or “father” and the Brazilian priest or “mother” figuratively and literally through a photograph. Participating in this “dialogue,” Alákétu Adewori and Mãe Senhora each looked boldly at the camera. Perhaps in a way that fits too neatly with the saying “mother is gold, father is glass,” Alákétu Adewori would die in 1963 after losing an election and much power but retaining his title as king, and Mãe Senhora would die in 1967 at the height of her power and popularity, having been named the “Black Mother of Brazil.”

To conceptualize black womanhood or motherhood in the Americas in terms of “survival” from Africa, or as consequence of poverty and racism, is to overlook the role of migrating Brazilians, West Africans, and Western researchers. The story of black women in the Atlantic world cannot be told in isolation from men or from the Western world. The shift from West African “public mothers” to Brazilian “Black Mothers” is not a simple echo or transformation or perversion of “traditional” African ideals. In both West Africa and in the Americas, the image of the mother figure has always been fraught with paradox and contradiction. In their comparative study of black and white feminisms in the United States, American authors Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis try to capture this ambivalent ideal of black motherhood: “The Black mother, however, is also a woman, and herein lies the great contradiction. The ‘honored’ mother is the same second-class citizen who is often regarded and treated as an object to be used, bruised, and abused. . . . The societal attitude toward Mother is one of both idealization and degradation. The mother’s role in the family is symbolic of contradictions and contrasts.”<sup>64</sup> While Joseph and Lewis are writing of black American women, it is difficult to talk about the “Black mother” without conjuring up an image of Africa. Their observation emphasizes that the ten-



Alákétu Adewori during his enthronement ceremonies, photographed by Pierre Verger. The similarity between his posture and that of Maria Bibiana do Espírito Santo, or Mãe Senhora of the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá (*next page*), raises questions about how women and men visually represent their power as “public mothers” and kings and about the role of the photographer and “subject” in determining poses. Foto Pierre Verger © Fundação Pierre Verger.

sion between women’s power and vulnerability lies beyond the physicality of biological motherhood. And if “mothers” are surrounded by blind reverence and mystique, they run the risk of being misunderstood, even when they are neither defamed nor forgotten.

Indeed, “mothers” and symbols of their power have persevered on both sides of the Atlantic in the form of West African “public mothers” who are allied with kings and Brazilian “mothers-in-saint” who are partnered with men.



Maria Bibiana do Espírito Santo, or Mãe Senhora, was head priest or *mãe-de-santo* of the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá from 1942 to 1967. She descends from one of the three “mothers” said to have established the Candomblé religion in Salvador, Brazil. Her son, artist Mestre Didi, claimed ancestral ties to Kétu through a praise name that she taught him, thereby reinforcing her renown and authenticity as a “Black Mother” in the Candomblé community and the Brazilian public.  
Foto Pierre Verger © Fundação Pierre Verger

Such relationships evoke several pairings in the study of Africa and a broader Atlantic world that are more complex than they seem: motherhood and fatherhood; power and vulnerability; gold and glass. Even during the “second” independence of Africa—the democratic renewal of the 1990s—these concepts have shaped Kétu’s evolving relationship with Brazil and the “rediscovery” of “public mothers” and kings.

## Epilogue: A Rebirth of “Public Mothers” and Kings

In 1994, Kétu celebrated the centennial of the “rebirth” of the town, recalling Kétu’s destruction in a war with Dahomey in 1886 and its renewal under the aegis of the French colonial state eight years later. By the end of the twentieth century, fewer than forty years had passed since French colonial rule came to an end in 1960. But Kétu had been “reborn” in multiple ways: as a town and kingdom, as part of a newly democratic Béninois nation, and as part of an Atlantic world. Scheduled events during the week-long celebration showcased Kétu’s prominent place in a broader Yoruba culture and the “multiethnic” nature of the Kétu region. In a booklet commemorating the occasion, one commentator spoke of “a demonstration of national culture and an occasion to reunite people from Kétu scattered around the world.”<sup>1</sup>

The era of democratic renewal serves as a fitting conclusion to the present study. Kingship and “public motherhood” in Kétu had been redefined with royal women ministers and with a new woman mayor, demonstrating the town’s “rebirth” and transformation in terms of gender and power.

## “Rebirth” of a King

The language of “rebirth” was part of the national rhetoric of Bénin during the period of democratization, which began in 1989 and culminated in 1991 with the multiparty election of Nicéphore Soglo. Rosine Soglo, the new president’s wife, even founded a new party evoking this theme of new beginnings, the Renaissance du Bénin (Rebirth of Bénin Party). At the same time, kings like Alákétu Adétútù were reclaiming power and influence lost in the two decades of dictatorial rule under Mathieu Kérékou. Kérékou, who took power after a 1972 military coup, had reduced even the symbolic power of kings by eliminating the title of “village chief,” used in the colonial period for men formally recognized as kings and for local elites who competed for such positions. Titles like “delegate” and “mayor” had been substituted. Alákétu Adétútù, though still recognized as king, lost the contest for mayor to his own cousin.<sup>2</sup> Such “traditional” leaders faced strong antagonism, if not outright attack, from the Kérékou regime, as kings across Bénin strove to reassert their power and formed the General Council of Kings, Queens, and Traditional Chiefs of Bénin in the early 1990s. Kérékou’s authority, in a stunning reversal, was for a short time “effectively emasculated,” as one scholar put it.<sup>3</sup>

Within months of the 1990 National Conference, which appointed Nicéphore Soglo as interim prime minister, Alákétu Adétútù was on a goodwill tour to Brazil sponsored by the Béninois and Brazilian governments.<sup>4</sup> The voyage drew not only on a history of government-sponsored travel and closer diplomatic and economic ties between Brazil and the Bight of Bénin that began in the 1960s, but also on forced and free travel in the era of the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>5</sup> The king of Kétu was accompanied by the minister of foreign affairs and a friend representing the head minister of Kétu in a trip that presaged Soglo’s own interest in developing tourism around the history of the slave trade in Bénin. During his presidency, two UNESCO-funded programs—the Ouidah 92 Vodun Art Festival and the Route des Esclaves (Slave Route Project)—sought to remember the transatlantic slave trade while celebrating African history and culture. The Slave Route Project, launched in Ouidah in 1994, has educational, artistic, and tourism components; a declaration was made in Accra, Ghana, vowing to “identify, restore and promote sites, buildings and places of memory linked to the slave trade and slavery in order to develop a tourist trade focused on remembrance.”<sup>6</sup> Alákétu Adétútù’s venture to Brazil pointed out that the slave routes emanating from the coast of Bénin had origins in the African interior. As emissary of the newly democratic government of Bénin, Alákétu Adétútù

embodied this history and memory of the Atlantic slave trade that had connected West Africa and Brazil, but as the king of Kétu, he evoked something more. The oral and written histories linked the founding of the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé to women who traveled back and forth from West Africa and, some say, specifically back to Kétu.<sup>7</sup>

Alákétu Adétútù's second trip to Brazil in 1994, just before the centennial celebration, was funded by an Argentinian cultural institute that sponsored the king's visit as an honorary guest at the Second International Congress of Afro-American Culture in Salvador, Brazil.<sup>8</sup> Associates of the king of Kétu had taken the initiative in contacting sponsors, but it is unlikely that the king, who identified himself as Catholic, was seeking to emphasize his authority in Yoruba religion. In the late 1990s, when a Brazilian musician turned government official, Gilberto Gil, arrived in Kétu to trace French photographer Pierre Verger's research in Kétu and other parts of West Africa, Alákétu Adétútù reminisced about the Yoruba religious shrines Verger had shown *him* in Brazil.<sup>9</sup> Alákétu Adétútù could make use of symbolic authority as the king of Kétu without abusing his own stature.

This appeal to the past glory of kingship during this historic moment of democratization in Africa was not contradictory. To evoke "tradition" was neither simply backward-looking nor overtly patriarchal. The revitalization of the king of Kétu's stature depended on a new national and international prominence that used the *image* of tradition since the precolonial political power of kings could not be resurrected in any substantive way. Even though Alákétu Adétútù was mainly exercising the most symbolic aspects of his rule after decades of dictatorial rule, his prominence during the new era of democratization was still a true resurgence.

Alákétu Adétútù's "rebirth" occurred within the context of his own transit (by plane rather than ship), flying above the routes of slave passages across the Atlantic Ocean, which, like the paths of migration from the Americas to Africa, was strongly defined by gender as well as by race. Over the centuries of transit in both directions, the percentage of men was higher, and the common image of the slave and the Brazilian traveler often was that of a young man. Yet the mythologized history that links Kétu to Brazil actually illuminates quite diverse travelers, including young enslaved girls from Kétu and mature and elderly women priests from Brazil. That it was a king of Kétu and male ministers who traveled to Brazil need not deny the image and presence of women as slaves, priests, and travelers in an Atlantic world. The image of a jet-setting king was incorporated into the tribute to kingship in the 1994 centennial events, and





Alákétu Adétútù, king of Kétu from 1963 to 2002, was invited to participate in the Second International Congress of Afro-American Culture in Salvador, Brazil, in 1994; he is pictured here with Kétu royal minister Antonin Iko Alayé to his left. The king's visit echoed the fabled, forced migration of the Kétu "mothers" said to have established Candomblé and the more recent migrations of scholars and travelers who have voyaged back and forth between Africa and the Americas. Photograph courtesy of Ilé Àṣe Oṣun Doyo, Instituto de Investigació y la Difusió de las Culturas Negras [Institute for the Investigation and Diffusion of Black Cultures], Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Kétu residents understood the contrast between Alákétu Adétútù's extensive tours and the past seclusion of the kings of Kétu. The celebratory pamphlet also drew special attention to the role of women royal ministers associated with the king; "public mothers" were an important part of Alákétu Adétútù's reign, a period that evoked past practices but reconfigured them in the present.

### **"Mothers of All Kétu" Revisited**

Unlike the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts of mother figures associated with the kings of Oyo and Dahomey, only in the postcolonial period are there definite records of royal women ministers in Kétu. The nineteenth-century "mothers of all Kétu" are unnamed, and the information on official women ministers and other prominent women in Kétu, even as recently as the

early to mid-twentieth century, is disputed. Before I ever inquired about female ministers in Kétu, I heard of a woman named Şanibi, important during the reign of Alákétu Odemufekun, king from 1918 to 1936. Her own descendants said she had been Ìyá Ọba (Mother of the King), a symbolic role, but a few elderly persons remembered her as another top female minister, the Ìyá Libara.<sup>10</sup> Adrien Adegnika, a retired schoolteacher and member of the Mefu royal family from which Odemufekun and Şanibi hailed, referred to Şanibi as an Ìyá Kétu (Mother of Kétu). He told me that Mother of Kétu was a supreme title of honor for women who intervened on behalf of people to resolve their problems. Chosen based on age, attitude, and appeal, such a woman would have been recognized by the entire population. Adegnika denied that women were ever recognized as ministers of the king, but he reconsidered his assertion about women as royal ministers when he began to talk about the position of the Ìyá Libara, providing the only attempted translation of her title as “mother who rids us from misfortune.”

Many would agree that the Ìyá Libara, described in the centennial publication as a “Grande Royale,” was foremost among women titleholders, a member of the royal family who served as an advisor to the king. Adegnika asserts that this title first appeared under Alákétu Adewori, king of Kétu from 1937 to 1963.<sup>11</sup> Pictured in an old photograph in the 1994 pamphlet was the Ìyá Libara during Alákétu Adewori’s reign, a woman named Okonou Iko Adeoti who was so popular and effective as Ìyá Libara that she continued to serve under the next king, Alákétu Adétútù, until her own death in 1982, even though Alákétu Adétútù was from a different royal family.<sup>12</sup> Her successor, Ìyá Libara Cathérine Oyewole Adebíyi, also featured in the 1994 publication, told me of the importance of the Ìyá Libara title, declaring that had she been a man she could have been king.

The Ìyálóde (Mother Owns the Outside World) Adunni, described as a minister of women and religion, is still fondly remembered as a powerful woman, though a successor, Ìyálóde Basília Abero, had been named to that post when I arrived in Kétu for the first time in 1997. A controversial figure, Ìyálóde Basília Abero has been a target of hostility. During an interview one man compared her problems to those of Kétu royal wife and French colonial agent Alaba Ida. Though the title of Ìyálóde dates back at least to the nineteenth century in Yoruba towns, it is a new title in Kétu. Alákétu Adétútù, known for bestowing honorary titles on wealthy patrons and visitors, introduced the title of Ìyálóde in Kétu after learning that it was a historical title in major Yoruba kingdoms in Nigeria.<sup>13</sup> The role of the Ìyálóde was described as a female advisor to the king

especially charged with the affairs of the market, but in Kétu, the title partly duplicated that of Ìyá Libara; the reigning Ìyá Libara and Ìyálóde whom I met each told me that she was the “leader of all the women.”<sup>14</sup> Nor was it uncommon for people to say that Ìyálóde had existed in the past. While I was interviewing one Kétu Muslim man, he asked some elderly women sitting nearby for names of important women from the past. The women mentioned a woman, a Muslim woman even, who they said had been Ìyálóde before the time Alákétu Adétútù was said to have brought the title to Kétu.<sup>15</sup> They laughed and shook their heads at the suggestion that the title of Ìyálóde in Kétu was only a recent creation.

The third woman pictured in the 1994 brochure was Ìyá Afọbajẹ (Mother Who Ends the Time of Spoiling) Salamantou Egunlope Brouaima, a woman charged with naming and installing kings. Although her title was described to me as “honorific,” suggesting that it was newer and not the same as the ministerial ones, Ìyá Afọbajẹ Salamantou Brouaima was, in fact, one of the most respected women in Kétu in the late 1990s.<sup>16</sup> Well-versed in the town’s oral history, she found herself caught between her titled role in the kingdom and her identity as a Muslim woman. She told me that women in her Muslim prayer group, or *asalatu* (from *salat*, Arabic for prayer), which met to study the Qur’an, rejected her because she wore the beads indicating her role at the king’s palace. (Beads are associated with indigenous religion, linking the spiritual and social worlds.)<sup>17</sup> That these most powerful women were still vulnerable to challenges to their authority and person captures well the contradictory nature of their position as “mother figures” in West African history.

Despite the strong and stately presence of these women ministers in Kétu in the postcolonial era, most of their predecessors have been lost to the historical record, whether women with established titles or women more informally recognized by the town. I used my one piece of evidence about the precolonial existence of publicly recognized women in Kétu—the brief note in Charles Gollmer’s 1859 missionary account about the three “mothers of all Kétu”—to preface my questions about high-ranking women ministers in Kétu in the past. Inevitably, people mentioned the Ìyá Libara, Ìyá Ọba, and Afin Ọba Obinrin, a woman charged with handling worship of *òrìṣà* (deities) for the king. No one could reliably name previous Ìyá Libara or Ìyá Ọba, much less Afin Ọba Obinrin for the nineteenth century or even for the first half of the twentieth century, during the colonial period.<sup>18</sup> It would be ahistorical to project these women’s titles into nineteenth-century Kétu, even with the written accounts and oral sources describing similar titled women in other Yo-

ruba towns. The top women ministers in Kétu in the 1990s also diverged in one significant way from the titled women in Oyo in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries discussed in chapter 2. The “public mothers” in precolonial Oyo were drawn from wives, dependents, or slaves living in the royal residence, while the Ìyá Libara, Ìyá Oba, and Afin Oba Obinrin in Kétu were said to have been named from the paternal side of the king’s family. The Ìyá Libara and the Ìyálóde could live and operate outside of the king’s residence, unlike the Ìyá Oba and Afin Oba Obinrin who were said to stay close to the king.<sup>19</sup> Because they were not wives who had risen in the ranks of the royal household but women translating their power within the ruling family into a role related to kingship and town government, perhaps the highest ranking women ministers in Kétu were acting as “public mothers” in a sense more similar to that of the king as the ultimate “public father.”

