Remains of Ritual
Northern Gods in a Southern Land

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Preview excerpts used by permission of the author
Fig. 1.1 Northern gods dancing at a triennial cow sacrifice (Elise Ridenour)
This book reaches back over a period of fifteen years—summers here, sabbaticals there—working with Ewe shrines. In many ways it seems overdue. Writing about the Ewe, however, is a notoriously difficult task, even though much has been written about them. More than one researcher has commented on a kind of Ewe chaos, a structured ambiguity that is resistant to synthetic analysis (Rosenthal 1998; Guerts 2002). There seems to be no getting to the bottom of things, especially those things having to do with shrines, leaving a distinct impression that no matter how long you stay in Ewe country, you are never quite there. It is like the many clay Legbas, the god of the crossroads and thresholds, protecting the entrances to villages and homes. You see only the visible anthropomorphic figure, Legba’s outward manifestation, not his power, the herbs, animal parts, and other things buried
deep inside. Much in Ewe culture is similarly subterranean, not visible to the naked eye. Nothing is quite what it seems; everything feels submerged beneath at least two layers of clay.

A drive into Three-Town, an assemblage of small municipalities located on the Guinea Coast near the Togo border where I did most of my fieldwork, will confirm that fact. If you happen to arrive at night, as you pass the Shell station just before the end of the Accra-Aflao road, you may catch a glimpse out of the corner of your eye of the night watchman sitting under the neon lights in his lazy chair, with his coat collar turned up against a slight night chill. An old man just trying to get through the night, most definitely, but earlier in the day he was carrying a duck in his mouth as he slithered along the ground in the guise of Da, the ancient snake vodu. It turns out that he is also a midawo, a priest of Xebieso, the wielder of thunderbolts. Drive a little further and, on the right side of the road, you will see market women selling their wares by the light of kerosene lamps, the open-wicked flames giving everything a warm glow. The old white-haired woman sitting in front of a table of onions with her granddaughter on her lap, a rather gentle-looking soul, is also an amegashi, a diviner who deals with hot spirits, those who “died in the blood.” The fishmonger sitting next to her, it turns out, belongs to the local medicine shrine, where, on a regular basis, she manifests a soldier god from the savannah, though when it happens she has no idea that it is in fact happening. And the man dressed in northern garb buying fish from her is not a Muslim from the Zongo quarter of town, as one would assume from his clothes, but a Brekete sfo (priest). Continue down the road and you probably will overlook the unassuming kindergarten teacher standing in front of the “chemical store” (pharmacy) waiting for a taxi. From his looks and demeanor, who would figure that, on the weekends, he is a great shrine drummer, bare chested and drenched in sweat, chewing kola and taking shots of akpeteshie (local gin), calling the gods to dance themselves into existence.

Finally, at the end of the highway from Accra, you come to a crossroads. If you take a left, you will be headed for Aflao, some ten kilometers away, where there are plenty of drinking bars, illegal money changers, smugglers, and other somewhat nefarious characters typical of a border town. Take a right and you pass through Denu, then imperceptibly into Xedranawo, and on to Adafienu (the three towns of Three-Town) toward the Keta Lagoon. Although distinct towns, with different histories, different chiefs, different concerns, you can’t really tell where one leaves off and the next begins. Most people either go left or right at the junction, but, if you decide to go straight, the pavement abruptly ends. Head down the dirt
road and less than a kilometer away you will be standing on the eastern shores of the Black Atlantic, on the shifting sands of what was once called the Slave Coast. Whichever way you go, everywhere clay Legbas—small ones sitting at the side of the road, large ones protecting whole towns, hidden by the night—are reminders that much lies underneath.

