Teachers are likely to find the book of use mainly as an historical survey, perhaps most satisfactory in the long chapter on West Africa, least so in the short, and occasionally inaccurate, one on Egypt and in the defence of the French colonial enterprise in North Africa. However, readers of this journal will probably be more concerned by an approach to Islam in Africa which fails to take account of its wide range of manifestations or to describe them with any exactitude, reducing all to ‘mixing’ with ‘animism.’ In discussion of Sufism, French colonialist influence is still apparent in the division between Sufism and ‘maraboutism,’ in which Sufism is associated with the ‘more scholarly mysticism of the turuq,’ while ‘maraboutism’ is linked with ‘purveyors of popular magic.’ On a more positive note, the chapter on African Islamic literatures is interesting and could perhaps have been extended with benefit. There are some useful historical maps.

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Matory’s ‘icono-praxis’ excursion into Yoruba religion poses three phases of Yoruba history and attempts to show in the last of these phases, the contemporaneous, the role religion plays in the changing creation and management of power in a competitive, divisive and material world. The first age, that of Sango, initiates the historical essay as one which attaches importance to ‘brideliness,’ expressed in the metaphor ‘gun,’ which means ‘mounting.’ Mounting is a key to a social relationship of power differential not just between men and women but also within the gender; and it is to dominate, to convert, to sex, to transform the other. At one end of the relational spectrum, the body becomes a receptacle for varied histories, agenda and operatives that forge a shared identity through direct involvement in political and commercial activities. And the subordination to the superior power—in this instance ‘through royal ritual strategies resonating with the signs and deeds of horsemanship, marriage, and gender transformation’—would mean that the age of Sango, which glorifies all of this, saw ‘brideliness,’ the act of the subordination of the body, as an instrument of political will. The age of Ogun, however, contrasts with the age of Sango in the relative freedom of the woman’s body, and hence in the emergence of powerful
and independent women. It is an age of gender conflict and rivalry; an age of endemic warfare, mobility, non ethnic, non-kin-based, non-marriage-based authority in which Ogun, quintessential male cult, rule supreme, independent of wifely roles. The power of women returns, and only partially so, in the final phase, the age of Abiola (a non cultic figure), through colonial interventions in administrative processes which returned royalty to the position of guardian and principal repository of power. However, the presence of Christianity and Islam, and a new capitalist market system, engendered mounting, this time sub-ordinating the power of women to state structures and influences. The non possession religions simply cast wives as exemplars and leaders of a moral order which rivals the national state, but nevertheless literalizes the sexual coordinates of power, in the monumentalization of the image of promiscuity, adultery, disloyalty and irresponsibility, thus helping to marginalize the female role in the political process.

Matory argues that women’s existential cycle in the age of Abiola is mediated by various images of containment that encourage either acceptance or forbearance of bridely submissiveness. In marriage, for instance, the patrilineages appropriate their productive and reproductive labour through ritual symbolisms that suggest the emptying of their female bodily vessels, and their refilling with the signs of the dominant. And in old age they, as aje, witches, are presumably destructive and so are socially restricted. Between childhood and adulthood, however, the wifely roles are exemplified in hierarchical relations and in rich gender idioms emphasizing humility, servility, and generosity.

In the age of Abiola there are moments when women’s initiatives and leadership are tolerated. And there are occasions when they are not. Their chance for any assertive role in society is transient. And in the description of the Orisa cults, it is clear that power is restored, in priesthood, through various iconography of resistance organized by post-menopausal and post-marital women. The vessel re-emerges, after reconstitution in the ritual, as an icon of motherhood which dispenses children’s medicine and as a representation of initiative and integrity rather than of the subjectivity that fills its hollow space. The image does not last long though. For, at the end of the performance, the supremacy of brideliness is reasserted in metaphors of captivity, infancy, blood, sex and marriage and the Oyo royalist designs.

Matory’s lucid, detailed and refreshing ethnography responds to issues of life history, ritual economics, and historical reconstruction in a way that many recent publications on Yoruba religion do not. It is certainly an imaginative, scholarly, essay: brilliant in its conception and execu-