

## The Ghosts of Performance Past: Theatre, Gender, Religion and Cultural Memory

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### Abstract

This article studies the phenomenon of ghosting in religious performance through an examination of a famous Yoruba actress, Iyabo Oguniola (Iya Efunsetan). Oguniola once played the role of a 19th century historical character, Efunsetan Aniwura, on stage at a remarkable period of Yoruba history thus embedding her life and career trajectory with that of the culture. Iya Efunsetan has currently transitioned to an Aladura church leader and a gospel performer. Building on works by theatre/performance scholars who have studied how previously staged performances haunt the re-enactment of performances in another place, time, and context, I examine the religious aspect of the phenomenon of ghosting as it relates to Ase, Yoruba concept of metaphysical force. While Iya Efunsetan cannot shake off the ghosts of her theatrical past, I note that she mobilizes the Ase of her embodied theatrical history fame to authenticate herself as a religious leader.

### Keywords

Aladura churches; theatre; ghosting; Efunsetan Aniwura; embodiment; cultural memory; motherhood.

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Central to the concerns of theatre scholars who study the phenomenon of *ghosting* in theatrical traditions are questions of how performances are haunted by memory, history, and embodiment (Blau 1982; Diamond 1997; Luckhurst and Morin 2014; Rayner 2006). Ghosting, a recognition of past performance in a present one, is not a mere repetition of the old. Rather, ghosting is about remembrance and familiarity; it is about those moments in a theatrical performance when a prior spectacle encroaches into present context. As theater depends on repetition of gestures and texts from a repertoire, performances are a dialogue with audience memory (Malkin 1999; Roach 1996; Schechner 1985). Marvin Carlson described ghosting as the *déjà vu* revealed to the audience witnessing a fresh performance and experiencing an ‘uncanny but inescapable impression,’ that what they see now has been seen before (Carlson 2003: 1). Carlson’s allusion to the spectral evokes the scene from *Hamlet* in which Marcellus questions the other watchmen, ‘What, has *this thing* appeared again tonight?’ Freddie Rokem’s perceptive analysis of this scene (in which the sentinels discuss the ghost of Hamlet’s father’s continued return) explained that ‘this thing’ is a return of a previous order that imposes itself into a new one. He stated, ‘On a metatheatrical level however, this...implies that the repressed ghostly figures and events from that ‘real’ historical past can re-appear on the stage in theatrical performances’ (Rokem 2002: xi).

I will be leaning on these scholars, their explorations of the metatheatrical dimensions of theatre history, staged performances, and dramatic literature, to explore theatre ghosts, gender, and the (re)making of memory in the context of religious performance. What ghost surfaces for an actor who makes the transition from secular theatre to religious performances? What are the metaphysical and metatheatrical forces that propel the ghost and in what ways might the gender factor complicate the dynamics? This investigation of performance haunted by memory revolves around a popular Yoruba actress who is currently an evangelist, Iyabo Ogunsola. She once played the role of *Efunsetan Aniwura*, a 19th-century Iyalode of Ibadan city, Southwestern Nigeria. Efunsetan Aniwura was an actual historical figure brought to life through a fictionalized drama written in Yoruba by foremost playwright, Professor Akinwumi Isola. Although Yoruba history books contain a more nuanced picture of the woman’s history, most people’s familiarity with the actual historical figure, Efunsetan Aniwura, stems from both the dramatic text, *Efunsetan Aniwura, Iyalode Ibadan* (Isola 1979) and Ogunsola’s stage performance. More than three decades later, and despite having transitioned to an evangelist and an artist performing in faith genres, she is still haunted by memories of that character.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article relies on oral interviews with members of the I Show Pepper Theatre Company, and my family members who witnessed the stage performances of *Efunsetan Aniwura*. They recalled that other theatre troupes around the 1970s and 1980s also staged the play, but the most memorable of all was one by the I Show Pepper Theatre Company, a fact they attributed to the actors’ compelling performances. The play also got a major boost when the playwright himself (a professor of drama at the Obafemi Awolowo University at the time) endorsed the performance by I Show Pepper troupe. Also, Laolu Ogunniyi, drama producer in NTV (the only television station in Nigeria in the 1970s) commissioned the I Show Pepper version for TV production. I would have preferred to analyze additional empirical evidence of Nigerian theatre history of this