Grandmothers and fishmongers, priests and diviners, gods and drummers populate a submerged life interlaced between heaven and earth, mortals and the divine. For the casual visitor—the new manager at the local Agricultural Development Bank, for example, who is working his way up the corporate ladder, or the Peace Corps worker working her way down—all this pretty much goes unnoticed (even for some Ewes). Most night watchmen, after all, are not thunder god priests (you do not choose that vocation, you are chosen); old ladies are usually just loving grandmothers, though occasionally, if their grandchildren are sick, they may consult a diviner; fishmongers are, for the most part, simply people from whom to buy that somewhat strange-named coastal delicacy “Keta school-boys”; the majority of schoolteachers are Christians, having nothing to do with shrines; and it is a pretty safe bet that nine times out of ten the man in northern garb is not a worshipper of “idols,” but will turn toward Mecca and pray when he hears the local muezzin call. As for Legba, well, he is the “divine trickster” (Herskovits 1938), and there is no telling what he may or may not be up to. If you don’t know Legba’s ways, it’s better not to notice him at all, even if you see that he is there. Sometimes, however, this may be hard to do.

They say Legba has a penis so large he must carry it over his shoulder, a burden he carries with joy. His insatiable sexual appetite is always getting him into trouble; how he gets out of such predicaments, legendary. Legba loves to mislead, whether mortal or god. He is known for luring the unwary into intractable situations only he can resolve (that is, once the appropriate sacrifice has been made). Many are the woes of those unfortunate souls who have crossed his path when he was up to something. Even the gods have not escaped the machinations of his mischievous spirit. There is more than one story of how he fooled Afa, the god of divination, or deceived Xebieso, and even played tricks on Mawu, the creator. No wonder the missionaries labeled him the devil incarnate.

A divine trickster, Legba, as with that other phallic god Hermes, is also the divine messenger, the linguist (tsiam) who speaks the language of the sky. Because he patrols the borders and protects the threshold, all sacrifice, all libation, ultimately all meaning goes and comes through him, hence his infinite possibilities, his refusal to be pinned down. Translator, trickster,
protector, linguist—all this and more comes under the sign of the crossroads where Legba rules, where there are always-already multiple paths, multiple meanings. And lest we think we have finally pinned Legba down as the phallic god par excellence, pregnant with meaning, it is helpful to remember that sometimes, though it is fairly rare, Legba anifests himself in female form complete with clay breasts. Nothing is quite what it seems.

The sand is quick along the Bight of Benin. There is no firm ground from which to take a stand, to get one’s bearings, only crossroads at every turn. Whether the site where two roads actually cross, traced in the sand with powdered clay, inlaid with cowrie shells on an altar, danced or drummed in intricate cross-rhythms, the crossroads—walked, traced, seen, or heard—is a place of possibility where choices are made, paths followed or discarded, doors opened and closed. This is not a convergence of activity congealing into a series of options, but a thinning out of things, allowing room for something to happen. The crossroads—that resonant symbol of an Africa that is always on the move—offers by definition manifold ways, while simultaneously defining a center where paths cross and destinies intersect and intertwine. Perpetually in motion, the crossroads turns to that which is not there, and in this essential absence is danced to the core.

On the front cover of this book is a photograph of the remains of a ritual.6 It is a picture of a crossroads drawn in the sand by Kpesusi, a Brekete priest, at the entrance to our compound. He made a circle and then cut it with a cross in white kaolin powder, then traced over it with water poured from the spout of a buta, the swirled-patterned plastic kettle used in shrines imported to the coast from the north. Nothing is as ritually powerful as the pouring of water, the only drink poured by man not made by man. It comes directly from Mawu’s hand, unaltered by human process, and thus carries God’s divine seal.

