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Yoruba Girl Dancing: a Nigerian/British Women's Reading of Herodias's Daughter in Mark 6:17–28 and Matthew 14:3–12

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Abstract

This article seeks to offer a Nigerian/British women's reading of Herodias' daughter's dance in Mark and Matthew by reading it alongside Simi Bedford's *Yoruba Girl Dancing*. In this article, the dominant Western interpretation of Herodias's daughter's dance being erotic is shown to have been heavily influenced by hypersexualised art reception history in the face of no biblical evidence. By combining insights from Simi Bedford's novel (which depicted Yoruba dance on British soil to be a public statement of resistance against European colonialism), and the important role that dance played within Yoruba life and death rituals, this article, written from the perspective of a Nigerian/British woman's, reconfigures Herodias's daughter's dance to be a form of resistance against the patriarchal gaze, a prophetic ritual lament of the death of John the Baptist, a means to communicate to a higher deity, and finally a means to mark the end of the John the Baptist era.

Keywords

Nigerian/British women's interpretation – Herodias's daughter – Mark 6:17–28 – Matthew 14:3–12 – dancing – Simi Bedford – *Yoruba Girl Dancing* (1994)

1 Introduction

This article seeks to challenge the "long history of disembodied views of mind, thought, and language" within Western scholarship[1] by presenting the first Nigerian/British women's reading of Herodias's daughter in Mark 6:17–28 through the Afropean epistemological lens of hypervisibility and embodied knowledge. In order to inform this new interpretation, I will be juxtaposing Simi Bedford's novel *Yoruba Girl Dancing*[2] alongside the biblical text in order to raise new questions within the biblical text. Historically, Western hegemony within scholarship has defined "legitimate knowledge" as being cerebral and disembodied, whilst labelling all non-Western ways of knowing as "savage, superstitious, and primitive."[3] This article, however, allies with nascent moves within scholarship that have recognised the limitations in Western thinking,[4] and begun to acknowledge that the body itself can be a legitimate source of knowledge.[5] Therefore, under the overarching theme of hypervisibility and embodied knowledge, this article will seek to explore Herodias's daughter specifically through the lens of performance and dance. For centuries, Eurocentric interpretations have portrayed Herodias's daughter's dance as being highly sexualised, "erotic,"[6] and akin to "the dance of prostitutes."[7] This parochial interpretation, based on a Western prejudice that has labelled all "othered" dance as "erotic,"[8] has unfairly shackled Herodias's daughter to the trope of being a "femme fatale,"[9] whilst failing to consider alternative constructions

1 M. Johnson, "Embodied Understanding," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (2015) 2, accessed September 20, 2023, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00875.

2 S. Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing* (London: Penguin Books, 1994).

3 F.A. Akena, "Critical Analysis of the Production of Western Knowledge and its Implications for Indigenous Knowledge and Decolonization," *Journal of Black Studies* 43 (6) (2012): 599–619 (600).

4 M.H. Coetzee, "Embodied Knowledge(s), Embodied Pedagogies and Performance," *South African Theatre Journal* 31 (2018): 1–4 (1).

5 S. Tanaka, "The Notion of Embodied Knowledge," in *Theoretical Psychology: Global Transformations and Challenges* (eds. P. Stenner, J. Cromby, J. Motzkau, J. Yen, and Y. Haosheng; Ontario: Captus, 2011), 149–57 (149).

6 J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 397.

7 R. Guelich, *Mark 1:1–8:26*, Word Biblical Commentary 34A (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 332.

8 C.O. Aluede, D.D. Aiyejina, and B.D. Ekewenu, "African Dance in the 'Nigerian Christian Church': An Appraisal," *African Musicology On-Line* (2007) 78–89 (85); and M.B. Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 340.

9 C.E. Joynes, "Visualizing Salome's Dance of Death: The Contribution of Art to Biblical Exegesis," in *Between the Text and the Canvas: The Bible and Art in Dialogue* (eds. J.C. Exum

of dance and embodied knowledge outside of a "Western" paradigm. This article therefore aims to tell the untold power of dance within this pericope, through a Nigerian/British women's epistemological lens, using Gaunt's key insight that the dancing body itself is "an environment where sounds and ethnic worlds become landscapes that speak to us."[10] It is therefore only for us to harken our ears to hear what it is saying. By introducing *Yoruba Girl Dancing* as a conversation partner with the biblical text, in which dance is used as a cipher for the "rite of passage rituals," "remembering Yoruba dance," and "rejecting Western hegemony," a Nigerian/British women's interpretation is able to read Herodias's daughter's dance in a new light. By considering a Yoruba epistemological construction of dance, which plays a crucial role in embodied religion, rituals, and spirit possession,[11] the dance of Herodias's daughter is redeemed from being just "erotic" and intended to cause "sexual arousal."[12] Instead, it emerges as a ritualistic and "possession like" encounter, where Herodias's daughter, as a Priestess, subverts Herod's alleged power over life and death and enters a possession state "expressed through the medium of dance."[13] This new Nigerian/British interpretation aims to use creative actualisation to offer different possibilities for envisioning Herodias's daughter's dance, whilst highlighting the parochial Western epistemic lenses attached to the constructions of dance,[14] hypervisibility, and embodied knowledge[15] that have been unchallenged for centuries.

The structure of this article will follow the standard "steps" for constructing a Nigerian/British women's interpretation of biblical characters: first, I will expand on my justification for choosing to use Mark 6:17–28 as the primary text,

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and E. Nutu; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 144–62 (152); and J.W. Lee and L.K. Kim, "Female Ambivalence of Colonial Imitation," in *Proceedings of the Korea Contents Association Conference* (Daejeon: The Korea Contents Association, 2014), 125–26 (125), https://koreascience.kr/article/CFKO201431749163919.pdf.

10 K.D. Gaunt, "Is Twerking African?: Dancing and Diaspora as Embodied Knowledge on YouTube," in *The Routledge Companion to Black Women's Cultural Histories* (ed. J. Hobson; London: Routledge, 2021), 310–20 (310).

11 See O. Ajayi-Soyinka, "Dance," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought* (eds. A. Irele and B. Jeyifo; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 273; B.I. Karade, *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts* (Newburyport, MA: Weiser Books, 2020), 72; and M.T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 183.

12 Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 398.

13 Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 183.