Ogunsola's artistic virtuosity not only endowed her public image with the Efunsetan Aniwura eponym, but she also became the actor Rokem would call a 'hyper-historian.' That is, the performer whose body, in the performance of roles that depict historical events, links the audience to the past. By acting as an eye witness to a past and re-enacting it before the audience through the agency of her body, Ogunsola became not just a historian but an icon. Rayner, on ghosting and the actor's body, stated, 'The actor embodies and gives life to a nonliving thing and essentially erases the differences between the living and the dead to produce an uncanny spectacle in which the animate and inanimate coalesce' (2006: xv). This article explores how Ogunsola engages her audience's remembering and forgetting when 'this thing' (the ghost of her previous performances) is invoked into her act as a faith performer. My analysis will explore if her lateral move from stage actor to pulpit performer displaces audience memory of her past, or in fact, reinforces the conduit through which the past ghosts the present. Also, as an older woman, a church leader, and a reputed former actor, I question how the coordinates of gender, sexuality, age, and artistry foreground the way *Ase* (spiritual power) is imagined into her performance. Throughout this article I will be demonstrating that Ogunsola, in her indexing of her body and its evocative history to authorize her claims to female priesthood, actively pushes against entrapment within the metanarratives of *Ase* inherent in female bodies.

## Iyabo Ogunsola (aka Iya Efun): A Biography of an Artist and the Culture

Ironically, Iya Efun (as Ogunsola is currently called) and her inscription in Yoruba cultural memory and its theatrical traditions began with an imagined historical narrative of Efunsetan Aniwura. The play text, written in 1961, was built on the scaffold of the factual account written by Rev. Samuel Johnson in the 18th century, *History of Yoruba People* (Johnson and Johnson 2010). However, the playwright, in a bid to make her character more dynamic and memorable, created a malevolent figure without any redeeming virtue. Johnson's eyewitness account of Efunsetan Aniwura tells the story of a highly successful trader who became the Iyalode (the highest socio-political position a female could attain) due to her political and economic savviness. She suffered from bereavement trauma when her only daughter died during childbirth, and afterward, she treated her slaves wickedly. The male leaders in Ibadan partly depended on her vast wealth and the large army of slaves who worked on her plantation to fight their expansionist wars of the time. Efunsetan Aniwura fell out with the key chief, Aare Latosa, when she withdrew her support when she saw the wars he kept fighting as pointless. Aare Latosa, in retaliation, prevailed on the all-male leadership

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period, but it was simply not available. Nigeria does not have a strong archival culture, and this made me resort to soliciting witnesses.

I personally interviewed Iyabo Ogunsola twice in her church, *Amen Covenant Christian Church*, Sango-Otta, Ogun state. Both interviews were scheduled and were conducted after church services although I could only join the worshippers at my second visit. The first time, I was not appropriately attired and I chose to stay outside the church while service lasted to avoid being a distraction.

council to depose her as Iyalode, a position that made her the leader of all the women in Ibadan (Awe 1992; Awe 2005; Garba 1999). Her deposition meant both social and physical death. Her eventual murder was plotted in connivance with her adopted son and executed through two of her many slaves.

Isola's play, however, portrayed Efunsetan as wealthy, sterile, violently anti-maternal, irrationally evil, and whose shameful suicide after she had been captured and disgraced by Aare Latosa was necessary to end a reign of evil. Isola claimed he tried to portray a 'strong' character because he particularly loved the idea of powerful women (Mosadomi 2010). Despite the gratuity of 'strength,' the notion of a strong woman in his male artistic imagination was over-idealistic and benevolently sexist (Ajayi 1983). Isola sold a composite image of a malevolent 'witch' whose economic and political power symbolized the supernatural power with which she carried out evil. The subliminal message was that the patriarchy needed to tame the woman with such dimensions of power before she imperiled the society. Although Isola's account has been variously refuted, people took his portrayal as factual. Historian and feminist, Bolanle Awe, pointed out that his damaging representation, in fact, made Efunsetan Aniwura a victim of male violence both in life and in death. Awe (1992) undertook to write a feminist history of the woman, digging into the cultural and temporal context she lived to provide a more rounded account. Notwithstanding the contention of history and memory, the play captured the public imagination and resulted in a definitive image of Efunsetan Aniwura. The book was also incorporated into the regional school curriculum, and many generations of Yoruba children from the 1960s upwards read it.

Modern Yoruba theatre history began with the popular traveling theatre troupe, Alarinjo, which reigned in post-independence Nigeria and which, in fact, evolved from early Yoruba theatrical traditions of masquerade performances (Jeyifo 1984). One of those Alarinjo performers was Ishola Ogunsola, who ran the I-Show Pepper Theatre Company. He was one of the most popular ones, a factor attributable to his marriage of literary traditions and Yoruba operatic traditions (Meyer-Dingrafe 2003). Typical of men who ran theatre companies, he married the women in his company for economic and cultural reasons. Iya Efun, who would play the role of Efunsetan Aniwura, was his second wife, but after her role as Efunsetan Aniwura, she became the most famous of his 13 wives. *Efunsetan Aniwura* was first performed in 1974 by the company and was well-received by the audience, most of whom had read the book. According to Mrs. Yetunde Ogunsola, one of the members of the original cast and wife of Ishola Ogunsola, the huge returns they made on that play alone were unsurpassed by any other play they presented.