After he drew the cross, we sat down on our haunches and he poured a libation. As he let the spirits slowly flow over the rim of the glass, finding that exact place, the threshold, where the liquid overflowed, he called the old sofowo, those who have gone before—Kodzokuma, Mama Seidu, Zigah, Nudedzito, Tsavi, Anibra—and I was reminded of how many of these priests I had the privilege of knowing, with how many I had danced. Kpesusi called them to draw near and bind the gates: “Whatever evil is
sent this way should find its owner.” Gunpowder was set off at the four corners where the cross cut the circle, then in the center itself, closing the door against harm. This act of protection was followed by a blessing, when Kpesusi took the buta and reinscribed the circle and cross once again with water, then in a final act drew two lines from the gates through the circle leading into the compound, opening a pathway so that all that was good could still enter. This book, as with those traces of traces in the sand, remains of ritual, is an invitation to enter, to follow a path, above all, to heed the way.
The following ethnography traces Ewe ritual life across the praxis of a northern medicine shrine that came to the Volta Region in the 1920s. These strangers in a southern land were part of a larger movement of “occult economies” (Allman and Parker 2005: 14) that flowed from the savannah regions literally in the bags of ritual entrepreneurs (Werbner 1979: 668). As did their southern counterparts, these gods both came in material form as god-things to which sacrifices were given—the “fetish” in the bag—and also manifested themselves through spirit possession, the “wives” of the gods. Although these northern gods were strangers (their otherness a source of their power), their ways, therefore, were not unfamiliar to Ewes. But it seems new gods were needed for new times, whether it was to address old concerns through
borrowed means or to try to deal with disruptions of more recent origin. While virtually all the other northern shrines that came to Ewe country during this period eventually withered away, Brekete, the shrine with which this book deals, not only survived, but flourished, becoming one of the dominant ritual scapes along the Guinea Coast.

The complex movement of these northern shrines has engaged the ethnographic and historical imagination of Africanists for generations, from virtually the beginnings of anthropology in Ghana (Rattray 1932; Fortes 1936; Field 1940; Ward 1956; Goody 1957a), with its concerns of effective governance and the changes wrought by new forms of solidarity, to more recent studies (Field 1960; Goody 1975; McCleod 1975; Werbner 1979; Parker 2004; Allman and Parker 2005), which have sought to understand the internal and external dynamics that created an opening for these foreign gods to operate, a space for these exotic others to inhabit. Although this work collectively embodies a rich literature that significantly deepens and broadens our understanding of both local and global forces that shaped this north-south ritual axis, there is an important issue of aesthetic force, a proverbial elephant in the room, that largely has been ignored.

What has been lost among the various explanations, interpretations, and theories that focus on such things as occult economies and ritual entrepreneurs, the introduction and effects of new capitalist modes of production, the inner and outer workings of antiwitchcraft movements, searches for security in a rapidly changing world, ritual as a form of historical practice, counterhegemonic discourse, and so on, is the fact that when these gods came south they danced all the way down. This aspect of ritual praxis may be mentioned, but that is about as far as it goes. We get no feel for the embodied presence of these dancing gods, the soundscape of a tuned world, the sheer intensity of being-with the gods in a musical way.

Musical experience, the term used here to encompass the entirety of this way of being, something I have written about previously in my work on the dancing prophets of Malawi (1996), is not merely one more event among others that happens within the horizons of ritual life, but is the very terms of existence from which all else flows. People experience their gods and each other, first and foremost, in the immediacy of a musical way of being-in-the-world, sharing a specific time and space inscribed by cross-rhythmic effect, engendering a multidimensional movement that is always-already on its way. Drumming, clapping, singing, dancing—a list that already separates, thus does violence to the unitary nature of the phenomenon—create a soundscape beyond the acoustical, bringing
into the world a way of being-there for the gods that is fundamentally a being-away.

Are you experienced?
—JIMI HENDRIX

Given the current emphasis on agency—gaining it, losing it, granting it, taking it, sharing it, dispensing it—what do we do with people who claim none, in fact are insistent that they are not there at all, are totally away, possessed by a god or spirit? How do we go along with ways of being-in-the-world so radically different from our own possibilities? If the people having such experiences can tell us nothing about it, and, given the fact that gods do not generally grant interviews to ethnographers, what kind of access can we have to such worlds? What does it mean to be embodied by a deity, to be-there and not-there at the same time? Is trance dancing inherently opaque, becoming a blank screen for our projections, power differentials cast before a silent landscape?