14 There has been a particular Western ethnocentric bias towards African dance in all its forms; see G.Y. Mills, "Is It Is or Is It Ain't: The Impact of Selective Perception on the Image Making of Traditional African Dance," *Journal of Black Studies* 28 (2) (1997): 144.

15 See Johnson, "Embodied Understanding," 2.

and Matthew 14:3–12 as the secondary text, from which to construct this new Nigerian/British women's interpretation, with specific reference to Josephus's extra-biblical account; second, I will review the history of interpretation of Mark 6:17–28 (briefly touching on how Salome's depiction in art and literature has influenced biblical interpretation) in order to identify the dominant lines of enquiry within extant exegesis; third, I will introduce Simi Bedford's book *Yoruba Girl Dancing* as the piece of Nigerian/British cultural reference that I will be juxtaposing alongside the biblical text; finally, I will highlight the motifs that arise from Bedford's book to create an original Nigerian/British women's interpretation of Herodias's daughter's dance through the method of creative actualisation. This creative actualised refiguring will uncover unseen plausible possibilities to explain her dance and free her from the false erotic label.

2 History of Interpretation: Hypervisibility and Embodied Knowledge

This section aims to critically examine extant interpretations of Herodias's daughter, primarily in Mark 6:17–18 (and touching on Matt 14:3–12), in order to identify the current questions that exegesis has tended to be pre-occupied by. The purpose of this section is to highlight and expose the parochial Western epistemological lenses that have been used with regards to the text in order to set the scene for a new original interpretation. Herodias's daughter has caught the attention of many scholars, playwrights, and artists outside of the field of theology, having been extensively portrayed in literature,[16] and within art,[17] especially in the late 1800s. Although conducting a reception history

16 Joynes, "Visualizing Salome's Dance of Death," 144; D.F. Owsley, *Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils* (Bloomington, IN: Booktango, 2014); E. Nesbit, *Salome and the Head: A Modern Melodrama* (Florida: Good Press, 2020); P. Rutka, *Salome: A Novel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010); and B. Hospodar, *Salome: Virgin or Prostitute?* (New York: Pageant Press, 1953).

17 See A. Beardsley, *Salome* (1893), accessed September 19, 2023, https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/aubrey-beardsley-illustrations-for-salome-by-oscar-wilde; O. Redon, *Salomé with the Head of Saint John the Baptist* (c. 1880–85), accessed September 19, 2023, https://art.nelson-atkins.org/objects/4851/salome-with-the-head-of-saint-john-the-baptist; E.F. Pell, *Salome* (1890), accessed September 19, 2023, https://www.crockerart.org/collections/scheherazade-and-her-sisters/artworks/salome-1890; A. Berruguete, *Salome* (1517), accessed September 19, 2023, https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/berruguete-salome-en; H. Regnault, *Salome* (1870), accessed September 19, 2023, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437384; Caravaggio, *Salome Receives the Head of John the Baptist* (c. 1607–10), accessed September 19, 2023, https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings

of Herodias's daughter is beyond the scope of this article,[18] I think it is helpful to be briefly aware of how artistic depictions of Salome have influenced biblical interpretation. Essentially, throughout art history, and especially in Richard Strauss's opera *Salome* and her "Dance of the Seven Veils,"[19] Herodias's daughter has been portrayed as a highly sexualised woman and a "seductive temptress."[20] As a result of this, Jennifer Glancy argues that, subsequently, biblical scholars merely "echo the prejudices of poets and playwrights."[21] She goes on to add that as result of these sexual depictions, "when modern commentators approach this story, they expect to find female characters who are sexually rapacious."[22] Whilst the Matthean account largely omits discussion of the dance altogether,[23] I agree that Western male interpretation of the Markan account is reflective of this. Although some scholars have avoided this pitfall by questioning the historical credibility of the dance altogether,[24] primarily Markan scholars have succumbed to the influence of art and referred to her dance as being sexual in nature.[25] It is interesting to observe that whilst historical-critical readings are ostensibly trying to give a historical view of the original historical context of the biblical story, these readings seem to be more influenced by the history of reception of the biblical text than might be acknowledged by that method. Historical critics only began to think of her as a sexualised woman in modernity once they had seen pictures of her within

/michelangelo-merisi-da-caravaggio-salome-receives-the-head-of-john-the-baptist; and G. Klimt, *Salome* (1909), accessed September 20, 2023, https://www.artbible.info/art/large/781.html 1909.

18 See I. Boxall, *Matthew Through the Centuries* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018), 227–31, for a reception history of Herodias's daughter through the centuries.

19 R. Strauss, "Dance of the Seven Veils," *Salome* (1907).

20 Joynes, "Visualizing Salome's Dance of Death," 150.

21 J.A. Glancy, "Unveiling Masculinity," *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (1994): (43).

22 Glancy, "Unveiling Masculinity," 50.

23 D.C. Allison, "Matthew," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (eds. J. Barton and J. Muddiman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 863; and K. Stendahl, "Matthew," in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (eds. M. Black and H.H. Rowley; New York: Thomas Nelson, 1975), 786.

24 See V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indexes* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 315; C.M. Tuckett, "Mark," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (eds. J. Barton and J. Muddiman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 898; H.G. Wood, "Mark," in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (eds. M. Black and H.H. Rowley; New York: Thomas Nelson, 1975), 688; and E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark: A Commentary on the Gospel* (trans. D.H. Madvig; London: SPCK, 1971), 133.

