

Book Review

'Yorubas don't do gender': a critical review of Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*

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A new generation of African scholars (e.g. Amadiume 1997, Nzegwu 2001, Okome 2001) located primarily in western institutions has begun to question the explanatory power of gender in African society. However, by a dialectical twist of fate, the very moment when categories such as 'gender' and 'woman' are undergoing renewed scrutiny is the very moment development discourses promote their indispensability to Africa's economic and political future. Rarely are the concepts subjected to the kind of critical reflection that will allow us to see their relevance and applicability to the African situation. Instead, gender functions as a given: it is taken to be a cross-cultural organising principle where men dominate and women are dominated. In contrast, drawing from examples among non-European cultures, feminist work in the last two decades has actively (with varying degrees of success) tried to show that, far from social life being organised around hierarchical sex difference, other kinds of categories (race, sexuality, age, class, etc.) are more salient. Despite this, development discourse continues to assume that gender difference is central to social life the world over.

Some of the key issues raised by the new African female scholars have parallels with those raised within feminist and postcolonial criticism of the 1970s onward and can be formulated in terms of the following questions: can gender, or indeed patriarchy, be applied to non-Euro-American cultures? Can we assume that social relations in all societies are organised around biological sex difference? Is the male in African societies seen as normative and therefore a conduit for the exercise of power? Is the female inherently subordinate to the male? Again, what are the implications of introducing a gendered perspective as a starting point for the construction of knowledge about African societies? What violence gets perpetuated when European conceptual categories are used to

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understand different African realities? Most of these questions have been raised in a number of articles, but it is in the book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) by the US-based Nigerian theorist Oyeronke Oyewumi that we find a sustained articulation of the argument against gender. She argues that the biological sex difference structuring social relations in Euro-American culture is irrelevant in many African societies. Focusing on the Oyo-Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, Oyewumi argues that gender distinction is not coded within Yoruba language and social practice and biology do not determine or influence social relations, access to power or participation in institutions. In place of gender, she claims that seniority is a key organising principle in Oyo-Yoruba.

This article endorses Oyewumi's overall project of shifting the debate away from a deterministic focus on biology,¹ the primacy of gender structuration in social relation and the need to be sensitive to the categories and concepts that are important to a culture. I will therefore begin by introducing Oyewumi's central argument. However, I will then develop an extensive critique of the method she adopts to make her claim. First, I will argue that by relying on language and discourse to articulate a cultural essence, she fails to understand the nature of power and the ways in which language is inscribed within social practices. This failure is crucial; without allowing for a distinction between meaning and its socio-existential context, Oyewumi's analysis reduces language to semiotics and representation. A related absence in her text that reinforces this reductive account of language is any focus on the effect of lived embodied subjectivity on men and women. What is therefore principally missing from her account is an unwillingness to take biology and embodiment seriously. This means that she cannot address how the experience of being a sexuated body affects how agents live through and are positioned within the field of power, language, discourse and social practice. Second, I will suggest that Oyewumi's antipathy and suspicion towards externally derived concepts in favour of hermetically sealed cultural knowledge is unnecessary and unfounded. I will then suggest that the polytheistic and polyrhythmic structure of many African cultures already suggests a framework which courts and positively invites alterity, in order to transform it. I shall conclude by arguing that it is this pluralist perspective which offers a more progressive and productive way forward for an informed exchange between African feminism and other theoretical traditions.

The Yoruba hermeneutical horizon

Oyewumi's central claim is that, historically, gender was not a structuring principle among the Oyo-Yoruba in western Nigeria. The contemporary influence of gender is therefore attributable to European cultural and epistemological imperialism. Gender, Oyewumi argues, is central to the organisation of social life in Europe, where biology is used to establish social relations, difference and

positioning. The physical body is *always* linked to the social body which influences participation in the *polis* and contribution to cultural symbolisation (Oyewumi 1997: xii; Douglas 1966). Oyewumi's argument resonates with other critiques of the European schism between 'mind' and 'body' (Lloyd 1984; Gatens 1996). The body is equated with passion, irrationality, barbarism and loss of control. In contrast, the mind is the seat of reason, restraint, control and power. This dualism has resulted in the association of certain groups with corporeality and bodily functions. Those associated with the body were visibly marked out for domination, exclusion and cultural manipulation. For Elizabeth Spelman, the oppression of women is located in 'the meanings assigned to having a woman's body by male oppressors', and the oppression of black people has 'been linked to the meanings assigned to having a black body by white oppressors' (1989: 129). Similarly, Oyewumi attributes the biologising of difference to the primacy of vision in European intellectual history. Privileging the visual facilitates an emphasis on appearance and visible markers of difference. Oyewumi concludes that the entire western episteme bases its categories and hierarchies on visual modes and binary distinctions: male and female, white and black, homosexual and heterosexual, etc. Physical embodiment becomes the basis for social relations and classifications. 1

Oyewumi rejects the notion that this visualist mechanism is also at work in African societies. Her key claim is that, in contrast to Europe, African cultures have not historically been ordered according to the logic of vision, but rather through other senses. Oyewumi therefore contests the idea that a western categorical schema for understanding society and social dynamics can simply be exported elsewhere. What she calls for above all is to recognise that a greater degree of conceptual sensitivity is necessary in order to understand non-western social structures. More specifically, she claims that in the Yoruba context, a different structuring principle is in operation and needs to be theorised. Instead of the visual logic informing social division and hierarchy, through structures such as gender, sexuality, race and bodily capacity, Oyewumi argues that it is in fact *seniority* that orders and divides Yoruba society.

Seniority refers primarily to chronological age difference. However, it also refers to an agent's positioning within the kinship structure. An insider (i.e. extended blood relations) is always senior to an outsider who is marrying into the family. For the insider, seniority is based on birth-order: the first-born is senior to all the other children. For an outsider marrying into the lineage, however, their seniority rank depends on how many children (including blood relations) are already part of the lineage. Seniority is therefore always *relative* and context-dependent: 'no one is permanently in a senior or junior position; it all depends on who is present in any given situation' (Oyewumi 1997: 42). For example, even if x is the first-born (and therefore senior in relation to the other members of the lineage), if x marries out, then automatically she is 'junior' with respect to her spouse's lineage. Seniority, 'cuts through the distinctions of wealth, of rank, and of sex' (J.A. Fadipe cited in Oyewumi 1997: 41).