Spirit possession variously has been taken as the local equivalent of multiple personality disorder, Freudian sublimation, Jungian archetypes, the formation of right brain personalities, Lacanian manifestations of the Real, peripheral strategies of marginal peoples, the working out of colonial and postcolonial disorders, Marxist illusion, mimetic excess, and just plain good acting. No one, after all, is “really” getting possessed by gods and spirits; they just think they are. To think otherwise is to leave ethnography behind and “go native,” mistaking a worldview for a separate reality. What rarely happens is for spirit possession to be taken for what people who practice such traditions say it is.

We can learn of the gods, their attributes, and lineages; pay attention to behavior, act, and word; track their movements across space and time; investigate the everyday life of devotees. We can even fill out such ethnographic detail with laboratory investigations into rhythmic effects on brain waves (Neher 1961, 1962); EEG readings in the field (Oohashi et al. 2002); analyses of autonomic responses to trophotropic rebound (Lex 1979); inquiries into the relationship of hypnosis to “monotonous drumming” (Maurer et. al. 1997); or theorizing on how deep listening evokes deep responses in the lower regions of the brain (Becker 2004 by way of Damasio 1999). From these facts, we then can extrapolate complex chains of causality. But when these facts are linked to narrowly defined sequences of cause and effect, the resulting analyses tend toward a stasis that is antithetical to the multidimensionality of spirit possession. The unrelenting pulse to turn
that which is possible into what is actual, hard facts ruled by the causal arrow of time, conceals more than it reveals. Suspicion always fills in the gaps with something concrete, leaving no room for silence to frame that which is already there.

If, however, we invoke a kind of *epoché* and explore the things themselves as they are given, go along with a way of being-in-the-world that is fundamentally a being-away, then perhaps we will stop listening to, thus dismissing, what people are telling us and, once again, begin to listen along with them. In doing so, we may begin to hear what the gods themselves have to say about the matter. In Africa—north, south, east, and west—that “saying” is most often a danced one.

I dance . . . therefore I am.

—LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR

Dance in Africa celebrates lives, commemorates death, consummates alliances, is part of the everyday lifeworld. We have nothing comparable in Western society, where danced bodies have been relegated to nightclubs, weddings, high school proms, and the occasional concert stage. In Africa, who you are often has much to do with how you dance. And nowhere is this more true than in dance’s embrace of the other in its embodiment of a multiplicity of deities and spirits. This last dance—striking in its frequency (Bourguignon 1968)—is not merely the final item in a series, but marks the entire African continent. The Saharan divide—that somewhat suspect division of Africa—is not operative here. Trance dancing is an ancient practice that, to the consternation of both missionary and government officials, persists to this day. Divine horsemen still ride in the northern savanna as well as on the Guinea Coast (Besmer 1983; Erlmann 1982; Matory 1994), and drums of affliction continue to sound throughout Bantu-speaking Africa (V. Turner 1968; Janzen 1992; Friedson 1996).