25 See Guelich, *Mark 1:1–8:26*, 332; and Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 397.

art being depicted in a sexual manner. Even some womanist[26] and feminist interpretations[27] have fallen into this hypersexualised trap. However, this parochial dominant interpretation of the pericope as indicative of an incestuous sex scandal has been rightly challenged by other feminist scholars who have argued that this interpretation is a merely "male construction."[28] They have gone on to say that "the dance was not necessarily performed with the eroticism with which later tradition has imbued on it."[29] I agree with this view, as neither Gospel account gives any detail about the nature, or the specifics of Herodias's daughter's dance; just the fact that Herod was "pleased" (Matt 14:6–7; Mark 6:22–23). The Greek verb ἤρεσεν, used in both accounts, has absolutely no inherent sexual connotation attached to it. Its root ἀρέσκω[30] has two main meanings within the New Testament. The first meaning is "to act in a fawning manner, win favour, please, flatter," with a particular "focus on winning approval."[31] An example of this meaning is found in 1 Thessalonians, where Paul urges the early church to not "please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts" (1 Thess 2:4).[32] Here, Paul's use of ἀρέσκω specifically denotes a form of flattery or favour, which he argues should only be afforded to God, and not given to people. In this context, it is clear that Paul's use of ἀρέσκω is devoid of sexual implications; instead, it is indicative of an inner "attitude"[33] to win the "approval" of another.[34] The second meaning of ἀρέσκω is to "give pleasure/satisfaction" or to "please, accommodate."[35] This meaning is particularly pertinent to Mark 6:22, as Western male scholars have falsely assumed that Herodias's daughter's dance *sexually* pleased Herod in the face of no evidence.[36] However, when one looks closely at the multiple other uses

26 See C.A. Kirk-Duggan, "Salome's Veiled Dance and David's Full Monty: A Womanist Reading on the Black Erotic in Blues, Rap, R&B, and Gospel Blues," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (eds. A.B. Pinn and D.N. Hopkins; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 217–33 (220).

27 See S. Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 81.

28 C.J. Anderson, "Feminist Criticism: The Dancing Daughter," in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (eds. C.J. Anderson and S.D. Moore; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 115.

29 M.D. Hooker, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St Mark* (A&C Black, 1991), 161.

30 G. Kittel, G.W. Bromiley, and G. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 455.

31 F.W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 129.

32 See also Gal 1:10.

33 Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 455.

34 Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 129.

35 Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 129.

36 Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 398.

of ἀρέσκω in the New Testament attached to this second meaning, it is clear that it is referring to two non-sexual ways in which to "give pleasure."[37] The first refers to "accommodating others by meeting their needs or carrying out important obligations."[38] An example of this is Romans 15:2, which says, "Each of us should please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour." In this verse, it is clear that Paul is not imploring the early church to give each other sexual favours, but instead to meet their neighbours' practical needs. Paul also encourages others to deny pleasing themselves,[39] in order to cultivate a culture where people carry Christ's "obligations" before their own.[40] The second non-sexual use of ἀρέσκω with regards to giving pleasure refers to the meeting of "expectations" in lieu of receiving a "reward."[41] There are many examples of this in Paul's letters, in which he encourages others to please God[42] in order to meet the "divine expectations" God has from them. In this same vein, Herodias's daughter's dance in Mark 6:22 and Matthew 14:6 did not sexually arouse Herod, but simply met his expectations. Herodias's daughter therefore received her reward in "keeping with the Mediterranean reciprocity system," having fulfilled Herod's expectations,[43] and not as a reward for a sexual favour as scholars have falsely suggested. This is in keeping with the use of ἀρέσκω within a wider Greek context, where it is used to refer to an action being deemed "acceptable."[44] There is simply no evidence to justify the view that her dance was "erotic," as we are not told anything about her body movements, or even what she was wearing. The root of the Greek word for dance, ὀρχέομαι, used in Mark 6:22, does not have any sexual connotations in its multiple uses in both the New Testament[45] and the Septuagint.[46] In fact, Danker's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* explicitly states that "the verb itself does not of itself indicate a specific type of style of dance."[47] In the Septuagint, the Greek present middle verb ὀρχούμενον is used to say that King David was "dancing before the LORD" (2 Sam. 6:17). This derivative use of ὀρχέομαι obviously contains no sexual connotations, as his dance was specifically directed

37 Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 129.
38 Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 129.
39 Rom 15:1; 1 Cor 7:33, 34.
40 Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 129. See also Matt 16:24–26; Luke 9:60.
41 Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 130.
42 See Rom 8:8; 1 Cor 7:32; 1 Thess 4:1; 2 Tim. 2:4.
43 Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 130.
44 H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), 215.
45 See Matt 14:6; Mark 6:22; Matt 11:17; Luke 7:32.
46 2 Sam 6:16–21; 1 Chron 15:29; Eccles 3:4; Isa 13:21.
47 Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 725.

before God. Within a wider Greek context, ὀρχέομαι has been described as "to leap, bound,"[48] which again has no sexual connotation. From this analysis of the Greek words ἀρέσκω and ὀρχέομαι, one can therefore conclude that the sexual perversion imbued onto Herodias's daughter's dance originates solely from the mind of Western male scholars and not from the biblical text. Laura Mulvey coined the term "male gaze" to refer to this in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."[49] In her essay she argues that the "male gaze *projects* its phantasy on to the female form."[50] The key thing to note here is the word "project." According to Mulvey, any action carried out by a female could be viewed as sexual to a patriarchal mind that is focused on sex, even if it is completely innocuous. Sharpley takes the notion of "male gaze" even further by introducing the concept of the "white male gaze as a conquering desire to discern, to shed light upon the unknown."[51] One can argue, therefore, that this unfounded presupposition that Herodias's daughter's dance was sexual could also be due to the historic Western "ethnocentric bias toward African dance,"[52] which extends also to other "non-Western" cultures and contexts. What new meaning could her dance take on if it were freed from the hypersexualised male and colonial gaze of Western scholarship? What else could her dance be saying?

Postcolonial interpretations succeed in reframing the biblical story to be a triumph of female power over colonial and patriarchal domination. Despite the fact that Herodias's daughter was a member of "the ruling class,"[53] there were "limits of power for even aristocratic women"[54] that left her relatively weak within the wider power structure. Postcolonial scholars argue that Herodias's daughter "used her body as a vehicle to acquire honour and power by making Herod and the guests' slaves to her body."[55] It is her dance that ultimately "gave her the weapon and power to ascend from being a mere woman to becoming a negotiator."[56] By portraying Herodias's daughter as a heroic

48 Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1080.

49 L. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (3) (1975): 11.

50 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 11.

51 T.D. Sharpley, *Through the White Male Gaze: Black Venus*, Ph.D. thesis (Brown University, 1994), 2.

52 Mills, "Is It Is or Is It Ain't," 144.

53 Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, 73.

54 M.A. Tolbert, "Mark," in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (eds. C.A. Newsom and S.H. Ringe; London: SPCK, 1992), 272.

55 L.M. Molopyane, *Displacing Power from the Dance Floor: A Postcolonial Gendered Reading of Mark 6:14–29*, M.Th. thesis (University of Pretoria, 2020), 65.

