CHAPTER TWO

A NIGERIAN MOTHER IN ISRAEL AT CONEY ISLAND: AUTHORITY, GENDER, AND TRANSLATION IN A TRANSNATIONAL YORUBA RELIGION

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Enirapada, Prophetess and Mother in Israel in the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim (esoc&s) Nigerian independent church, stands with me one night in the water’s shallows at Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York. The water touching our ankles, traveling east-southeast, touches Nigeria. For her, and for other Nigerian expatriates in the New York area, Coney Island is their Bar Beach, the holy place of prayer on Victoria Island in Lagos, Nigeria. She is a Prophetess, one of the most senior women in the esoc&s worldwide, and Mother in Israel for North America, where only one woman is senior to her. Mother travels widely for the church in Nigeria and in the Yoruba diasporas of Canada and the United States. The transnational dimension of esoc&s is nowhere more clearly evident than in the Mother herself: in her travels as a church administrator, in the multiple spatial centers—geographical and cosmological—that constitute her authority, in the strengths and constraints of her identities as a woman and as a mother, and in her adaptations to turn-of-the-century Yoruba expatriate life and the fluency she has acquired in cultural and religious translation. This chapter will endeavor to understand and contextualize the religious authority of this Yoruba woman leader in its multiple dimensions. In doing so, it will emphasize the complexity of her national, religious and gender identifications, her strategies of translation, and the vitality and flexibility which underlie them.¹

Aladura is the Yoruba name for the indigenously led independent churches which developed in the early twentieth century—among them the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim Church

¹ This chapter is based upon my ongoing association with Mother, which began in 1993. Aside from the quote from Baba Alakoso and academic references, all information in this chapter is from Mother.
(Kerabu ati Serafu), the C.A.C (the Christ Apostolic Church), and the C.C.C (the Celestial Church of Christ). “Aladura” literally means “the owners of prayer” or “those who pray,” and one of the Cherubim and Seraphim churches’ earliest organizational forms was the Praying Band, which focused communal prayer to heal. Today these churches are characterized by their focus on healing and other gifts of the spirit, including prophecy and visions. J.D.Y. Peel (1968) and J. Akinyele Omoyajowo (1982: 123–24) contend that the church, officially registered in 1925 by Moses Orimolade and Christianah Abiodun, was the only one of the Aladura churches that from its beginning eschewed foreign missionary influence and affirmed the centrality of continuous revelation and prophecy and the use of “omi iye” (living water) in healing. The esoc&és has experienced numerous schisms and contestations over leadership, yet all the factions have continued to claim the name. In the mid-1980s, the factions formally reunited. The esoc&és Worldwide does not recognize Abiodun as a founder.2

Authority

Mother’s awareness of her vocation as a Prophetess and healer dates from her early life. She grew up in Ibadan, Nigeria, the daughter of first-generation Christians and devout Cherubim and Seraphim. “Of course,” she says, she “followed them” to church. She remembers an event in Osogbo when at ten years of age she witnessed the Church’s powers of prophecy and healing. In the church, people entered trance and healed those who came for help. Customarily, the authenticity of a person’s trance state was tested: true trance made the person insensible to the pricking of pins or the heat of hot wax. Mother tested them in her own way. She rounded up lame, blind, and sick beggars who congregated at the busy roundabout near Station Road and conveyed them by taxi to the church. One elder in the church, AtunbiJesu, prophesied that they were coming before they arrived. As they entered, AtunbiJesu healed them. In telling the story, Iya emphasizes that the infirmities of

2 In this chapter I refer to Iya Aladura’s church affiliation as she does, as esoc&és (the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim). Some church members, when speaking in Yoruba, may say simply “Kerabu ati Serafu,” yet also use esoc&és on church buildings and printed materials. When I quote the church elder Baba Alakoso, I follow his practice of saying “Kerabu ati Serafu.” When I quote scholars who speak of “Kerabu ati Serafu,” I follow their practice as well.