No doubt trance dancing was never far from Senghor’s mind when he predicated his ontological turn on dance’s fundamental difference: its orientation toward the other. This was not merely a substitution of terms, but a reversal of effect. His philosophical take on négritude, part of that Left Bank efflorescence of the Black Atlantic (Mudimbe 1992; Jules-Rosette 1998), was the “weak beat” in a dialectical negativity (Jeanpierre 1969: 451; Sartre 1969). If not for Africa, “who would teach rhythm to the dead world of machines and cannons?” (Senghor quoted in Vaillant 1990: 266). This parsing of vocations was part of Senghor’s riff on a rhythmized Africa that was always-already different.
If all this begins to sound somewhat familiar—African participatory reason confronting European analytical minds, the regionalized equivalent of black people clapping on “two” and “four”—it is not surprising. The tableau of Africans dancing into an exceedingly dark African night runs deep in the Western imagination. The rhythmic vitality that is the core of Senghor’s négritude lent itself to a misappropriation aligned with oversexualized African bodies trapped in tropical climes (the overdeterministic view of weather), lost in a participation mystique (the overdeterministic view of mind). Yet, despite all the advances in microbiology, we never have found that ever-elusive rhythm gene. Nevertheless, if you have been danced since you were in your mother’s womb, rhythm can take on the dimensions of a cultural physiology (Moerman 1979), what Senghor understood as the psychophysiological contours of a “Black soul.” The rhythm of African life made manifest in the beat of the drum was part of his poetry of retrieval, his project of recovering this negative stereotype of Africa in order to lay the foundations for an Africa worthy of its name.

Whether négritude is ultimately an inverted philosophy, Cartesianism in disguise, or antiracist racism (Senghor has been accused of all these; see Mudimbe’s 1988 defense), it does not change its insight into African rhythmic praxis, regardless of how rhythm writ large was used in the imaginary of a pristine “Afrique-nature” (Jules-Rossette 1992: 22). This is not an essentializing of Africa, or rhythm, to reify its difference, as some have suggested (Agawu 2003), but rather an acknowledgement of the reality of a different way of being-in-the-world. Instead of suppressing the body as the antithesis of a higher spirit on the way to an ever more perfect knowledge, trance dancing privileges the body as the site of a gathering of mortals and the divine. Cartesian metaphysics seeks to overcome gods who may be deceiving; danced existences embrace them. What better place then to recover Senghor’s ontology than in this dance that calls out to worlds that are both here and away?

A danced existence is, by its very nature, always on the move, a coming and a going, a continual leaving and approach. Arresting this movement in order to gain control over it, to categorize and analyze it into modes of behavior understood functionally, structurally, cognitively, so that it can be replicated and put to use in books, CDs, and videos, may make things more recognizable, thus more satisfying, but it turns what is there into a totality that overlooks that which is away. Claiming to understand more than it does, this stable ground gives way under the sedimented weight of dancing gods. A glance from the side, a fleeting glimpse of that which moves on the periphery, is much more in keeping with the phenomenon at hand,
though it never will be as comforting as the cold discourse of certainty. This furtive vision, productive of understanding, is found in-between the being-there and being-away of trance dancing. To access such a world requires more than ethnography, more than ethnomusicology; it calls for an ontomusicology that engages music as ritual and ritual as music. Such an ontology moves us out of an interiority that projects a vision of certainty and into a world that calls the body to recognize itself in the contours of musical experience.

That much else happens—sacrifice and libation, divination and prayer, sometimes even possession—when music is largely absent will become evident in the following pages. But it will also become abundantly clear that musical experience is never far away: in the turn of the dance (chap. 1), the chanted call to prayer (chap. 2), the musical silence of sacrifice (chap. 3), the sounds and movements of wake keeping (chap. 4), the play of the drums (chap. 5), the poetics of divination (chap. 6). This is not a matter of building up ethnographic detail, chapter by chapter, into a context for understanding musical events. Rather, what follows continually unfolds from out of these peak musical experiences. The echoes of this structured ambiguity, enshrined, along with Legba, in the rhythm of the crossroads, resonate on every page, in every chapter, whether explicitly mentioned or not. They are the remains of ritual found interlaced throughout this book.
Major gods:

- Kunde: Father and hunter
- Ablewa / Tseriya: Mother
- Sanya Kompo: God of the stone, linguist and secretary
- Bangle / Ketetsi: Warrior and soldier
- Sakra Bode: God of the land and Bangle’s stool
- Wango: God of the waters and roads

Minor gods (all work with Bangle):

- Tsengé: God of the seven knives
- Gediya: Policeman
- Surugu: Lieutenant