56 L.M. Molopyane, "The Female Body on the Dance Floor: Reclaiming Power from the Dance Floor in Mark's Herodian Daughter," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 6 (2020): 99–100.

anti-colonial female figure,[57] this interpretation provides a good foundation for a Nigerian/British women's interpretation to build upon. It is particularly interesting to note, however, that African interpretations of both the Matthew and the Mark pericope have failed to offer any new insights into the possible meaning of Herodias's daughter's dance.[58] This is surprising, considering the special value attributed to dance on the African continent.[59] Within a Nigerian (Yoruba) context specifically, dance forms an integral part of "every turn in human life,"[60] particularly religious ceremonies.[61] Within a Yoruba context, dance is also an important aspect of ritual that enables "spiritual forces [to] materialise in the phenomenal world."[62] Through dance, priests are able to become "possessed" by a deity and manifest its power and influence in the material world.[63] Taking into cognizance these insights from Yoruba culture could open new realms of possibility regarding Herodias's daughter's dance. How could the dance possibly be reframed if we considered how dance was valued within a Yoruba context? Rather than being intent on causing "sexual arousal,"[64] could her dance have been a form of religious ritual? Was her power yielded through her sexuality, or through her spiritual possession?

In summary, whilst Western male interpretations of her dance,[65] and even some feminist[66] and womanist[67] interpretations, have hypersexualised Herodias's daughter's dance, having been most likely influenced by sexualised portrayals of Salome in art and literature,[68] close analysis of the Greek words ἤρεσεν and ὀρχέομαι used in both Matthew 14:6–7 and Mark 6:22–23 reveal that this interpretation does not at all originate from the biblical text. Instead, it reveals a Western colonial bias that has unfairly portrayed "othered"

57 This seems coherent with Mark's "anti-imperial" and "anti-authority" ideology; see T.S.B. Liew, "The Gospel of Mark," in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (eds. F.F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2009), 110, 111.

58 V.B. Cole, "Mark," in *Africa Bible Commentary* (ed. T. Adeyemo; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 1208; and J. Kapolyo, "Matthew," in *Africa Bible Commentary* (ed. T. Adeyemo; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 1166.

59 Ajayi-Soyinka, "Dance," 271.

60 A. Ogundipe, *Èṣù Elegbára: Chance, Uncertainly in Yorùbá Mythology* (Ilorin: Kwara State University Press, 2018), 25.

61 H. Peggy, "Dance in Nigeria," *Ethnomusicology* 13 (2) (1969): 280.

62 Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 183.

63 Ajayi-Soyinka, "Dance," 273.

64 Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 398.

65 See Guelich, *Mark 1:1–8:26*, 332; and Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 397.

66 See Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, 81.

67 See Kirk-Duggan, "Salome's Veiled Dance and David's Full Monty," 220.

68 Joynes, "Visualizing Salome's Dance of Death," 150.

dance as "erotic in posture and movement"[69] when this is simply not the case. Whilst postcolonial interpretations have succeeded in laying a strong foundation for a Nigerian/British women's interpretation to build upon, by reframing Herodias's daughter's dance to be the means by which she subverts colonial and patriarchal power structures,[70] African interpretations[71] have ultimately failed to free her from the false "femme fatale" trope.[72] However, insights from a Yoruba epistemological view of dance, where the moving body plays an integral role in "ritual ceremony,"[73] "religion,"[74] and "possession"[75] could open the door to a new Nigerian/British interpretation women's. Within the next section I will highlight the dominant themes explored within *Yoruba Girl Dancing* that could prove fruitful for a new Nigerian/British women's interpretation.

3 Nigerian/British Cultural Reference: Simi Bedford's *Yoruba Girl Dancing*

In this section, I will introduce Simi Bedford as a Nigerian author living in the UK, and give a brief overview of her book *Yoruba Girl Dancing*. In the following section, I will then outline the main themes and ideas that Bedford explores within her book in order to identify potential lenses through which to approach the biblical narrative in a new and fresh way. Simi Bedford, born in Lagos, Nigeria, was sent to an English boarding school at the age of six.[76] Her semi-autobiographical novel *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, set in the aftermath of World War II, follows the journey of the protagonist Remi Foster, as she too is ripped from her family in Nigeria to attend a boarding school in England. Bedford intentionally characterises Remi as being an exceptionally intelligent child from a wealthy Nigerian background in order to "deconstruct continuing nineteenth-century notions of African mental incapacity."[77] Bedford's novel has been said to "ingeniously, entertainingly, eloquently, and intelligently"

69 Aluede, Aiyejina, and Ekewenu, "African Dance," 85.
70 Molopyane, *Displacing Power from the Dance Floor*, 65.
71 See Cole, "Mark," 1208; and Kapolyo, "Matthew," 1166.
72 Joynes, "Visualizing Salome's Dance of Death," 152.
73 Peggy, "Dance in Nigeria," 280.
74 Karade, *Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*, 72.
75 Ajayi-Soyinka, "Dance," 273.
76 B. Cooper, ed., *Stories Fly: A Collection of African Fiction Written in Europe and the USA* (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2003), 60.
77 C.O. Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 324.

explore issues of "home and identity,"[78] as Remi wrestles with belonging and identity in an environment where she is hypervisible. On arrival in the UK, Remi experiences abhorrent racism from her peers and teacher alike, being called a "savage,"[79] a "darkie,"[80] and a "wicked and evil child."[81] For the first time in her life, she is forced to deal with incessant staring because of the colour of her skin, as people's mouths literally "dropped open" when she walked into a room.[82] As the novel progresses, Remi's self-confidence is seen to wane, as the once "favoured grandchild" of her Grandmother[83] who had once danced "long into the night"[84] at a wedding in Nigeria is now found "concealed" on a bench by a teacher and in floods of "tears,"[85] her identity "broken" by racism.[86] Over time, however, as Remi forgets about her African background and assimilates well into British culture, Remi's school friends begin to accept her as being British, telling her: "you're not a savage any more, it's simple."[87] It is only when Remi attends a Caribbean church in the school holidays that she finds that the "clapping and the dancing had awoken fierce memories of the rhythms of home."[88] The novel ends with Remi at the age of eighteen, about to attend university, dancing at a party in the UK as a true "Yoruba girl."[89] Ultimately, Bedford's *Yoruba Girl Dancing* is a beautiful coming-of-age novel that follows Remi as she "gradually becomes detoxified from being an Englishwoman and blossoms, like the many flowers in one of her schools, into an Afro-Englishwoman."[90] Dance is the key medium that Bedford uses to depict this transformation, as after years of attempting to assimilate to English culture by doing Western "ballet" and "country dance,"[91] at the end of the novel Remi discovers that is "possible to be English without relinquishing her formative Yoruba background, with