At the height of its popularity, in Ibadan – the city where the actual Efunsetan Aniwura reigned – an audience of 40,000 people once witnessed *Efunsetan Aniwura* (Isola 1992). When the I Sho Pepper Theatre troupe was going to stage the command performance of *Efunsetan Aniwura* for then Oyo state governor, Chief Bola Ige, they received intelligence reports that a crowd of eager fans would overrun the theatre. Governor Ige had to direct the company to take the show to Liberty Stadium (with its 25,000 seating capacity) to accommodate fans. Some of those who witnessed the live performance wistfully narrated to me how Iya Efun held everyone spellbound with her performance, such that the actual historical figure became 'real' to them. The characterization of Efunsetan Aniwura as a strong – though evil – character drew a grudging (or

perverse) admiration for the woman who stood up to powerful male figures of her time, even if the audience still reviled her for wickedness. So realistic was Isola's version of her history that when Efunsetan Aniwura's statue was going to be erected in Ibadan, some people objected saying such memorialization was tantamount to a celebration of evil (Ogunleye 2004).

Iya Efun herself, when I met her in Otta, Ogun State, where she now leads a church, testified to how her representation of Efunsetan Aniwura dramatically altered her life course. People took her for the actual character, and though some hated her for Efunsetan Aniwura's moral repugnance, most admired Iya Efun for her talent. Her fame brought her invitations to social occasions by the wealthy and powerful men of the time, most of them industrialists and entrepreneurs, who saw her as the materialization of a character that had previously existed only as an absence. At the social events where she was accompanied by her husband, she would be given a special seat. Whenever she was on the dance floor, she would be lavishly 'sprayed' with Naira notes. Her popularity was not exactly typical considering that social perception of actors at that time was uncomplimentary. In recalling those times, Ogunsola conjured grand narratives of the 1980s, an era of Yoruba history when indigenous literature was appreciated, industrial and entrepreneurial initiatives had not yet been overtaken by the locust years of economic mismanagement, and Nigerians took pride in their local cultural industry.<sup>2</sup>

Ishola Ogunsola's death in 1992 put the company in jeopardy. The wives and older children summoned efforts to continue producing TV dramas on state-owned televisions, such as NTA and BCOS,<sup>3</sup> but they had limited success. They had to contend with high costs of making a TV drama within the strangulating context of the Nigerian economy that was failing due to political and economic instability. Besides, the focus had begun to shift towards the home video format, a techno-cultural evolution that metamorphosed into what is now described as 'Nollywood.' The company eventually disintegrated in the late 1990s, and Ogunsola turned to evangelism full time. Her participation in secular drama and films waned, although she was later recalled for the film version of *Efunsetan Aniwura*.<sup>4</sup> Today, she is equally popular on her merits as a faith performer, and I noticed that my interviewees (especially of the older generation) began their narration of their relationship to her from the time they first saw on her

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<sup>2</sup> Other interviewees I spoke to in the church evoked nostalgia for that productive era in Nigeria, which they believed has now been lost forever. For instance, live theatre as popular performances has long receded into mainly elite neighborhoods where they are priced out of the reach of many. The I Show Pepper Company diverged into TV dramas and films for a while, but it still did not survive. Ogunsola recalled that when *Efunsetan Aniwura* was made into TV drama, some of the audience of their traveling theatre troupe told them they preferred the realism of the scenery to the rather sparse set constructed on the live stage.

<sup>3</sup> NTA – Nigerian Television Authority (formerly NTV – Nigerian Television)  
BCOS – Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State.

<sup>4</sup> The producer and director of the film version of *Efunsetan Aniwura*, Tunde Kelani, took the feminist critique into account and "redeemed" the tragedy of the historical character's representation. He provided a rationale for Efunsetan Aniwura's meanness by linking it to post-bereavement trauma. The film also dignified her character's suicide by making it take place in the privacy of her bedroom.

stage as Efunsetan Aniwura. Moses Adedipe, the pastor of CAC Revival Center, an Aladura church in Houston, Texas, told me, 'You simply could not forget *Efunsetan Aniwura*. It was phenomenal. Now that she has left the world and is now a woman of God, she has a powerful testimony. She is a testimony.' Pastor Adedipe's church had invited Ogunsola over to the US for a ministration in 2016.

