Being-In-Between

It was right before the old woman became possessed. I was looking at the ground, fascinated by the play of light and shadow on the dance floor created by the sun coming through the woven palm-leaf roof covering the open pavilion. We had been up all night wake keeping, and I was feeling pretty tired. Now late afternoon, I found myself starting to doze but not quite going to sleep, in a kind of twilight existence, when a type of synesthesia set in, and the play of light and shadow started to take on a musical dimension. As this modality thinned, it simultaneously spread out and grew deeper. I was somehow between the light and the shadow, the sound of the drum and the rattle, between the call of the priest and the response of those who were gathered. Everything was
on the move, including the ground, and I was suspended in between the shadows, the sounds, the smells, the heat, the wind. And this was precisely when the old woman leaped out of her chair, transposed into the sublime countenance of a dancing god.¹

In Brekete shrines of West Africa ancient rhythms move bodies in spectacular ways. The power of repetition, inscribed in a soundscape of welcome and praise, calls northern gods to possess their devotees. These divine horsemen, so goes the trope, ride their mounts.² In the blink of an eye a person can become seized. Captured by their capacity to be taken, they are no longer aware of their bodily existence, for they are no longer themselves. It is not they who dance, but Kunde the hunter, or Ablewa his wife, Sanya the firstborn, or Bangle the soldier.³ Embodiments of virtuosity, these gods are virtuosos of being-there. Dressed in swirling saturated colors, they dance themselves into existence. And as long as the gods are there, someone always must be leaving. What is a being-there for a deity is already a being-away for a devotee. And this is exactly what had happened to the old woman when she became possessed. No longer a widowed fishmonger with arthritic knees, she was Bangle the avenging and thus protecting deity, the soldier, the owner of dzogbe (the desert), where hot deaths reside.

Ketetsi (one of Bangle’s many praise names) had been coming to Adzo for a long time and was as familiar with being in her body as she was with being-away. It was after several miscarriages, when she was in her midtwenties, that her husband first took her to seek the help of the gods. Shortly thereafter she became pregnant, and when she subsequently delivered a healthy baby boy, they were both, as it were, “born into the shrine.” And soon after she joined the shrine, the god joined her. Adzo became a wife for a second time, a trɔsɔ, a spouse of the gods.⁴ Some forty years later, her first husband long since dead, Ketetsi was still working his way in her body. When he rides he puts her through paces she couldn’t possibly imagine performing in her everyday life: spinning at a high rate of speed for fifteen or twenty revolutions and then landing on one foot precisely on the last stroke of the bell pattern to continue a dance that had been going on for hours; or sitting on the sharp end of a short spear, supporting a brekete drummer on each leg while gunpowder is being set off in her outstretched palms.⁵ This and more happened that afternoon when Bangle came to ride.

Adzo, of course, knew nothing of the matter. Her knowledge of possession is restricted to arrivals and departures, of going into and out of trance, everything in between a total blank. Her ten-year-old granddaughter had
experienced more of Bangle’s presence than she had in the forty years he had been coming to her. But that is the nature, and irony, of possession: horses don’t know they are being ridden. Only the day after would she feel the aches and pains of such physical exertion. After years of experience with “the day after,” however, she is no longer confused over the exhausted state of her body when she wakes up the next morning; nowadays, she is accustomed to the aches, conversant with the pain. Being-away is just another kind of being-there, part of her life in the shrine.

Adzo is a fixture on the Brekete scene, a long-standing and well-known trɔsɪ. She, however, accumulated no particular spiritual capital as a result of this, was not considered to be enlightened in some special way, was not paid any special deference. No one confused fishmonger with divine horseman. True, it was generally assumed that she was of high moral character and followed the taboos religiously or Bangle would have left long ago, but other than that she was just one more member of the shrine. The fact that her old and partially crippled body could execute such impressive feats of balance and strength was confirmation for those who witnessed such events of Ketetsi’s presence and her absence. How else to explain such goings-on?

Not everyone who joins Brekete, however, gets “married” to the gods. In a shrine such as the one Adzo attends, with some two hundred members, perhaps only twenty or so are trɔsɪwɔ, three-quarters of them women. The gods choose only those who are worthy of their attention, those who follow the tenets of the shrine and keep the taboos. That is why there are more women who are trɔsɪwɔ than men. The rules are many, and men, in particular, have a hard time following them. Women are not as morally lax as their male counterparts, who are more likely to sleep around, get in fights, deal with juju, drink too much, and pursue various other activities that are at variance with the laws of the shrine. This particular assessment was not merely the negative judgment of women but was put forth by men themselves. This helps to explain why men are more involved with sacrifices than women—they are continually atoning for their sins and misdeeds—and offers a different take on women and trance than the theory of deprivation, with its attendant mechanisms of redress (Lewis 1971, 1999).

Though Adzo’s status was not elevated as a result of being possessed, when she was away and Bangle was there her presence was a formidable one. Her entire physiognomy was transformed into the face of a dancing god. Not only was Bangle’s dance one of divine virtuosity, but, when there, he was healer and protector, seer and judge. I have seen him grab a baby,
take her into the shrine and smear her with protective medicines, then reemerge dancing with the baby on his back, all the while with the child sound asleep; heard him chastise a priest (sɔfo) for some infraction and demand a sizable sacrifice to rectify the matter and listened as no amount of pleading on the priest’s part would change his mind; was present when a celebration was stopped in midstream and an entire congregation shaved their heads at his insistence (something I was, fortunately, able to avoid only because I was not a member). These and countless other acts characterized Bangle’s ride and attested to his power.

This was not always so. When Bangle first came to Adzo, as with all trɔsiwo, the ride was a silent one. Until the mouth-opening ritual (nuwuwu) is performed, those possessed cannot talk, nor does anyone know which god has come. Dressed in simple white calico wraps, they are confined to a dancing that is yet to achieve the power and dexterity of a fully installed trɔsi. To open the mouth seven fowl are needed, along with two bottles of foreign drink, preferably schnapps, a calabash of kola nuts (roughly one hundred), and a calabash of kaolin. This can impose a formidable financial burden on new trɔsiwo, who often have difficulty procuring all that is required. If husbands and other relatives are not prepared to contribute, the ritual can be put off for months, sometimes years, which leaves the person in a kind of limbo, a potentially dangerous and vulnerable situation. But eventually people usually do help, sometimes even the gods, who may, as was the case with Adzo, increase a fishmonger’s business to help cover expenses, and the ritual takes place in a timely manner.