78 D. Johnson, "Who Belongs to Whom?: Assimilation and Deracination in Simi Bedford's *Yoruba Girl Dancing*," *Bookbird* 37 (2) (1999): 11.
79 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 50.
80 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 89.
81 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 57.
82 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 64.
83 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 7.
84 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 26.
85 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 91.
86 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 92.
87 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 122.
88 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 150.
89 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 185.
90 Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, 326.
91 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 135.

which she finally feels free to reconnect and re-experience."[92] She is Nigerian and British, and in that there is no contradiction. Through this novel, Bedford successfully deconstructs the binary Western perception that all Nigerian novels must be set in a rural poor village. Instead, Bedford shows that "Yoruba girls dancing with fellow law students at posh London parties are just as representative of Nigerian realities as Yoruba girls dancing with their age-mates at village harvest festivals."[93]

In her book *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*, Ogunyemi offers key insights regarding Bedford's use of dance in *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, that could offer new and exciting avenues for a Nigerian/British interpretation of Herodias's daughter's dance. Ogunyemi states that Bedford's construction of dance in the novel, serves to highlight the "ritualistic, spiritual purpose" of dance within Yoruba epistemology.[94] She goes on to say that the "last dance brings the story full circle. Not only does it remind us of the first dance to celebrate a Yoruba wedding with the pregnant Sisi Bola at the beginning of the novel, it contrasts sharply with the stiff waltz, quickstep, and uncoordinated rock-and-roll that pass for dance in Europe."[95] By juxtaposing Remi and her friend's Nigerian dance, where they "wound and unwound" their bodies,[96] within a Western culture where alcohol is predominantly required to get people dancing,[97] their bodies and hypervisibility are particularly poignant. Whilst dance may simply be viewed as a social pastime[98] or a source of exercise[99] within a Western context, studying dance has been shown to offer "new authenticity, based on body knowledge."[100] As we have previously seen in the preceding sections of this paper, Western hegemonic interpretations of the

92 H. Lock, "Yoruba Girl Dancing and the Post-War Transition to an English Multi-Ethnic Society," *Ethnic Studies Review* 22 (1) (1999) 112–21 (120).

93 W. Griswold, "The Nigerian Fiction Complex," in *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 28.

94 Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, 326.

95 Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, 325.

96 Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, 185.

97 A.G. Rúdólfsdóttir and P. Morgan, "'Alcohol is My Friend': Young Middle Class Women Discuss Their Relationship with Alcohol," *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 19 (6) (2009): 502.

98 See T. Stickley, K. Paul, B. Crosbie, M. Watson, and G. Souter, "Dancing for Life: An Evaluation of a UK Rural Dance Programme," *International Journal of Health Promotion and Education* 53 (2) (2015): (74).

99 See Z. Bremer, "Dance as a Form of Exercise," *British Journal of General Practice* 57 (535) (2007): 166.

100 J. Jones, "Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity," *Theatre Topics* 12 (2002): 14.

biblical story have arbitrarily labelled Herodias's daughter's dance as "erotic" in the face of no evidence. Could there be deeper insights regarding dance that a Western epistemic hegemony has overlooked? According to Ajayi-Soyinka, on the African continent, "no ritual is complete without dancing; not even Christianity and Islam, the imported monotheistic religions, escape the danced worship."[101] If within the Yoruba community in Nigeria particularly dance is seen as "the vortex of religious ritual ceremony,"[102] could this open a new door for a rereading of Herodias's daughter's dance? Rather than viewing Herodias's daughter's dance as being "erotic," the next section uses Yoruba epistemology to reframe the biblical story as a death ritual that enabled John the Baptist's transition "from the realm of the living to that of the dead."[103]

4 Using Creative Actualisation to Construct a Nigerian/British Women's Interpretation of Herodias's Daughter in Mark 6:17–28 and Matthew 14:3–12

In order to form a creative actualised interpretation of this biblical story, it is important to start by looking deeper into the wider context in which Herodias's daughter's dance occurs. The first clue to the wider context of her dance is found right at the outset of the story in both Gospel versions, where Herod hears rumours that John the Baptist had been "raised from the dead" (Mark 6:14; Matt 14:2). In this wider setting, the biblical story hardly seems conducive for a steamy erotic dance to take place. Instead, closer analysis of these verses reveal a potential to reframe Herodias's daughter's dance as a ritualistic, "possession like" encounter, as opposed to a sexually charged scandal. The tone at the beginning of the Markan version is particularly macabre, as it is littered with references to "the dead" (Mark 6:14), deceased prophets (Mark 6:15), and gruesome "beheadings" (Mark 6:16). When one takes into consideration the morbid tone at the beginning of the story, it opens up the possibility that Herodias's daughter's dance was more than just an incestuous lap dance, akin to something out of *Game of Thrones*. Instead, the continual references to "death," "resurrection" (Mark 6:14, 16; Matt 14:2), and to supernatural "powers" (Mark 6:14; Matt 14:2) allude to a more spiritual, "other-worldly" occurrence.

101 Ajayi-Soyinka, "Dance," 272.

102 Peggy, "Dance in Nigeria," 280.

103 H. Oripeloye and M.B. Omigbule, "The Yoruba of Nigeria and the Ontology of Death and Burial," in *Death Across Cultures: Death and Dying in Non-Western Cultures* (eds. H.R. Selin and M. Robert; Cham: Springer International, 2019), 193–205 (194).

This bears resemblance with Matthew 27:19, in which Pilate's wife has a supernatural encounter and says to her husband, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." Pilate's wife is a woman of the ruling class, just like Herodias and her daughter,[104] who was used powerfully within the book of Matthew through her supernatural/ spiritual insight. This lays a foundation for Herodias's daughter to possibly possess a similar supernatural insight. The form of the Gospel accounts may also be said to reflect this supernatural insight, as both accounts start with John the Baptist's fate already being sealed in death (Mark 6:14; Matt. 14:2). The chronological order of the biblical story is radically subverted, starting with the end, and then using the main body of the biblical story to inform the reader about the beginning and the middle of the story. There is sufficient evidence, therefore, to argue that due to Herodias's daughter's unique spiritual gifting, she was aware of John the Baptist's death *before* she ever began to dance. If she did in fact have this spiritual insight, as the form of the pericope and the wider book of Matthew suggests, it would have undoubtedly affected the purpose of her dance in a way that previous scholars would not have thought to investigate. In that case, what could it possibly have meant?