In subsequent sections, I further explore how Ogunsola and her current status as a female evangelist in an Aladura church are haunted by the sediments of the memory of *Efunsetan Aniwura* engrafted into Yoruba cultural history. First, I start with a discussion of the Aladura church and its congruity with indigenous African religions to ground an understanding of the character of her church. The notion of *Ase* and its workings in the cosmos comes up frequently in Aladura church ritual worship, a testament to the earthy character of the church. This point is a key factor in illustrating how her past haunts her present, and how the congruity of the Aladura church to indigenous culture and philosophy shapes reception of her faith performance. In the following section, I review how the semiotics history and memory inscribed on the body that performed *Efunsetan Aniwura* interacts with the body that preaches and prays in her current evangelical performances. Finally, I conclude on the ghosting phenomenon in religious performances as a manifestation with its own gendered dynamics. To this end, this study has employed multiple methods: personal interviews with Iya Efun, and other witnesses to her history as a performer. Also, I include content analysis of her music in both audio and video formats, an examination of media reports about her, and my ethnographic notes in the time I spent in her church.

## Ase and the Aladura Church in Nigeria

Iya Efun's music performances are chants of intercessory and supplicatory prayers that use a weave of Bible texts, vivid description of difficult human situations, prophetic declarations uttered to liberate people from those conditions, and spoken words against a background of soft music. Her mediatized performances of prayer are similar to her performances on the pulpit largely because the Aladura church she pastors is a praying church. Aladura itself literally translates as 'the praying people' or 'people of prayer.'<sup>5</sup> Prayer in the Aladura church is a weaponized rhetoric, a course of action, and a spiritual instrument (Adogame 2005). Iya Efun's invocations are mostly in Yoruba, and she frequently alludes to *Ase*, which in Yoruba cosmology is 'power that makes things happen.' *Ase* is an animating force of supernatural power or authority that makes prayers, desires, wishes, and solicitations happen as pronounced; a creative energy that flows through animate or inanimate objects (Omari-Obayemi 1996). The concept of *Ase* derives from Yoruba philosophy of the harmonious and fluid interaction between the natural and the supernatural, and power to subdue and

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<sup>5</sup> Here, I acknowledge the problem of taxonomy in the Nigerian church structure. The Aladura church and the Pentecostal church, despite their denominational differences, have considerable overlap in worship practices and rituals. In that sense, Ogunsola's church can pass for a Pentecostal church. Ogbu Kalu treats the similarities and differences of both denominations in his book, *African Pentecostalism*.

manipulate other forces under one's will or desires (Verger 1965). Ase electrifies latent possibilities in the spiritual atmosphere; in Yoruba art and culture, it is considered an 'enigmatic and affective phenomenon' (Abiodun 1994a: 309).

Ase also appears in the scholarship and practice of various Afro-diasporic religions that have Yoruba origins. Marta Moreno Vega refers to Ase as 'an elusive creative sacred aesthetic impulse' that is embedded in the religion and philosophy of Africa and African Diasporic religions; 'culturally and spiritually endowed impulse... the nexus, the bond, that unified the aesthetic vision of Africans and their descendants' (Vega 1999: 45). Despite its potency, Ase is considered neutral because it can be invoked for an errand of either malevolence or benevolence. Due to its centrality in indigenous cosmology, Iya Efun's constant allusion to Ase has an instinctual resonance with her Yoruba audience.

I want to explore two reasons her invocation of Ase as an Aladura preacher is significant to her embodied history's ghosting her faith performances, both woven into Nigeria's postcolonial history and resilient cultural beliefs. First, the Aladura church was a Christian religious movement that began in the 1920s by Yoruba people under the colonial government. They separated themselves from the missionary churches (mostly the Anglican denomination) because they found them too spiritually constrictive. The founders of the Aladura movement wanted a Christianity that would straddle the reality of their African spiritual needs but which the formalized liturgy and elitism of existing churches could not provide. The Aladura church became a space for them to effusively express the charisma of religious worship, resist the dominance of white missionaries who monopolized church leadership, bring Christianity to the people at the grassroots, cater for the poor and the sick that were being left behind, and also use the church as a springboard to engage the politics of nationalism and the movement towards independence (Adogame and Omoyajowo 1998; Ayandele 1969; Hayward 1963; Mitchell 1970; Peel 1968; Turner 1962, 1967; Ukah 2007).

The yield of their beliefs in indigenous Gods, they found, did not do away with the spiritual challenges they confronted as Africans. That yearning necessitated the fashioning of what the Bible itself referred to as 'weapons of warfare' that was Christian in character but which appropriated their approximate African beliefs. The Aladura church movement retained beliefs such as the idea of a Supreme God, contention of spiritual forces latent in the atmosphere, and that ritual words and acts are efficacious to counteract these forces (Adogame 2004; Ray 1993; Ray 2000). These churches and their various splinter formations typically reject all forms of western medicine and focus solely on prayers as weapons in a manner evocative of Ase's verbal forms – Igede (incantation, language as invocation and evocation) and Afose (the power of spoken language to make things be) (Jones 2015). The popularity of Aladura among the Yoruba derives from their focus on prayer as a form of remediation and prescription to human issues (Idowu 1965).