In contrast to the invisibility of Kétu women ministers during the precolonial and early colonial period, over the border in Nigeria, a British colonial officer reporting on the history and politics of the town of Abeokuta in Nigeria in 1937 commented, “Today, women’s affairs are mostly petty matters of sanitation, they told me with disgust; in the old days they were concerned with war.”<sup>20</sup> Women ministers and officials continued to serve in Yoruba towns in Nigeria during the colonial period; another British colonial administrator listed the top women minister for more than twenty towns in one Yoruba-speaking district. The top woman minister, whether an Ìyálóde or a similar official, named other women as her assistants.<sup>21</sup> In Kétu in the summer of 1997, a group of women, some of whom held various titles, accompanied Ìyálóde Basilia Abero as she greeted a group of Béninois government officials. Because I was staying in her compound at the time, I too was swept up in the ceremony as a dancing member of her entourage.<sup>22</sup> Considering the ongoing communication and travel between a town like Kétu in Bénin and other Yoruba towns in Nigeria, it would be surprising if there had been no similar titled positions for women in Kétu dating to the precolonial period and extending, albeit transformed, during the colonial period. Still, it is difficult to know how and when certain titles for women came into existence in Kétu during the period before 1960. Because of the elasticity of the use of the title Ìyá (Mother) for elder women, priests, and divinities, people in Kétu disagree, each remembering differently the significance of women in “public” positions.

For some, the ambiguous power of these women suggests two opposite trends: the resilience of long-lost matriarchy or the maintenance of patriarchy. But neither scenario alone is a useful way of thinking about these com-



The late Cathérine Oyewole Adebisi, Ìyá Libara of Kétu, shown here in 1999, once told me that she could have been king had she been a man. Photograph by author.

plex relationships. Women ordinarily did not rule over the entire community through these titled positions, and the women's political relationship with the town was defined through a link to the king. It is the connection between kings as ultimate "father figures" and these symbolic "mothers" that is most significant, not simply for collaboration in decision making but for the way symbolic fathers and mothers defined one another. Often this connection is overlooked when the power of kings and other leading men is emphasized. Sometimes the influence of certain well-placed women is highlighted without reference to men. The seductive concept of "complementarity"—the idea that African women were historically equally represented in politics, society, and households by women who were counterparts to leading men—builds too easily upon certain fixed assumptions about femininity versus masculinity; private versus public; religious versus political. These simple contrasts are at the heart of the limits, hierarchies, and inequalities that shape the lives of women, youth, junior siblings, widows, and anyone with less access to resources.

The popular saying "mother is gold, father is glass," used as a point of departure, captures these multiple and changing relationships between women, men, power, and vulnerability, especially in Kétu as kingship and public motherhood have been "reborn" in the decades since independence. While neither the idea of women royal ministers nor of transatlantic ties is new for Kétu, the concepts of "public motherhood" and a "black" Atlantic world were still transformed even more when a woman became mayor of Kétu in 2005.

### **Meet Madam Mayor**

Mayor Lucie Sessinou Tidjani, a Gbe (Mahi) woman from Kétu, began her improbable rise to her position of power through local political party work. Drawn to the development issues that continued to plague Kétu, including road construction, education, maternal health, and general poverty, she saw opportunities to address issues facing women and children. By 2003, she was the first assistant to the mayor—the top three positions in the Kétu council must be shared between the Kétu, Gbe (Mahi), and Oho populations that make up the region.<sup>23</sup> The sudden death of the mayor, followed by the resignation of his successor, led to an emergency session in which the local council unanimously voted Tidjani into office as mayor on July 4, 2005.

Tidjani's appointment as the third woman mayor in Bénin—the first in Kétu—occurred during the time of the new decentralization policy put in place by then president Mathieu Kérékou, who had ruled as a dictator for almost

two decades but who had refashioned himself in the years after the period of “democratic renewal,” whereupon he served as president from 1996 to 2006. Since 2002, decentralization policies have mandated that individual communities in Bénin be self-supporting and self-sufficient. Tidjani was searching out development partners around the world to advise and support an ambitious set of projects in Kétu ranging from sanitation, improved facilities at the main market, and agricultural development to a cyber café, museum, and shopping mall. To realize these plans, Tidjani was eagerly seeking organizations in the United States and Europe and was traveling internationally; she attended a meeting of African mayors in Nairobi, Kenya, the week before I met with her in October 2006.<sup>24</sup>

Tidjani’s tactics and vision suggest an image of women’s power beyond that of “mothers” or “wives,” even though she frequently touts her own personal experience as a woman, mother, and wife when discussing her work. In a 2006 interview that appeared on the official government website for the region, she responded to the charge that she is a “fervent militant for gender and development,” saying, “The only thing that I know is that as a woman, for the past two and a half years, I have tried to demonstrate that I am capable, I worked, I tried to show men through my work that a woman is capable of many things. Besides, women address and better manage things than men. . . . It is that men don’t pay attention, a woman, she observes the most minor details. When ready, she does everything to succeed.”<sup>25</sup>

While Tidjani uses the image of “mother” and “wife” literally, she recognizes the symbolic power of the king and his women ministers in the community. Outside the mayor’s office I met two women who now hold honorific titles bestowed by the current Alákétu Aladé Ìfè. As much as Tidjani asserts her power as a woman who used the challenges she faced as a wife and mother to prepare for her political career, she does not ignore the profound vulnerability of wives, grandmothers, and daughters. She wants to encourage women to become political and to participate in local development, because “if women suffer, it is the whole community that suffers.”<sup>26</sup>

On one hand, Mayor Tidjani captures how women’s experience and the study of gender merge in daily life, and she reorients the relationship between Africa and the African diaspora. On the other hand, as a middle-aged woman, Tidjani does not fit the mold of the symbolic elderly “mother figure” who historically wielded power in Kétu and elsewhere in the Bight of Bénin. Instead, building on her identity as a woman, mother, wife, and activist, she potentially defines a new era of politics. Rather than seeking connections through the for-

mer slave trade routes that connected Kétu to the Bahia region of Brazil, she sees new possibilities in Europe, North America, and Africa itself. By 2009, following an apparently controversial re-election bid by Tidjani, a Kétu man assumed the position of mayor and Tidjani was back to being a regional counselor. Only time will tell how people will recall and represent this historical period in the future.<sup>27</sup>

My title, *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass*, seeks to convey the tension between the rhetoric of women's power as "public mothers," "queens," and priests in West Africa and the realities of women's subordination and vulnerability as wives, young mothers, and slaves. Shaped both by their links to "fathers" and husbands and by larger cultural ideals of power and identity, some women have been highly valued by kings, others have been abandoned by husbands, and still others objectified by French colonial policies. As part of a collection of kingdoms and towns that shared—sometimes closely and other times loosely—a religion, culture, and language, Kétu women and men did not come up with ideals about gender and power in isolation. The transatlantic slave trade transported ideas and practices to the Americas, but never whole and always altered in form and meaning. The image of mothers and wives has been tenacious across West Africa and in the Americas, though these concepts have been flexible and adaptable, reflecting the impact of the Atlantic slave trade, French colonialism, and more recent travel between West Africa and Brazil.

The question then becomes whether societies and scholars can understand the multiple identities women (and men) have occupied historically, and sometimes simultaneously, as priests, travelers, slaves, royal ministers, traders, and government officials, while pushing the boundaries of their symbolic positions as "mothers" and "wives" (and "fathers" and "husbands"). The slippage between the realities and symbolism of motherhood is not unlike the blurring of sex and gender in academic writing and popular culture; historian Joan Scott observes that "academics are not much better than the general public at maintaining the distinction between the physical and the social (nature and culture, body and mind) that the introduction of 'gender' was meant to achieve."<sup>28</sup> The widespread failure to differentiate between the physical nature of sex and the social definition of gender in academic writing and popular culture is precisely the point. The social definition of gender is so powerful that it seems "natural" even as scholars have shown that the physical definition of sex itself based in appearance and in scientific testing is not a given.<sup>29</sup> Though in many African societies, cultural processes and ceremonies define gender together with the



physical body, the connection between women's sexuality and motherhood is often assumed, thus obscuring broader cultural ideas about motherhood and power.<sup>30</sup>

Linked to the confusion over sex and gender is a distinction some scholars would like to make between women's history and gender history—differences that reflect ongoing debates over feminism and feminist theory. Some Africanist scholars, more likely perhaps to identify themselves as women's historians, highlight the “resilience of (colonial) patriarchies.” Those Africanists who use “gender” more deliberately as an analytical tool seek to examine “social and symbolic relations” and to shed assumptions about women's subjugation, resistance, and “universal” experience.<sup>31</sup> Still other Africanists, some with African backgrounds, question the Western feminist ideals that have shaped the debate between women's and gender history. Several African feminists, many of them literary scholars, have developed alternative concepts for African feminism(s) that emphasize the importance of diverse African cultural practices, the African “tradition” of “complementarity” or power sharing and negotiation between African women and men, and the larger social and political problems confronting African women and men.<sup>32</sup>

Debates over women's and gender history reveal what may come to be a fruitful middle ground that encompasses “feminisms” between and among Western and African scholars. Zimbabwean writer and economist Paul Tiyambe Zeleza acknowledges that “gender history cannot go far without the continuous retrieval of women's history, while women's history cannot transform the fundamentally flawed paradigmatic bases of ‘mainstream’ history without gender history.”<sup>33</sup> By echoing the concept of “complementarity” espoused by some Africanist feminists, scholarship on women and gender could “balance” one another not because they are so different but because both women's and gender studies endeavor to rewrite traditional history and transform society.

Thus feminist scholars and activists of Africa, Asia, and Latin America have taken up issues such as access to clean water, housing, war, human rights, and development policy, showing how society itself, not just women's place within it, may be reconfigured.<sup>34</sup> In these intellectual and political endeavors, diverse experiences, local practices, and ideologies of womanhood and manhood must be taken seriously. Still, the ultimate challenge lies in a thorough reconceptualization of research and activism that is no longer a reaction to Western models. Broadening the time and space of the African diaspora to in-

clude the post–Atlantic slave trade era and the period of European colonialism in Africa encompasses the more complex experiences and relationships among all Atlantic communities—African, American, and European. To think creatively about the connections between gender and power on all sides of the Atlantic Ocean is to reveal more than a “renaissance” or a transformation of society; to write such a history gives birth to something entirely new.



# Essay on Sources and Methodology

Like other Africanist historians, I have been eclectic and have sought to be innovative in gathering and using evidence. Thus I have juxtaposed my reinterpretation of archival sources and analyses of ethnographies and I have examined works of fiction alongside unpublished field notes of researchers. While this diversity of research materials attests to Kétu's rich and complex history within West Africa and a broader Atlantic world, it also demonstrates the particular challenges and rewards of writing Africanist history. I have elaborated in the text on source materials where appropriate. In this essay, I discuss how I have woven sources together, reflecting the concept of "dialogue," as used in the book, to describe Kétu's ongoing relationship with the Bahia region of Brazil. By placing written and oral sources in a conversation, I have tried to capture the dynamism of African history itself.

Oral traditions—defined as town histories and genealogies passed down for generations—are one of the classic sources for precolonial African history. The conventional guides to using such sources, Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1965), David Henige's *Oral Historiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), and Joseph Miller's edited volume, *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone, England: Dawson; Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1980), provide scholars with tools to analyze facts embedded in oral data likely to have been manipulated and used for political purposes. Because of such problems with oral traditions, some scholars have ceased to use them to help reconstruct the past. Contributors to the volume edited by Luise White, Stephen Miescher, and David Cohen, *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), explore the symbolism, performance, and power relationships represented in oral traditions more than the historical content itself.

I myself decided that the methods offered by Vansina, Henige, and Miller would keep my own focus too narrow and that the approach of White, Miescher, and Cohen would distance me from the historical narrative I was trying to recreate. Borrowing from both, I took a middle road: to examine oral traditions seriously while simultaneously demonstrating their historical and symbolic power and value. So, for example, while oral traditions of Kétu's history, written down as early as the mid-nineteenth century, tell of a kingdom founded by "fathers" yet incorporate "mother figures" and wives as participants in the historical process of establishing the settlement, I do not focus on whether such stories could have been reliably handed down over the centuries. Instead, I discuss how these stories reflect contemporary ideologies about the role of "public mothers" in politics and religion, looking at oral sources more broadly and symbolically and in relation to the historical context and neighboring states. Broadening my perspective beyond Kétu meant I could draw from a larger body of texts, yielding a more forceful argument about the contradictory nature of gender relationships in West Africa and the connections to ideologies within a colonizing French nation. Viewing Kétu through a wide-angle lens also opened up links with African diaspora communities in the northeast Bahia region of Brazil.

If African oral tradition represents a valuable, lost, insider perspective, the European man's travel narrative epitomizes an outsider, and often male, bias. A close reading of texts can allow scholars to, in the words of historian Marc Bloch, "overhear what was never intended to be said."<sup>1</sup> European travel accounts that are often pro-slave trade or anti-slave trade do not only reveal generalities on kingship, religions, slave trading and culture, but also a historical trajectory of tension between the role of "mothers" and the role of "wives" throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Though the European authors of these travel narratives did not realize it, these written sources chronicle the increasing presence of royal wives. They also foretell France's anxiety about the social and legal position of African wives in its West African colonies. Inspired by Robert Harms's *The Diligent: A Voyage through the Worlds of the Slave Trade* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), which weaves many of these travel accounts into a compelling narrative of eighteenth-century West Africa, I looked further for stories and conversations in European accounts. William Snelgrave's stories about the elderly woman from the Dahomey palace rescued off the shores of Ouidah, or about his own conversation with the Dahomean king, revealed a great deal about the historical context. Thus stories and conversations embedded in traveler accounts offer a window onto the attitudes and ideas of Af-

rican women and men and of European men toward them in the precolonial era, whatever the interests and perspective of the author.

European missionaries, like European traders and travelers, were outsiders, but with their proselytizing efforts, their often longer stay in Africa, and their more intimate knowledge of local culture and language, European, American, and especially West African missionaries exposed more of their personal experience in their accounts. Missionaries' reports and letters home were part descriptive account and part conversation among missionaries and between missionaries and potential converts. In his *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), John Peel emphasizes the individual histories and religious imagery central to missionary writings. Though I examined the original journals of missionaries at the Church Missionary Society archives in Birmingham, Great Britain, and later reviewed them in microfilm at Yale University, it was in the collection of letters written by Southern Baptist missionary Thomas Bowen at the Southern Baptist Convention library in Nashville, Tennessee, that I recognized the stylized emotion yet deeply felt fervor of evangelical revival still prevalent in the nineteenth century. Thus, I analyzed missionaries' stories of sentiment as part of larger issues of religion, race, and gender.

For the period through World War I, before colonial documentation became increasingly bureaucratized and formulaic, the reports of French colonial administrators, especially lower-ranking ones on the ground, are also detailed and descriptive, exposing more of the relationship between colonial authorities and local African populations than perhaps colonial officials intended. Debates over the performance of Alaba Ida or Yá Şègén as colonial agents or over a rare child custody court case in 1912 are part of a series of letters, opinions, and judgments that were, sometimes and sometimes not, shaped by what people in Kétu were doing in everyday life. In examining these documents, I have been influenced by the "culture and colonialism" concept explored in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler's edited volume *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), which emphasizes the interplay between European and African ideas about labor, gender, sexuality, and citizenship. Often I have found the European perspective explored more fully in such studies, hence, as my historical narrative moved on multiple levels from specific West African kingdoms to the broader West African region, as well as to Europe and the Americas, I endeavored to keep Kétu central to the story.