The second clue to the wider context of Herodias's daughter's dance is found in Mark 6:21, at the specific point in which the "story crescendos."[105] It is here that the reader is finally informed that the biblical story is set specifically on Herod's "birthday" (Mark 6:21). Despite this being the only occurrence of a "birthday" in the entire Bible, extant scholarship has had surprisingly little to say on the topic. Whilst there is some research in the UK to suggest that the month of a child's birth may affect their education outcomes,[106] predominantly an individual's date of birth within a Western context has very little significance outside of identifying their medical records or looking up their horoscope at the back of a magazine. Birthdays are now commonplace and are a normative part of modern-day society. This is very different from Greek antiquity, where birthdays "were solely reserved for kings and nobility

104 Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, 73.

105 F.M. Gillman, *Herodias: At Home in that Fox's Den* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 53.

106 C. Crawford, L. Dearden, and C. Meghir, *When You Are Born Matters: The Impact of Date of Birth on Educational Outcomes in England* (London: Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2010), accessed September 20, 2023, https://ifs.org.uk/publications/when-you-are-born-matters-impact-date-birth-educational-outcomes-england.

members."[107] Only the rich and elite were able to celebrate their birthdays in ancient times as "people did not know how to calculate dates."[108] This is similar to the personal experiences of older members of the Yoruba community, who grew up in poor, illiterate communities and were thus completely unaware of their date of birth.[109] Therefore, within traditional Yoruba cosmology, dates are not constructed based on "numerical chronicling," as we are used to in the West, but is instead "based on important historical events" and the events occurring around that time.[110] Using a Yoruba cosmology regarding dates as a lens to view Herod's birthday allows a new and exciting meaning to emerge that has been overlooked by extant scholarship. The significance of Herod's birthday, therefore, may not lie within the date itself (which is not specified within the biblical text), but could lie within the events that coincide with that date. In "ancient pagan cultures,"[111] it was believed that "evil spirits visited" people specifically on their birthday.[112] It was on this day specifically that they were most at risk from "the evil eye" and in need of protection.[113] Taking this into cognizance erodes the notion of a happy birthday celebration and introduces a deeper significance to Herod's birthday. Although the majority of scholars argue that the Greek word γενέσια used in Mark 6:21 and Matthew 14:6 is translated to mean "birthday celebration,"[114] in classical Greek

107 O. Redlich, "The Concept of Birthday: A Theoretical, Historical, and Social Overview, in Judaism and Other Cultures," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 14 (9) (2020): 791–801 (791).

108 Redlich, "The Concept of Birthday," 791.

109 J. Iliffe, *Obasanjo, Nigeria and the World* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2011), 7; and W. Abimbọla and I. Miller, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yoruba Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora* (Roxbury, MA: Aim Books, 1997), 41. This is the experience of my father who was born in a poor village called Abababubu in Ondo State, Nigeria. He was completely unaware of his exact date and year of birth, and so when he came to the UK, he picked October 1, as it is Nigerian Independence Day. Thankfully, he had a rich friend in Nigeria whom he knew was born three days after him and had his birthday recorded. As an adult, my father was able to contact him and finally learn his exact date of birth. Now he has two birthdays – just like royalty!

110 F.A. Kazeem, "Time in Yoruba Culture," *Al-Hikmat* 36 (2016): 27–41 (33).

111 The word 'pagan' used here is problematic as it subsumes all non-Western beliefs into one religious category.

112 Redlich, "The Concept of Birthday," 791.

113 Redlich, "The Concept of Birthday," 791.

114 See A.Y. Collins and H.W. Attridge, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 308; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 401; A.E.J. Rawlinson, *Westminster Commentaries: The Gospel According to St Mark* (London: Methuen, 1956), 82; Hooker, *Mark*, 161; and W.I. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), 220.

τά γενέσια was translated to mean "a day kept in memory of the dead."[115] If we were to adopt this classical translation of the word γενέσια, it could offer new insights into the biblical story. According to ancient Greco-Roman tradition, on this day specifically, the dead were believed to be able to "return to earth and try to invade the domain of the living."[116] This could explain why Herod, at the beginning of the biblical story, was so fearful that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead (Mark 6:14; Matt 14:2). Particularly notable with regard to these ceremonies is the fact that they began "with entertaining" to attempt to appease the dead and ended with the dead being driven out in order to protect "the living from them."[117] Diviners in the Greco-Roman period were also known to use rituals in order to communicate with the dead.[118] The macabre, but supernatural, tone at the beginning of the pericope, combined with the fact that τά γενέσια may refer to "a day kept in memory of the dead" allows the doors of interpretation to be thrown open wider than ever before. It steers the conversation away from a sexualised reading, and ultimately reveals the false androcentric belief underpinning dominant translations that a "women's power is in their ability to please men" in a sexual way.[119] However, by drawing parallels between Herodias's daughter and Pilate's wife in Matthew 27:19, new possibilities arise with regards to spiritual and supernatural insight to explain the power behind Herodias's daughter's dance. Now that we have framed the biblical story within this context, we can begin to explore the rest of the story that leads up to Herodias's daughter's dance.