Oyewumi rejects gender categorisation in Yoruba culture and privileges seniority as an organising principle for two reasons. First, she argues that there is no mark of gender in the Yoruba language whilst seniority is linguistically marked. Second, she holds that Yoruba social institutions and practices are not organised around anatomical difference.

Oyewumi elaborates the first claim by arguing that language is central to the formation of social identity and therefore key to her argument. She writes:

I should add here that language is central to my study, and my engagement is with the Yoruba language as spoken by the Oyo. Language represents major sources of information in constituting world-sense, mapping historical changes, and interpreting the social structure.

(Oyewumi 1997: 32)

As such, she suggests that African languages should be taken more seriously in the analysis of African societies, rather than being trapped within the terms of a western conceptual schema. She argues that to continue to rely on concepts born out of Euro-American linguistic and cultural experience can only lead 'to serious distortions and quite often to a total misapprehension of Yoruba realities' (ibid.: 28). Unlike many European languages, whose grammatical structure positions women as negative and Other to men who function as the norm (in terms of generic usage of pronouns and at a general level of language use), in Yoruba, gender distinctions *only* occur in terms of anatomical sex difference, which Oyewumi refers to as 'ana-male' and 'ana-female'. This biological approach has no bearing on lived experience. For Oyewumi, the word *obinrin*, erroneously translated as 'female/woman':

does not derive etymologically from *okunrin*, as 'wo-man' does from 'man'. *Rin*, the common suffix of *okunrin* and *obinrin*, suggests a common humanity; the prefixes *obin* and *okun* specify which variety of anatomy. There is no conception here of an original human type against which the other variety had to be measured. *Eniyan* is the non-gender-specific word for humans.

(ibid.: 33)

Against Freud, 'anatomy is not destiny' or imply hierarchy. *Obinrin* (female) is not subordinate or powerless to *okunrin* (male). Neither is she symbolically, grammatically or normatively inferior to him. Similarly, *okunrin* is not privileged over *obinrin* on account of his biology. In simple terms, sex difference has no normative implications beyond anatomical distinction. Instead, social positioning and identity are derived through a complex and dynamic web of social relationships that are unrelated to physical embodiment. Names, occupation, profession, status and so on are also linguistically unmarked in terms of gender. Therefore, categories that have the mark of gender in English have no equivalence in Yoruba. She continues, 'There are no gender-specific words denoting son, daughter, brother, or sister. Yoruba names are not gender-specific; neither are *oko* and *aya* – two categories translated as the English husband and wife, respectively' (Oyewumi 1997: 28). In contrast, seniority is linguistically encoded in Yoruba: 'The third-person pronouns *o* and *won* make a distinction between older and younger in social relations' (ibid.: 40). An example of the social pressure of this distinction can be observed in social encounters. Two Yoruba meeting for

the first time are often at pains to establish who is senior, junior or age-mate. In the absence of age status being agreed, the formal third-person pronoun *won* is used. Moreover, the desire to establish seniority and status achieves exaggerated effect in the fetishisation of names and professional titles. These are often linked together for additional prestige, so that people describe themselves (or are described as): Doctor, Chief, Mrs X or Professor (Mrs) Y. Thus, in social interactions, there is an obsessive quest to establish seniority early on in an interaction, via what Ezeigbo (1996) calls 'titlemania'. As this mode of Yoruba sociolinguistics contrasts so strongly with western forms, Oyewumi argues that it is essential that indigenous categories and grammar are examined and not assimilated into a western conceptual framework. For Oyewumi, the absence of gender in Yoruba language means that the 'woman' theorised in western feminist theory in terms of negation and limitation has no equivalent in Yoruba culture. Women in Yoruba culture are simply not perceived or positioned as 'powerless, disadvantaged, and controlled and defined by men' (Oyewumi 1997: xii).

This line of argument leads to her second point about the constitution of identity in the social sphere: the absence of gender demarcation in language is reflected in a corresponding omission in social institutions and practices. Yoruba institutions are traditionally organised around *agbo ile* – a compound housing facility composed of a group of people with common ancestry, sometimes specialising in a particular occupation such as weaving, dyeing, hunting, drumming and so on. The lineage group is the site for the expression of social legitimacy, authority and power. Each member of a lineage (whether ana-male or ana-female) is referred to both as *omo-ile* (children of the house/insider) and *oko* (husband). The *omo-ile/oko* occupies a privileged position *vis-à-vis* an *aya* (an incoming ana-female). Social hierarchy is thus structured in terms of an insider–outsider relationship, by which all *omo-ile* are automatically senior to incoming outsiders, irrespective of their chronological age. Therefore, a woman is not *intrinsically* disadvantaged in relation to a man. Oyewumi writes:

Although ana-females who joined the lineage as *aya* were at a disadvantage, other ana-females who were members of the lineage by birth suffered no such disadvantage. It would be incorrect to say, then, that anatomic females within the lineage were subordinate because they were anatomic females. Only the in-marriage *aya* were seen as outsiders, and they were subordinate to *oko* as insiders. *Oko* comprised all *omo-ile*, both *ana-males* and *ana-females*, including children who were born before the entrance of a particular *aya* into the lineage. In a sense, *aya* lost their chronological age and entered the lineage as 'new-borns', but their ranking improved with time *vis-à-vis* other members of the lineage who were born after the *aya* entered the lineage.

(1997: 46)

Oyewumi goes on to show that social practices (such as the division of labour, kinship, profession and monarchical structures) are not ordered in terms of gender difference but according to lineage. For example, she critiques the dominant assumption in West African studies that equates men with farming and women with trading. She argues that among Oyo-Yorubas both *okunrin* and *obinrin* are represented in trade and farming. Therefore, the sexualisation of

the professions is 'without foundation and so [is] nothing but an imposition of an alien model that distorts reality and leads to false simplification of social roles and relationships' (1997: 76). Instead, occupation and status depend on how agents are positioned within the social field – a positioning that is always relative and contextual. Hence an ana-female could be both an *aya* and an *oko* (an outsider to one lineage, an insider within another). At the level of practice, Oyewumi argues that there is no barrier to participation in various fields of power in terms of anatomical differences. Ana-females are not precluded from becoming warriors, diviners, hunters, farmers and so on. Nor are ana-males excluded from trading and food preparation, even if this food preparation is only for themselves and rarely extended to the entire family.