I interviewed about a hundred individuals in Kétu (several more than

once) in the summer of 1997, from September 1998 to June 1999, from April to June 2000, and in October 2006. The majority of the interviews were in Yoruba and French, conducted with the help of my research assistant Alhaja Safouratou Mama. I had prepared questions for her to use as a guide. While I could understand the general flow of the conversation and ask for clarification, she translated my questions from French and the interviewee's responses from Yoruba. Once we had completed several interviews, she was able to conduct them more like a conversation, picking up on the tangents that she knew interested me, pressing on points that she and I had discussed about the history of Kétu. Because I had talked to both women and men, I found, embedded in those discussions, a crucial theme of my book on women and gender: men, and to some extent fatherhood. Ironically, however, I initially found it difficult to portray or to use those conversations in the book, though I had read and taught several books and essays on the nature of interviews, the power dynamic between researcher and interviewee, and the performance that is part of the interview process.<sup>2</sup>

This book is about the concept of “public motherhood” first and kingship and marriage second; it is the image of “public motherhood” that raised the theoretical and historical questions about social change and power at the center of the book. Though I have been critical of studies of gender that exclude men and masculinity, at first I myself did not intellectually engage with the kings, missionaries, and traders who were popping up in my own book and *their* relationships with women. By beginning to incorporate the conversation between “public mothers” and kings, between spouses, and between women and men who were spiritual and intellectual partners in the Brazilian religion of Candomblé, I was able to trace more sharply the changing meanings of “public motherhood” in precolonial and colonial Kétu and in a broader Atlantic world. In the process, I have carved out a “middle way” for myself, bridging the work of scholars like Edna Bay and Randy Matory, whose different approaches to gender and culture in West Africa and Brazil ultimately focus on “wifeliness.”<sup>3</sup>

I had not at first planned to include the Brazilian story in my book, but I concluded that it was an important part of the history. I first learned of Pierre Verger's extended stay in Kétu by chance, during an interview with a descendant of the *babaláwo* (father owns the secrets) or diviner who had initiated Verger and instructed him in *ifá* divination.<sup>4</sup> Although I did not conduct fieldwork on the Brazilian religion of Candomblé, I was able to examine the rich history of the religion through ethnographies, letters, and unpublished field

notes. I visited the Pierre Verger Foundation in Salvador, Brazil, to examine Verger's extensive scholarship on Atlantic world exchanges and, recalling the fortuitous remark from my field interview, came to realize his particular connection to Kétu. Letters written by Verger and other scholars, taken together with their published accounts, also revealed paradoxical concepts about women, men, and power in Candomblé, conjuring up similar images of "public motherhood" and kingship that I was examining in Atlantic Africa.

I also have incorporated a broader Atlantic world into my study to demonstrate the cosmopolitan history of a place, Kétu in Bénin, long considered a backwater. When I told my research assistant, herself from Kétu, that a nineteenth-century missionary wrote of hundreds of people attending a market day in Kétu, she did not believe me. Yet in the nineteenth century, traders from distant interior towns, and missionaries who were international travelers, passed through Kétu; by the twentieth century, different forms of those travel routes from and to Kétu were opening up again. Kétu's connection to a wider world embraces not only international travel but also regional trade and identities. Kétu residents themselves were, and are, diverse and engaged with multiple local and global contexts; the border with Nigeria, a few miles away, linked Kétu to other Yoruba-speaking towns and offered Kétu access to part of the British colonial empire.

The disparate sources I have explored have forced me not only to go beyond the usual sources in my research and analysis, but also to reconceptualize African history. I have been inspired by these texts and by my own multidisciplinary way of teaching African history with primary sources, novels, ethnography, and film. Taking into consideration the range of materials with which I seek to engage my students and illustrate Africa's dynamic history, I have tried to present the same vibrant story in this book.





# Notes

## Prologue

1. Linguist Oyekan Owomoyela reports the saying in its entirety as “mother is gold, father is glass; the day the mother dies is the day the gold is ruined; the day the father dies is the day the glass is gone,” but he does not offer any date or source. Owomoyela, *Yoruba Proverbs*, 307. Owomoyela uses the Yoruba word *jígí* for glass.

2. Egunlete Elegbede, interview with the author, September 22, 2006. There is also a popular song originally released in the 1950s by Dele Ojo and His Star Brothers Band called “Iya Ni Wura,” which celebrates women’s sacrifices in motherhood. *Iya Ni Wura*, Deje Ojo and His Star Brothers Band, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBTHDuhMcU8> (accessed July 14, 2009). People in Kétu often referred to a more recent song called “Iya Ni Wura” during my interviews in 2006, but I could not verify the singer or lyrics.

3. Yai, “Review of *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*,” 24.

4. Alaketu Aladé Ifẹ, interview with the author, September 19, 2006.

5. Garrard, “Myth and Metrology: The Early Trans-Saharan Trade,” 460. Garrard even suggests that there was the potential for gold production in the region of Ile-Ifẹ.

6. Pierre Verger, *Flux et Reflux*, 129.

7. For examples, see Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave Trade*, 34; Clapperton, *Hugh Clapperton into the Interior of Africa*, 96, 184.

8. Drewal and Mason, *Beads, Body, and Soul*, 39.

9. Alákétu Aladé Ifẹ, interview with the author, September 19, 2006.

10. For a general short discussion on the ambivalent image of women and gender in Yoruba proverbs, see Yusuf, “Contradictory Yoruba Proverbs about Women, 206–15.

11. Olinto, *The King of Ketu*, 5.

12. “Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database,” <http://www.slavevoyages.org>.

13. Eltis and Engerman, “Fluctuations in Sex and Age Ratios in the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” 310. For a more complex explanation of the changes in the ethnicity and gender of people enslaved in the Bight of Benin, see Lovejoy, “The Yoruba Factor in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade,” 40–55.

14. Eltis, “The Diaspora of Yoruba Speakers: Dimensions and Implications,” 17–39.

15. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*; Niara Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 171–72; Oyèwùmi, “Introduction: Feminism, Sisterhood, and other Foreign Relations,” 15–16.

16. Rev. Samuel Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Time*, 65–66.

17. Asiwaju, “The Alaketu of Ketu and the Onimeko of Meko,” 134–60.

18. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, xiii–xviii; Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*. For an overview of African diaspora studies, see Mann and Bay, “Shifting Paradigms in the Study of the African Diaspora,” 3–21.

19. Guyer, *Marginal Gains*, 4; Young, *Rituals of Resistance*; Sweet, *Recreating Africa*. For some, “African Atlantic” is another way of writing about the African diaspora, especially for a period prior to the nineteenth century. Other scholars use the term “Atlantic world” to examine earlier European colonial empire in the Americas. For example, see Bailyn, “The Idea of Atlantic History,” 19–41. For an overview of Atlantic world scholarship, see Games, “Atlantic History.”

20. Oyèwùmi, “Family Bonds/Conceptual Binds,” 1094, 1097. Several African feminists have emphasized a mother-centered ideology in African society. For example, see Acholonu, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*.

21. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, 10, 46.

22. Some scholars examining how women have translated “private” roles as mothers into political organizing in African, Western, and Latin American contexts have defined such action as “maternalist” politics. Maternalist politics is defined narrowly in terms of a specific (often confrontational) relationship that self-defined mothers establish with the state. Examples of maternalist politics vary and include southeastern Nigerian women’s “war” against the threat of taxation during the colonial period, black South African women’s protest of pass laws restricting movement in urban areas, Argentine women’s ongoing demonstrations for those who “disappeared” during the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983, and Western women’s demand for welfare rights in the twentieth century. While many scholars debate whether such maternalist activism is “feminist” or not, others focus on the symbolism behind maternalist politics. For a general overview of maternalist politics internationally, see Jetter, Orleck, and Taylor, *The Politics of Motherhood*; Wells, “Maternal Politics in Organizing Black South African Women,” 253; Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” 417–37; Wolfe and Tucker, “Feminism Lives,” 448; Koven and Michel, “Introduction: ‘Mother Worlds,’” 2. In terms of case studies, research on the Igbo Women’s War in 1929 in southeastern Nigeria has recognized, in different ways, how economic change and colonial taxation were perceived as threats to womanhood, whether in terms of social roles or fertility. Van Allen, “‘Aba Riots’ or ‘Women’s War,’” 59–85; Ifeka-Moller, “Female Militancy and Colonial Revolt,” 127–57; Bastian, “‘Vultures of the Marketplace,’” 260–81. Diana Taylor, in her creative interpretation of gender and the state in Argentina, argues that the activities of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo operate as a “bad script,” replicating the victimization of women and the feminization of the general population under the masculinized military regime. Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*.

23. For overviews of feminist literature on motherhood, see Snitow, “Feminism and Motherhood,” 33–51; and Arendell, “Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood,” 1192–1207. For African American critiques, see Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; James, “Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation?” 45–56.

24. Lindsay and Miescher, “Introduction: Men and Masculinities in Modern African History,” 5.

25. In 1999, a special volume on fatherhood in the *Journal of Family History* acknowledged that race was not addressed constructively in any of the contributions, none of which addressed Africa. Griswold, “Introduction to the Special Issue on Fatherhood,” 251–54.

26. Relationships between siblings and other extended family members, such as aunts or elder mentors, could also be explored in more depth. On sisters, see Sacks, *Sisters and Wives*.

## 1. Founding Fathers and Metaphorical Mothers

1. Specific to Kétou and neighboring kingdoms, see Adediran, *The Frontier States of Western Yorùbáland*, 42, 68; Barnes, “The Many Faces of Ogun,” 4–7. More generally on the theory of a matriarchal African past, see Diop, *Cultural Unity of Black Africa*; Amadiume, *Re-Inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture*. For a general discussion of the matriarchal myth, see Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*.

2. For an examination of how history, symbolism, and gender operate in oral histories in Dahomey, see Blier, “The Path of the Leopard,” 394.

3. Iya Afobaje Salamantou Egunlope Brouaima, interview with the author, November 2, 1998.

4. Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. I, 29. In Moulero’s version, the person who assists them in Panku is another man, a hunter. Moulero, “Essai historique sur la ville de Kétou (suite),” 6.

5. Moulero, “Les rois de Kétou: Ordre de succession et éducation du candidat au trône,” 11; Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. I, 49–55; Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, 73.

6. Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, 11; Adediran, *Frontier States of Western Yorùbáland*, 68.

7. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times*, 3–12; Law, *The Oyo Empire, c.1600–c.1836*, 27–29.

8. Barber, *I Could Speak until Tomorrow*, 310n16; Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 31–34; Law, “Local Amateur Scholarship and the Construction of Yoruba Ethnicity,” 55–90.

9. Steady, “African Feminism: A Worldwide Perspective,” 8; Also see Steady, “The Black Woman Cross-Culturally: An Overview,” 1–41. For an overview of literature tracing the concept of “complementarity” or “parallelism” in Latin American and Pacific societies, see Stoeltje, “Asante Queen Mothers: A Study in Female Authority,” 44–45.

10. Okonjo denies that the “mother” and the king ever “clashed.” Another scholar does find evidence of nineteenth-century conflict between a specific *omu* (mother) and king and refutes the claim that “mother” and king were literal counterparts, with equal or “parallel” power. Okonjo, “The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation,” 47; Henderson, “Onitsha Woman: The Traditional Context for Political Power,” 225, 238.

11. Barnes, “The Many Faces of Ogun,” 2, 8.

12. Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, 46.

13. Comaroff and Comaroff, eds., *Modernity and its Malcontents*; Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft*.

14. Verger, “Grandeur et décadence du culte *Ìyámi òsòròngà* (ma mère la sorcière) chez les Yoruba,” 141–243; Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Text*, 14–17.

15. Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. I, 35.

16. He also traces the origins of Kétou to Oyo-Ile rather than Ile-Ife in the process. Adediran, *Frontier States of Western Yorùbáland*, 74–80.

17. Moulero, “Essai historique sur la ville de Kétou: Le Roi Andé,” 4; Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. I, 63–64; Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, 25. Crowther may provide a description on an engraving on the Kétou palace gate depicting a Kétou victory over Dahomey “by the third king from the present one.” Parrinder takes it to be a reference to Dahomey’s attack on Iwoye during the reign of Akibiowu (c. 1780–1795), but the gory description of “Ketu victorious warriors standing in the piles of decapitated heads and their wives carrying some of the heads strung together in a triumphal march about the streets” sounds more like the violent victory that King Ande (c. 1760–1780) was said to have won over Da-

homey. Crowther, January 8, 1853, in “Account of a Journey to Ketu,” Church Missionary Society (CMS), CA2/031/128.

18. Archibald Dalzel, British governor at Cape Coast Castle (Ghana) and supporter of the slave trade, wrote of a Dahomey victory over the town itself, whereas Kétu and Dahomey traditions emphasize not only the Dahomey attack on the outlying village of Iwoye (said to be the birthplace of the mother of Alákétu Akibiowu himself), but also the coincidence of two extraordinary events: the appearance of a fatally wounded elephant who collapsed between the two armies and the occasion of a solar eclipse. The dead elephant was thought to presage the demise of one of the kings. The solar eclipse was said in Kétu traditions to be evidence of the power of the king of Kétu. Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy*, 200–01; Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. I, 69–70; Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, 34–35. For the story of the connection to Afro-Brazilian Candomblé through the kidnapped princess Otampê Ojarô, see Lima, “O conceito de “Nação” nos Candomblés da Bahia,” 83–86, and chapter 7 below. In fact, there were no solar eclipses recorded in West Africa in 1789, but there was one on June 4, 1788. See “The NASA Eclipse Website: Solar Eclipse Explorer for Africa,” <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/JSEX/JSEX-AF.html> (accessed June 15, 2009). Given that King Kpengla of Dahomey died in 1789 during a time of political unrest, partly symbolized by the rumor that he died of smallpox, the earlier solar eclipse and the image of the elephant may have been incorporated into the oral histories of the battle in both Dahomey and Kétu. On the symbolism of smallpox in death of Dahomey kings, see Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 155–59.

19. Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, 76.

20. Iroko and Igue, *Les villes Yoruba du Dahomey*, 14–16. The Akaba Idena doorway was restored and declared a historical site by UNESCO.

21. For similar examples in other Yoruba towns, see Peel, *Ijeshas and Nigerians*; Barber, *I Could Speak until Tomorrow*, 50–62; Watson, “Ibadan-A Model of Historical Facts,” 5–26.

22. Camille Elegbede, interview with the author, November 2, 1998, in the Ajapasu Kekere Compound, which claims origins among the Baatonu/Bariba; Jeanne Akanro and Vicencia Ode, interview with the author, December 9, 1998, in Gbudu Compound, which also traces the founders hometown among the Baatonu/Bariba; Camille Fagbohun and Pascal Fagbohun, interview with the author, January 15, 1999, in Mejiòsu Compound, where residents claim origins in Sabe (Savé); Maimounatou Soumanou, Nanfissatou Saliou, interview with the author, January 26, 1999, in the Ajati Compound in the Muslim quarter of Masafe, where people also trace their origins to Sabe; Felix Odjoawo, interview with the author, December 5, 1998, in Ojuare Compound, where people link their founder to the Tapa region. Lloyd, “The Yoruba Lineage,” 241; Fagbite, “Sens des Mutations Socio-Economiques à Kétu,” 52–56; Adediran, *Frontier States of Western Yorùbáland*, 184–85.

23. Goddard, “Town-Farm Relationship in Yorubaland,” 21–29. In 1853, CMS missionary Samuel Crowther pegged Ijaka Oke as the eastern boundary of the Kétu kingdom. The village was twenty-four miles east of Kétu’s town center and was a few miles away from outlying villages linked to Abẹokuta.

24. Bascom, “Urbanization Among the Yoruba,” 446–54; Wheatley, “Significance of Traditional Yoruba Urbanism,” 393–423; Lloyd, “The Yoruba: An Urban People?”; Law, “Towards a History of Urbanization in Pre-colonial Yorubaland.”

25. Nanfissatou Saliou, interview with the author, January 26, 1999. The distant ancestor whose name was forgotten in this case traveled from Savé with his wife.

26. Raymond Fashain, interview with the author, November 11, 1998.

27. Alhaja Nanfissatou Saliou and Maimounatou Soumanou, interview with the author,

January 26, 1999; Salamantou Osseni, interview with the author, March 1, 1999; Berry, *Fathers Work for Their Sons*, 47n197.

28. McCabe, “Histories of Errancy,” 46–49.

29. Adedoyin Olouye and Fatoke Casimir Elegbede, interview with the author, December 17, 1998.

30. Mamadou Imoru, interview with the author, January 28, 1999.

31. La Pin, “Story, Medium, and Masque,” 30–35.

32. CMS, CA2/031/128, Reverend Samuel Crowther, Account of Journey to Kétu, January 16, 1853.

33. Archives Nationales du Bénin (ANB), 1E11 3-1, “Rapport sur la mission accomplie dans la region Kétou-Savé du 18 janvier au 20 février 1894,” 3 mars, 1894.