Verses 17 and 18 of Mark 6 detail the beginning of the chronological events that ultimately culminate in John the Baptist being beheaded in Mark 6:27. In verse 17, the text says: "Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison *on account of Herodias*, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her." Apart from revealing a rather questionable and complicated "Herodian family tree,"[120] this verse reveals the fact that Herodias is in fact the motivation behind the subsequent murder of John the Baptist. Verses 18 and 19 tell us that John the Baptist had been critical of the fact

115 H.E. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1980), 161.

116 F. Jacoby, "Γενεσια: A Forgotten Festival of the Dead," *The Classical Quarterly* 38 (3–4) (1944): 65–75 (66).

117 Jacoby, "Γενεσια," 66.

118 Kapcár, A. "The Origins of Necromancy or How We Learned to Speak to The Dead." *Sacra*, 13 (2) (2015): 30–58.

119 Anderson, "Feminist Criticism," 131.

120 Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 394. See also J. Painter, *Mark's Gospel: Worlds in Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1997), 102.

that Herod had married Herodias, as "she was still the wife of his brother,"[121] and as a result Herodias "wanted to kill him." As Herodias is revealed to be the true motivation behind the beheading of John the Baptist, the mother/daughter family dynamic within this biblical story is key. Whilst Western male scholars have hastily labelled Herodias to be an "arch-villain," and her daughter to be a "willing accomplice,"[122] postcolonial interpreters have highlighted the fact that Herodias and her daughter "evoke multiple examples of the varied male creation of woman as Other, as Difference."[123] This key insight from postcolonial scholarship introduces the themes of power and colonial gaze into the discussion. Could this form another important aspect of Herodias's daughter's dance? The American painter and printmaker Romare Howard Bearden, who sought to "present a mythic vision of Black American life" through his art,[124] depicted Herodias's daughter as being Black in his painting entitled *Salome* (*John the Baptist*).[125] As a man of mixed heritage,[126] Bearden's "fair skin allowed him to cross boundaries that restricted most other blacks [*sic*]."[127] His decision to therefore depict Herodias's daughter as being covertly Black is therefore particularly poignant, as it demonstrates his commitment to identify with his African heritage in order to challenge Euro/North-American hegemony and highlight the "political issues affecting African Americans [*sic*]".[128] Bearden's intention to reclaim his African history is also evidenced by his depiction of "masklike heads" within the painting.[129] Depicting the biblical characters in

121 J. Hargreaves, *A Guide to St Mark's Gospel* (London: SPCK, 1965), 100.

122 Painter, *Mark's Gospel*, 103.

123 Anderson, "Feminist Criticism," 116–17.

124 M.S. Campbell, *Romare Bearden: A Creative Mythology*, Ph.D. thesis (Syracuse University, 1982), iv. Bearden's art aimed to recover the African-American experience during a time when "a massive movement for social justice burst upon the American scene." C. Greene, *Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual* (1971), 4, Museum of Modern Art, accessed September 20, 2023, https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_2671_300298969.pdf.

125 R.H. Bearden, *Salome* (*John the Baptist*) (1974), accessed September 19, 2023, https://www.phillips.com/detail/Romare-Bearden/NY030210/72.

126 He had "Cherokee and Italian as well as African ancestry." S. Kinzer, "Arts in America; Charlotte Acclaims Romare Bearden as a Native Son," *The New York Times*, October 2, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/02/arts/arts-in-america-charlotte-acclaims-romare-bearden-as-a-native-son.html.

127 Kinzer, "Arts in America."

128 UMMA Exchange, *Salome* (*John the Baptist*) (2018–19), https://exchange.umma.umich.edu/resources/41075/view.

129 Smithsonian American Art Museum, *John the Baptist from the Prevalence of Ritual Suite* (2023), accessed September 19, 2023, https://Americanart.Si.Edu/Artwork/John-Baptist-Prevalence-Ritual-Suite-78166.

this way is particularly poignant as Bearden intentionally "reclaims the stylistic influence of the West African masks from such early modernist artists as Brancusi and Picasso, who appropriated African culture in the early 20th century."[130] The phrase "Prevalence of Ritual" is also attached to his African painting, which in turn invokes themes of "spirituality" and "religion" into the biblical story for the first time.[131] What new insights could arise from the biblical story if we challenge Euro/North-American hegemonic biblical interpretations and reclaim an African epistemology regarding dance?

Verse 20 contrasts starkly with verse 19 and exposes the "the limits of power for even aristocratic women."[132] Despite the fact that Herodias "wanted to kill" John the Baptist in verse 19, verse 20 shows that she was unable to do so because "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him." Although Herodias's status was as an elite member of society, her hands were tied, as men were the overall ruling authority at that time. She manages to subvert this male gaze, however, through the hypervisibility and dance of her daughter in verse 22. We will now closely examine verse 22 in light of themes that have been highlighted so far – spiritual insight, death, and colonial and patriarchal gaze – in order to offer new possibilities to explain Herodias's daughter's dance.

Verse 22 starts by saying that Herod's daughter "came in and danced" in a banqueting hall that was full of men. This is the first powerful meaning of Herodias's daughter's dance, as she is able to physically "transgress the boundary separating men and women, while her mother waits outside."[133] In a context where the "male body was ruling, and the female body was oppressed,"[134] Herodias's daughter is able to use her physical body as a form of resistance against the colonial and patriarchal gaze of her day. This is in line with the overall "anti-imperial" and anti-authoritarian theme within the book of Mark.[135] In the wider context of Mark, the author is highly critical of the Jewish leaders of the day,[136] and offers an "apocalyptic promise of a racially or ethnically inclusive eschatological community"[137] in response. Through her dance,

130 Hood Museum of Art, *Salome, from the Portfolio "Prevalence of Ritual"* (2023), accessed September 20, 2023, https://Hoodmuseum.Dartmouth.Edu/Objects/Pr.975.58.3.

131 UMMA Exchange, *Salome*.

132 Tolbert, "Mark," 272.

133 Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, 78.

134 Molopyane, "The Female Body on the Dance Floor," 99–100.

135 Liew, "The Gospel of Mark," 110.

136 J.D. Kingsbury, "The Religious Authorities in the Gospel of Mark," *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 52.

137 Liew, "The Gospel of Mark," 111.

Herodias's daughter was able to use her hypervisibility "as a vehicle to acquire honour and power by making Herod and the guests' slaves to her body."[138] Taking into cognizance the spiritual insight of Pilate's wife in Matthew 27:19, the second possible meaning of her dance could have been a prophetic death ritual for John the Baptist. Rather than her dance being the vehicle behind which Herodias's daughter subverted patriarchal power in order to murder John the Baptist, perhaps her dance was a response to a death that she had already foreseen? If she had known about John the Baptist's death through her prophetic, supernatural gifting, then her dance would be able to take on the form of a religious death ritual. In Yoruba culture, "dance always becomes an important part of the rituals" for the deceased.[139] This bears resemblance with antiquity, as ritual lament of the dead involved "movement," "wailing and singing," which "must have resembled a dance."[140] Death rituals in antiquity also served as a "function of release, like the tears that flow unrestrained down the cheeks of the lamenting women."[141] If Herodias's daughter had the insight found in Mark 6:14–16, before she conducted her dance in verse 22, she could be prophetically enacting the required death dance ritual for John the Baptist before he had even been killed.