Their worship rituals consist of added elements such as visions, trances, dreams, divine revelations, ecstatic dances, use of holy water, incense burning, symbolically colored vestments, glossolalia, spiritual baths, Psalm recitations, shouting 'hallelujah' and 'Hosanna,' ascription of mythical power to numbers and their multiples, exorcism, rites of purification, and unstructured liturgy (Adogame 2009; Ogungbile 1997a,b; Oshun 2000; Parratt 1969). Though their mode of worship has the imprint of Yoruba religions inscribed all over it, they do not take kindly to any attribution of syncretic practices into their practices.

They consider themselves as severing from their past and are grounded in only Jesus and Christian practices. When Iya Efun, a former member of the Anglican Church herself, invokes Ase in her chants, she demonstrates the chain of continuities and discontinuities in Yoruba philosophy and religions across time and space. Here is an excerpt of her message, translated:

The Bible says God is a warrior and his name is that of a warrior too. In this fight, he will fight on our behalf. Therefore in the name of Jesus, I am praying and commanding, with the call of God (upon my life) and the Ase of the covenant of the Blood of the Lamb with which he commissioned me for this purpose, Jesus Christ himself, I command that all souls listening to me right now that from today, that the war you have fought, fought, fought, for a long time without success, God is giving you a victory now today....The Word has gone forth, backed by Ase...and I, therefore, command in Jesus name that all creatures that have introduced battles into your life, let them disappear in Jesus name...<sup>6</sup>

The second reason Ase is significant links to Iya Efun's history as an actress. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones's study of Ase looks beyond its attributed intercessory and solicitous functions and instead expands it towards performance efficacy. Jones shows that Ase comes in physical and metaphysical forms, both taking their transcendental qualities from texts – written or oral. The power of language derives from its abilities to summon the inner will, express it, and catalyze enactment. In Black/African performances, language is essential because the act of speaking is both an expression of being and making into being. Words, especially when spoken, stimulate the body, and release the psychic energy that eventually affirms, 'The potentiality of the words unleashed' (Jones 2015: 218). A Black/African performance rendering of Descartes' '*Cogito, ergo sum*' would be, '*I speak into being, therefore I am.*' Both the physical and metaphysical Ase of Black/African performances are mutually affirming, but it is the physical that is embodied in a person. The embodiment, according to Jones, empowers its owner with the ability to make things happen through the things they say or do. That factor, she explains, is why theatre can cause cultural and political shifts.

Theatre, with its 'weave of words and action' and the interlock of 'words, life force and manifestation' sparks Ase (Jones 2015: 218). The Ase Iya Efun embodies by playing the role of Efunsetan Aniwura – whose manifold history made her a mythical and mystical figure in Yoruba history – ghosts her faith performances as a preacher and contours congregational receptivity of her evangelical act. Iya Efun told me that sometimes, when churches invite her for ministration, they not only include the name 'Efunsetan Aniwura' on promotional materials, they sometimes create a space on the altar for her to perform a scene from *Efunsetan Aniwura* before she ministers the gospel. The churches' strategic activation of the Ase she embodies is a way of catalyzing her pulpit performance. By advertising her as 'Efunsetan Aniwura' and asking her to perform Efunsetan Aniwura on the altar, they are calling up the ghost of theatre to haunt her body on the pulpit and endow her gospel ministration with the Ase of performance. In the context of religious ritual, this theatrical manipulation technique is however incrustated with other layers of meaning. When Iya Efun, on the altar, moves from the role of Efunsetan Aniwura to that of God's minister, the audience literally

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<sup>6</sup> Ogunsola, Iyabo. *Adura Mi Gba*. © by Alpha Fortunes Music. Compact Disc.

sees a conflated Efunsetan Aniwura – the historical character and her stage impersonator – being converted to a preacher. The subtext of this conversion as being staged to the congregation is the promotion of God's ability to 'redeem' virtually anyone, including an evil historical character.

In the next section, I will be exploring Iya Efun as an agent who actively manages the concentric rings that encircle her as a faith performer that has a secular history. As long as she is that interface between a play text, theatre and embodiment, visibility, Ase, and Yoruba cultural history, 'that thing' haunts her performances and signals. The Christian calling, meanwhile, also comes with its version of Ase, or what Judeo-Christian thought refers to as the 'anointing,' a divinely bestowed unction on people that grants them the power to carry out exploits in the world (Balogun 2007). Both Ase and anointing converge on Iya Efun, and she exploits both in her performances to not only legitimate herself but to also maximize the potentials of public memory.

### **The Ghost and the Ase in *Iya Efunsetan's* Faith Performance**

The crossover of artists from religious to secular genre typically entails a revision of their persona and a performance of an act that appeals to their widened audience. Robert McManus (2004: 58) describes such changes as becoming 'all things to all people.' The cross-fertilization of popular music industries that have enabled artists like Amy Grant to make the move has also required them to water down the theological content of their art – a factor attributed to the economic benefits of a larger audience (see Grossman 2005; Nichols 2009). In Africa, it is more likely an artist would cross from secular to religious either because of their religious transformation or the economic benefits since religious people are usually the dominant demographic (Parsitau 2012). This factor does not, however, mean the sacred is always normative against which the secular is defined, neither is either category an absolute niche. Both are fluid in form and function, and Christian performances, due to their entanglement with popular culture, tends to appeal across religious persuasions.