The night before the mouth opening Adzo was taken to dzogbe, the desert where Bangle rules, a place near the shrine that is usually enclosed in palm branch fencing and accessible only to initiated members. In dzogbe she had to “clear her stomach” (dome kɔkɔe), confessing all that she had done wrong in her life. If the person does not make full disclosure, serious consequences—sickness, even death—are sure to follow. Her head was then shaved (hair can accumulate negative forces), and she was bathed in the amatsi (herb water) of the gods. The next day prayers were made, and the kola, kaolin, drink, and some money were presented to the gods before the chicken divination began.

Death can give evidence of things unseen, and the way a chicken dies—more precisely, the position in which a chicken expires—reveals the will of the gods. If it dies on its back, it means assent; if on its stomach, refusal. Ewes, as do many Africans, have a different take on what we would consider aleatory events. Instead of taking such chance happenings as the luck of the draw, Ewes see the work of the gods in these ritual situations
Where Divine Horsemen Ride

precisely because human intentions are removed from the equation. The divination got under way, and a fowl was brought into the shrine, its throat cut, and bled on Kunde, the father. The chicken was then tossed outside and, after it seemed as though it was going to die on its back, it flipped onto its stomach and expired—Kunde had said no. The same was done for Ablewa, the mother, and Sanya Kompo, the firstborn, who is linguist, secretary, and god of the stone, and each time the chicken took its last breath facing the earth. But when it came to Bangle, the chicken jerked up once in a spasm and died straightaway on its back. Ketetsi had chosen another bride.

Just as all new trɔsiwo are marked, once the trɔ made himself known, three cuts about a half inch long were made at the corners of Adzo’s mouth. The same medicines and herbs that are used to make the fetishes (see chap. 3), those objects that are the gods in their physical form, the things that sacrifice and libation, blood and drink, are directly given to, were rubbed into the wounds, creating a permanent tattoo. You can always spot a trɔsi as a result of these marks. The bodies of the gods are fused into the bodies of their spouses, not metaphorically, but literally. The trɔ, now installed, is given voice and released into the world of the living through the unique body of the one he or she has chosen. Once the mouth is opened, whenever the god rides a torrent of words pour forth in a multiplicity of languages—Ewe, Twi, Hausa, and others no one can quite identify—addressing a complex of issues of health and wealth, sanction and censure, that affect the members of the shrine. In the peripheral economy of a struggling Volta Region at the beginning of the twenty-first century—as it was at the turn of the twentieth century, when colonialism was firmly taking hold in the far eastern part of what was then called the Gold Coast—a search for some kind of security, to echo Margaret Field (1960), was, and is, often a difficult and elusive task.

The coastal plains of the Volta Region, with its infertile soil and low rainfall, its lack of natural resources, and a fishing industry that at best barely supports the many fishermen that dot the coast, are one of the poorest areas of Ghana. No goldfields here, no fertile fields for cocoa production—the main export earners for Ghana. What we cannot take from this depressed economic condition is a direct causal link to shrine activity. In fact, the explosion of cocoa production as a cash crop in the Akan forest region is often cited for the many witchcraft accusations, which precipitated bringing northern gods south. There are myriad contexts that frame who came where and why. Ewes don’t turn to Brekete just because they are mired in seemingly intractable economic difficulties, which indeed may
strain social relations, exacerbate health-care problems, and so on, just as the uneven distribution of wealth from cocoa is not the sole answer to the many antiwitchcraft movements that were powered by northern fetishes. Much more and much less is at work here.

Kola-Nut Gods

Brekete, officially known as Lahare Kunde, was, as was previously stated, but one of a wave of “medicine” shrines (atikevodu; literally, “medicine vodu”) brought to southern Ghana in the early to mid-twentieth century.10 They offered cures for all kinds of afflictions and protection against sorcerous attacks, which for the Ewes is generically referred to as juju. For generations, people along the Guinea Coast had turned to more indigenous medico-religious practices to address the vicissitudes of daily life. What, then, was going on in southern Ghana that moved people to actively seek foreign gods, especially northern ones? Why this influx of northern shrines at this particular time?

Part of the answer had to do with a general belief that the north had resisted European domination more effectively than the coast, and therefore their gods must be stronger. That this had little basis in fact did not deter southern peoples from positing a northern resistance that was effective, thus giving hope for a reversal of fortunes.11 Although this was not the only reason for their adoption—they already fitted into a long-held conviction that northern strangers had access to occult powers not available in the south—northern gods did find fertile ground in the disruptions of colonialism.12

When Kunde moved south, he and his family rode into a long and complicated history of north-south contact in trade and conquest, religion and ideas. They found themselves part of an ambiguous discourse that was both receptive to such northern strangers and also extremely suspicious of them.13 There is a strongly held ethos among Ewes concerning “strangers” (amedzrowo) that is summed up in the frequently heard statement that “you should treat strangers with respect and hospitality, for you never know when you may also find yourself one,” a situation Ewes found themselves in many times during their long migration from points further east to their present home.14 This ethos of the “stranger,” however, is tempered with a certain wariness when the strangers in question are Muslims. Most Ewes, then and now, imagine the “north” as an Islamized region of “otherness”; its people, regardless of where they come from or what ethnic group they belong to, are all considered to be Hausa, Islamic traders not to be trusted.
in business or, for that matter, in religion. As sententious wisdom would have it, “If they can get away with cheating you, they will, and if they profess to be pious Muslims, you know that after prayers they are not averse to having a beer or two, or a couple of tots of gin in private.” This negative attitude of Ewes toward Muslims is vividly displayed in the painting on the front wall of a Brekete shrine in the border town of Aflao. A python is depicted with the turbaned head of a bearded northerner, with his tail wrapped around a tree, looking piously toward heaven, but with crossed eyes. The inscription below the painting reads, “God hates hypocrisy.” That the shrine displays such attitudes prominently while simultaneously aligning itself with certain Islamic practices is a kind of cognitive dissonance that is carefully managed by members of the shrine. At best, Islamic practice in Brekete is but a thin overlay. There is no deep syncretism here, such as the kind that can be found among the Tumbukas of northern Malawi, where Christianity has been fused with a traditional drum of affliction (Friedson 1996). All Tumbukas profess to be Christian; virtually no Brekete member would claim to be a practicing Muslim, someone who follows the five pillars of the faith. Islam in Brekete always has been a matter of geographic fact rather than religious belief.