In what follows, I will explore some of the difficulties raised by Oyewumi's thesis. I will suggest that because Oyewumi privileges a *de jure* analysis of language (bracketing existential context and the nuances of social interaction) as well as addressing formal and explicit power structures, she is unable to address the *de facto* existential realities of sexuated asymmetry as they occur in practice. I develop this argument in three strands. First, I discuss Oyewumi's failure to question the limits of a purely linguistic approach to assessing cultural norms. I suggest an alternative approach to language, and indicate how different the outcome might be from this perspective. Second, I argue that by putting so much pressure on language to make her claim, Oyewumi flattens out the relationship between language and social reality. She assumes that there is a simple isomorphism between the two. Third, I suggest that Oyewumi's model of language does not allow her to investigate the power relations that are immanent within linguistic exchange. It is through a discussion of these three issues that we will be able to clarify the import of her arguments against the universalisability of gender distinctions.

Language as cultural truth

In order to deny gender demarcation, it is important for Oyewumi's critique that she refers to a pre-colonial trajectory of anatomical difference, found in its purest form amongst the Oyo-Yoruba. In this way, *okunrin* and *obinrin* are shown to have become tainted with symbolic, gender-based layers of meaning only through the colonial project. She therefore assumes that the original meanings of these words lie beneath the surface of colonial mis-projection and mis-translation. This recuperative strategy and the desire to capture the 'original' meaning of words is similar to that employed by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger in order to theorise the historical destiny of the German *volk* in the run up to the Nazi regime in the 1930s. In both cases, that of Oyewumi and that of Heidegger, we can detect a questionable understanding of how words convey their meaning across time. Both assume that words have an 'original' meaning that can be accessed in some way or other, as if words are like dirty brass plates that need an occasional polish. How can we guarantee that the meaning of a

word in a particular time or place continues to convey that meaning across time? Even if an earlier meaning is detected (an easier task but no less contentious in literate cultures with a history of dictionaries, but more difficult in historically oral cultures like the Yoruba), how can we be sure that this previous connotation is the only or *original* meaning?

I suggest that a more accurate account of how words convey meaning across time emphasises flux rather than stasis and conservation. Nietzsche's (1977) assertion that truth is a 'mobile army of metaphors' is more useful here, describing the transient nature of words and the ways in which bodies (armies) transmit and transform words through motile communication with others in each historical presence. Understood in this way, the meaning of a word reveals the history of the projections its uses have imposed upon it. In this sense, words are more like totems, bearing the meaning that society projects upon them, yet lasting beyond each epoch of projection and changing along the way. It may well be that even the *history* ascribed to a word is in part a projection of the present. Specifically, Oyewumi focuses on *okun* and *obin* as marks for pure anatomy. The question is, how can we be sure that these two words have always implied the anatomical? At this point, a deeper problem arises: how can Oyewumi be sure that the concept of anatomy can be applied retrospectively? In this sense, Oyewumi's claim about language revealing social dynamics can be at most half right. It may be that *okunrin* and *obinrin* from an etymological perspective appear to reveal little beyond anatomical difference; however, Oyewumi does not ground her etymological approach within a theoretical perspective.

The danger of resorting to etymological arguments is that they ultimately support an *authenticist* and *organicist* approach to language and culture. Just as Heidegger wanted to express the authentic destiny of the German people, so, too, Oyewumi is specifically interested in the traditions and world-sense of the Oyo-Yoruba. On what basis and why ascribe a linear history to words and their relation to origin myths? Why understand origin only in the singular? Why assume that the explicit meaning of a word forecloses and precludes other possible meanings of words? Absent from Oyewumi's text is a sufficient appreciation that linguistic meaning changes according to usage, intonation, gestural patterns, intersubjective encounters and across time. Language is not an inert, closed system, but a dynamic and evolving field of possibilities opened up by a community of expressive speech. Indeed, it is these factors that contribute to the creation of meanings. Referencing the Austrian philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alison Weir demonstrates precisely this point, in relation to an alternative non-essentialist conception of how meaning operates across time.

For Wittgenstein, words could be better understood on the model of a rope that consists of a multiplicity of individual fibres: thus, the meanings of words can be better understood in terms of a multiplicity of interrelated usages. Once this model of language is combined with an historical model, it becomes possible to understand meanings as mediated through complex interrelations of different social practices in different contexts, through different discourse and institutions, which invest these concepts with multiple layers of meanings. Thus, the

concept of 'women' already *includes* multiple and often contradictory meanings, and is already open to shifts and changes in meaning.

(1996, 121)

The etymological method can work only if one assumes that a culture has in some way remained pure across time and that there have not been discontinuities or paradigm shifts in collective self-understanding. As Weir's quote suggests, this methodology is even more questionable when we consider that a spatial (or synchronic) discontinuity can be added to the temporal (or diachronic) discontinuity of language meaning. The meaning of words even within the same present can alter from place to place and context to context – differing in different institutional or praxial situations. In contrast, Oyewumi claims to have uncovered a pristine repository of Yoruba meaning that transcends both space and time. She relies on there being an *essence* or *pure form* to the Yoruba culture, social system and language that is unaffected by changing socio-cultural forces and time. Although conscious of the influence of other languages, such as Hausa and English, Oyewumi assumes a pure and lineal origin to Yoruba, rather than viewing it as an impure system, whose very origins are multiple and themselves always in the process of being reconstituted. Instead, she succumbs to the age-old 'will to truth' – the term Nietzsche (1989) applied to a fundamental desire present in all western metaphysics since Plato to uncover *the* truth – a desire that must remain unconscious of the very assumption that motivates it – that there *is* a Truth (capital T) of Yoruba to be discovered. Unwittingly, Oyewumi presents Yoruba culture as an unhistorical presence that is unaffected by time. A more attentive listener to the Yoruba language and culture will not fail to notice the complete absence of such a notion of a cultural Truth or essential uniformity. As we shall see, rather than a model of language that assumes a pure ahistorical sub-structure that is only altered as it is cast into history and society, I will suggest a model of language which is impure and hybrid from the outset. Beyond the spatial-temporal discontinuity of a culture, the polytheistic structure of Yoruba society requires that ruptures in social structures and language are always already given.