Artists like Iya Efun who move from secular to religious, and who are involved in performances that entail battles with supernatural forces, however, set up esthetic and moral boundaries to protect their art from corrupting spiritual influences. This boundary setting is particularly critical for Iya Efun given that her background is in a secular theatre that employed a lot of indigenous religious ideas of supernatural power as an esthetic. Her audience memory of her performance still revolves around Efunsetan Aniwura, and as an evangelical performer, it is a ghost she has to regulate. I see her contemporary performances as both an exploitation of the Ase of her theatre history and a distancing from it. This simultaneous connection and disconnection take place through three inter-related strategies: her narratives of disengagement; her aural performances, and subsequent visual appearances; and her projected status of motherhood. Each one of the three is a rendering of religious, cultural, and artistic (dis)continuities.

For the first, the narrative of disengagement, she told me that as her acting career blossomed, she was struck by a 'mysterious' illness. For six months, she suffered insomnia and a high temperature around her forehead. Neither the western medicine nor indigenous spiritualists her family patronized could

help her. On the verge of a mental breakdown, she had an inspired moment in which she recalled the story of blind Bartimaeus in the Bible, who cried to Jesus, attracted his attention, and was healed.<sup>7</sup> She prayed fervently to God, fell into a deep sleep, and dreamt she saw Jesus Christ. Her description of him to me matches visual media artifact's iconographic representations of Jesus – a white man with long flowing shiny silver hair, dressed in a shepherd's robe and a sash. In the dream, she was in a dark place from where she glimpsed the brightness of Jesus. To reach him she would have to cross over a deep chasm. Jesus, she said, helped her cross and in that place of brightness, she heard delightful, heavenly voices singing songs of worship.

When she woke up, she had not only slept for 10 hours; she had crossed from death to life. She re-dedicated her life to serving Jesus Christ based on that experience. Along the line, she attended Bible school and her graduation was a media sensation that helped launch her eventual full-time career as a preacher. Most people who read about her Bible school graduation in the newspapers, she said, were surprised she was a Christian. They thought she practiced the Yoruba religions their theatre troupe had represented on television or stage. Iya Efun insisted to me they (the theatre troupe) prayed to Jesus to sacralize the props used as fetish items. The only time she ever used any material that had to do with Yoruba religion was during her illness when her family contacted some herbalists to make concoctions for her.

Her refusal to embellish her autobiography or enhance the dramatic detail by linking her past to Orisha worship (or public imagination of it), as typically done by other Yoruba preachers (Oyegoke 1994), separates her from the ghosts of Efunsetan Aniwura's supernatural power that would have haunted her. Accounts of religious conversion, usually, are 'personal myths' that conjugate past and present into a compressed narrative to both make sense of now and also control the future (McAdams 1993; Maruna et al. 2006). Paula Fredriksen stated the conversion experience finds its deepest theological meaning retrospectively – when the convert interprets his/her past in the light of their present status and from that vantage point 'constructs a narrative that renders past and present continuous, intelligible and coherent (This is how I got here)' (Fredriksen 1986: 33). Such accounts are apologetic (publicly explaining your choices to both the old and new groups) and anachronistic (shaped by later concerns of legitimating the new status).

Iya Efun's personal myths, however, not only strategically narrates 'how I got here' but loudly proclaims to her audience the route she did *not* take. Her emphatic disengagement from indigenous religion and their practices dissociates her Ase from the possible taint of lingering 'pagan' influences. She instead links her priesthood directly to Jesus whose phenotypical features typify the 'whiteness' of Christianity and the African modernity it has come to represent (Meyer 1998; see also Keane 2007 for further discussion on how Christian and modernity leads to distancing from cultural practices considered 'fetish'). In one of my interviews, I referred to an aspect of her message where she talked about predestination using the vocabulary of Yoruba conception of *Ori*, the head (Abiodun 1994b; Lawal 1985; Makinde 1985). She interrupted me, 'Everything I preach is from the Bible.' I wanted to push further by explaining how

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 10: 46–52 (KJV).

her constant allusion to *Ori* shows cultural and religious continuity but she summoned an assistant to fetch a copy of Bible. 'Read Jeremiah 1:5 for me!' The assistant opened the Bible and read, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.' Then she turned to me with a smug smile on her face and said, 'That is predestination right there! Tell me, where is the Yoruba in that?' I also noticed that in her recorded prayer performances, she would switch from Yoruba to English, although she is much more fluent in the former. Considering that her primary audience is a Yoruba-speaking one, this switch is a navigation of linguistic politics in a society in which there is a conflation of the English language with notions of class, modernity, and upward mobility.