Needless to say, this diverse group of people—Mossi, Fulani, Zabrema, Songhay, Maprusi, Dogon, Gonja, Dagbamba, “real” Hausa, and others that make up these generic “northerners”—resent this stereotyping, and, of course, not all southerners subscribe to such labeling. Although Islam is an established presence in Ewe lands—most towns of any size have a Mosque and a Zongo (Islamic or stranger quarter)—Islam, unlike Christianity, has made few inroads into Ewe society and even fewer converts. It was, and remains, the northern “other,” and it is within this context that these northern gods were adopted.

All of this is further complicated by the fact that, according to shrine history, Kodzokuma, the man who brought the gods south, received them from the hands of the Dagarti of what is now officially called the Upper West Region. Ironically, the Dagarti are one of the northern peoples who instead of coming under the sway of Islam were heavily missionized by Catholic white fathers (the Society of the Missionaries of Africa). They were an island of Christianity amid a sea of Islam. This seeming incongruity, however, was easily explained by shrine members who either didn’t know the Dagarti were not predominantly Muslims, and whose religion was therefore not an issue, or, if they did, reminded me that not all Dagarti were Christians, such as the ones who were taking care of Kunde and his wife Ablewa. When it serves their purposes, at least some Ewes have no
trouble executing more fine-grained discriminations regarding northern peoples.

When Kodzokuma went north, he didn’t go looking for the gods, according to his son Kwasi Anibra, who, at the time of my research, was head priest of all of Brekete; they instead found him. After all, as he recounts it, his father back then was only a boy of thirteen:

Between 1916 and 1918 three chiefs were enstooled in Kpando and three chiefs died. There was *masɔmasɔ* [confusion] in the town, and *juju* had killed all three. The elders finally turned to the maternal side of the royal family to choose a new chief, but the queen mother would not let her son be put on the stool unless they brought a fetish from the north that could protect him. A delegation was formed of six elders and my father, Kodzokuma, who was the water boy. They set off on foot for a town called Dukuma where Kunde was worshipped. After several weeks of travel, they finally arrived in Dagarti country and the owner of the fetish was informed of their mission. He said he would give them the fetish if Kunde agreed. He instructed them to gather seven chickens for a divination to find out Kunde’s wishes. But each fowl that was sacrificed died on its stomach, a sign that Kunde refused to go with any of these men. Having failed in their mission, they gathered their things and were beginning to leave when an old woman in the fetish house said: “You haven’t tried the young boy who is carrying the water jug. Is he not too a human being?” So they threw a chicken and it landed on its back, and they threw another chicken and it died on its back, and another. Each one confirmed that Kunde wanted to go with my father. He was carried on the delegation’s shoulder, and they returned to Kpando. Kodzokuma was thirteen years old at the time. But the other members of the delegation were jealous and tried to undermine him. He moved away from Kpando and became a fitter (auto mechanic) in Kumasi. In his twenties he eventually returned to his home and established a shrine, but the elders of the community were jealous and told the Europeans it was a place for *juju*. The governor came and asked my father: “Does the shrine punish evildoers”? My father said, “Yes,” and the governor told him to go about his work.

From Kpando, a town in the northern Volta Region that had been a center for German economic and missionary activity at the turn of the century when this area was part of the Trans-Volta region of Togoland, the shrine spread first to the coastal border town of Aflao, then shortly thereafter to Lome, the capital of Togo, and to Accra, the capital of what was then the Gold Coast. Thus there was a second migration of the shrine from the north to the south, but this time it was taking place among different...
groups of Ewes with different traditions. By the early 1960s Brekete was well established in Ghana and Togo, wherever there were large groups of Ewes. The *trowo*, the spirit-gods that Kodzokuma had brought back from the Dagarti, were proving more successful than he ever could have imagined. Kpando became a kind of Mecca, and Kodzokuma became the pope for an ever-increasing number of shrines.

What Kodzokuma received from the Dagarti was not esoteric knowledge of gods and their rites, but the gods in their material form, what Ewes still refer to (as we just read in his son’s account) as “fetishes.” For the peoples of the Guinea Coast, the word is not a loaded term burdened with sexual overtones and Marxist theory (see chap. 3), but rather points to those powerful “things” found in shrines. This is not to say that some Ewes, particularly Christians, don’t see fetishes as evil, the work of the devil, which ironically confirms their reality (Meyer 1999), but the term itself is not pejorative. Whether taken as something good or bad, fetish merely speaks of those things that receive sacrifice and libation. All the northern shrines that came to the coast brought with them these god-things, which were collectively known as *gorowoduwo*, a name that points both to their northern origin and their southern embrace. The first part of the name, *goro*, is the Hausa word for kola nut, the medicine cum sacrament of these shrines, and a commodity with a long history of trade between the Sahel and the forest zones of central Ghana, where the most sought-after variety (*Cola nitida*) is grown (Hiskett 1984; Abaka 2005). Islam came to Ghana, in part, following the trails of these kola-nut traders. In a religion with strong sanctions against mood-altering substances, kola became the recreational drug of choice—albeit a rather soft one—for many Muslims in West Africa. These days in Ghana, pretty much the only people who chew kola on a regular basis are Muslims and members of *gorowodu* shrines. The former use it as a stimulant, the latter as part of medico-religious practices. Whenever prayers are made—to Kunde or Ablewa; Sanya or Bangle; Sakra Bode, the god of the land, or Wango, the god of the seas and roads—that is what the gods were offered in the north. And, as in the north, after contact with the fetishes the kola—distributed to members in its transformed state as the food of the gods—both heals and protects. It is the kola sacrament perhaps more than anything else that, in Ewe eyes, separates these gods from the second part of the name, *vodu*, the word for spirit-god in many Kwa/Gbe languages of the Guinea Coast. *Voduwo*, as with Kunde and his family, are both fetishes and dancing gods who possess their devotees.

