WOMEN IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

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In approaching the topic of women in African traditional religions, several methodological issues immediately arise: how to define religion, how to sample religious systems, and how to cope with fragmentary information. Each of these issues demands a rather arbitrary decision which implies that any analysis based upon such decisions must be considered suggestive rather than conclusive.

If one defines religion as beliefs and practices associated with spiritual beings, one is likely to neglect important ritual domains dealing with status transformations that involve great and lengthy ceremony but rarely notions of transcendental beings. Moreover, such ritual situations of status transformation frequently involve women in important ritual responsibilities. Consequently, I begin with a Tylorian definition of religion as concern with spiritual beings in discussing religious norms and ideals for women, and move to a more extensive consideration of ritual in my analysis of religious organization and practice.

In considering traditional sub-Saharan African religious systems for study, one is confronted not only by the multiplicity of potential units of study but by the diversity in societal complexity ranging from the Southwestern San bands to the Western Sudanic empires. In selecting societies for study, I decided to use Robert M. Marsh's index of social differentiation. 2 Within sub-Saharan Africa, Marsh classi-

1 This paper was originally prepared for the Wellesley Conference on Women and Development, held at Wellesley College in June 1976. I am grateful to the Radcliffe Institute for support and to Carol Troyer-Shank for assistance while writing the paper.

2 Robert M. Marsh, Comparative sociology. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World 1967, 329-365. Marsh's index of social differentiation in preindustrial societies is based on George P. Murdock's classification of social stratification and population size of the political unit. In the "World Ethnographic Sample" (American Anthropologist 59, 1957, 664-687), "Murdock coded each society according to five categories for each variable." Marsh assigns numerical scores to each of Murdock's categories ranging from 0 to 4, or from least to most differentiated. Marsh's "Index of Differentiation score for any given society in Murdock's sample is the sum of its score for population size of the political unit and its score for social stratification."
fies societies on seven levels of social differentiation. I chose two societies from each level for which I believed there was adequate religious data. Ultimately, however, I was able to use information on thirteen religions. In this paper I use Marsh's social classification, though were I constructing my own index of social differentiation rather different societal groupings probably would emerge.

In addition, one faces the problem of scarce and fragmentary information about women in African traditional religions. With few exceptions African societies have been described from a masculine perspective which is understandable insofar as anthropologists have been primarily concerned with charting the public structures of social authority. Invariably such structures involve relations between men. Nevertheless, even in societies where women play important public roles, such as the queen mothers in several Akan- and Bantu-speaking societies, these roles usually have been studied not on their own merits but only in their relation to some male role. Carol Hoffer's seminal essay on Madam Yoko of the Kpa-Mende Confederacy indicates how richly illuminating a feminine perspective on women's roles can be. Since it is impossible to infer an accurately detailed feminine portrayal of social roles from data drawn from a masculine viewpoint, the many informational lacunae in this essay imply not that a belief or practice does not exist but that I do not have information about its existence.

Norms and Ideals for Women

In recent years Robin Horton has argued persuasively that differentiation in religious beings and their cults is related to differentiation in levels of explanation in African systems of thought. At the most general level a supreme being exists who is rarely involved in human endeavors except as an ultimate source of explanation; lesser categories of spiritual being are associated with social units within the community and are considered responsive to the deeds of men in their secular and religious lives. Horton's view is consistent with the information on spiritual beings and cults presented in Chart I. In many of these societies, a supreme being is recognized but no formal cult activities are associated with it, while other kinds of spiritual beings are

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3 Unless otherwise noted, my analysis is based on information derived from the sources listed in the ethnographic bibliography.

acknowledged to whom cults are addressed. In all thirteen societies ancestral spirits are worshipped and often some other spiritual being. In these societies, there does not appear to be any correlation between levels of social differentiation and types of spiritual being.

*Chart 1*

**Spiritual Beings and Cults**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LSD*</th>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Supreme Being</th>
<th>Deities</th>
<th>Heroes</th>
<th>Ancestral Spirits</th>
<th>Other Spiritual Beings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Swazi</td>
<td>x no cult</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>x no cult</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bemba</td>
<td>x no cult</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ganda</td>
<td>x no cult</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>nature spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Azande</td>
<td>x no cult</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mende</td>
<td>x no cult</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>nature spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lamba</td>
<td>x no cult</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>nature spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Safwa</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Khoikhoi</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nyakyusa</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yao</td>
<td>x no cult</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>San</td>
<td>x no cult</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yako</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cult</td>
<td>fertility spirits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*LSD:* level of social differentiation  
— : no information  
x : belief present

Although data are fragmentary on the sexual identity of various kinds of spiritual beings, a few observations may be noted. When the sex of the supreme being is mentioned (Mende, San), it is male. Both the supreme being and male deities may be believed to have divine wives (Yoruba, Bemba, Ganda, Mende, San) and mothers (Bemba). Although ancestral spirits of both sexes may be worshipped within domestic groups (e.g., Yoruba, Mende, Lamba, Safwa), male ancestors apparently are the only ones revered in national cults (e.g., Swazi, Bemba, Ganda, Nyakyusa). These findings concerning the sexual identity of spiritual beings suggest that female deities like their human
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counterparts ordinarily have domestic rather than communal orientations.