34. Crowther, November 21 and November 22, 1852, in “Journal of Samuel Crowther for the quarter ending December 1852,” CMS CA 2 031–034, Reel 61, Yale University Divinity Library (YUL), New Haven, Conn.

35. YUL, CMS CA 2 031–034, Reel 61, Reverend Samuel Crowther, August 23, 1846, in “Journal of Samuel Crowther ending September 25, 1846.” When he first mentioned the Alákétu in his diary, Crowther referred to him as a “chief.”

36. Asai may have been the Esa Kétu, a royal minister charged with welcoming visitors. CMS, CA2/031/128, Reverend Samuel Crowther, January 8, January 10, and January 15, 1853, in “Account of a Journey to Kétu, January 5–19, 1853.”

37. ANB, 1E11 3-1, “Rapport sur la mission accomplie dans la region Kétou-Savé du 18 janvier au 20 février 1894,” 3 mars, 1894.

38. The five royal families are Alapini, Magbo, Aro, Mefu, and Meša, and the most recent Alákétu (kings) named from each family have been: Aladé Ifé(Aro), Adétútú (Magbo), Ade-wori (Alapini), Odemufekun (Mefu), Onyegen (Mesha).

39. ANB, 1E11 3-1, “Rapport sur la mission accomplie dans la region Kétou-Savé du 18 janvier au 20 février 1894,” 3 mars, 1894; Pied, “De Porto-Novo à Oyo, février–mars 1891,” 265.

40. The term “oral historian” is Susan Geiger’s; Miller uses the term “oral narrator.” Miller, “Introduction: Listening for the African Past,” 5–6; Geiger, “What’s So Feminist about Women’s Oral History?” 180n6.

41. R. P. Thomas Moulero was ordained in 1928. Paul Ignace Faly, also of Kétu, was ordained in 1949. Asiwaju, *Western Yorubaland under European Rule 1889–1945*, 242.

42. Ibid., 33n11; Drewal, “Thomas Moulero: Historian of Gèlèdè,” *The University of African Art Press*, 2008, 4, <http://www.universityofafricanart.org/Image/Text/drewal%20moulero.pdf> (accessed August 13, 2009); Drewal and Drewal, *Gèlèdè: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba*; Olinto, *The Water House*, 210.

43. The manuscript for Dunglas’s article is located at the former Institut de la Recherche Appliqué du Dahomey (IRAD). Edouard Dunglas, “Légendes et Histoire du Royaume-Kétou,” typescript, n.d. British missionary and religious scholar Geoffrey Parrinder worked with Dunglas during his research, publishing an English version based on his collaboration with Dunglas. Even though Parrinder claimed to have done his own additional research to produce an original work, since it is so close to Dunglas’s version, it will not be analyzed in detail here. Parrinder’s text is footnoted where relevant. Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, 3. For a recent French translation of Parrinder’s book, see Parrinder, *Les Vicissitudes de l’histoire de Kétou*.

44. Moulero, “Essai historique,” vol. 9, 7.

45. Iroko, “Les personnes âgées n’ont jamais eu en Afrique le monopole de la tradition.”

46. Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. I, 11–15.

47. Moulero, “Essai historique sur la ville de Kétou,” vol. 9, 7n1; Moulero, “Essai historique sur la ville de Kétou: Le Roi Adiro (suite),” 3; Moulero wrote that it was “difficult to discern between legend and the historical,” in Moulero, “Essai historique sur la ville de Kétou: Les travaux des premiers rois,” 4.

48. Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writings*, 40.

49. Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. I, 37.

50. *Ibid.*, 60–61, 64, 100–101. Dunglas also collected songs in the Gbe language of Dahomey. For example, see Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. II, 114, 118.

51. Moulero, “Les rois de Kétou,” 7–8.

52. Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. I, 59.

53. Cohen, *Rulers of Empire*; Harrison writes of earlier scholar-administrators and their engagement with West African Islam in Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa, 1860–1960*, 97–117.

54. Dunglas did not mention Moulero in his acknowledgments. Parrinder claimed that they consulted Moulero’s work together. Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. II, 11–15; Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, 3.

55. La Pin, “Story, Medium, and Masque,” 144–45.

56. Moulero, “Conquête de Kétou,” 61; Dunglas, “La Première attaque,” 7–19.

57. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 112. Emphasis mine.

58. Beidelman, “Myth, Legend and Oral History,” 74–97; Miller, “Introduction: Listening for the African Past,” 5–6; Cooper, “Oral Sources and the Challenge of African History,” 191–215.

59. White, Miescher, and Cohen, “Introduction: Voices, Words, and African History,” 1–27.

60. Moulero, “Essai historique sur la ville de Kétou,” 7.

61. Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. I, 13. Geoffrey Parrinder wrote his English version of Kétu history to keep it from becoming lost to an English readership. Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, 3.

62. White, Miescher, and Cohen, “Introduction: Voices, Words, and African History,” 2, 11–12.

63. Barber, *I Could Speak until Tomorrow*, 58.

64. La Pin, “Story, Medium, and Masque,” 20.

## 2. How Kings Lost Their Mothers

1. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times*, 63; Kaplan, “*Iyoba*, the Queen Mother of Benin,” 72–102; Hanson, “Queen Mothers and Good Government in Buganda,” 219–36.

2. Law, *The Oyo Empire, c.1600-c.1836*, 37–43.

3. *Ibid.*, 43–44.

4. Willem Bosman, a Dutch trader stationed at Ouidah in the late 1690s, does not mention Oyo by name but describes their well-known use of a cavalry. Willem Bosman, “A new and accurate description of the coast of Guinea, divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts.” *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale. Wesleyan University, <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&contentSet=ECCOArticles&type=multipage&tabID=To01&prodId=ECCO&docId=CW101007353&source=gale&userGroupName=31841&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE> (accessed July 2, 2009); Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de la Nigritie*, 235–36; Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo*, 222.

5. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times*, 63.
6. *Ibid.*, 59–60, 62, 65–66, 76.
7. *Ibid.*, 64.
8. Clapperton, *Hugh Clapperton into the Interior of Africa*, 159–60.
9. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times*, 66. In contrast, the Oni Ojà in Kétu was a eunuch the king was never allowed to see, an interdiction that led to the death of one Kétu king who was tricked into meeting the Oni Ojà on market day. Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol.I, 57–58; Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, 44.
10. Drewal and Drewal, *Gèlèdè: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba*, 10–11.
11. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times*, 65–66.
12. Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More*, 9.
13. *Ibid.*, 10.
14. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times*, 63, 66.
15. Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, 11.
16. Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More*, 79.
17. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times*, 66.
18. *Ibid.*, 56.
19. Clapperton, *Hugh Clapperton into the Interior of Africa*, 107.
20. Awe, “Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura (Owner of Gold);” Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More*, 18–20.
21. Law, *Oyo Empire, c.1600-c.1836*, 245–99; Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 36.
22. Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, 45–46, 48, 60.
23. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 48. Suzanne Blier provides the translation of Aligbonon’s name (which she spells Aligbonu) and gives alternative versions and interpretations of the origins of the Dahomey kingdom. Blier, “The Path of the Leopard,” 401–402, 402n41.
24. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 52.
25. Many Europeans visited Ouidah and Dahomey during the eighteenth century, but only in the twentieth century did European writers hear that Na Geze helped her father defeat Ouidah in 1727 by obtaining the missing parts for the guns used by her father’s army. She had, as the story goes, treated the king of Ouidah and his leading ministers to ample food and drink the day before the attack and ordered her servants to wet the stores of Ouidah gunpowder to render it ineffective. *Ibid.*, 59–60.
26. *Ibid.*, 74–76.
27. *Ibid.*, 76. On placeholders in Dahomey more generally, see Blier, “Path of the Leopard,” 391.
28. Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea*, 34.
29. *Ibid.*, 38–39; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 11, 353.
30. Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea*, 97–106.
31. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours*, 77–80; Law, “Slave-Raiders and Middlemen,” 45–68.
32. Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea*, 12–25; Harms, *The Diligent*, 199–221.
33. Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea*, 61–63.
34. *Ibid.*, 130; Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahádee*, 27, 54.
35. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 111–17.
36. *Ibid.*, 92–96.
37. *Ibid.*, 91.
38. Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de la Nigritie*, 172–73.
39. Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahádee*, 40–48, 107–108. Robin Law and Edna



Bay examine the implications of the Tegan's actions, in Norris's uncorroborated account, for the emergence of the Yovogan. Law, "The Slave-Trader as Historian," 229–30; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 108–109.

40. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 152.

41. Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy*, 82, 175–76.

42. Pires, *Crônica de uma embaixada*, 59, 84, 93–94; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 67, 151.

43. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 74, 78–84, 162.

44. Between 1616 and 1863, 1,534,827 enslaved Africans embarked ships from ports in the Bight of Benin, with 1,333,739 of them disembarking, mainly in the Americas (about 700 went to Europe and just over 1,200 are listed as "other"). "Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database," <http://www.slavevoyages.org>, <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1514&yearTo=1866&mjbyptimp=60500> (accessed June 9, 2009).

45. The actual number of ships providing information on the sex and age of slave captives is small, less than 13 percent, so age and gender ratios are reconstructed based on historical data available. Eltis, "Construction of the Trans-Atlantic Database" (accessed on June 9, 2009). For the gender ratios for the Bight of Benin for the eighteenth-century Atlantic slave trade, the majority of the information comes from ships that took slaves to the Caribbean rather than Brazil, where the vast majority of slaves from this region—almost 60 percent—landed. Also see Eltis and Engerman, "Was the Slave Trade Dominated by Men?" 237–57.

46. Most of the limited data on sex ratios in the eighteenth century refers to ships that sold slaves in the Caribbean. "Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database," <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1701&yearTo=1800&mjbyptimp=60500To> (accessed June 9, 2009).

47. Paul Lovejoy suggests that women who were enslaved and sent to the Americas from the Bight of Benin region in the nineteenth century tended to be Yoruba-speaking and from nearer the coast because they were more likely to be pawned for debts. Women and girls who were pawns garnered a larger profit when sold to slave traders if the debt was not paid. Lovejoy, "The Yoruba Factor in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade," 49–50.

48. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 143.

49. *Ibid.*, 199–200.

50. Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea*, 50–51.

51. Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de la Nigritie*, 165; Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahádee*, 88–89, 99.

52. Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahádee*, 99, 101–102, 108.

53. *Ibid.*, 110–11.

54. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 65–66.

55. Clapperton, *Hugh Clapperton into the Interior of Africa*, 153.

56. Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahádee*, 50–51.

57. Dalzel, *History of Dahomy*, 211.

58. Pires, *Crônica de uma embaixada*, 70–71.

59. Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahádee*, 128–29; Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy*, 204–05, 222–23; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 160–61.

60. D'Almeida-Topor, *Les Amazones*; Law, "The 'Amazons' of Dahomey," 245–60; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 136–39, 207.

61. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans*, 66; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 208.

62. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 240–41; Herskovits, *Dahomey*, 111.

63. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 15, 72.

64. Herskovits, *Dahomey*, 111.

65. Burton, *A Mission to Gelele*, 211; Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans*, 238; Bay, “The Royal Women of Abomey,” 281–88; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 243–44.

66. For a general discussion of the potential power of sisters in extended families, see Sacks, *Sisters and Wives*; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 244–47.

67. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 271–72.

68. Gollmer, August 16, 1859, in “Missionary Tour to the Ketu Country,” CMS, 043/132.

### 3. Giving Away Kétu’s Secret

1. Clapperton, *Hugh Clapperton into the Interior of Africa*, 144.

2. Imam Alhaji Nassirou Raji, interview with the author, February 23, 1999; Alhaji Machoudi, interview with the author, December 2, 1998. In the short pamphlet produced to celebrate the centennial in 1994 of Kétu’s rebuilding after the war with Dahomey, Sofo is named simply as the first imam of Kétu, and the engaging story of Sofo’s many wives is omitted. Odjo, “A la découverte de Kétou,” 11.

3. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 187–90.

4. Matory describes *ifá* divination and Islam as in a “mutually constituting dialogue.” Matory, “Rival Empires,” 496.

5. Islam arrived on the African continent and was diffused through West Africa, particularly in the Mali empire far northwest of Yoruba towns, at least by the fourteenth century. It may have been as early as the latter sixteenth century when Muslim practices from Mali reached Yoruba populations, though conversion to Islam in West Africa occurred most rapidly and extensively during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Peel, *Religious Encounter*, 115–16.

6. Matory, “Rival Empires,” 496; Owomoyela, *Yoruba Proverbs*, 468–69.

7. Imam Alhaji Nassirou Raji, interview with the author, February 23, 1999. “Kanike” is specifically associated with Hausa speakers from the region of Kanuri. Gbadamosi, *The Growth of Islam among the Yoruba*, 25; also see reference to Kaniki in Ouidah in Marty, *Études sur l’Islam au Dahomey*, 108.

8. Adediran, “Islam and Political Crises in Kétu,” 7.

9. The Kanike represent one or two of approximately twenty Muslim lineages that occupy Masafe and Yawomi quarters. People view Ile Laku (“big house”) compound in Masafe as the home of the actual descendants of Sofo or the Kanike. Alhaji Lawani Kifuli, interview with the author, December 3 and 4, 1998. Masafe Owa also may be an offshoot of Ile Laku. One Muslim man noted that though people say that Muslims are foreigners, the only *àlejò ọba* (strangers of the ruler) were at Ile Laku. Interview with the author. Name of interviewee has been omitted.

10. For a reference to the Kétu Muslim quarter and its mosque in the nineteenth century, see Church Missionary Society Archives (CMS), CA2 031/128, Samuel J. Crowther, “Account of a Journey to Kétu,” January 15, 1853. The Muslim quarters in Yoruba towns are often known as *sabo*, understood to be a shortened version of the Hausa phrase *sabon gari*, meaning “new town.” Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*, 9. The other common name for Muslim neighborhoods in West Africa is *zongo*. Cohen notes that the Hausa word *zango* refers to cattle markets in Western Nigeria, in contrast to the term *sabo*, which is used to refer to living areas of Muslim strangers. Hausa Muslims in Ghana live in neighborhoods called *zongo*, and the Muslim part of Cotonou, Bénin, is also known as the Zongo. Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*, 224n6; Schildkrout, *People of the Zongo*, 67.

11. Ivor Wilks discusses this relationship between Muslim migrants and their hosts as part

of a “Suwarian” tradition, prevalent in areas linked to the former Mali and Songhay empires. Wilks, “The Transmission of Islamic Learning in the Western Sudan,” 162–97.

12. Many of the towns and villages in the region visited by Captain Hugh Clapperton in the 1820s were later destroyed by war. Thomas Bowen to Brother Taylor, July 1st or 10th, 1851. Letter taken from Home and Foreign Mission Journal of February 1852, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives (SBHLA), Microfilm (MF) 2040-1.

13. Gollmer, *Charles Andrew Gollmer*, 148.

14. Sanders, “The Hamitic Hypothesis,” 521–32.

15. Thomas Bowen to (Brother) Rev. J. B. Taylor, November 21, 1851, SBLHA, MF 2040-1.

16. Thomas Bowen to (Brother) Rev. J. B. Taylor, November 13, 1859, SBLHA, MF 2040-2.

17. McKenzie, “Samuel Crowther’s Attitude to Other Faiths during the Early Period,” 6.

18. Crowther, January 9, 1853, in “Account of Journey to Ketu,” CMS, CA2/031/128.

19. This would have been the five-day market as opposed to the daily or more local regional market held on different days. Crowther, January 11, 1853, in “Account of Journey to Ketu,” CMS, CA2/031/128.

20. Ali vacated his quarters for Crowther during Crowther’s visit. Crowther, January 7 and January 12, 1853, in “My Journey to Ketu,” CMS, 021/1-24. Biodun Adediran interprets the displacement of Ali as an insult that encouraged anti-Christian sentiment among the Muslim populations, Adediran, “Islam and Political Crises in Kétu,” 11; Crowther, January 16, 1853, in “My Journey to Ketu,” CMS, 021/1-24.

21. James Barber, April 3, 1853, in “My Journey to Ketu,” CMS, 021/1-24.

22. James Barber, June 25, 1853, in “James Barber’s Second Journey to Ketu,” CMS, 021/1-24; Adediran, “The Ketu Mission, 1853–1859,” 89–104.