What this all suggests is a single widespread West African religion with
different denominations in the north and south that probably have influenced each other for centuries. Greenberg (1941), in fact, makes one-to-one equivalences between *iskoki*/*bori* spirits and such coastal gods as Xebieso, the thunder god of the Ewe and Fon, and Shango, a similar thunder god of the Yoruba; Aido Hwedo, the rainbow snake god of Dahomey, and Legba, the messenger and *vodu* of the crossroads. But the history of these connections, contacts, influences, exchanges, and interactions is yet to be written.

To trace but one such possibility, the horse in West African history has been well documented (Law 1980; Webb 1993), but there is virtually no work on the relationship between this history and the widespread trope of divine horsemen. Given the fact that horses were introduced to the Guinea Coast relatively late (probably no earlier than the nineteenth century) and were extremely hard to maintain as a result of this area’s being a vector for trypanosomiasis, spread by the tsetse fly (Law 1980: 77), there seems to be at least circumstantial evidence that the trope migrated from the north to the south long before kola-nut gods arrived.

Through the Middle Passage, divine horsemen traveled to Latin America and the Caribbean (Matory 2005; Bastide 1978; Deren 1953; Métraux 1972; Walker 1972; Houk 1995) and, in a second and more recent dispersion, to such cities as Miami and New York (Brown 1991; Vega 1995; Lefever 2000). We are confronted here not with the history of the movement

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Fig. 1.2 Bangle / Ketetsi as *gorovodu* fetish (Steven Friedson)
of localized cults, but with the workings of what amounts to a world religion. In 1983 the World Council of Churches acknowledged this fact by officially recognizing Vodu (Fleurant 2007: 237). Today, divine horsemen ride throughout, to appropriate Thompson’s (1983) suggestive phrase, the Black Atlantic (see also Gilroy 1993; and Matory 2005). Vodu is not some historical curiosity, but a living reality.

Drum Brekete

By the time I arrived on the eastern shores of the Black Atlantic, Brekete was one of the fastest growing shrines in all of West Africa, found as far east as Nigeria (recently a shrine was even established in Gabon) and extending in the west to Côte d’Ivoire and beyond. It seems to be only a matter of time, if it has not happened already, that the Brekete gods will follow the lead of other divine horsemen and start to ride on other western shores. Of all the gorɔvoduwo that came to the Guinea Coast, Brekete was the only one that had any staying power. Tigare, as most witchcraft eradication movements did, burned itself out relatively quickly, and, though Alafia is still around, it only has a small following. Why those failed and Brekete flourished is not entirely clear. No doubt it was partly due to the combination of a charismatic founder who seems to have had superior organizational skills, his ritual genius in combining what had been different fetishes with separate shrines into one single pantheon, the belief that it addressed a wider range of problems than just witchcraft (see n. 22), and, perhaps the most important reason, something that we cannot just dismiss out of hand, that this group of gods simply proved to be more effective than their northern counterparts, and they did turn out, as people had thought, to be more powerful than their southern cousins. They were more successful in solving the problems of those who sought their help: they promoted fertility, cured intractable illnesses that proved resistant to other remedies, protected against the evil intentions of others, restored balance in personal relationships that had turned poisonous, and ensured success in business as well as other aspects of life in both urban and rural environments when people invoked the intervention of powers greater than that of mortals.

But the shrine also flourished in no small measure because of its art, the spectacle brought forth at a Brekete shrine during times of celebration, the center of which is, as it is with much ritual and celebration in Africa, a potent and powerful musical experience. Significantly, while the gods, Islam, and kola nut came south, northern music, for the most part, did not. The
music of Brekete for all practical purposes is the music of the Ewes of the
Guinea Coast. Ewes may have been looking for new gods, but they were
not looking for a new musical world; the gods were assimilated into Ewe
religious life but were totally adapted to southern ways of making music.
Brekete was, in a sense, domesticated, made familiar, to a large degree
through musical means.

Pretty much all that remains of northern musical practice, besides
snatches of songs and lyrics here and there, is the double-headed drum
that followed the gods and some of the praises played on them. This or-
ganological evidence of geographic origin, however, turns out to be no
small matter. Transformed from a shallow wooden drum in the north into
one made from used metal chemical or oil barrels in the south, which are
about twice the length, it has a low booming sound with a buzzed edge
due to the string snares affixed to each head, a feature typical of northern
drums. When they are played correctly, the resonance, though low
pitched, is focused and penetrating. Standard practice is for two of these
drums to play at the same time, individually elaborating on stereotypi-
cal patterns, creating a synergistic effect that produces a truly impressive
sound.

Northern drums playing within the context of a southern style is con-
sistently cited by Ewes as one of the main reasons for the success of the
shrine; it caught the aural imagination of coastal populations. That a phe-
nomenon as aesthetically charged as musical sound would have a direct
influence on the acceptance and adoption of ritual change is something
most anthropologists not only haven’t heard, but have never even consid-
ered. In anthropological thought about ritual, if music is mentioned at
all, usually it is relegated to the status of an epiphenomenon, something
accompanying other more important ritual happenings. The soundscape
of two brekete drums, however, may have something to say to us about
the ontological contours of a particular way of being-in-the-world that all
the nuanced analyses of peripheral strategies, subaltern tactics, gendered
hegemonies, political economies, social histories, structural relationships,
thick descriptions, and so on, can never reveal. In essence, drumming may
be a form of Ewe philosophy, one not done with words but through musi-
cal sound (see chap. 5). Whether this is so might be open to debate, but
its importance to the shrine is undeniable. Brekete, after all, took its name
from the drum that accompanied these northern deities when they were
brought south and the one still used to call the gods to descend and dance,
as it had that afternoon when Bangle came to ride.
Being-There

When Adzo became possessed, it was the third, and next-to-last, day of a fetatrɔtɔ (literally, “the year head turning”), a triennial cow sacrifice. No one had gotten much sleep, for at a fetatrɔtɔ every night is a wake keeping and every day a jubilation. What little rest we had managed consisted of short naps here and there. REM sleep was beginning to work itself out whether we knew it or not, and by that penultimate day we were all in an altered state, some obviously more than others. The almost constant music making, and three days of chewing kola nut and drinking akpeteshie, the potent locally distilled gin, more than contributed to the mood. A cow sacrifice, of course, is serious business: gods must be fed, libations poured, ancestors remembered, debts repaid, and pledges redeemed. Gods in West Africa, however, also simply love to celebrate with their children. Whatever else this sacrifice was about, whatever stories people were telling themselves about themselves, a fetatrɔtɔ was always a good party, and this was no exception.