Language and discourse and social life

The second problem with Oyewumi's use of an etymological/linguistic method is that she assumes that the prevalent meanings of words can completely capture social reality. Although Oyewumi is right to argue that language *can* express reality, why should we assume that the realm of language, law, discourse or symbols is simply a mirror of society? Oyewumi fails to see that language works only on the basis of an embodied complex social interaction which both precedes and exceeds it. In other words, we cannot adequately capture the significance of social life with language without mistaking the map for the territory. Language has no meaning outside of a community of users who are always already in the process of reworking and jamming the syntax of language. Listening to Yorubas in conversation we can immediately appreciate their love of

language, and recognise the desire to pierce open words in order to render them more deeply meaningful. However, Oyewumi is unable to deal with language as it sings with and to the world, precisely because she fails to make a distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* description – that is, between what happens at the level of a formal, linguistic understanding of grammatical norms on the one hand, and what happens in language use, practice and everyday lived experience on the other. It is therefore Oyewumi's preference for formal linguistic analysis that allows her to equate gender neutrality in Yoruba language with the absence of sex/biologically-based inequalities in Yoruba culture. She assumes that language simply reflects social reality, rather than acknowledging that it is caught up within it. In this instance, registering the simple presence and absence of terms within language is not always an effective analytic strategy. Simply because gender difference is not inscribed within discourse or marked within language does not mean that it is absent in social relations. There is often a gap between what happens in formal discourse and social practices. As Moore points out, 'marriage ceremonies ... are sometimes situations in which sexual difference is stressed; whereas philosophical discussion may produce a very different account, underplaying the role of women and men ... and emphasising their essential similarities' (1994: 25). It is precisely by underplaying these factors that Oyewumi is able to assume that Yoruba women have the same power as men in their lineage. However, if we introduce examples that insist upon the necessity of a distinction between the *de jure* and *de facto* analysis, we can question the extent of linguistic egalitarianism (and, therefore, social egalitarianism) amongst the Yoruba. Demonstrating that social inequality is often mapped onto the apparently neutral and anatomical is not difficult. We only have to turn to proverbs, an important form of speech amongst the Yoruba, to see how ana-females are positioned and described. It is important to note that proverbs have a much more prominent role within everyday speech in Yoruba than in western language use. One reason for this is the fact that Yorubas consider it indelicate to 'speak with the whole mouth'. Diplomacy and implicit use of language are favoured, hence the everyday usage of proverbs by both the young and the old. Again, proverbs are situational; they are used in specific contexts, as a form of implicit and indirect commentary on a given situation or action. A brief look at just five proverbs (amongst many) that refer to *obinrin* (ana-female) quickly demonstrates the misogynistic prejudice that exists within Yoruba everyday speech.

1. *Ito pelnu o di warapa, egbo pelese o di jakut; bi obinrin ba pe nile aej ni i da.* 'Saliva stays long in the mouth, it becomes epilepsy; a sore stays long on the leg, it becomes putrid; if a woman stays too long in a home she becomes a witch.'² This proverb is typically used when a woman is considered to be domineering. A woman is reduced to unwanted bodily excretion and dis-ease that needs to be disposed of or purged.
2. *Enito da aso obinrin bora werepe lo da bora.* 'The person who covers himself [although the Yoruba term is ungendered, in this instance the male is implied] with a woman's cloth, covers himself with a stinging nettle.' This proverb is used when a man is seen to be too dependent on a

woman. The reference to a stinging nettle alludes to the potential pitfalls of unforeseen consequences of this dependency. Again, women are reduced to the status of a harmful object.

3. *Aya beere, osi beere*. 'Many wives, increases poverty.' A cautionary note to a man embarking on a second marriage. This proverb suggests that a wife will soak up her husband's resources and energy.
4. *Bi iyawo ole ba dagba, olowo ni yoo gble e*. 'When the wife of a lazy man grows up, the wealthy man acquires her.' Here, the woman is reduced to the status of transferable property, to be dropped and acquired when the situation changes. This proverb is often used to address a man who is suspected of not taking sufficient care of his wife.
5. *Foforo-foforo imu iyawo, o san ju yara ofifo*. 'The nasal sound of a wife is preferable to an empty house.' Reducing the wife to a piece of furniture, this proverb depicts the presence of a woman as a necessary evil in a household.

All of these proverbs are unfavourable to women, depicting them variously as bodily excreta, menace, greedy, property, and inanimate objects. Of course, it would also be possible to list and contextualise other Yoruba proverbs that are more positively complimentary towards ana-females; however, the point here is that Yoruba language, considered in the wider context of conventional patterns of speech and speech-acts, reveals different layers of valorisation concerning women. Moreover, in relation to the *ana-male*, we find very few pejorative proverbs. Oyewumi's claim about gender-neutrality therefore falls apart, in the face of an analysis of Yoruba that extends beyond formal semantics. The point is not to privilege one mode of analysis over another (everyday speech-acts over semantics, *parole* over *la langue*, *de facto* over *de jure*), but rather to suggest that different ways of analysing language can reveal different approaches to the relation between power and meaning. Against Oyewumi's etymological analysis, attention to language use and intentionality, such as in proverbs, reveals a completely different value structure. Perhaps more significantly still, Oyewumi's claim about the absence of gender difference is clearly challenged by the brief reference to Yoruba proverbs. In each of the examples given, biological sex difference cannot be separated from the lived situation of the body as it dwells in and interacts with the body politic. By positioning women in terms of cultural codings such as the household, clothing, wealth and so on, the above proverbs serve precisely to differentiate the female body from the male from a socio-cultural perspective. This distinction also has implications for the kind of life experience an individual has, depending on the social value and significance attached to their anatomical body-type. Thus, it becomes imperative that we bring Oyewumi's productive account of seniority into dialogue with the experience of sexuated existence.