Her aural and visual performances in her CDs and videos also demonstrate similar control of how her audience hears and sees her. She stated to me that her journey to music-prayer performances began when she was sidelined in a church where she had tried to grow roots. She had helped establish the church with her prophetic and teaching gifts, but the all-male church council became unsettled by her popularity and influence. They restricted her from the altar where she could exercise spiritual influence and confined her to a corner in the church with an empty title of 'the Lady Evangelist.' Such gender politics is one of the paradoxes of Aladura churches and their splinter formations – some allow women as leaders while others oppose their leadership based on myths of ritual pollution (Crumbley 1992). Frustrated, she left the church and set up her own. She took her case to God by immersing herself in days of prayer, fasting and Bible study. As she prayed, she received inspiration for prayer points and she began to write them in a notebook. At the end of her spiritual exercise, she found she had hundreds of prayer points, all backed by Scriptural invocations and were useful for confronting spiritual battles. She took the notebook to late filmmaker and Nollywood pioneer, Alade Aromire, who had the idea of making it into a performance piece. Aromire hired backup singers, booked studio time, and they worked together to create a structure where she would chant the prayers accompanied by background music and occasional singing.

According to Iya Efun, the album relaunched her into public consciousness. The distinct style of someone chanting words of *Ase* (as she describes it) in prayer and backing them with the scriptures was immensely appealing. In the hour length ceaseless chanting of her audio tapes, she gives the audience instructions about certain ritual practices to observe to guarantee their victories. She uses Scripture citation to petition divine power on behalf of her listeners. She prays to God to retrieve their stolen destinies, curses the enemies who stand in the way of divine purpose for their lives, and at the same time, enables people to listen and say 'amen' at appropriate moments even while engaged in other tasks. For instance, she would cite a verse in the Bible in which Jesus gave a command to his disciples to go untie a donkey where it was kept and bring it to him (Matthew 21:2).<sup>8</sup> Then she would widen this interpretation to, 'whoever or whatever power has tied me and held me down from crossing to my place of glory, I command such ropes to be untied in Jesus name.' In another instance, she would cite a Scripture in which Jesus asked all those that have been wearied by their life burdens to come to him and receive rest from their labors and then

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 21: 2 (KJV).

add, 'All the heavy burden the world has put on my head, such as debts, sickness, misery, disappointments, failures, fall from my head this year! Let me be free in Jesus name!'<sup>9</sup>

From the audio, Iya Efun graduated to making videos of those performances even though the prayers were better suited for aural, rather than visual, engagement. She said the videos were a response to her fans overwhelming demand to 'see' her. Making videos of performances with evangelical intent is a key aspect of visual culture in Nigeria/Africa. Several authors, including Rosaline Hackett, Katrien Pype, and Birgit Meyer, have examined religious performances and mediatization along the lines of their moral messages, publicity drive in a market economy, and the immediacy with which the visuals connect with the audience (Hackett 1998; Meyer 2006a, 2008; Pype 2009, 2012). Still, there are at least two other ways to understand the fan request to 'see' Iya Efun. First, when a priest uses visuals to represent the mediating nature of religion, a link can form between the divine, the priest, and the human viewer with such a realistic force that images take a life of their own (Meyer 2006b). Meyer's explorations of evangelical dramas assert the 'techno-religious realism' that results from communicating to viewers with such immediacy that representation is accepted as authentic (Meyer 2005). Second, Iya Efun's audience desired to reignite the intimacy they shared with her as Efunsetan Aniwura.

In the initial videos Iya Efun made, her self-presentation is spare and has an ascetic quality. She downplays attractiveness – her costume is modest, and she wears no makeup. She has the humble appearance of a mother whose main adornment is her spiritual mien. The locations she chooses for her videos are virtual simulations of heaven or on the sea, actual bush locations, or on top of mountains. She explained that these choices are deliberate because she wanted to be close to nature and let people see where they could go to pray to deploy the *Ase* that resides in nature to their advantage. In her later videos though, she puts on more glamorous traditional wear and chooses locations like the compound of a mansion to pray for material blessings to be released on her audience. Her gestures in her videos show literalized enactments of ritual processes – pointing to heaven and at unseen enemies, holding a Bible like a sword to cut through an imaginary invading force, stamping her feet assertively, adopting a fighting stance, and maintaining a serious facial expression. Sometimes she would ask for the thunder of heaven to come down on her enemies, and a virtual simulation of thunder would flash across the screen. Iya Efun told me she would gesticulate so that people would mirror her actions whenever they were praying in their private spaces.