African traditional religions are life-affirming religions. They seek to insure the fertility and vitality of human beings and of the land on which their own and other creatures' livelihoods depend. Through ritual human beings attempt to maintain or reestablish harmonious relations with spiritual beings who control fertility. The religious quest for fertility is explicit in the aims of several central communal cults (e.g., Swazi, Yoruba, Bemba, Ganda, Nyakyusa, and Yakō) and implicit in those religions seeking to control rain that fructifies the land (e.g., Azande, Mende, Lamba, Safwa, Khoikhoi, Yao, and San). Moreover, diverse spiritual beings are considered to control these sources of fertility. Direct control of fertility is attributed to deities (Yoruba), heroes (Ganda), royal ancestors (Nyakyusa), clan fertility spirits (Yakō), and the supreme being (Bemba), while control of rain rests with the supreme being (Mende, Lamba, Yao, San), ancestral spirits (Swazi, Azande, Safwa), and deities (Khoikhoi) in these societies.

Beliefs about the ultimate control of spiritual beings over fertility represents only one aspect of the life-affirming nature of African religions. Sexual relations in ritual (e.g., Swazi, Bemba, Nyakyusa, Yao) and in secular life are intimately connected with vitality. Through their contribution to the reproduction of human life, women play an essential role in the continuity of human society. Yet in many African systems of thought, women's sexuality is regarded ambivalently. Women are regarded not only as producers of life but also as sources of danger as expressed in notions about the polluting nature of blood — especially the blood of menstruation and the blood of childbirth (e.g., Swazi, Ganda, Bemba, Azande, Lamba, Khoikhoi, Nyakyusa, Yao). Such notions of pollution underlie rituals intended to separate unclean women from contact with others or to neutralize the sources of pollution. Women, therefore, are anomalous creatures — intimately associated with the well-being of society through their life-giving attributes and deeply threatening to life through their polluting qualities. Traditional African religious ideology, therefore, stresses the domestic orientation of women's lives, affirming their reproductive role, while disdaining other aspects of their sexuality.

**Religious Organization and Practices**

Through ritual human beings attempt to contact and manipulate spiritual beings or to manipulate and transform human beings. Com-
munal ritual addressed to spiritual beings constitutes religion — narrowly defined — though communal cults may be performed to benefit groups ranging in magnitude from the Swazi or Ganda states to the households within them. Personal ritual, on the other hand, aimed at redressing some individual's misfortune or transforming her social status from little girl to marriageable maiden may — or may not — be addressed to any transcendental being. Both communal and personal ritual merit consideration in analyzing women's roles in African traditional religions.

In African societies the central communal cults may be addressed to a diverse array of spiritual beings: royal ancestral spirits, deities, heroes, or fertility spirits (see Chart II). Nevertheless, in such com-

*Chart II*

**Central Communal Cults**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LSD*</th>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Beings of Cult</th>
<th>Main Ritual Role</th>
<th>Lesser Ritual Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Swazi</td>
<td>Royal Ancestors</td>
<td>Priest (= King)</td>
<td>Queen Mother Ritual Queens Mediums (male &amp; female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>Deities</td>
<td>Priest of Patriclan</td>
<td>Mediums (male &amp; female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bemba</td>
<td>Royal Ancestors</td>
<td>Priest of Matriclan</td>
<td>Priest's Wife Mediums (male &amp; female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ganda</td>
<td>Heroes</td>
<td>Priest</td>
<td>Mediums (male &amp; female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Azande</td>
<td>Ancestors</td>
<td>Priest</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mende</td>
<td>Ancestors</td>
<td>Priest/Priestess</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lamba</td>
<td>Royal Ancestors</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Mediums (male &amp; female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Safwa</td>
<td>Ancestors</td>
<td>Priest</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Khoikhoi</td>
<td>Deities</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nyakyusa</td>
<td>Royal Ancestors</td>
<td>Priest (= Chief)</td>
<td>Priest's Wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yao</td>
<td>Ancestors</td>
<td>Priest (= Chief)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>San</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Curers (male)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yako</td>
<td>Ancestors/Fertility Spirits</td>
<td>Priest</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*LSD*: Level of Social Differentiation  
— : No Information
munal cults women rarely play primary ritual roles. Almost without exception the principal intercessor with spiritual beings on behalf of human beings is a male priest. Among the African religions sampled the Mende and the Swazi may give primary ritual responsibilities to women in communal cults. Among the Mende, ancestral spirits associated with women's communal sodalities are addressed by women; among the Swazi, the queen mother shares a dual monarchy with her son and together they serve the royal ancestors and make rain magic. Moreover, only in Mende society can women achieve high status in public affairs in their own right, elsewhere women assume prestigeful public roles by virtue of their relation to some man (e.g., Swazi, Ganda, Bemba, Nyakyusa). For the most part, women are relegated to subordinate ritual roles in African traditional religious structures as suppliants, ritual assistants, and most importantly mediums.