De jure and *de facto* modes of reality are often considerably out of joint and at odds with each other. Thus, it becomes vital that we recognise and account for this difference. In the case of women in the Yoruba context, the task, *contra* Oyewumi, is one of citing cases and frameworks of gender oppression or privilege that are not inscribed within the discursive/judicial sphere. A key

issue here, among many that we may point to, is the fact that, statistically, Oyo-Yoruba is a patrifocal (father-focused) society and, as such, it is the *ana-female* as *aya*/wife who generally has to 'marry out', becoming an outsider and therefore subordinate to anyone already in her spouse's lineage, and not the *ana-male*. Over time, even the husband's sisters will effectively lose their rank as they marry out, and will never again rank over the men of the household. It is only with advancing age that the woman's status rises, but this is only in relation to her children and later-arriving wives of her husband or his sibling's children. The logic of seniority therefore suggests a fairly strict gender hierarchy in practice, but, one which is, as Oyewumi rightly claims, absent within the Yoruba hermeneutical universe.

Oyewumi passes over these statistical and normative structures by resorting to two strategies: first of all questioning the value of statistics, and secondly pointing to counter-examples. Neither of these responses is at all adequate in the face of the critique developed here. Whatever one may think about statistics, the fact that probabilities can be calculated on their basis tends to indicate a normative structure at work. Denying the validity of statistics then becomes a weak way of denying the existence of normativity itself. It is true that even in the most unreconstructed of patriarchal cultures one can always find accounts of women in positions of power, taking up a variety of roles such as monarch, hunters, etc. However, the use of counter-examples can often become just another instance of what Bourdieu has termed the presence of the 'miraculous exception' within what is in reality a hegemonic framework. Although there are some *ana-females* who are both *aya* (in relation to their spouse) and *oko* (in relation to their lineage) and who *are* hunters and farmers, it is not the case that *ana-males* as *oko* have child-rearing responsibilities or are involved in food preparation for the family, beyond providing for themselves during their stay on the farm. Using the experiences derived from the 'miraculous exceptions' has the function of neutralising the real workings of power and helps to mask oppressive regimes. While we can agree with Oyewumi's desire to present the logic of practice in Oyo-Yoruba, the linguistic/etymological evidence she uses to support her argument simply does not stand up to scrutiny. What is missing in her account is concrete evidence about the experience of being an *ana-female* or *ana-male* in Yoruba culture, prior to the imperial encounter. In the absence of any substantive genealogical work on the lived experience of men and women across time, we cannot simply use the experience of princesses and privileged women to evaluate the position and experience of *most* women in society. Instead, their experience should be used to imagine new possibilities and fight inequality and not to deny the lived experience of women in its myriad forms.

Once we start to recognise modes of oppression that exist below the threshold of discursive analysis in the way I have suggested, we then need to account for the difference between words, representations and laws on the one hand and social reality on the other. It is at this point that we can point to Oyewumi's text as being caught up in the very modes of power she attempts to

articulate. The central problem for Oyewumi here is that because of the absence of a *de jure/de facto* distinction, she can have no conception of *ideology* – a discursive framework that seeks to legitimate and reproduce certain norms of power and privilege. Without this conception, her thought itself is vulnerable to becoming trapped within the *ideology* of seniority, rather than simply describing it. By portraying seniority as the defining characteristic of Yoruba power dynamics, against which all other modes of power are secondary, in the context of a naturalistic approach to the relation between language and reality, Oyewumi's text ends up uncritically adopting the very form of power she sets out merely to describe.

No one has expressed the dangers of such ideological capture better than Bourdieu: 'The most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words, and ask no more than complicitous silence' (1977:188). Here, Bourdieu shows his acute awareness of a *de jure/de facto* distinction – that social dynamics and hegemonic practices often exist below the level of discourse and linguistic pattern. The failure to *recognise* this process (by remaining silent about ideology) runs the risk of complicity. This danger is further explored in the section that continues immediately after this sentence in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*:

It follows, incidentally that any analysis of ideologies, in the narrow sense of 'legitimizing discourses', which fails to include an analysis of the corresponding institutional mechanisms is liable to be no more than a contribution to the efficacy of those ideologies: this is true of all internal (semiological) analyses of political, educational, religious, or aesthetic ideologies which forget that the political function of these ideologies may in some cases be reduced to the effect of displacement and diversion, camouflage and legitimation, which they produce by reproducing – through their oversights and omissions, and in their deliberately or involuntarily complicitous silences – the effects of the objective mechanisms
(1977: 188–9)

In this light, Oyewumi's attention to language, which appeared at first to be over-emphasised, actually turns out to be not strong enough. Nowhere in her text does she reflect critically on the apparent neutrality of biological difference at the level of language, or suspect that this language itself might be imbued with normative or ideological traces. She fails to consider the intertwined relationship between power and language. The result of this is that her text ends up uncritically restating the normative power of seniority. Moreover, she has no way of addressing the complex relationships in which people 'play with' the normative structure of seniority to their own advantage. For example, as a junior, it might be in my interest to acknowledge the authority of a senior and show deference because it suits my own needs and purposes. In this case, my apparent respect is just that: an appearance. My 'respect' is not in reality motivated by the consideration that as an elder they are worthy of that status. Again, a senior may tacitly relinquish her seniority when she is dealing with a junior because the junior has economic or social capital which she wishes to access. Seniority thus becomes a 'game' that people can play to different effects and for varying purposes. But if we stay at the level

of the explicit meaning and symbolic coding, then we miss out on the gaps, significant silences, and concealed meaning within any particular mode of address. In contrast to this playful, hybrid and, above all, pragmatic approach to the language of seniority mentioned, Oyewumi's book is replete with refusals to envisage any other way of viewing the Yoruba social system except as structured by seniority *qua* seniority.

For all these reasons, Oyewumi's text falls prey to a dubious manoeuvre that is commonly made by theorists striving to articulate an account of identity and social dynamics in opposition to the western norm – that of repressing the difference, the silences, the blind spots, that inhere within the object of study itself. As Nancy Fraser writes of those involved in identity politics:

Stressing the need to elaborate and display an authentic, self-affirming and self-generated collective identity, it [identity politics] puts moral pressure on individual members to conform to a given group culture. Cultural dissidence and experimentation are accordingly discouraged, when they are not simply equated with disloyalty. So, too, is cultural criticism, including efforts to explore intragroup divisions, such as those of gender, sexuality and class. Thus, far from welcoming scrutiny of, for example, the patriarchal strands within a subordinated culture, the tendency of the identity model is to brand such critique as 'inauthentic'. The overall effect is to impose a single, drastically simplified group-identity which denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations.