The third aspect, her projected status of motherhood, bears some complexity of culture and ascriptions to the female body. In Yoruba thought, the biological body is 'a kinetic sculpture activated by *Ase*, the vital force concealing and revealing the soul in the physical world, enabling an individual to have a physical existence' (Lawal 2011: 164). The female body is especially invested with the weight of cultural signification – self-authenticating myths, roles, and expectations. The Yoruba world that envisioned the concept of *Ase* also prizes women for their fundamental role in the 'womb to tomb' evolutionary social processes

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<sup>9</sup> Oguniola, Iyabo. 2016. *YouTube*. february 14. Accessed October 31, 2016. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ary\\_vyOG2c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ary_vyOG2c).

and the rituals through which society affirms these roles (Opefeyitimi 1994). Women's Ase is related to their procreative abilities (Popoola and Oyesanya 2008). Therefore, as a metaphor for life, they are believed to uphold social balances with physical activities. They are considered to have an intuitive knowledge of how physical and metaphysical energy can be manipulated to change things in the world. Elizabeth Grosz described this cultural conception as the imaginary anatomy – 'an internalized image of the meaning that the body has for the subject, for others in its social world and for its culture as a whole' (Grosz 1999: 39). That is, the human body as a biological substance is mediated by a psychical projection of what it is supposed to be. This idea invariably results in a socio-political mandate imposed on female bodies through various tropes such as witch, wife, mother, widow, market woman, and barren woman.

As a trope source, women's bodies carry connotations that are meaningful within Yoruba cultural structure. These tropes variously symbolize power – economic, social, political, and supernatural – and affect the way their bodies are treated in religious and social spheres (Matory 2005; Nadel 1970; Nolte 2008; Obayan 2012; Omari-Obayemi 1996; Peel 2002; Semley 2012; Stevens 2006). Iya Efun projects the image of a mother, a deeply spiritual one but along the lines of Christian traditions. Her visual appearance and her acting in her videos were controlled – dramatic enough to give her audience gestures to mimic in their private prayer rituals but not too theatrical to be conflated with the impassioned act that brought Efunsetan Aniwura alive on stage. By still referring to herself as Iya Efun, she obviously still wants the association with the historical character, but she suppresses the ghost by being selective of how she is seen. For older women like Iya Efun (she is in her 1970s now), projections on their gendered bodies can be complicated.

While their aging bodies primarily project motherhood, the anti-senescence of popular culture also associates such bodies with witchcraft. Witchcraft, as a feminine cult, derives power from Eshu, and in Yoruba thought, witches are to be regularly appeased and revered as mothers (Prince 1961). Teresa Washington attributed the reverence for women as witches as part of Yoruba cosmology that views the womb as a symbology of the cosmos itself. Thus, women are creators since their bodies create further (Washington 2005). If they become malevolent, the society comes together to expunge them. However, in contemporary popular culture, especially Nollywood films, witchcraft represents evil that requires destruction, and the wizening bodies of women are usually the ones used to make this representation.<sup>10</sup> The times 'witches' have been lynched on Nigerian streets, they have been mostly older women, a fact that shows that some people take visual representations very seriously.<sup>11</sup> While Iya Efun's self-presentation ties to her theatrical past, she selectively manages her image to distance her body, her Ase, and her gospel performances from the ghosts of Efunsetan Aniwura.

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<sup>10</sup> Some of those films include *Omo Iya Aje* (child of the witch mother), *Aje Meta* (three witches), *Efo Arugbo* (the old woman's vegetables), *Aje ni Iya mi* (my mother is a witch) and *Ologbo Iya Ijebu* (the old woman's cat).

<sup>11</sup> Two examples of such stories were reported by Vanguard Nigeria and the BBC. <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/01/missing-ekiti-grandmother-lagos-branded-witch-escapes-mob-lynching/> <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-29644681>.

## Conclusion

Theatre/Performance scholars who have looked into ghosting have focused on how previously staged performances continuously haunt the re-enactment of such performances in another place, time, and context. In this article I have added the religious aspect to metatheatrical dimension of the ghosting phenomenon by studying Iya Efunsetan, a famous actress (now a church leader and a recording artist in the faith genres) whose theatre history is embedded within Yoruba culture and history. By playing the role of Efunsetan Aniwura, a famous historical character brought to life through dramatic literature, and at a golden epoch of Yoruba history, Iya Efunsetan conjures nostalgia and memories that haunt her performance as an evangelical performer in Aladura church. The proximity of the Aladura Church practices to Yoruba indigenous philosophy shapes the way audience might relate to the Ase of theatre carried over into the Ase she invokes into her religious performance. While Iya Efunsetan cannot help the ghosts of her theatrical past, I note that she both engages and disengages them using three tactics: her narratives of disengagement, aural performances and visual appearances, and her projected status of motherhood. With these strategies, she capitalizes on her fame while at the same time, authenticates herself as a religious leader.

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