It was taking place at Sɔfo Peter’s shrine, located in his natal village a few kilometers from the Togo border in the eastern part of the Ketu District just a hundred meters or so from the high-tension electricity pylons.

Fig. 1.3 Brekete drummers kneeling out of respect for priests who are dancing (Steven Friedson)
that go directly from the Akosombo Dam to Lome and beyond. Surrounding the main shrine building were the houses for himself and his wives, his brothers’ families, and other patrilineally related kin. Lente (population roughly 250), the name of the village, always seemed to have a cool breeze blowing through it, a peaceful air, and while Peter’s shrine had gone through some rough times in the recent past, it currently was prospering, with over two hundred members.

Although it had seemed like days ago, it was only earlier that morning that the fetishes had been brought outside and “washed” in the blood of the cow. Inside the shrine-house, each god has his own kpome (literally, “in the oven,” but here meaning the home of the god), a half-walled cubicle where sacrifices and libations usually are offered. For a cow sacrifice, however, the fetishes are gathered together, put into a large metal basin, and placed in the courtyard in the middle of the dance floor in front of the shrine-house. It is one of the only times when the gods are taken from their altars and displayed publicly, and one of the only times they are in physical contact with each other, which is no small matter (fig. 1.4).

As the gods were brought out that morning, several of the bosomfowo, who are especially initiated sacrificial priests, led a large bull into the courtyard. The bull, not surprisingly, was not very cooperative, and it was only after several tries they finally got him on his side and proceeded to lift him over the basin, which had been placed in the center of a cross drawn inside a circle with kaolin powder, an invocation of the power of the crossroads. One man put his fingers inside the bull’s nose and pulled back the head so that the neck was exposed as one of the senior bosomfowo emerged from inside the shrine with the special cow-sacrificing knife (nyitsohe) in his hand. He walked over to the cow and with several quick slashes nearly decapitated it. Blood gushed out of the jugular vein, pouring out all over the gods. When the blood quit flowing into the basin, the cow was tossed to the side and the trowo were taken inside to be “polished.” As always, there was an almost eerie silence when the gods were fed. There was no music, no dancing, and most people kept quiet; it is not polite to talk when the gods are eating.

After the bull died and was removed, however, the special hunting songs of the bosomfowo were raised as the sacrificial priests processed out of the shrine led by a drummer playing on the apentema, a small footed hand drum of Akan origin now associated with Ade, the indigenous god of hunting, and also part of the brekete drum ensemble. Associations with hunters and hunting are many in Brekete, especially around Kunde, the father of the pantheon. Not only is he considered to be an adela, a hunter, and often
depicted as such in paintings that decorate the outsides of shrines, but he is also referred to as a lion, the ultimate predator. One can often hear the drums calling out *dzata gbɔna*, “the lion is coming,” a warning to his prey, in other words, those who have offended him in some way. His children, the members of Brekete, are referred to as the *adehawo* (literally, “the hunting group”), and when he rides, his Kundesiwo (wives of Kunde) often carry a hunting bow and quiver of arrows or a wooden gun. Although Kunde is specifically aligned with Ade, they are not isomorphic. Many *sofo* have an Ade shrine at their compound, separate from Kunde—easily identifiable by the many animal skulls around the entrance—that is handed down from father to son. In contrast to Brekete ritual and ceremonial, which is open to a congregation of adherents, Ade ritual is usually a private family affair. Much of the ritual surrounding this god has to do with appeasing the souls of the animals that have been killed by ancestral hunters. Kunde, on the other hand, is a hunter not in the sense of a skillful stalker and killer of animals but in the moral sense of a hunter of wrongdoers, both those who try to cause harm to the *adehawo* and those who are members and break the laws of the shrine.

When the *bosomfowo* came out of the shrine after having polished the gods and sacrificing the other animals required when a cow is offered (see chap. 3), each was wearing his bloodstained *adewu* (hunter’s shirt). These ritually charged tunics with their sewn-on talismans (*tsila*) and other medicines are always worn for sacrifices, offering protection (resonant with Ade...
practice) to the sacrificer from numerous dangers associated with the ritual killing of animals. They are never cleaned, and years of caked-on blood have turned the fronts black. As the bosomfowo circled the dance floor in their adewuwo, they periodically stopped to sing the ritually charged songs of *ase* (see ex. 1.1). While the song is in Twi, the last line is Ewe and sums up an approach to the vicissitudes of life; it is an acceptance of what is—not a defeatist attitude, but a pragmatist understanding expressed in musical terms.

![Musical notation for Ase songs](image)

Ase I ye  
Ekraa ṭaṣe mewua  Holding a cutlass, we saw it  
(Wokura dade o, Yehunu oo)  
Enua basa mewua  The arm is strong  
(Basa mu yedwru o)  
Egbleo, enyo, aho!  Whether bad or good, aho!  

Ex. 1.1. *Ase*  
Lyrics in parenthesis are the Twi equivalents of the Eweized version of that language.

*Ase* songs are sung in free rhythm, punctuated now and then by the drum.13 Everyone kneels down when singing, and plenty of gunpowder is set off. The songs and gunpowder are meant to increase and raise the level of excitement, to inject energy into the proceedings. The word *ase* itself, probably borrowed from the Yoruba language, points to spiritual energy,
power, and life force. This style of music seems counterintuitive to the usual attribution of highly charged polyrhythmic percussion ensembles as a main ingredient of musical energy and excitement, but *ase* songs are intensely felt and build ritual tension.