(2000: 112)

Acknowledging any attempt to uncover gender asymmetry in Oyo-Yoruba is precisely what Oyewumi's account obscures and brands as inauthentic and imperial. The critique presented here does not deny the existence of seniority in Yoruba society (both as a structuring form and as a rhetorical strategy); neither does it disregard Oyewumi's attempt to show that it often dominates other modes of capability or constraint. The point is rather that in claiming an irreducible difference between the Yoruba social system and western systems, Oyewumi undermines the differences that are themselves always already at work in Yoruba society. Seniority may well take precedence over patriarchy in the Yoruba worldview. However, Oyewumi's account of language and its relation to social reality remains problematic, her understanding of modes of power and how they operate monolithic (and therefore simplistic), and finally, her conception of the relation between *language* and power silently complicitous with normative forces that she fails to articulate.

The language of power

The third problematic area in Oyewumi's account relates to her understanding of power in the Yoruba social system. Although Oyewumi's account of power dynamics, based around being an insider or outsider in relation to lineage and seniority, involves context-dependency (being an outsider in one context, an insider in another) and relativism (being senior to certain members of the

lineage, junior to others) and is inevitably complex in form, it none the less remains simplistic in another sense. As already suggested above in the brief explanation of how it is possible to play with seniority, the essential pitfall of her account of power, whether that of seniority in Yorubaland or gender distinction in the west, is that a particular variable of power is *the same everywhere* in isolation from any other form of enablement or constraint. One can readily concede that Oyewumi is right to argue that seniority is the dominant language of power in Yoruba culture. However, she is wrong to conclude that seniority is the *only* form of power relationship and that it operates outside of other forms of hierarchy and difference. In line with recent theories of power (such as in feminist and post-modern thought), I suggest that different modes of power are always working in terms of each other. No mode of power, be it gender, seniority, race or class, has the same value from context to context and from time to time. No form of power is monolithic or univocal, existing in isolation from all other modes of social structuration. Rather, each variable of power acquires its *specific* value in the context of all other variables operating in a given situation. The consensus amongst many critical thinkers today is that the boundaries between different modes of power are often irreducibly blurred. For example, class difference works only in the way it does through a specific constellation of effects that are articulated in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion, geography and generation, and vice versa. And of course, this pluralised, context-sensitive approach to class changes how we understand these different positionings in turn. Each mode of power is like a thread that creates a pattern of significance only when woven together with all the other threads that combine in a specific situation (family, generation, workplace, religion, city, cultural norms and so on).

Oyewumi's failure to take seriously the interwoven nature of power relations means that she cannot account for the complexity and nuances of seniority as it actually operates in the Yoruba context. For example, she cannot discuss the fact that the ideology of seniority is very often used as a way of masking *other* forms of power relationship. It is in this sense that her theorisation of seniority may be seen as politically dangerous. The vocabulary of seniority often becomes the very form in which sexual abuse and familial (especially for the *aya*/wife in a lineage) and symbolic violence are couched. When we take the example of the virulent abuse of power in the teacher–student relationship in the Nigerian education system, where victims are reluctant to challenge the abuser in the name of 'disrespecting their senior', Oyewumi's unwillingness to interrogate the workings of power becomes extremely alarming. Had she nuanced her analysis of seniority, she would uncover the myriad ways seniority often becomes the very institution for the exercise and legitimatisation of pernicious forms of abuse. However, because Oyewumi wants seniority to stand alone as *the* dominant mode of power in the Yoruba social system, she simply cannot recognise the complexity of social relations. She therefore must avoid *all* work done by feminists and social theorists that stresses the complex interdependency of one form of power upon another, and the ways in which one explicitly manifested

(and respected!) mode of power often conceals other more insidious ones. Her occlusive account of power resembles early first-wave forms of feminism that stressed the transcendent nature of patriarchal oppression (and bracketed out, at least initially, many other forms of power domination that women were and are subjected to), the difference being that she has replaced patriarchy with seniority.

Of course, Oyewumi's thematisation of seniority in the Yoruba context differs from early feminist discourse in that she stresses power as *enabling* over power as *constraining*. However, the emphasis placed upon positive power serves to highlight the problems with her account. It is precisely because she *doesn't* recognise that seniority operates in differential contexts, intertwining with other variables (which remain at best 'second order' in her account), often functioning as a euphemism shrouding abuse in respect, that she is able to deny that gender distinctions are at work in Yoruba society and overlook the existence of sexuated-based inequality. Only when isolated from all other conditioning factors can a particular variable of power (like seniority) appear to be wholly enabling. However, as soon as we adopt a more complex, interrelated notion of power, we can see that power as capacity always operates in the context of other forms of limitative power. Oyewumi's desire to foreground and celebrate Yoruba or African female power need *not* preclude an analysis of the ways in which they experience constraint and domination. Power-over and power-to can and shall be seen as interdependent. The extent to which we ignore either form or privilege one over the other is the extent to which we *simplify* social reality and our understanding of the complex operations of power.

African local knowledge in the plural

I suggest that Oyewumi's fixation with an untainted linguistic and social indigeneity is ultimately motivated by a desire to assert the radical Otherness of African culture in relation to Europe. This desire to proclaim Africa's own unique culture, mode of being and hermeneutic tradition has a long tradition in African political and intellectual history, embedded as it is in the quest to contest European denial of African humanity and their global dominance. Oyewumi's project of highlighting a Yoruba cultural logic that is not polluted by western gender demarcation or inequalities thus situates her in a long list of 'race men' who are keen to uncover and assert indigenous African knowledge and modes of self-representation. Yet, her desire to uncover a pure Oyo-Yoruba cultural framework that is anterior to colonial projects is deeply problematic and against the grain of the cultural system she wishes to uncover. In the final section, I want to challenge Oyewumi's 'cultural insiderism' by sketching an alternative way of conceptualising social relations and the production of knowledge in the Yoruba social system. This account still allows for sensitivity to differences in

social systems (such as the relative absence of seniority in one context and its prevalence elsewhere) without falling into the trap of purity and authenticity.