23. Gollmer, August 15, 1859, in “Missionary Tour to the Ketu Country,” CMS, 043/132. The fresh drinking water was originally delivered to Gollmer on a Sunday and he at first wanted to refuse it altogether but then agreed to accept it on another day to avoid “disturb[ing] [his] friendly relations” with the Muslim man. Similar incidents had occurred during previous visits by missionaries. When the Alákétu Adebias wished to send gifts to Crowther on a Sunday, Crowther advised that no work could be done on that day, and the royal ministers opted to give the gifts on another day. Crowther, January 9, 1853, in “My Journey to Ketu,” CMS, 021/1-24. During his second visit to Kétu, Barber completely refused a gift sent to him by the newly named Alákétu because it was delivered on a Sunday. Barber, June 26, 1853, in “My Journey to Ketu,” CMS, 021/1-24.

24. Gollmer, August 18, 1859, in “Missionary Tour to the Ketu Country,” CMS, 043/132.

25. The factions that emerged after Alákétu Adebias’s death continued to clash during the reign of the subsequent king, Alákétu Adiro Olumaja, perhaps explaining why he fled to an outlying village of Kétu. Moulero, “Essai historique sur la ville de Kétou: Le Roi Adiro (suite),” 4.

26. Adediran, “The Ketu Mission,” 89–104. Authors have argued that African communities viewed Islam and Christianity as additions to existing indigenous religious pantheons. Peel, “The Pastor and the Babalawo,” 338–69.

27. James Barber, June 24, 1853, in “James Barber’s Second Journey to Ketu,” CMS, 021/1-24.

28. Moulero, “Essai historique sur la ville de Kétou,” 4.

29. Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. II, 97–99.

30. Arigba’s name remained an honorary title in Kétu; people remember another infamous man named Arigba in the 1920s or 1930s whose own story may have merged with that of the nineteenth-century figure. Alákétu Adétútù also granted the title to a wealthy, influential Muslim man, the former husband of my research assistant.

31. Dunglas reports that Pakoyi was also a “Minister of Muslim Affairs” in Kétu, with the

title “Olumale” (leader of Muslims). Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. II, 149; Moulero, “Conquête de Kétou,” 62.

32. Moulero, “Conquête de Kétou,” 62; Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. II, 135–43.

33. Bibliothèque Nationale de Bénin (BNB), UOD 203-III, “Les Deux Guerres de Kétou 1882 et 1884 ou 1884–1886 et Conquête de Kétou par Glélé et Conquête d’Abomey par la France—d’après un témoin oculaire,” Undated typescript, 14–15.

34. Interviews with the author. Names of the interviewees have been omitted. The Muslim community in Agbome in the early twentieth century consisted primarily of Kétu descendants and former Kétu slaves. Archives Nationales du Senegal (ANS) 8G 14, Cercle d’Abomey au Gouverneur du Dahomey, 6 août 1907. Maupoil, “Contribution à l’étude de l’origine musulmane,” 94. Maupoil found that the house of Arepa’s descendants was in ruin by the 1930s. Residents had deserted it after 1892. The fate of the descendants of Arepa’s many “wives” remains unclear.

35. Alhaja Safouratou Mama, interview with the author, October 5, 2006.

36. Lloyd, “Agnatic and Cognatic Descent among the Yoruba,” 484–500.

37. Interview with the author. Name of interviewee has been omitted.

38. Interview with the author. Name of interviewee has been omitted.

39. Thomas Bowen to (Brother) Rev. J. B. Taylor, November 21, 1851, SBLHA, MF 2040-1.

40. Adegnika and Djossa, “Les Premières heures d’évangélisation à Kétou,” 26.

41. Assétou Ayouba is identified by name, along with a photograph, in (BNB), UOD 203-III, “Les Deux Guerres de Kétou;” Moulero, “Conquête de Kétou,” 64–67.

42. Morton-Williams, “A Yoruba Woman Remembers Servitude,” 102–17.

43. On the expanded industry of women in the nineteenth-century Dahomey palace, see Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 210–13.

44. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours*, 149.

45. Edna Bay, “Servitude and Success in the Palace of Dahomey,” 145, 200–209.

46. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours*, 148.

47. Miers and Kopytoff, “Slavery as an Institution of Marginality,” 18–20; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

48. Crowther, January 15, 1853, in “Account of a Journey to Ketu,” CMS, CA2/031/128.

49. Crowther, January 16, 1853, in “Account of a Journey to Ketu,” CMS, CA2/031/128.

50. Crowther, January 11, 1853, in “Account of a Journey to Ketu,” CMS, CA2/031/128.

51. Crowther, January 16, 1853, in “Account of a Journey to Ketu,” CMS, CA2/031/128.

52. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891*, 106–108, 245–53; Ayandele, *Missionary Impact in Modern Nigeria, 1842–1914*, 201–202, 206, 210–16. Crowther pronounced harshly against polygyny as part of the Lambeth Conference in 1888.

53. Ajayi, “Samuel Ajayi Crowther of Oyo,” 293–94, 299, 302–303.

54. *Ibid.*, 305–306n45; Samuel Crowther, August 21, 1846, journal for the quarter ending September 25, 1846, CMS CA 2 031–034, copy at Yale University Divinity Library Film Ms109.

55. James Barber, April 3, 1853, in “My Journey to Ketu,” CMS, 021/1–24.

56. Barber, June 26, 1853, in “James Barber’s Second Journey to Ketu,” CMS, 021/1–24.

57. Moulero, “Essai historique sur la ville de Kétou,” 3–5. It is possible that the story of the favorite wife and her curse upon Kétu is an embellishment used to explain the calamity that befell Kétu a few years later.

58. Gollmer, *Charles Andrew Gollmer*, 180.

59. Charles Andrew Gollmer, August 12, 1859, in “Missionary Tour to the Ketu Country, Journal Extracts for the half year ending September 2, 1859,” CMS, 043/132.

60. Gollmer, August 12, 1859, "Missionary Tour to the Ketu Country," CMS, 043/132.
61. Gollmer, August 15, 1859, in "Missionary Tour to the Ketu Country," CMS, 043/132.
62. Gollmer, August 16–17, 1859, in "Missionary Tour to the Ketu Country," CMS, 043/132.
63. Gollmer, August 16, 1859, in "Missionary Tour to the Ketu Country," CMS, 043/132.
64. Aublet, *La Guerre au Dahomey 1888–1893*, 334; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 297–98.
65. Moulero, "Conquête de Kétou," 67; Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 304–305. While it is unclear if the woman was Behanzin's biological mother or a "public mother," the act and symbolism of the sacrifice demonstrates profound despair.
66. Garcia, *Le Royaume du Dahomé face*, 249–54.
67. Hazoumé, "Tata Ajachê soupo ma ha awouinyan," *La Reconnaissance Africaine* 1 (1925): 7–9; Hazoumé, "Tata Ajachê soupo ma ha awouinyan," *La Reconnaissance Africaine* 2 (1925): 7–8; Hazoumé, "Tata Ajachê soupo ma ha awouinyan," *La Reconnaissance Africaine* 3 (1925): 7–8.
68. Athanase Allayé, interview with the author, September 23, 2006.
69. Deogratias Odelui, former mayor, interview with the author, January 14, 1999.
70. ANB, 1E14 1–4, "Rapport Politique—Ouidah," January 1904; Vicencia Ode, interview with the author, December 9, 1998.
71. Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (AMAE), Chargé du Portugal à Paris sur la répatiation des Dahoméens, 4 août, 1898, New Series, Dahomey 67 (1896–1911); ANB, 1E11 1, Témoin d'un ancien esclave de Kétou à São Tomé, 8 avril 1900.
72. Pellet, "Au Dahomey de Porto-Novo à Kétou," 561–63; Pellet, "Au Dahomey de Porto-Novo à Kétou," 573–76. Pellet later made a speech in 1901 in which he rejected the idea of mass liberation of slaves in West Africa. Pellet, "Rapport de Mgr. Pellet," 5.

#### 4. "Where women really matter"

1. One of the earliest examples of French women formally serving in the French administration comes from Morocco a couple of years later, when French women were recruited as arts educators for Moroccan women; see Irbouh, *Art in the Service of Colonialism*. In Algeria, wives of colonial administrators, such as French feminist Hubertine Auclert at the turn of the century and writer Marie Bugéja after World War I, wrote politicized tracts about French colonial policy. See, for example, Clancy-Smith, "Islam, Gender, and Identities in the Making of French Algeria," 167–72; Eichner, "*La Citoyenne* in the World," 63–84; Bowlan, "Civilizing Gender Relations in Algeria," 175–92. For African women as colonial agents in British colonial West Africa, see Day, "The Female Chiefs of the Mende, 1885–1977"; Day, "Nyarroh of Bandasuma, 1885–1914," 415–37. After the war, there would be women French colonial officials in French West Africa, such as Denise Moran Savineau, discussed below in chapter 5. In their introduction to their volume on African colonial intermediaries and employees, Benjamin Lawrence, Emily Osborn, and Richard Roberts note the limited analysis of women and gender in their compilation. Lawrence, Osborn, and Roberts, "African Intermediaries and the 'Bargain' of Collaboration," 26–28.

2. ANB, 1E11 2–3, Bertheux, "Rapport sur situation politique de la partie orientale Zaganado, Kétou-Hollis-Adja-Ouééré," 22 mai 1911.

3. Nago is the term used in Dahomey to describe Yoruba speakers. ANB, 1E 11 1–5, "Transmission d'un rapport et d'un dossier annexe en Commission permanente du conseil de Gouvernement relatifs au rattachement du canton de Kétou à la circonscription provisoire de Pobé," Lieutenant-Gouverneur du Dahomey à Gouverneur de l'Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF), 17 octobre 1915.

4. "Royal wife" is not the equivalent of "queen" in the French sense of the word.

5. Institut pour la Recherche Appliqué du Dahomey (IRAD), Document du Porto-Novo 20, Cercle de Pobé-Kétou. Anonymous and undated document describing the 1910s, attributed to Edouard Dunglas, though he was an administrator in Kétou decades later.

6. ANB, 1E 11 3–1, Lieutenant H. Aubé, “Rapport sur la mission accomplie dans la région Kétou-Savé du 18 janvier au 20 février 1894,” 3 mars 1894.

7. Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, 66.

8. Babatunde Oroufila, interview with the author, June 24, 1997; Iyalode Basilia Abero, interview with the author, July 16, 1997; Soumanou Ganiou and Kelani Guiwa, interview with the author, January 29, 1999.

9. In previous publications, she is referred to as Ida Alaba, with her title preceding her name. The French often called her Queen Ida but during my interviews people always called her Alaba Ida.

10. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, 113.

11. The unsigned and undated document housed at IRAD, Document of Porto-Novo 20, refers to her as *chef du canton* (head of district). The IRAD document also suggests that she was consulted on the performance of village heads. Asiwaju writes that Alaba was the head of the district, but based on interviews rather than on French colonial documents. Asiwaju, “The Alaketu of Ketu,” 145. The following document from 1915 clearly states that Onyegen was *chef du canton*, Centre des Archives Outre-Mer (CAOM), 14 Mi 837, “Demande de rattachement du Canton de Kétou au Cercle Provisoire du Pobé,” Lieutenant-Gouverneur du Dahomey à Gouverneur Général de l’AOF, 17 octobre 1915.

12. Babatunde Oroufila, interview with the author, June 24, 1997.

13. Bénin, Direction des Archives Nationales, “Rapport du tournée,” 86.

14. Drewal, “Symbols of Possession,” 15, 17; IRAD, Document of Porto-Novo 20; Pierre Idowu Ladele, interview with the author, September 30, 2006.

15. ANB, 1E 20 2–3, “Rapport Mensuel, Cercle de Zagnanado,” janvier 1906. Administrative circles were akin to a province.

16. ANB, 1E 11 2–4, “Rapport sur l’incident du village de Digne,” 11 novembre 1912.

17. IRAD, Document of Porto-Novo 20. Several villages listed have other men who served as head or “chief” of the village. For the full list of villages put under jurisdiction including Ilikimu, Issélou, Idigne, Ilahé, Ilara, and Obatèdo, see CAOM, 14 Mi 837, “Rattachement du Canton de Kétou au Cercle de Pobé,” 13 juillet 1915.

18. ANB, 1E 11 2–4, “Telegramme Officiel,” 12 avril 1911.

19. ANB, 1E 11 2–4, “Cercle de Zagnanado, Interrogatoire de Fagbité,” 22 avril 1911.

20. ANB, 1E 11 1–5, “Retour de l’ Ex-Queen Ida,” Le Capitaine Malnous de l’Infanterie Commandant le Cercle à Gouverneur du Dahomey, 17 mai 1918.

21. Asiwaju, *Western Yorubaland under European Rule 1889–1945*, 149n17; Soule Brouaima, interview with the author, December 10, 1998.

22. ANS, 2G10 22, “Situation politique et administrative, 1909,” 21 mars 1910. The highest office in each West African colony actually was lieutenant governor; the head of the entire French West Africa federation of colonies was governor general.

23. People referred to the educated African interpreter as *òyimbó* or as “white man” or as “European” because of his status. ANB, 1E 11 2–3, Lieutenant-Gouverneur p.i. à Gouverneur Général de l’AOF, 24 mai 1911.

24. IRAD, Document of Porto-Novo 20.

25. ANB, 1E20 4-2, “Situation politique, Cercle de Zagnanado, juin 1908.”

26. ANB, 1E11 2-3, Bertheux, “Rapport sur la situation politique de la partie orientale Zagnanado, Kétou-Hollis-Adja-Ouéré,” 22 mai 1911.

27. Bénin, Direction des Archives Nationales, “Rapport du tournée,” 84.
28. *Ibid.*, 85.
29. ANB, 1E 11 2-4, “Rapport sur l’incident du village de Digne,” 11 novembre 1912.
30. On several occasions, before he became incapacitated and was replaced by assistant chiefs, Alákétu Onyegen requested the assistance of guards or other personnel to collect taxes. ANB, 1 E11 1-2 “L’Administrateur Juillet St. Lager (Cercle de Zagnanado) à Lieutenant-Gouverneur du Dahomey,” 21 février 1905 and 18 août 1905.
31. ANB, 1E 11 1, “Rapport sur le recrutement dans le canton de Kétou,” 13 juillet 1915.
32. CAOM, 14 Mi 837, “Le Chef de Poste Auxiliaire Barretto à l’Administrateur du Cercle,” 2 août 1915.
33. CAOM, 14 Mi 837, “Telegramme Officiel,” 7 septembre 1915.
34. ANB, 1E11 2–3, “Rapport concernant le règlement à Kétou, des incidents signalés par l’Administrateur du Cercle à Gouverneur de la Colonie,” 21 septembre 1915.
35. On the practice of suicide among weakened Yoruba kings, see Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times*, 168–77.
36. ANB, 1E11 1–5, “Rapport du Tournée,” 29 septembre 1915.
37. CAOM, 14 Mi 837, “Demande de Rattachement du Canton de Kétou au Cercle Provisoire du Pobé,” Lieutenant-Gouverneur du Dahomey à Gouverneur Général de l’AOF, 17 octobre 1915. In an earlier version of the report, the French official refers to Onyegen as the king. CAOM 14 Mi 837, “Rapport concernant le règlement à Kétou, des incidents signalés par l’Administrateur du Cercle à M. le Gouverneur de la Colonie,” 21 or 29 septembre 1915. At one point, the local French official refers to Abimbòla as the “chef de Kétou,” but the meaning is unclear. CAOM, 14 Mi 837, L’Administrateur du Cercle à M. le Lieutenant-Gouverneur du Dahomey en tournée, 15 septembre 1915.
38. Crowther, January 11, 1853, in “Account of a Journey to Ketu,” CMS, CA2/031/128; Gollmer, August 15, 1859, in “Missionary Tour to the Ketu Country,” CMS, 043/132.
39. Soule Brouaïma, interview with the author, December 10, 1998.
40. Salamantou Osseni, interview with the author, March 1, 1999.
41. Céline Idowu, Boyoko Iko, and Sikiratu Idowu, interview with the author, March 1, 1999; Adebayo Adegbite and Adeniran Alabi Fagbohun, interview with the author, March 7, 1999.
42. Celine Idowu, Boyoko Iko, and Sikiratu Idowu, interview with the author, March 1, 1999.
43. Lloyd, “Sacred Kingship and Government among the Yoruba,” 221–37.
44. Benjamin Oyewusi, interview with the author, November 27 and 30, 1998; Asiwaju, “The Alaketu of Ketu,” 146.
45. Iya Afobaje Salamantou Egunlope Brouaïma, interview with the author, November 2 and 26, 1998.
46. Asiwaju, *Western Yorubaland under European Rule 1889–1945*, 271–72.
47. Palau Marti, *Le Roi-Dieu au Bénin*, 59.
48. ANB, 1E 11 1–5, “Destitution de la Reine Ida de Kétou,” Le Capitaine Commandant de Cercle de Holli-Kétou, 2 mars 1918.
49. ANB, 1E 11 1–5, “Retour de l’ Ex-Queen Ida,” Le Capitaine Malnous de l’Infanterie Commandant le Cercle à Gouverneur du Dahomey, 17 mai 1918; Saoudatou Moussa, interview with the author, February 19, 1999.
50. Parrinder reports that she died in 1938 in Irocogny, a village outside of Kétu’s central town. Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, 66.
51. Mamadou Imoru, interview with the author, January 28, 1999.