After the *ase* songs were finished, the *bosomfowo*, as metaphoric “hunters” who deal in the sacrificial immediacy of life and death, once again took up the songs of their vocation and one by one danced the hunt. This individualistic display of the hunters—stalk ing the prey, capturing and slitting its throat, leaping into the air from sheer exuberance—can be, in its own way, as visually spectacular as the ride of divine horsemen. If one hadn’t known better, if one had been just looking at their behavior, it would have seemed as if they were totally possessed. But possessed they were not; in fact, it was just the opposite. Instead of being away they were fully there, overcome by the intensity of sacrifice and the power of the music. It was an inspired dance, not a possessed one (see Rouget 1985).

As the hunters continued their dance, eventually new songs were brought forth and the *brekete* drums reentered the soundscape and once

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**Fig. 1.5** *Bosomfowo* in sacrificial shirts singing *ase* songs  
(Elise Ridenour)
again resumed their prominence. As the level of excitement continued to increase, the lâtsohawo (literally, “animal-cutting-songs”) were introduced and the whole atmosphere reached an intensity that verged on chaos. These songs (each god has his or her own) are sung only after sacrifices and are different from other brekete songs in melody and text, though rhythmic practice remains the same (see chap. 5). It is during their performance, however, that drummers can apply their vocation; this is a time for them to dig into their repertoire of “licks” and revel in their competence to continually and spontaneously transform them. These are considered the most potent brekete songs, and, when they are sung, many trɔsiwo come to ride their horses. By the time Sanya’s song was sung, followed immediately by Bangle’s, the most compact songs of the set of lâtsohawo, both continually repeating only a few words, the dance floor was filled with trɔsiwo, many of whom were wielding knives and spears, performing feats of bravado only northern gods would dare.

\[ J = 560 - 600 \text{ ppm} \]

Ex. 1.2. Sanya’s lâtsoha (song for animal sacrifice)

Call-and-response form is most commonly mapped across the distinction between solo and chorus—the soloist calls and the chorus responds. For these two lâtsoha songs, however, the reverse is true—the chorus calls out and it is the soloist who responds. (See www.remainsofritual.com for transcriptions of the full set of lâtsoha songs.)

And this was when Adzo the fishmonger became possessed for the first time that day. After the possession was settled in her head with the help and under the ever-watchful eyes of the senterwawo, who are especially appointed women “sentries” who attend to the needs of the trɔsiwo when possessed, Adzo stormed into the shrine, picked up the trident that is Bangle’s spiritual weapon, and joined the other gods. But it was only for a short stay—gods come and go as they please—and within the hour he
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took his leave. As usual it took a while for Adzo to completely come back to the everyday world, but soon she was sitting with the other adehawo singing and playing the akpé clapping sticks.

The celebration continued throughout the day, and by late afternoon most of us were running on empty, moved on by the sheer energy of the

Ex. 1.3. Bangle’s lãtsoha (song for animal sacrifice)

Most priests and members do not know the meaning of this song, nor could they identify the language. A native speaker of Twi told me that Diamlo was an Ashanti warrior whose name is derived from the Twi word Ḋiamlo, meaning cooked food. He further explained that, according to Ashanti tradition, this king did not eat uncooked food for forty days before he went into battle and, therefore, could not be defeated. Although he did not recognize the word atsidżé, or what language it was, he assumed this was some kind of praise song. Sọfo Peter thought that atsidže might be a Fanti word meaning “Can you challenge me.” Hill (1981: 224) translates atidzé from the same song as an Ewe word meaning “guilty conscience.” Westermann ([1928] 1973) does not list the word. Yewo is a vocable.

Atsidżé, atsidżé Ḋiamlo

Yewo Ḋiamlo
music—and the continuing rounds of kola and *akpeteshie*. I was drifting in and out and had totally given up any pretext of being the resident ethnomusicologist. I no longer cared what songs were being sung or who was playing the *brekete* drums; whether the rhythms I was hearing were syncopated, polymetrical, or just plain unfathomable; who was or was not possessed, inspired, participating, or bored; and countless other things I was supposed to be concerned with in the field as a researcher. Instead I just sat there somewhat in an alcohol-induced and sleep-deprived fog as twenty or so *trɔsiwo* continued to appropriate the dance floor, taking up the entire space in their expansive and highly articulated movements. Visually it was stunning: the gods’ northern-style dress, with its striped cloth in primary colors highlighted by the stippled effect of the filtered light. Acoustically it was overwhelming: songs of deep Ewe filling the air as they began playing Bangle’s music.

Befitting a soldier, his music is that of *agbadza* (usually translated as “gunbelt”), the classic war drum of the Ewe. In the olden days, when it was known as *atrikpuí*, it was performed only on the outskirts of the village by returning warriors, or at the funerals of those who died a hot death (Fiagbedzi 1977: 57–58; Jones 1959: 162–63; Alorwoyie 2003). Now it is mostly heard at wake keepings and burials, both for those who died coolly in bed at an old age (*afemeku*, or “house death”) and those who died “in the blood” (*vumeku*) as a result of some kind of accident or other misfortune. This music touches people deeply, seeming to embody core features of an Ewe sensibility. At a wake keeping, I have seen more than one old man inspired by memories past—and a bit of *akpeteshie*—dance to this drum with a force and grace that gave those who were gathered pause.

And this is when Adzo became possessed for the second time. She joined three or four other *trɔsiwo* who were already manifesting Bangle, which seemed totally normal to everyone else, but always struck me as a bit strange, especially when the various Bangles would engage each other in animated conversation. Eventually, however, I began to realize that Bangle in Adzo is something slightly different from Bangle in someone else, which is different from Bangle as fetish. The gods are not a single transcendent entity analogous to a Western projection of personhood with a bounded identity and delimited personality, but always a multiplicity of effect. These were not gods frozen in an eternal bond of always the same, but a dynamic presence of difference. Bangle is always a particular Bangle.