Through mediums, spiritual beings are believed to make their wishes known to human beings. Human beings as the vessels of spirits have revered status during their periods of possession but deference need not be given to unpossessed mediums. Within African central communal cults, mediumship is often the vocation of men and women (Chart II). Moreover, in most such central communal cults, most mediums are women. This finding is consistent with I. M. Lewis' argument about the patterning of possession and sexual identity. Lewis maintains that "where an established male priesthood, which does not depend upon ecstatic illumination for its authority, controls the central morality cult, women and men of subordinate social categories may be allowed a limited franchise as inspired auxiliaries." As has been noted, in African society females are not regarded as intrinsically superior to males, although some women of royal lineage may outrank some commoner men (e.g., Swazi, Ganda, Bemba, Azande), some women legitimately may control men within the domestic sphere (e.g., Khoikhoi) and a few women may exercise chiefly power (e.g., Mende). Through ecstatic mediumship, however, able women can temporarily transform their inferior social status into the highest status in societies where people believe that immortal spirits can speak through the lips of mortals.

Although women play subordinate roles within the central communal cults of traditional African religions, they frequently have important roles in personal rituals of status transformation associated with birth, puberty, and death. From the perspective of women’s ritual and secular roles, the most important status transforming rituals are concerned with the transformation of a girl into a nubile maiden. Such rituals occur in many African societies (see Chart III); wherever they occur

*Chart III*

Rituals at Puberty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LSD*</th>
<th>Society</th>
<th>For Males</th>
<th>For Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Swazi</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Princesses only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bemba</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ganda</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Azande</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mende</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lamba</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Safwa</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Khoikhoi</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nyakyusa</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yao</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>San</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yakö</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*LSD*: Level of Social Differentiation  
X: Rituals occur  
None: Rituals do not occur  
—: No information

the principal officiants and participants are women. Moreover, the symbolism of these rituals vividly portrays the essential cultural meaning of mature womanhood. Audrey I. Richard’s classic analysis of *chisungu*, the Bemba nubility ritual, suggests that such rituals may frequently articulate “marriage morality.” Through *chisungu* a Bemba girl is magically transformed into a woman, instructed in the “socially approved attitudes” towards her domestic roles as wife, mother, and housewife, and is magically protected with her bridegroom. Such  

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rituals express the dualistic nature of women's sexuality and the means by which the positive aspects of fertility may be harnessed for social good and the negative aspects of sexuality may be contained and socially controlled. Both religious ideology and female puberty rituals, therefore, stress concepts associated with fertility and feminine sexuality.

**Potential for Change**

The dualism of African traditional religious ideology reinforces the secular social structure. Three basic social principles are affirmed in religious thought: the subordination of female to male, the separation of male from female, and the complementarity of male and female. In religious institutions as in secular ones, male is recognized as generically superior to female, though specific females may be superior to certain males. Nevertheless, the separation of spheres of activity for males and females enables women to exercise authoritative and prestigious roles among members of their own sex as senior co-wives or senior members of women's groups based on kinship and residential principles (e.g., Swazi, Yoruba, Azande, Mende, Nyakyusa, Yakö). Nevertheless, the cooperation of the sexes is essential for social continuity. Fertility and vitality of humanity and its world represent important religious goals. Such goals reaffirm women's domestic and inferior orientations in society. In and of themselves, therefore, African traditional religious ideologies do not promote social change.

Nevertheless, such systems of traditional religious thought are responsively adaptive to structural changes. As Robin Horton has argued so effectively, the "two tier structure" of traditional cosmologies readily adapts to Islamic and Christian cosmologies. In traditional religion, the differentiation between supreme being and lesser spiritual beings is associated with the former's macrocosmic disinterest in human activity and the latter's microcosmic involvement with social life. Nevertheless, the basic ideological structure adapts readily to newly enlarged worlds by shifting its emphasis to the macrocosmic level from the microcosmic level.

Additionally, traditional concepts and behavior associated with spiritual possession have adapted readily to new religious contexts. The rapid development of "spiritual" Christian churches throughout modernizing sub-Saharan Africa attests to the assimilation of traditional ideas to new social situations. Within the context of an evolving strati-
fication system based on education and money, possession ideas and behavior continue to resolve status discrepancies.

I consider, therefore, that traditional African religious ideologies can facilitate structural changes initiated in other social domains. Whether African women’s statuses have been enhanced by the economic and political transformations of the twentieth century is debatable.

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Mende


Nyakyusa


Safwa


San


Swazi


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Yakô

Yao

Yoruba