52. Celine Idowu, Boyoko Iko, and Sikiratou Idowu, interview with the author, March 1, 1999.
53. Barber, “Going too Far in Okuku,” 71–83.
54. Isola, *Efunsetan Aniwura, Iyalode Ibadan and Tinuubu, Iyalode Egba*, 6.
55. Awe, “Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura,” 57.
56. Achebe, *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings*, 197–217.
57. Barber, “How Man Makes God,” 724–45; Barnes, “The Many Faces of Ogun,” 8.
58. ANB, 1E 11 2–4, “Rapport sur l’incident du village de Digne,” 11 novembre 1912.
59. Bachirou Babatunde Olofindji, interview with the author, May 8, 1999, Indigne; Souberou Inita and Idji Inita, interview with the author, Ilikimu, May 8, 1999.
60. Alaba Ida waged most of her failed recruitment drives in the small Gbe-speaking villages near Kétu or the eastern Yoruba villages under Yá Şègén’s jurisdiction, avoiding the central town or heartland of the kingdom.
61. Asiwaju, *Western Yorubaland under European Rule 1889–1945*, 94; Alhaji Lawani Kifuli, interview with the author, December 3 and 4, 1998.
62. IRAD, Document du Porto-Novo 20. Ondo is an *òrìṣà* who possesses or “mounts” his priests, who were described as males in accounts from the 1950s and 1970s. The priesthood may have changed over the years, or Yá Şègén’s title may have been unique to Obatèdo. Verger, “Trance and Convention in Nago-Yoruba Spirit Mediumship,” 50–66; Drewal, “Symbols of Possession,” 15–24.
63. Iya Libara Catherine Oyewole Adebisi, interview with the author, July 15, 1997.
64. Accampo, “Gender, Social Policy and the Formation of the Third Republic,” 1–27.
65. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, 11.
66. Even in Gorée, Saint Louis, Dakar, and Rufisque—the Four Communes of Senegal first established in 1848, in which resident Africans technically enjoyed rights as citizens—French and mixed-raced communities initially dominated local politics until political alliances that included Western-educated Africans and Muslims coalesced in the election of African deputy Blaise Diagne in 1916. Nevertheless, throughout the colonial period, most African residents of the Four Communes remained restricted in their political power and influence in relation to the French administration. See Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 97–139.
67. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans*.
68. William Ponty, “Circulaire sur la politique indigène,” 22 septembre 1909, *Journal Officiel du Dahomey*.
69. I borrow the term “new men” from Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, 113.
70. Alice Conklin criticizes scholarship that implies that France simply wanted to change Africans into Frenchmen. *Ibid.*, 73–74.
71. William Ponty, “Session de l’ouverture du Conseil de Gouvernement de l’Afrique Occidentale Française, 14 December 1908,” *Journal Officiel du Dahomey*.
72. Gouverneur Général Ponty à Lieutenant-Gouverneur Dahomey, 12 avril 1908, *Journal Officiel du Dahomey*.
73. CAOM, 574/1, “Rapport politique du 4ème trimestre,” Gouverneur Général AOF à Ministre des Colonies, 9 mars 1914.
74. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, 176–78.
75. François Clozel, “Discours au Conseil du Gouvernement de l’Afrique Occidentale Française, 29 novembre 1915,” *Journal Officiel du Dahomey*.
76. CAOM, 574/1, François Clozel à Gabriel Angoulvant, 13 juin, 1916; CAOM, 574/1, Gabriel Angoulvant à Ministre des Colonies, 8 mars 1917. From June to December 1916, Gabriel Angoulvant, infamous for his brutal “pacification” campaign in Côte d’Ivoire, served as Clozel’s acting governor general. He was asked to keep an eye on Noufflard’s handling of the events in Da-



homey. Noufflard himself was eventually dismissed because of his handling of the upstarts in the Ohoi region.

77. CAOM, 574/3, “Rapport Politique, 2ème trimestre 1917,” Gouverneur Général Fourn à Ministre des Colonies, 13 juillet 1917.

78. Governor General Joost Van Vollenhoven, “Circulaire au sujet des chefs indigènes,” 15 août 1917, *Journal Officiel du Dahomey*.

79. CAOM, 574/3, “Rapport politique 3ème trimestre 1917,” Lieutenant Général Fourn à Gouverneur Général AOF, 29 octobre 1917.

80. Accampo, “Gender, Social Policy and the Formation of the Third Republic,” 1–27; Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War*.

81. Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*.

82. McBride, “Divorce and the Republican Family,” 72; Schafer, *Children in Moral Danger*, chapter 2; Childers, *Fathers, Families, and the State in France*.

83. CAOM, 14 Miom 1078, 17G 61, Gouverneur Général Joost Van Vollenhoven à Ministre des Colonies, 20 décembre 1917.

84. For a different discussion of European fears of emasculation in the Belgian Congo, see Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon*, 156–57.

85. ANS, 2G 25/21, “Rapport Politique Annual, 1925”; Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, 217.

## 5. “Without family . . . there is no true colonization”

1. Le Roy, “La désorganisation de la famille Africaine,” 17.

2. Following the printout of the survey in the issue of the French Antislavery Society’s journal on March 31, 1910, it also notes that the questionnaire was reproduced in the magazine *Dépêche coloniale*, “promising excellent publicity.” Anonymous, “Enquête colonial sur l’organisation de la famille,” 23.

3. Pellet, “Rapport de Mgr. Pellet,” 5.

4. Le Roy, “La désorganisation de la famille Africaine,” 13.

5. ANS, Vicaire Apostolique Louis Dartois à Monseigneur Legros, Directeur Générale de la Société Antiesclavagiste de la France, October 15, 1904; Dartois, “Le Village Saint-Lazare à Zagnanado, Dahomey,” 139–40.

6. The reprint of the survey is anonymous but it follows an article by Mgr. Le Roy titled, “Le relèvement de la famille en Afrique” (Uplifting the African Family) and is introduced by Le Myre de Vilers, president of the French Antislavery Society. Anonymous, “Enquête colonial sur l’organisation de la famille,” 20, 22, 23.

7. Father Vallée wrote another report on Kétu published in the French Antislavery Society’s journal in 1908. Delafosse and Poutrin, *Enquête coloniale*, xxii, xxiv, xxvii. Studies by Delafosse and Poutrin are added to the edited results from the survey but do not fit with the survey material. The actual editors of the 1930 publication are anonymous.

8. *Ibid.*, 181–82.

9. *Ibid.*, 183.

10. Vallée, “Village de Liberté de St. Augustin,” 217.

11. Delafosse and Poutrin, *Enquête coloniale*, 184.

12. *Ibid.*, 186.

13. *Ibid.*, 189–90.

14. Vacharet, “Le village de liberté,” 392–93; Vallée, “Village de liberté de St. Augustin,” 217–20.

15. Delafosse and Poutrin, *Enquête coloniale*, 190.

16. I use pseudonyms for the couple and their child. The court case appears in ANB, 1M169 20.

17. Administrator Duboscq arrived at his post on October 21, 1912, and had worked with Alaba Ida and Yá Šègén before they were removed from their positions. Though he had been stationed in the region for three years, Duboscq's lack of knowledge of marriage practices in Zagnanado and in Kétu suggests that the responses to the French Antislavery Society, including descriptions of Zagnanado and Abomey, presumably completed five years earlier, were never seen or retained by the French colonial administration but traveled instead through missionary circles.

18. ANB, 1M169 20, Questionnaire sur le mariage selon la coutume de Zagnanado (Agony), Réponses par Guendehou, Chef du Canton de Cove et Premier Assesseur du Tribunal, 5 juin 1915. Guendehou was responding to a question about whether separation constituted the dissolution of a marriage. The first part of his answer was "No, marriage was not dissolved based upon that fact."

19. ANB, 1M169 20, Lieutenant-Gouverneur à l'Administrateur du Cercle, 1 juin 1915. It is unclear where the lieutenant governor was getting his information on marriage in Abomey and Savé (Sabe) when he did not have the same type of information for Kétu. ANB, 1M169 20, Questionnaire sur le mariage selon la coutume de Zagnanado (Agony), Réponses par Avoundela, Président du Tribunal de la Subdivision de Zagnanado, 6 juin 1915. Avoundela and Guendehou distinguished between *ha dido* marriage in Abomey that applied only to women descended from the ruling lineage. These women freely could enter liaisons with men and maintain control over any children that resulted from that marriage.

20. ANB, 1M169 20, Questionnaire adressée à Adekambi sur la coutume indigène, 6 juin 1915. For an explanation for the use of the term "Nago" for Yoruba speakers in Dahomey, see Law, "Ethnicity and the Slave Trade," 212–15.

21. ANB, 1M169 20, Questionnaire adressée à Adekambi sur la coutume indigène, 6 juin 1915. The Catholic priest, based in Zagnanado, suggested religion was a motive, accusing the French colonial administration of siding with Muslims over Catholics. But Adekambi rarely evoked his Muslim identity, submitted to local practices to marry Adogbonu, and sent his children to Catholic school. ANB, 1M169 20, L'Administrateur à Lieutenant-Gouverneur du Dahomey, 15 mai 1915.

22. ANB, 1M169 20, L'Administrateur à Lieutenant-Gouverneur du Dahomey, 8 juin 1915.

23. ANB, 1M169 20, Réponses par Avoundela et Guendehou, 5–6 juin 1915. Ponty, *Justice indigène*; Cachard, *The French Civil Code*, 10; Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic*, 179–81.

24. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times*, 116.

25. *Ibid.*, 7, 26.

26. Ajisafe, *The Laws and Customs of the Yoruba People*, 56.

27. *Ibid.*, 62.

28. *Ibid.*, 56, 58.

29. *Ibid.*, 51–52.

30. *Ibid.*, 2, 19–20, 48.

31. *Ibid.*, 6.

32. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, 317.

33. *Ibid.*, 80, 85.

34. *Ibid.*, 114–16.

35. For interpretation of *igiyar arme* as "thread/ties of marriage," see Cooper, *Marriage in Maradi*, 10. *Arme* or *aure* is marriage while *igiya* is "thread or rope." The Arabic term for marriage is *nikah*. *Sàráà* is derived from the Arabic term *sadaqa*, meaning almsgiving. Some Yo-

rùbá Muslims in Kétu claimed marriage by *sàráà* as better than “selling away their daughters.” Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, 67. Kétu residents who were not Muslim sometimes derided the practice of *sàráà* as “giving daughters away.” Women in the Hausa Muslim community in Maradi, Niger, found marriage by *sàráà* degrading. Cooper, *Marriage in Maradi*, 98.

36. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, 91–92; Mann, *Marrying Well*, 43; Judith Byfield, “Women, Marriage, and Divorce,” 35–38.

37. Le Roy, “La désorganisation de la famille Africaine,” 12; Schneider, *Quality and Quantity*, 37–41; Accampo, “Integrating Women into the Teaching of French History,” 278; Cole, “There Are Only Good Mothers,” 640–41.

38. Zola, *Fruitfulness*, 471–81.

39. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, 68–70; Sacré-Cœur, *La Femme Noire*, 233.

40. Schneider, *Quality and Quantity*, 36.

41. *Journal Officiel Lois et Décrets* (9 décembre 1924), 10803 as quoted in *Ibid.*, 141–42. In Dakar, headquarters of French West Africa, social hygiene policies had been reinvigorated a few years earlier with the founding of a new training school for African doctors and midwives in 1918, a maternity hospital in Dakar in 1919, and an Office of Social Hygiene in 1921. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, 221.

42. Gouverneur Général Carde aux Lieutenant-Gouverneurs de l’AOF, 15 février 1926 as quoted in Sacré-Cœur, *La Femme Noire*, 233.

43. CAOM, AFFPOL 3063, Inspecteur, 2eme Classe Haranger, Chef d’ Inspection, Mission de Dahomey à Ministre des Colonies, Paris, 19 juin 1929.

44. Abbatucci, “La Maternité en Afrique Noire,” 106.

45. Thomas, *The French Empire between the Wars*, 165.

46. For similar concerns and policies to combat depopulation and fertility in Europe and Africa, see Nancy Rose Hunt’s study of Belgian colonialism in the Belgian Congo, Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon*, 243–46.

47. Brévié, “Circulaire sur la codification des coutumes indigènes,” 75, 77–78.

48. Maupoil, “L’Etude des coutumes juridiques de L’AOF,” 13–14.

49. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory*; Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, 203–11.

50. In his circular on the codification of indigenous customs, Governor General Brévié lists the studies done to date, noting that they were “fragmentary.” Brévié, “Circulaire sur la codification des coutumes indigènes,” 72–75.

51. *Coutumier du Dahomey*. Bernard Maupoil, former French administrator and scholar of divination in Dahomey, introduced the collection in 1939, blaming the delay on the large task given to an understaffed administration and the antiquated format of the questionnaire. Maupoil, “L’Etude des coutumes juridiques de L’AOF,” 37–38.

52. Kétu was not mentioned specifically as a source of the information in the 1933 publication, though a questionnaire for the broader region was completed. In the 1939 version, the discussion of the Yoruba was limited to areas south of Kétu. *Coutumier*, 30, 39.

53. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

54. *Ibid.*, 37.

55. *Ibid.*, 57.

56. Governor General Brévié, “Extraits des Instructions données par le Gouverneur Général en date du 8 Mars 1932 pour l’application du décret du 3 décembre 1931 réorganisant la justice indigène en AOF,” as quoted in Sacré-Cœur, *La Femme Noire*, 266.