As I sat there watching the multiple Bangles dance, every once in a while one of them would stop in front of me to offer greetings and give
his blessing with the typical handshake of the gods, a hard slap of the hand. In West Africa you can shake hands with your gods, engage in face-to-face interaction, experience them in immediacy. They are not “other worldly” but decidedly “this worldly” (Horton 1971: 86). If I had been daydreaming or nodding off to sleep, which by this time was a frequent if not almost a continuous occurrence, the hard slap would immediately pull me back into my body and an awareness of my immediate surroundings. And just as suddenly I would start to drift off again. The time between the shifts became slower yet somehow closer together. I started getting confused about which mode I was in. Being-away started feeling like being-there, and in this liminality the texture of light and shadow, sound and movement, began to separate and coalesce at the same time.

Being-Away

Of course, we all have experienced being-there while being-away to some degree: daydreaming while driving a car, attending a lecture, listening to music, or in countless other ways. During those moments, we somehow manage to withdraw our awareness of bodily emplacement even while we continue to do complex tasks, such as drive a car or even play in a symphony orchestra, as happens sometimes with professional musicians playing Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony for the hundredth time. It is not something we willingly do, even though sometimes we might think so. We may consciously want to think about being somewhere else when, for example, listening to a boring lecture, but thinking it and doing it are two different things. Of course, you can be thinking of something else and still be there at least half-listening to a lecture. But when you are truly daydreaming you are “away,” the very definition of the phenomenon. Rather, daydreaming comes over us of its own free will at the moment of its happening. And just as suddenly, without warning, we are once more back in our bodies: someone asks us a question, a car pulls out in front of us, the speaker stumbles over her words, a string breaks. The displacement itself is displaced as it withdraws.

This is to say nothing of sleep, a much more radical attunement of being-away. When we are sleeping, our bodies are not so much displaced as bounded in immobility. And, just as we cannot willingly daydream, we cannot willingly go to sleep. This is evident when we nod in and out while dozing, but it is also true when we go to bed. As Merleau-Ponty (1962: 189–90) reminds us, interestingly relating sleep to possession, before we actually go to sleep we assume the position of someone already asleep:
I lie down in bed, on my left side, with my knees drawn up; I close my eyes and breathe slowly, putting my plans out of my mind. But the power of my will or consciousness stops there. As the faithful in the Dionysian mysteries, invoke the god by miming scenes from his life, I call up the visitation of sleep by imitating the breathing and posture of the sleeper. The god is actually there when the faithful can no longer distinguish themselves from the part they are playing, when their body and their consciousness cease to bring in, as an obstacle, their particular opacity, and when they are totally fused in the myth. There is a moment when sleep “comes,” settling on this imitation of itself which I have been offering to it, and I succeed in becoming what I was trying to be; an unseeing and almost unthinking mass, riveted to a point in space and in the world henceforth only through the anonymous alertness of the senses.

We may call sleep to visit us, but, as with Dionysian frenzy and the dance of northern gods, the moment of its arrival is not under conscious control. I am not suggesting that possession trance is somehow an extreme form of daydreaming or some kind of sleepwalking, but that there is a resonance bringing us somewhat closer to an understanding of how someone entranced can be there and away at the same time.

No matter what the similarity may be, however, a gulf remains between the two that never can be bridged. For a trɔsi, to dance is to dream of nothing. In our dreams, whether they be of day or night, we are always involved, in some way, with the dreamplay that unfolds; we hold on to who we are. While they are happening, we are definitely there, even if we have absolutely no memory of the dream when we awake. But dreaming of nothing is a whole other matter. Waking and sleeping are neither equivalent to consciousness and unconsciousness nor coterminous with being-there and being-away, but are present in both. Likewise, just because the trance of a trɔsi entails a complete sacrifice of persona and a total concealing of identity in order to allow the unconcealing of a trɔ, it does not necessarily mean that there is no experience at all. Possession trance may not be remembered because the happening is not so much linguistically encoded, and thus not amenable to a retelling, as for much of the time an embodied musical experience not tagged by syntagmatic chains. This kind of experience moves back on itself in a continual round of polythetic retrieval (Schutz 1951). It is an example of why a logocentric bias blinds us to a hearing of what happens in spirit possession. Recollection, recounting, retelling, or just telling, if nothing else, is something that takes time—precisely why Adzo can tell me in vivid detail of Bangle coming in her dreams as an Arabic man dressed as a mallam, a learned Muslim
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This lack of a “present” characterizes possession trance in two significant ways: it aligns it to animality, hence the horse metaphor, and simultaneously projects it within a temporal horizon, an ontological dimension overlooked in most studies of trance. First I turn to horses, a trope that seems to have provided diverse peoples a way to talk about the experiences of trance. In its classical inner Asian form a shaman’s frame drum is his horse, and the beater his whip (Eliade 1964). As he plays the drum, he rides to the upper and lower worlds in search of lost souls, to act as a psychopomp for the departed who are on their final journey, to do battle with spirits, gods, and other shamans, and sometimes for no other reason than to gain a deeper understanding of this complex geography. The shaman is in control of his trance when he is away; in other words he is totally there, intensely aware of everything that is going on: the look of an insect in the underworld, the smell of a person when sensed from above, the feel of the air when riding, the sound of the drum with its subtle timbral changes. Instead of being the horse of a god—that a god would ride a man must be a strange thought to a shaman—the shaman is the one doing the riding. As Rouget (1985) has pointed out, this is almost exactly the opposite of West African spirit possession: the shaman appropriates the energy of his “musical” horse (his drum) to take him on his journeys; when Adzo is possessed, she is the one whose energy is appropriated by the god to ride in the world of humans.

If horses, both metaphoric and literal, were truly aware of being ridden, the question of who exactly was riding whom would inevitably arise; the fact that it doesn’t is why a horse can be ridden to death and Adzo can be put through such physically demanding paces. It is precisely this captivating quality of animality that makes the metaphor of divine horsemen so compelling. Horses and tɔsìwɔ are captivated in an “environment,” totally transposed into the happenings of their behavior. Unlike human comportment, which is world-forming, they both ride in fields not of their own making. When Adzo is possessed, she is temporarily released from her own rings of contextuality and thrown into a being-there that is a being-away. But this is also precisely what separates one who is possessed from real horses, for animals can never be-away because they can never be-there in the world. It situates someone like Adzo in a certain kind of animality while simultaneously moving her toward a certain kind of divinity. It is this double move that characterizes spirit possession in West Africa. When Bangle rides, he is not poor in world, as with a horse,
nor is he world-forming as with a fishmonger; he is by his very nature, world-possessing. By possessing a world Bangle is moved toward the being-in-the-world of humans just as Adzo is moved toward the captivating world of animals; both are a step down in the ontological hierarchy of the Ewe cosmos.