This alternative conceptualisation takes its lead from Weber's speculative use of the religious basis of modern capitalism in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1976). Just as Weber points to a specific theological context in which capitalism developed (that of a Protestant culture that, in its divorce from Catholicism, had erased all modes of mediation with the sacred, leading to a collective spiritual anxiety that was responded to in terms of a special emphasis on *work*), so too I will suggest that acknowledging the specific theological-aesthetic horizon of Yoruba culture leads to insights into the structure of Yoruba social dynamics. In contrast to Weber's Protestant monotheism, the Yoruba social system is inherently polytheistic. Polytheism is not simply a plural relation to the spirit-world; rather, deeply inscribed theological imperatives have an organising power that spreads far beyond religious practice. Polytheism potentially opens up a fluid and pragmatic attitude, not just towards gods, but towards all things, categories and concepts. Although contemporary Nigerian society (and contemporary Yoruba culture) is, on the surface, divided in terms of Christian and Islamic faiths, the deep structure of the society is polytheistic and ordered by the spirit-world of the traditional gods. This theological background is revealed most readily in aesthetic practices such as dance and music. Polytheism in spirit translates into the aesthetics of *polyrhythm*.³

Yoruba society has been and still is both polytheistic in its belief structures and polyrhythmic in aesthetic practice and everyday life. Unlike the European spiritual tradition, there is no central transcendental ordering principle in the Yoruba context – instead individual gods function to serve different spiritual needs. As a person's spiritual needs change across time, so too does their theological allegiance. This does not mean that people change gods intermittently or have an attitude of 'anything goes'. Instead, polytheism involves living with several different moral or truth claims and negotiating the tension that arises from sameness and difference without excluding one or the other. In this light, Yoruba society more closely resembles the account of inter-relational and multiplicitous power structures that post-modern theorists have provided. In a polytheistic society there is no dominant line of power that has a monopoly on truth – rather, there is a shifting constellation of forces of capability and restraint. Truth, under polytheism, does indeed resemble Nietzsche's mobile army of metaphors. At the level of discourse, no one interpretation can dominate; at the level of lived reality, enabling and constraining forces are always in contestation with each other.

It is in this context that we can contest Oyewumi's authenticist account of the Oyo-Yoruba. Instead of privileging a specific form of Yoruba culture (e.g. seniority amongst the Oyo) as the paradigmatic version, a polytheistic take on Yoruba culture and society shows that there is an intrinsic *internal* difference and differentiation at work which cannot be entirely adduced to European imperialism. The Beninois philosopher Paulin J. Hountondji has argued that

inconsistencies, pluralism and discontinuities in African society cannot be explained solely in terms of colonisation. For Hountondji it is necessary to appreciate that:

Pluralism does not come from any society from outside but is inherent in every society. The alleged acculturation, the alleged 'encounter' of African civilization with European civilization, is really just another mutation produced within African civilization, the successor to many earlier ones about which our knowledge is very incomplete, and, no doubt, the precursor of many future mutations, which may be more radical still. The decisive encounter is not between Africa as a whole and Europe as a whole: it is the continuing encounter between Africa and itself.

(1976: 165)

In contrast to Oyewumi, this approach to pre-colonial internal differences among different African cultures presents a conception of a society that is fluid and open to difference, rather than oppositionally stacked against alternative conceptualisations. Yoruba culture, as polytheistic, matches Wittgenstein's metaphor of language as a rope: certain aspects of the culture extend across time and space, but there is *no* central strand of the culture (from the perspective of expressive practice or power dynamic that stands as an ordering principle for the whole). In this sense, polytheism and polyrhythm operate as an alternative model of social structure and dynamics that contrasts strongly with the purist schema Oyewumi prefers. In this view, Yoruba culture occupies an impure, bastardised and bastardising space, inviting inter-mixture and productive dialogue with its outside rather than shunning it. It is this kind of mangled and mixed local knowledge that I find productive.

The important difference between this approach and Oyewumi's is that discourse (language, regimes of representation and so on) can now be seen to be perpetually in conflict with itself and the practices of the multitude. Although one mode of discourse (that of the necessity of paying respect to seniors) may be hegemonic, an appreciation of the differential character of Yoruba society points to other forms of duty, allegiance, capacity and limitation that are also at work. Approaching Yoruba culture as polytheistic facilitates a *critical* relation to Yoruba discourse. Instead of simply accepting one mode of speech or representation (as Oyewumi does), this approach suggests that discourses themselves should be examined in order to determine if they themselves are concealing relations of domination or are ideologically motivated. With Bourdieu in mind, we can then look beneath the discursive layer to examine the logic of practice at work. Instead of concentrating totally on language and what is *said*, we can then examine what is *done*, what remains unspoken, using statistics, typical examples and a whole variety of other methods that anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists and philosophers have spent decades perfecting. This is not to privilege action over speech, or social reality over discourse and law, it is rather to place discourse *in the context* of practice and unmask how they are negotiated *and* manipulated. It is in this way that the distinction between *de jure* representation and *de facto* reality can be maintained for the purposes of a genuinely critical theory.

The approach developed here around polytheism is based on an appreciation of the deeply-grounded theological and aesthetic structures that enable both plurality *and* existence across time. Polytheism helps to explain how Yoruba society absorbs and is absorbed by change and innovation, rather than how it has excluded it. It also allows us to move away from a totalising theory based on the idea of the *ultimate* truth that Oyewumi's ideology of seniority relies upon. In a move that echoes Nietzsche's critique of the will to truth, the Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe has argued that one of the features of a *monotheistic system* is the belief in the notion of the '*ultimate* – that is, the first and last principle of things. Speaking of the ultimate is another way of speaking of the truth' (2001: 215). He goes on to say that 'there is no monotheism except in relation to producing a truth that not only determines the foundations and goals of the world but provides the origin of all meaning' (ibid.). A monotheistic conceptualisation can become fixated on a single notion of what the culture is, and block other stories dwelling within that culture. It is often the case that at the very moment when African thinkers assume that they are paying attention to local knowledge and realities (against western epistemic hegemony), their own blind-spots and embeddedness within a particular epistemological tradition are produced and made manifest. In the case of Oyewumi, the blind-spot is that of an unconsciously adopted conceptual monotheism. Oyewumi's figuration of a pure Oyo-Yoruba social landscape marks a refusal to open herself up to the mystery of alterity, of the contradictory pains and pleasures of a Yoruba world of difference. The metaphysics of monotheism that underscores her text shows how unwittingly *western* Oyewumi's thesis has become despite her stated desire to project Yoruba epistemology into scholarship.