57. Governor General de Coppet, “Circulaire au sujet des mariages indigènes,” 7 mai 1937, as quoted in *ibid.*, 270–71.

58. Lydon, "Women, Children and the Popular Front's Mission," 179.
59. Northwestern University Library (NWU), Denise Moran Savineau, "La Famille en A.O.F: Condition de la Femme" (1938), 1.
60. *Ibid.*, 26.
61. *Ibid.*, 216.
62. *Ibid.*, 218–20.
63. Sacré-Cœur, *The House Stands Firm*, vii–x. She served as a member of the Academy of Sciences Overseas, the Superior Council of Overseas Social Affairs, and the Superior Council of Overseas Sociological Research, and she was known in French administrative circles. Georges Hardy, honorary director of the Ecole Coloniale (Colonial School) that trained French administrators, wrote the introduction to her first book.
64. Sacré-Cœur, *La Femme Noire*, 15–18.
65. *Ibid.*, 236–37.
66. *Ibid.*, 244.
67. Sacré-Cœur, *The House Stands Firm*, 224, 231.
68. The image of the nuclear, middle-class family was an idealized norm that did not capture the experiences of all American and European women across time and place. The classic white American feminist text is Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.
69. In contrast to the "first wave" of American feminism that began in the nineteenth century and focused on voting rights, the "second wave" of the 1960s emphasized "sisterhood." When American feminism, in the 1980s, began to acknowledge actively an American women's experience informed by race, class, and sexuality, it was seen as a new "third wave" that called into question earlier white feminist writings, even though black, Latina, Asian, working-class, and Native American women had been organizing around and theorizing about womanhood(s) for decades. bell hooks, "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women," 396–411, originally published in hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Theory*; White, "Black Feminist Interventions," 25–80; Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism," 336–60; Maclean, *Freedom Is Not Enough*, 117–55.
70. Hall, "Feminism and Feminist History," 1–40; Midgley, *Gender and Imperialism*. For case studies in India and the Sudan respectively, see Burton, *Burdens of History*; and Janice Boddy, *Civilizing Women*.
71. Offen, "Body Politics," 138–59; Eichner, "La Citoyenne in the World," 64.
72. Céline Idowu, interview with the author, March 30, 2000. In her study of Yoruba concepts of menstruation and fertility, Elisha Renne documents similar language of nostalgia for past practices and condemnation for modern-day attitudes. Renne, "Cleaning the Inside," 197.
73. Seidou Sadikou, interview with the author, April 5, 2000; Alhaji Akeju Moussouloumi, interview with the author, April 4, 2000.
74. I tried to estimate time period based the on the reigns of different Alákétu. Thus, the woman here claimed to have "known" Alákétu Onyegen (1894–1918) and that her daughter was married during the time of Alákétu Odemufekun (1918–1936). Interview with the author. Name of interviewee omitted.
75. Interview with the author. Name of interviewee omitted.
76. See chapter 3 above.
77. Interviews with the author. Names of interviewees are omitted.
78. Interview with the author. Name of interviewee omitted.
79. Interview with the author. Name of interviewee omitted.
80. Many people in Kétu, including ministers at the king's palace, identified Koyato in the Verger photograph that I showed them in October 2006, but no one was willing to discuss her

*òrìṣà* (deity). Their reticence was understandable; the deity in question was probably the potent Nana Buku, said to control birth and death. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 68–71; Drewal and Drewal, *Gèlèdè: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba*, 166, 170; Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts*, 63–64.

81. Interview with the author. Name of interviewee omitted.
82. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 234–36.
83. Mann, *Marrying Well*, 77–91.
84. Interview with the author. Name of interviewee omitted.
85. Schneider, *Quality and Quantity*, 209–16.
86. Offen, “Body Politics,” 138–59; Conklin, “Redefining ‘Frenchness,’” 65–83.
87. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, 220–21, 224.

## 6. “The Opening of the Eyes”

1. Some people claimed that Alhaji Moussa Laurent began *fàyàwò* (pulling chest to ground; cross-border trade) in the 1920s or 1930s, but his own children and one of the women he married in the 1930s said that he took up *fàyàwò* in the 1940s. Prior to that time he was a weaver. Alhaji Taofik Moussa, interview with the author, May 18, 2000.

2. Peel, “Qlaju: A Yoruba Concept of Development,” 139–65. Peel also tends to translate the term as “enlightenment” to recognize the association made with the arrival of missionaries in the nineteenth century.

3. ANB, 1E11 2, “Rapport sur la situation politique, Cercle Ouéré-Kétou-Hollis,” 7 décembre, 1894. *Aloufa* is the French adaptation of the Yoruba *àlùfáà* or *alfa* meaning “Muslim cleric.” The French were using the word *aloufa* in these early documents in the same way that they used the term *marabout* throughout Africa. Triaud, “Introduction,” 11–29.

4. ANB, 1E11 2(2), “Rapport politique,” 30 octobre–30 novembre 1894. Protectorat d’Agony-Ouéré-Kétou à Directeur d’Affaires Politiques, 22 juillet 1895; ANB, 1E11 2(2), “Rapport sur la situation politique du Cercle Ouéré-Kétou-Holli,” 10 mai–10 juin 1895; ANB, 1E20 3(2), “Rapport de l’administrateur des colonies à M. Lieutenant-Gouverneur,” 10 janvier 1906.

5. ANS, 2G1 36, “Rapport Politique,” 19 décembre 1901. Liotard’s report concerns the entire border from the coast to Kétu and makes a special notation about Sakété. Sakété lies about halfway between Kétu and Porto-Novo, on the coast.

6. ANB, 1E11 2(1), “Lettre du Résident au Gouverneur,” 6–7 février 1898; ANB, 1M 37(13), “Affaire Soumanou,” 9 mai 1916. This particular case involved an array of Muslim and non-Muslim local and Lagos traders trying to smuggle ivory.

7. Alhaji Lawani Kifuli, interview with the author, May 21, 2000; Ìyá Libara Cathérine Adébiyi, interview with the author, May 24, 2000. Local, regional trade in these types of products continued through the rest of the colonial period.

8. ANB, 1E11 2(3), “Rapport du tournée,” 29 septembre 1915; ANS, S10, Douanes No. 1052, 26 octobre 1917; ANS, S10, “Lettre du Chef des Douanes,” 26 mai 1917; Journal Officiel de l’Afrique Occidentale Française (JOAOF), Arrêté portant suppression du bureau des Douanes d’Irocogny (Dahomey), 25 février 1935. A second post was supposed to open at Iga, south of Kétu, but as late as 1917 it was still not created.

9. Madeleine Adekambi, interview with the author, May 12, 2000.

10. Mondjannagni, “Quelques aspects historiques, économiques, and politiques,” 34–35. One interviewee exclaimed that if a person could carry palm oil nuts the long, treacherous distance to the coast just once, that person would be rich. Salamantou Imoru, interview with the author, April 26, 2000.

11. ANS, S10, “La Création des Douanes à la frontière du Dahomey,” 7 mars 1914. Customs offices were created at Irocogny, Jabata, and three other sites. The man noted the existence of customs officials during this period but they primarily stayed in Jabata in the Savé region.

12. Benjamin Oyewusi, interview with the author, April 10, 2000.

13. Pascal Fagbohun, interview with the author, April 7, 2000; Sani Salami, interview with the author, April 22, 2000.

14. Benjamin Oyewusi, interview with the author, April 10, 2000.

15. Alhaja Safouratou Mama, research assistant, personal communication, October 2006. Alhaji Moussa Mama died in 1988 after a debilitating illness; years later, elderly people’s eyes gleamed at the sight of his adult daughter Alhaja Safouratou Mama, my research assistant. They would honor Alhaji Moussa Laurent’s memory by citing the nickname of his father, a renowned hunter and maker of medicine.

16. Benjamin Oyewusi, interview with the author, April 10, 2000.

17. Those who continued to farm would work in *fàyàwò* during the dry season only. Those who worked in *fàyàwò* all year round noted that during the rainy season, one could move goods with more ease because the customs agents did not come out or could not operate their bikes or motorcycles as well in the rain. Patrice Ajibade, interview with the author, April 12, 2000.

18. Alhaji Taofik Moussa, interview with the author, May 18, 2000.

19. Ayodele Félicité Fagbohun, interview with the author, May 4, 2000; Ìyá Libara Cathérine Oyewole Adebisi, interview with the author, April 20, 2000.

20. Ayodele Félicité Fagbohun, interview with the author, May 4, 2000; Subedatou Mouritala, interview with the author, April 25, 2000.

21. These court cases were discovered in the now defunct subprefecture of Kétu. With decentralization, Kétu has its own mayor and budget, and I was told that the older documents were no longer part of their holdings; it is unclear where these assorted documents would have been sent. Only fifteen cases appeared in the records for 1963 and 1964, eight of them involving bridewealth disputes, referred to as “dowry reimbursement” (*remboursement de dot*). Such a small, isolated number of examples cannot suggest definitive patterns for these types of cases.

22. Archives de la Sous-Prefecture de Kétou (ASPK), V.A. vs. A.O. (1963). Full names of parties are omitted.

23. ASPK, C.I. vs. I.A. (1964).

24. ASPK, O.O. vs. I.A. (1964).

25. Iroko and Igue, *Les villes Yoruba du Dahomey*, 5. Benjamin Oyewusi, interview with the author, April 10, 2000.

26. Seidou Amala apparently traveled to Mecca several years before Alhaji Moussa Laurent and Saha and died en route. People claim that Saha returned with Seidou Amala’s baggage. Alhaji Shouaibou Chekoni, interview with the author, April 3, 1999. By the 1950s the French colonial government was organizing and overseeing Air France flights from West Africa to Mecca. ANB, 4E9 3, “Pilgrimage à la Mecque,” 7 juin 1951. The document noted the requirement, fees, and paperwork required of Muslim pilgrims.

27. Gbadamosi, *The Growth of Islam among the Yoruba*, 5. Gbadamosi claims Kétu was a center for Islamic learning but does not cite any sources.

28. ANB, 1E20 4, “Rapport Politique, Cercle de Zagnanado,” juin 1914.

29. Alhaji Lawani Kifuli, interview with the author, April 13, 2000.

30. Imam Alhaji Nassirou Raji, interview with the author, April 23, 1999.

31. Marty, *Études sur l’Islam au Dahomey*, 139–40. ANS, Série J, 1904. Reference to the qu’anic school may concern a man named Ogouansi with twenty-two students. This may be

the same Alayansi mentioned by the imam as his first teacher. Magaji is a name/title associated with the Hausa language. Kétu residents also pointed to the possible existence of schools that existed sometime in the 1920s under the guidance of men named Amadu, Mamah, and Lawani. Other schools were headed by Seidou Amala, Saha, Abudu Azziz, Atiku, Mamadou Lawal, Mamadou Aruna Arepa (Lawani Guiwa), and perhaps Abibu and Abubakar. Alhaji Lawani Kifuli, interview with the author, December 16, 1998; Alhaji Shouaibou Chekoni, interview with the author, April 3, 1999.

32. The simplified pronunciation is known as *amúkálàmù* or *amukala* (we bring pen). There is an equivalent of this practice in Hausa areas to the north, but that pronunciation and writing style known as *ajami* became a popular medium for a range of literary arts in Hausa communities. Alhaji Lawani Kifuli, interview with the author, December 14 and 16, 1998. Since that time, some Kétu *àlúfáà* (scholars) have learned Arabic in various parts of Nigeria and other areas of Bénin Republic. However, *amúkálàmù* remains the popular style of instruction in all schools in Kétu except for one.

33. A woman named Aminatou may have served as Ìyá Sunna during the 1920s and 1930. She was followed by Sefiatou, and Rucayatou of Iṣaare. Imam Alhaji Nassirou Raji, interview with the author, February 3, 1999; Seinabu Bakary, interview with the author, February 18, 1999.

34. The association between Islam and *òlájú* in Kétu contrasts with the Peel's characterization of that relationship in Ilesha. Peel, "Òlaju: A Yoruba Concept of Development," 153.

35. Childers, *Fathers, Families, and the State in France*.

36. Pedersen, *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State*, 224–288.

37. *Ibid.*, 357–58.

38. Under the Fourth Republic, the French-controlled Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, the South American colony of Guyana, and the island of Reunion off the coast of East Africa became full departments equal to those in mainland France, while West African colonies became Overseas Territories with limited representation in the French National Assembly. In other reactions to the reorganization of the French empire, Vietnam declared independence in 1945, triggering a war with the French that lasted until 1954. Cameroon, the former German colony administered by France and Britain after World War I, tried to become a Trust Territory of the United Nations in order to gain independence.

39. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 281–85.

40. *Ibid.*, 287. Grand Conseil, *Bulletin* No. 12, session de 6 novembre 1941, 15–36 as quoted in Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 556n27.

41. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 315–21.

42. Grivot, *Réactions Dahoméennes*, 7, 11–12.

43. *Ibid.*, 171.

44. *Ibid.*, 96, 102–103, 107; France. Afrique Occidentale Française, *Conférence Africaine Française Brazzaville*, 35.

45. *Ibid.*, 19, 30.

46. *Ibid.*, 33–34.

47. A little more than 10 percent of the delegates came from the colonies, some renamed "departments," others "territories."

48. Glélé, *Naissance d'un Etat noir*, 71–73; Manning, *Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa*, 139–41.

49. Grivot, *Réactions Dahoméennes*, 81.

50. On anticolonial protest in Dahomey during World War I, see Garcia, "Les mouvements de résistance au Dahomey."

51. Jules Brévié, "Circulaire sur les chefs indigènes," 28 septembre 1932, cited and translated in Hargreaves, *France and West Africa*, 219–20.

52. Reste, *Le Dahomey*, cited in Cornevin, *Histoire du Dahomey*, 425–46.
53. Desanti, *Du Danhome*, 97, cited in Cornevin, *Histoire du Dahomey*, 426–27.
54. CAOM, AFFPOL 576/14, Gouverneur Général de l'AOF à Ministre des Colonies sur les chefs indigènes au Dahomey, 2 juillet 1935.
55. Asiwaju writes that Bankole Okanleke, long recognized as a village chief by the French administration, had insinuated himself into the position as canton chief after Alákétu Ode-mufekun's death in 1936, trying to capture the crown, only to see Alákétu Adewori named instead. Asiwaju connects Adewori's official installation—which he dates to 1947—to Okanleke's untimely death in a fire. Asiwaju, *Western Yorubaland under European Rule 1889–1945*, 94. When I interviewed people specifically about Adewori's status as Alákétu or canton chief, they invariably said that he had been king and canton chief beginning in 1937. Asiwaju, "The Alaketu of Ketu," 146–47. On the continuous problems with the Ohoi (Hollidje) region that led to the creation of the Cercle Holli-Kétou in the 1910s and its dissolution in 1933; see CAOM, 14 Miom 2157, "Rapport d'Inspection du Cercle de Holli-Kétou," 13 mars 1933. At that time, Hollidje became part of the circle of Porto-Novo and Kétu was absorbed into the circle of Abomey. On the creation of a Kétu subdivision within the circle of Abomey, see CAOM 14 Miom 2155, "Arrêté portant ouverture la création de la subdivision de Kétou dans le Cercle d'Abomey," 30 avril 1947.
56. CAOM, 14 Miom 2721, "Revue trimestrielle pour le premier trimestre, 1949." The French official writes derisively of these "traditional" kings as *roitelets* (kinglets). But as the official head of the canton after 1947, the king of Kétu was recognized as head of a group of geographically and ethnically related villages and as an agent of the French administration with a salary and secretary. Cornevin, *Histoire du Dahomey*, 425–26.
57. Asiwaju, *Western Yorubaland under European Rule 1889–1945*, 111n91.
58. Asiwaju, "The Alaketu of Ketu," 154–55.
59. Glélé, *Naissance d'un Etat noir*, 92.
60. *Ibid.*, 100–106, 139–42.
61. Camille Elegbede, October 7, 2007; Anani Abimbola, October 5, 2007; Antonin Iko Alayé, October 6, 2007; Gérard Adechinan, October 2007, interviews with Athanase Alayé; Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Economic Growth in Dahomey*, 277–78.
62. Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa*, 131–33; Staniland, "The Three-Party System in Dahomey," 310.
63. Anignikin, "La régionalisation de la lutte anti-impérialiste," 251.
64. The candidate was Camille Elegbede, a schoolteacher since retired, who has helped scholars who have worked in Kétu, including myself, with his knowledge of local history. Camille Elegbede, October 7, 2007; Anani Abimbola, October 5, 2007; Antonin Iko Alayé, October 6, 2007; Gérard Adechinan, October 2007, interviews with Athanase Alayé; Decalo, *Historical Dictionary of Benin*, 216.
65. Glélé, *Naissance d'un Etat noir*, 304, 310–11.

## 7. Mothers and Fathers of an Atlantic World

1. Nago is used as a general term for Yoruba in Brazil. Robin Law argues that the term Nago may have originally referred only to the western Yoruba in West African usage and that the later generic use of Nago for Yoruba, especially in French-controlled Dahomey, reflected feedback from Brazilians who returned to West Africa. Law, "Ethnicity and the Slave Trade," 212–215.

2. For an exception, see a case study of a Brazilian Candomblé house headed by a man in Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 224–66.