This brings us to the second moment of the metaphor: the significance of temporality. What trɔsiwo and gods have in common is not so much the relationship between real horses and their human riders as a strange time-out-of-time temporality that binds possession to animality, gods to horses. Ask a trɔsi after she has come back how much time has elapsed, and she will invariably tell you that no time has passed: one minute she was sitting there singing, and the next she found herself drenched in the herb water (amatsi) of the god. Where Adzo and other trɔsiwo go when they are away no one knows, nor are we likely to ever find out: this temporal disruption of the body precludes such tellings.

Instead, it is northern gods, those timeless beings, who, when they are there, take up temporality, the projects and possibilities, cares and concerns of being-in-the-world. They do so, however, in a different mode than that of mortals. Bangle’s being-there is not in time, nor does he have time; he cannot lose it or save it, because he does not exist within the “ekstatic” temporal horizon of human comportment and therefore cannot fold back the possibilities open to him into having been. Gods cannot grow older surrounded by a field of finitude because only humans can die. (Animals may expire, but they are not thrown, or are caught, in an understanding of this mortal coil.) As Gadamer once put it for a different set of immortals, that is why “none of the gods philosophize” (1976: 121). This does not mean that gorovuduwo cannot cease to exist, that they necessarily live forever. If not taken care of, paid attention to through sacrifice and libation, they eventually may be forgotten and, as with old soldiers, just fade away, as seems to have been the case with many other kola-nut gods that were brought south.

But this day at Sofo Peter’s shrine the gods were well fed and well feted. Bangle was in his prime even though he was in the arthritic body of a sixty-eight-year-old woman who had worked hard her entire life. Once again he had transcended her physical limitations and danced himself into existence by going along with her, not so much inside her, as it is usually depicted, but by being by her side, as it were, thus trance-posing human experience into the time-out-of-time temporality that is the trance-action of being-in-between.

And that is where I found myself late in the afternoon when Adzo
became possessed and Ketetsi stood up to dance, suspended in-between the symphony of drumming, dancing, and singing that takes place at a Brekete shrine. Everything was in slow motion: the cross-rhythmic density of drums, bells, clapping sticks, and rattles separating themselves out into distinct “timbric” bands (Léon 2007); the play of light and shadow, color and costume, call and response in a continual flux, coalescing under the weight of fluid synesthetic boundaries. It was the rhythm of the crossroads inscribed in the flesh of the world.39

Adzo became for me a strange kind of doppelgänger, both there and not-there at the same time. She was the site of an interval in-between the customary terms of existence, a reversal in the density of being that loosened the intentional threads that bind us all to particular places and times. In the moment of that reversal, time was stilled and my leaving seemed no different from my arriving. I was somewhere I had never been, though it all seemed so familiar I could have sworn I had been there before, that there had been other sunlit afternoons like this that I somehow must have forgotten.

Being-There-and-Away

The late afternoon sun eventually turned into that distinctive equatorial twilight that makes everything seem bathed in shadows. The celebration was breaking up, and the brilliant colors of the afternoon were giving way to a more monochromatic hue. The gods decided that it was time to leave, and each trosi was washed in the special water of the deity who possessed her or him, bringing the trosi out of trance and back into the world of everyday cares and concerns. Most people started heading home, and the brekete drums were taken inside the shrine house and put away till the next ride, which would take place the next morning, when salah prayers would be said and the “breaking of the head” (lātagbagba) would take place. The only people remaining in the courtyard were some women and young girls, mostly the wives, sisters, and daughters of the head priest, who were cleaning up the courtyard and surrounding area.

Off to the side of the shrine house, however, all by herself, was Adzo, who was still twirling around, dancing to music that no one else could hear. Bangle was not yet ready to let go, intent on taking one last turn with his horse. No one tried to stop her, or seemed to pay much attention to what she was doing. After all, it was the god who was dancing, and gods do what they want. I, on the other hand, sat there fascinated by this silent dance, realizing in the moment of its happening that music for Adzo, Bangle, and
myself was not, as I always had assumed, something dependent on the compression and expansion of air molecules. This was a musical experience born of its own ekstatic time, an original leap out-of-itself.

I think somehow Ketetsi knew that I too was listening, for he suddenly stopped dancing and came over to me. Welcoming me in Hausa, he knelt down and grabbed both of my hands, his right hand holding my right hand, his left, my left, thus causing them to cross. Different from the hard slap of earlier greetings, this was the traditional way Bangle’s priests shake your hands after offering prayers to the fetish. It is Ketetsi’s particular way of blessing. Then he did something that was not traditional; he rested his head on our crossed hands. Adzo’s breathing was so intense that her entire body was shaking in a kind of fine muscle tonicity. It felt like she was giving off electrical shocks. I had learned from watching others that it is impolite to look directly at the god, so through all of this I was averting my gaze, only seeing Bangle off to the side in my peripheral vision. Then, without warning, he jumped up and took his leave, dancing his way into the shrine house. It was the last time I would see him that day, because twenty minutes later Adzo, the fishmonger, emerged dressed in her everyday clothes, walking slowly because of her arthritic knees.

Fig. 1.6 Kunde (Elise Ridenour)
Where Divine Horsemen Ride

The spirit is made flesh in West Africa in very particular ways. Divine horsemen ride their mounts in an extravagant immersion into the sensorium of human experience. It seems that West African gods have an intense desire to feel the sweat and smell of finitude, to sense light set upon the eyes, the pull of gravity holding one close to the earth, but, especially, to experience a rhythm upon the body, music that fills the ears. Gods dance themselves into existence, living the death of another while those whom they ride die the life of the other. This dark formula is what allows gods to be gods, and humans sometimes to be horses. For the Vodu shrines of West Africa, Léopold Senghor’s (1974) ontological turn—“I dance . . . therefore I am”—is not a statement of a devotee, but a declaration of the gods. In the in-between of a danced existence, divine horsemen ride in musical fields.