As an aside, we may now mention another weakness in Oyewumi's argument. She assumes that an egalitarian and anatomical relationship between the sexes has been erased by European colonialism. The question that arises here is, why ascribe such importance to the European colonial encounter over earlier or other encounters? Why should we assume that pre-colonial structures could be so easily wiped out? Examples of retained cultural traits among diasporic Africans since the Middle Passage indicate that such structures could survive even the most violent of upheavals (Sturkey 1987; Sobel 1987). In this case, Oyewumi needs to explain how gender egalitarianism was erased through indirect colonial rule, whereas the harrowing passage across the Atlantic and plantation slavery did not completely erase other African cultural patterns. I suggest that the adoption of a 'colonial' gender ideology in Yoruba society cannot be simply explained as an erasure of an earlier form. Though polemic, it would make more sense to suggest that there may have been an element within Yoruba culture itself – a 'cultural fit' between an unmarked gender ideology in Yoruba society and gender coding in European culture that allowed for easy co-option into the colonial ideology of gender difference. This is not to deny the violent disruption wrought by the colonial processes, or the relative power of women; rather, it suggests that cultural actors are more strategic (albeit tacit) *and* often complicit in their attitude and response to change. As an elderly

Malian Imam puts it, when discussing the ending of the practice of female circumcision: 'Change must discover unexpected reasons for its existence; it too must be surprised at what it brings about. Only in the tension between the old and new does the elaboration of a moral practice occur' (Hecht and Simone 1994: 17). Therefore, constructing differential African realities from within – indicated by a polytheistic approach to discursive practice and critique – indicates that Yoruba society, in all its plurality, already had the *potential* to absorb external schemas and power dynamics. Again, this absorption is always critical, playful and pragmatic – rather than dogmatic, authenticist and uncritical. 4

Here then is the final difference between the account of seniority found in Oyewumi and the more hybrid version of the Yoruba social system I have outlined. Oyewumi ultimately *rejects* any form of western categorisation as inappropriate in other contexts, such as Yoruba society. In this case, gender distinction, as with the highly problematic reference to homosexuality, can only be seen as a 'western import'. In contrast, adopting a critical polytheism enables us to understand how Yoruba society is already amenable to difference, much more than Oyewumi might think. Unfortunately, it is often the case that theories of African cultures disclose more about the theorist's own anxieties than they illustrate how the majority of Africans engage and navigate their everyday life world. Beneath the surface of language, gender distinctions (as with other allegedly second-order modes of power structure) have always been at work in Yoruba society; the only thing western discourse has done is to help to articulate it and invite the work of raising it to a critical discursive plane. Just as second-wave feminists in the west had first of all to struggle with the ways in which patriarchal ideology exists and invites complicity in language, so too elsewhere.

What is most fundamentally at stake here in my argument is the necessity to reject an oppositional and rejectionist attitude towards theoretical models and vocabularies derived from elsewhere. In this respect, as I have indicated, perhaps the biggest irony of Oyewumi's text is that it is ultimately very 'western' (in the clichéd sense of the word) in its unconsciously monotheistic approach to difference. Instead of intrinsic difference (the difference of the multiple, of a society that is always at odds with itself, a society alive to the richness of otherness, a polyrhythmic society), Oyewumi invites us to think of difference in exclusionary and oppositional terms. In this way, she rejects western theory only to commit mistakes that have long been criticised *within* its terms. Her account is ultimately ideologically driven by a quest for the ultimate truth that must implicitly reject the internal difference at work in Yoruba society. A hermetically sealed African or Yoruba culture fearful of impurities and contamination has never existed. The desire for purity and a self-contained, referential self/nationhood is a construction of the political and intellectual elite.

In conclusion, in terms of the question of gender, the forcefulness and conviction at work in Oyewumi's account are such that her account of seniority

must be taken seriously and be explored beyond Oyewumi's own project. Despite her problematic assumptions about the nature of language and its relation to power, she none the less succeeds in cautioning against automatically importing concepts from the socio-historical experience of one society to another. All future research into gender outside of the west should therefore be mindful that it runs the risk of projecting into the society that which is not there at either a discursive or praxial level. With this incessant vigilance about the threat of theoretical projections in mind, it is then possible to examine the ways in which gender inequality may yet still exist by other means despite its absence within language. Or, it may be that gender demarcation and discrimination, on further exploration, are relatively absent. In this case, the analysis of other social systems may reveal distinctive constellations of power (both as capacity and as constraint). It is unlikely, however, that a result which privileges one mode of power above all others (such as Oyewumi's notion of seniority or the feminist reification of gender) will entirely escape a similar form of critique to that staged here, which detects ideological complicity at work in the argument.

Most importantly, we must reject outright any attempt to assign a particular conceptual category as belonging only to the 'West' and therefore inapplicable to the African situation. For millennia, Africa has been part of Europe, as Europe has been part of Africa, and out of this relation, a whole series of borrowed traditions from both sides has been and continues to be brewed and fermented. To deny this intercultural exchange and reject all theoretical imports from Europe is to violate the order of knowledge and simultaneously disregard the (continued) contribution of various Africans to European cultural and intellectual history, and vice versa. Finally, asserting a polytheistic approach to understanding Yoruba (and other African) social dynamics does not lead to an outright rejection of Oyewumi's theorisation of seniority. Rather, what is now required is to open up a space where a multiplicity of contradictory existences and conceptual categories can be productively engaged within our theorising. It is in this way that we can understand and maintain African knowledge in the plural.

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Notes

1. It is important to note that Oyewumi is not the first to make this move. Feminist anthropologists such as Henrietta Moore (1994), Julia Epstein and

Kristina Straub (1991), and Marilyn Strathern (1988) have pointed out that the use of biology to establish social relations and self-identity is not universal. Moreover, she is also not the first to critique Euro-American feminism for its universalising impulse. There is a strong body of literature in this area by African, black and other Third World feminists which has deepened and broadened the field of feminist scholarship. In this light, we might want to pause and reflect on why a scholar so concerned with seniority should fail to acknowledge the work of her academic seniors.

2. Translation by the author.

3. We can speculate that there is a general relation between deep historical-theological structures (even in secularised societies) and aesthetic practice. Just as in the west, historical monotheism has led to or privileged monorhythmic practice (for example, 4/4 or 3/4 time in music), so too in Yorubaland, polytheism has nurtured and encouraged the development of polyrhythmic expressive practice.

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