3. *Ibid.*, 285.
4. NWU Africana Library, Lorenzo D. Turner Papers, Africana Manuscripts 23, Box 40, Folder 5, “Our Recollections of Lagos,” Martiniano do Bonfim and Anna M. Santos, n.d. The term *agudá* is a local term for Brazilians who returned to West Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On *agudá* culture and history in West Africa, see Yai, “The Identity, Contributions, and Ideology of the Aguda,” 72–82; Guran, *Agudás*.
5. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 115–48.
6. Matory, “The English Professors of Brazil,” 79.
7. Landes, *The City of Women*, 28.
8. *Ibid.*, 27–28.
9. Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil*, 242–43, 272.
10. Nina Rodrigues, *L’Animisme Fétichiste de Nègres de Bahia*.
11. Ramos, “The Negro in Brazil,” 522.
12. Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil*, 321–25, 336–39.
13. Landes, *The City of Women*, 26–27.
14. Berlin, “From Creole to African,” 251–88; Mann and Bay, “Shifting Paradigms in the Study of the African Diaspora,” 3–21; Lindsay, “To Return to the Bosom of their Fatherland,” 22–50; Matory, “The English Professors of Brazil,” 72–103; Turner, “Some Contacts of Brazilian Ex-Slaves,” 55–67.
15. Turner, “Some Contacts of Brazilian Ex-Slaves,” 60–62; NWU, Africana Manuscripts 6 35/6, Melville Herskovits Papers, Lorenzo Turner to Melville Herskovits, February 4, 1941.
16. Gershenhorn, *Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge*, 92.
17. Herskovits, *Acculturation*, 10.
18. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 15, 34.
19. Holanda, *Pierre Verger: Mensageiro*.
20. Jean Pierre Meunier, “Le Biguine à Paris: Migration et Mutation d’une Musique Métisse de la Caraïbe,” at [http://svr1.cg971.fr/lameca/dossiers/biguine\\_paris/index.htm](http://svr1.cg971.fr/lameca/dossiers/biguine_paris/index.htm) (accessed April 17, 2007).
21. Métraux and Verger, *Le pied à l’étrier*, 56.
22. NWU, Herskovits Papers, 6 35/6, Box 42, Folder 3, Pierre Verger to Melville Herskovits, December 25, 1948.
23. Nóbrega and Echeverria, *Verger: Um retrato em preto e branco*, 171–73, 178–79. For another interpretation of Mãe Senhora and Pierre Verger’s relationship, see Alberto, “Terms of Inclusion,” 256–80.
24. Pierre Verger, *Orishas: Les dieux Yorouba*, 28.
25. NWU, Herskovits Papers, 6 35/6, Box 42, Folder 3, Pierre Verger to Melville Herskovits, February 8, 1949.
26. NWU, Herskovits Papers, 6 35/6, Box 50, Folder 27, Pierre Verger to Melville Herskovits, January 29, 1950.
27. Lühning, “Pierre Fatumbi Verger e sua obra,” 318, 330.
28. Métraux and Verger, *Le pied à l’étrier*, 62.
29. Fundação Pierre Verger (FPV), 1–B 352 (I), Pierre Verger to Roger Bastide, April 16, 1953.
30. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times*, 78, 133, 379, 551. On a different interpretation of the origin of the title *Aṣipa* in New Oyo, see Goddard, “Ago that Become Oyo,” 209.
31. Santos, *Ancestralidade Africana no Brasil Mestre Didi*, 67–69; Verger, *Flux et Reflux*, 632.
32. The water house of the title also was an actual well built by members of the da Rocha family with whom Olinto claimed a maternal link. Mba, “Literature as a Source of Nigerian

History,” 356–57; Tallman, “The Ethnographic Novel,” 14. Olinto is also known by the name Antônio Olinto Marques da Rocha.

33. Olinto, *Brasileiros na África*, 165–66; Olinto, *The Water House*, 54–69.

34. Olinto, *The Water House*, 398–99; Olinto, *The Glass Throne*.

35. Carneiro, “The Structure of African Cults in Bahia,” 272; Nina Rodrigues, *L’Animisme Fétichiste de Nègres de Bahia*; Querino, *Costumes Africanos no Brasil*; Carneiro, *Candomblés da Bahia*; Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil*. Matory counters the academic focus on Kétu Candomblé with his study of a Jeje house.

36. Carneiro, *Candomblés da Bahia*, 61. Based on interviews he conducted in Bahia and in Dahomey in the 1960s, Brazilian anthropologist Vivaldo da Costa Lima concluded that Iyá Kalá and Iyá Nassô were honorific titles for the same person and that Iyá Nassô was a title for the female Şango priest of the king of Oyo. Lima, “O conceito de ‘Nação’ nos Candomblés da Bahia,” 80–82.

37. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times*, 64. Because of the reference to the Oyo title and other religious forms, Matory argues that an Oyo rather than specifically Kétu influence prevailed in the three famous Candomblé houses, otherwise identified with Kétu. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 121–22.

38. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (SC), Melville Herskovits Papers, Box 22, Folder 135; Box 19, Folder 119. In Yoruba, the phrase would appear as *mojúbà*.

39. Pierre Verger asserted that two women, Iyanaso Akala (or Iyanasso Oka) and Iyaluso Danadana, founded the Candomblé house. Verger, *Orishas: Les dieux Yorouba*, 27–28. He also wrote that the Yoruba name of Engenho Velho was Iya Omi Ase Aira Intile.

40. Carneiro, *Candomblés da Bahia*, 63.

41. Her own parents were Gurunci, associated with a distant region of Burkina Faso. Sodré and de Lima, *Um vento sagrado*, 26.

42. Lima, “O conceito de ‘Nação’ nos Candomblés da Bahia,” 83–86. The late eighteenth-century attack by Dahomey is described in Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy*, 202, and Dunglas, “Contribution à l’histoire du Moyen-Dahomey,” vol. I, 68–70. Also see chapter 1 above. Renato da Silveira has recently tried to trace both the founder of Alaketo and the founders of Engenho Velho to this Dahomey attack. Silveira, “Sobre a Fundação do Terreiro do Alaketo,” 345–79.

43. Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder*, 100–101.

44. Dzidzienyo, “The African Connection,” 142–43. Dzidzienyo cites an article that describes Olga do Alaketo as a “pawn of the powerful”; after attending two arts festivals in West Africa in 1966 and 1977, she was invited to prepare a special meal for the Brazilian president.

45. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 241–42.

46. de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 516–20, 524; Butler, *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won*; Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder*. For a critique, see Matory, “Gendered Agendas,” 409–39.

47. Robertson, “Africa into the Americas?” 9–21. For an Afrocentrist position and a critique, see Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; and White, “Black Feminist Interventions,” 132–50.

48. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 190–92.

49. Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil*, 285. Pierson also implied that the women priests were a new phenomenon.

50. Herskovits and Herskovits, “The Negroes of Brazil,” 265.

51. Harding, *Refuge in Thunder*, 70–71.

52. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 35.

53. FPV, Nigeria Correspondance, 1-B 394, Alaafin Adeyemi to Madame Senhora, Iyanaso, August 14, 1952.

54. Hollanda, *Pierre Verger: Mensageiro*.

55. Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, 278–79.
56. Siegel, *Uneven Encounters*, 206–34; Alberto, “Terms of Inclusion,” 106–107. I am grateful to Marc Hertzman for bringing both of these texts to my attention.
57. Andrews, *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil*, 215–16; Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 202–203. Mãe Senhora’s son Mestre Didi describes her acceptance speech in 1965 upon receiving the title, in Santos, *Ancestralidade Africana*, 102. Also see Alberto, “Para Africano Ver,” 94.
58. Landes, *The City of Women*, 82–83.
59. Clécio Max, “Mãe Stella.” at <http://povodosanto.blogspot.com/2008/02/se-ns-no-preservarmos-natureza-viva.html> (accessed July 13, 2009). The term *aconchego* was translated as “maternal comfort and kindness” in a translation of the article on a website for Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá at <http://www.geocities.com/ileohunlailai/page12af.html> (accessed October 8, 2007; site now discontinued.) Matory translates *aconchego* (“maternal comfort and kindness”) as “snuggly embrace.” Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 205.
60. Faria, *A Cidade das Mulheres [City of Women]*. Mãe Stella’s lighthearted allusion to sexual relationships within the Candomblé temple is interesting considering Landes and Carneiro’s discussion of a lesbian priestess in the 1930s and Matory’s reference to lesbian priestesses heading Candomblé houses in more recent years, Landes, *The City of Women*, 46–47; Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 213–14.
61. Paulina Alberto argues that by engaging with the Black Mother image and the concept of a special relationship between West Africa and Brazil, Mãe Senhora and others like Romana de Conceição also helped bolster the myth of Brazil’s “racial democracy” during the pivotal period of the 1960s when Brazil reinstated democracy and tried to carve out a new foreign policy that engaged with a newly independent Africa. Alberto, “Para Africano Ver,” 101–108. Matory argues that terms like “queen” and “lady” place black Brazilians outside of the national Brazilian identity as a republic and a democracy. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 27–28, 203. Royalist terms do not simply refer to a glorious African past. Black queens and ladies remind us that in an Atlantic world, especially in the Americas, women of color did not come easily by titles of respect and dignity. In Olinto’s *The Water House*, Mariana Silva achieves success as an entrepreneur, trader, and property owner, but only realized what she had achieved when a man addresses her as “Sinha” (lady) rather than “Yaya” (black woman/girl). Olinto, *Water House*, 137.
62. Verger, *Orishas: Les dieux Yorouba*, passim; da Cunha and Verger, *Da senzala ao Sobrado*.
63. FPV, Photography Library, Roi Adewori, Ketou, Dahomey, 1948–1979, number 6234; Fundação Pierre Verger, Photography Library, Candomblé Opô Afonjá, Salvador, Brazil, 1948–1967, number 27593; Alex Baradel, personal communication with author, August 2006.
64. Joseph, “Black Mothers and Daughters,” 92.

## Epilogue

1. Idji, “1884–1994: Cent ans déjà!” 7.
2. Bierschenk and de Sardan, “Powers in the Village,” 151, 155; Camille Elegbede, October 7, 2007; Anani Abimbola, October 5, 2007; Antonin Iko Alayé, October 6, 2007; Gérard Adechinan, October 2007, interviews with Athanase Alayé.
3. Nwajiaku, “The National Conferences in Benin and Togo Revisited,” 429.
4. I could not determine the precise dates of the trip, but given that the National Conference occurred in January and February of 1990, it is unlikely that the trip could have been arranged any earlier or at the same time.
5. Dzidzienyo, “The African Connection,” 139–40; Alberto, “Para Africano Ver,” 78–117.

6. UNESCO, “The Slave Route Project,” <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001511/151178e.pdf> (accessed June 3, 2008); Aruajo, “Political Uses and Memories of Slavery in the Republic of Benin,” Institute of Historical Research, <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Slavery/articles/araujo.html> (accessed April 3, 2007). The Ghana declaration was made in 1995.

7. See chapter 7 above.

8. Adrien Adeniyi Adeoti, interview with the author, October 2, 2006. The full name of the Argentinian organization is Ilé Àṣe Oṣun Doyo, Instituto de Investigación y la Difusión de las Culturas Negras, <http://www.doyo.com.ar/frame.htm>.

9. Hollanda, *Pierre Verger: Mensageiro*.

10. Jules Adesina, interview with the author, September 21, 2006; Fidèle Olude, interview with the author, September 24, 2006.

11. Adrien Adegnika, interview with the author, October 4, 2006.

12. Odjo, *La revue du centénaire*, 55–56. Several men were featured in individualized photographs including a former schoolteacher named Paul Fadairo, Alákétu Adewori, and three recently appointed kings in villages that had been part of the Kétu kingdom in the nineteenth century.

13. Alákétu Aladé Ifẹ́’s ministers, interview with the author, September 19, 2006.

14. Ìyálóde Basilia Abero, interview with the author, July 16, 1997; Ìyá Libara Cathérine Oyewole Adebisi, interview with the author, July 15, 1999.

15. Alhaji Moussadikou Soumaila, interview with the author, September 24, 2006.

16. Odjo, *La revue du centénaire*, 55–56; Alákétu Aladé Ifẹ́, interview with the author, September 19, 2006.

17. Ìyá Afọbajẹ Salamantou Egunlope Brouaïma, interviews with the author, November 2 and 26, 1988; Drewal and Mason, *Beads, Body, and Soul*.

18. This problem became painfully clear in my interview with Fidèle Olude on September 24, 2006, when he constantly mixed the names and titles of women he listed as Ìyá Libara, Ìyá Qba, and Afín Qba Obínrin during the reigns of Alákétu Onyegen, Alákétu Odemufekun, and even Alákétu Adewori.

19. Jules Adeşina, interview with the author, September 21, 2006; Fidèle Olude, interview with the author, September 24, 2006. Edna Bay shows that by the nineteenth century some princesses in Dahomey were taking on roles as *ahosi* (“wives” of the king). Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 248.

20. Blair, *Abeokuta Intelligence Report*, 25–26. That the women spoke openly of their political decline raises another set of questions worthy of systematic research.

21. Denzer, “Yoruba Women,” 10–11.

22. Ìyálóde Basilia Abero, interview with the author, July 16, 1997. Some of her associates at the time were Q́tún Ìyálóde and Osi Ìyálóde, her assistants to the “right” and the “left.”

23. Gbe speakers in the Kétu region are referred to as Mahi, rather than Fon, the more common term for Gbe speakers in Bénin Republic.

24. Mayor Lucie Sessinou Tidjani, interview with the author, October 6, 2006.

25. Gouvernement du Bénin, “Message du Maire: La 3eme Femme Maire du Bénin s’installe,” [http://www.gouv.bj/communes/oueme\\_plateau/ketou/message.php](http://www.gouv.bj/communes/oueme_plateau/ketou/message.php) (accessed April 30, 2007; site now discontinued).

26. Mayor Lucie Sessinou Tidjani, interview with the author, October 6, 2006.

27. “La Commune de Kétou,” <http://www.ketou.bj/index.php> (accessed July 16, 2009). Athanase Alayé, personal communication with the author, August 19, 2009. It was suggested that there was controversy and dissension around Mayor Tidjani’s re-election bid. Doctor Salami Saliou Ossenì assumed the office of mayor in Kétu in May 2009.

28. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 200.

29. Laqueur, *Making Sex*; Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*.

30. Lindsay and Miescher, "Introduction: Men and Masculinities," 1–29.

31. Hunt, "Introduction," 1–15; Allman, Geiger, and Musise, "Women in African Colonial Histories," 3, 10.

32. For example, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie developed the term "stiwanism" from her acronym STIWA (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa). She writes, "'STIWA' allows me to discuss the needs of African women today in the tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures. . . . Women have to participate as co-partners in social transformation." Ogundipe-Leslie, "Stiwanism," 229–30. Chikwenye Ogunyemi differentiates between her own definition of "African womanism" and Alice Walker's "womanism" by emphasizing "African women's inclusive, mother-centered ideology, with its focus on caring—families, communal, national, and international. . . . Other oppressive sites include totalitarianism, militarism, ethnicism, (post)colonialism, poverty, racism, and religious fundamentalism." Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, 114. Obioma Nnaemeka elaborates on her own term for African feminism, "negofeminism," as "feminism of negotiation" and "no ego feminism." She finds the art of negotiation integral to Igbo and many other African cultures and also critiques "the ego trip that engenders feminist arrogance, imperialism, and power struggles." Nnaemeka, "Foreword: Locating Feminisms/Feminists," 12. Nnaemeka first introduced the concept of "negofeminism" in Nnaemeka, "Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries," 80–113. For an overview of African feminism(s), especially in literature, see Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism*, 27–70.

33. Imam, Sow, and Mama, *Engendering the African Social Sciences*, 6.

34. Kemp et al., "The Dawn of a New Day," 131–62; Miles, "North American Feminisms/Global Feminisms," 172.

## Essay on Sources and Methodology

1. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 63.

2. For example, see Geiger, "What's So Feminist about Women's Oral History?" 169–82; Cooper, "Oral Sources and the Challenge of African History," 191–215. For a critique of the lack of actual interpretation of African oral sources, see White, *Speaking with Vampires*, 43–50.

3. I thank Misty Bastian for the use of the term "middle way" to describe my analysis.

4. Félix Odjoawo, interview with the author, December 5, 1998.

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