The third possible meaning of her dance could be that she was using her dance as a means to communicate with a higher power. It is important to note the fact that within Greco-Roman culture, dance was seldom found without music.[142] It would have been hard for her to dance without any instrument accompanying her. In Yoruba culture, the drums specifically are used to "communicate with those who are gifted or trained to understand the drum verse."[143] Drums are particularly important in settings such as "naming ceremonies, funeral parties, weddings and other celebrations."[144] Traditionally, drums are a means for Yoruba people to be in "communication and communism

138 Molopyane, *Displacing Power from the Dance Floor*, 65.

139 F.A. Akinsipe, "Dance in the Yoruba Family Rites of Birth, Marriage and Death," *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research* 15 (2) (2018) 214–26 (225).

140 M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 6.

141 E.J. Håland, *Rituals of Death and Dying in Modern and Ancient Greece: Writing History from a Female Perspective* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), 258.

142 N. Choubineh, "Ancient Greek Dance," *World History Encyclopedia*, 1, accessed September 19, 2023, https://www.worldhistory.org/Greek_Dance/.

143 T. Babáwálé, "Drums," in *Encyclopedia of the Yoruba* (eds. T. Fálọlá and A. Akínyẹmí; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016) 108–9 (108).

144 A. Villepastour, *Ancient Text Messages of the Yorùbá Bàtá Drum: Cracking the Code* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 72.

with their God and gods."[145] This allies with antiquity, as in the Hebrew Bible, "particularly in the Psalms, the frame drum is mentioned in association with religious ritual."[146] In ancient Egypt, the frame drum was also used as a "ritualistic instrument that enhanced communication" with gods.[147] As dance was "an integral part of the way in which people communicated"[148] in antiquity, perhaps Herodias's daughter used her body in collaboration with the music to communicate to a higher power? In Yoruba epistemology, dance is also a way for an individual to be "possessed" by a higher deity or god.[149] Could something like this have been occurring within the pericope?

The fourth and final possible meaning of Herodias's daughter's dance could be to signal the end of the era of John the Baptist, and to welcome in the era of Jesus. In Yoruba culture, names are highly significant and are sometimes used to "accentuate and situate the significance of an experience."[150] Yoruba people also celebrate "expansively during a child's naming ceremony"[151] – even more than at the child's birth. At the very beginning of the biblical story, in verse 14, it specifically says that "Jesus' *name* had become known." This contrasts with Matthew 11:11, where it says, "Whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he [John the Baptist]." Despite the prominence of Jesus in the New Testament, "John was a much more important figure than is usually supposed."[152] John the Baptist's death in chapter 14 therefore is a really defining moment. It marks the end of the John the Baptist era. Perhaps Herodias's daughter's dance was a significant way to "commemorate the dead"[153] John the Baptist and usher in Jesus as the new king.

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145 A. Adegbite, "The Drum and its Role in Yoruba Religion," *Journal of Religion in Africa/Religion En Afrique* 18 (1988): 15.

146 M. Molina, "*Tympanum tuum Cybele*: Pagan Use and Christian Transformation of a Cultic Greco-Roman Percussion Instrument," in *Moysiké/Musica: La Música En El Món Antic I El Món Antic En La Música* (ed. J.A. Sardà; Barcelona: Institute d'Estudis Catalans, 2014), 51–69 (67).

147 Molina, "*Tympanum tuum Cybele*," 56.

148 F. Naerebout, "Dance in Ancient Greece: Anything New?," in *Orchesis: Texts on Ancient Greek Dance* (eds. A. Lazou, A. Raftis, and M. Borowska; Athens: Tropos Zois/Dora Stratou, 2003), 139–62 (156).

149 Ajayi-Soyinka, "Dance," 273; and Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 183.

150 F. Gbenga, "Yoruba Proverbs, Names and Consciousness," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 1 (4) (2006): 52. "In the first name, the parents have little role to play. The name is chosen by the circumstances of birth." M.E. Sotunsa and A. Borah, *Imagining Vernacular Histories: Essays in Honor of Toyin Falola* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 127.

151 Sotunsa and Borah, *Imagining Vernacular Histories*, 127.

152 C.H.H. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, Ph.D. thesis (University of Glasgow, 1961), 330.

153 K.J. Hame, *Ta Nomizomena: Private Greek Death-Ritual in the Historical Sources and Tragedy*, Ph.D. thesis (Bryn Mawr College, 1999), 102.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has sought to offer a Nigerian/British women's reading of Herodias's daughter's dance in Mark and Matthew by reading it alongside Simi Bedford's *Yoruba Girl Dancing*. By looking closely at the Greek verb ἤρεσεν (Matt 14:6–7; Mark 6:22–23), I have exposed the fact that the dominant Western male interpretation of Herodias's daughter's dance as being "erotic" has no basis, and has in fact been heavily influenced by art history.[154] Considering Afropean epistemological considerations of dance, ritual, and embodied knowledge, Herodias's daughter's dance is transformed from a one-dimensional sexual encounter into a multitude of spiritual and ritual alternatives. Taking into cognizance Ogunyemi's key insight regarding Bedford's novel, that Yoruba dance on British soil "doubles as a public exorcism of European devilry,"[155] combined with the foundational role that dance plays within Yoruba life and death rituals,[156] has allowed four new possible interpretations of Herodias's daughter's dance to arise. First, in keeping with the overall "anti-imperial"[157] theme of the book of Mark, her dance could be seen as a form of resistance against the colonial and patriarchal dominant gaze of that time. As an "othered" subject, she manages to "displace" the imperial authority of Herod through her hypervisibility and her dance.[158] Even though Herodias and her daughter were undoubtedly members of the ruling class,[159] because they lived in a patriarchal society, there were "limits of power" upon these women.[160] Perhaps by being able to physically "transgress the boundary separating men and women,"[161] she was able to resist patriarchal domination, and make a stand for female rights. Second, by taking into cognizance the importance of dance within Yoruba death rituals,[162] Herodias's daughter's dance could also be reconfigured to be a prophetic ritual lament of the dead John the Baptist. This bears resemblance with ancient Greco-Roman death rituals in which "ritual dance serves the function of release, like the tears that flow unrestrained."[163] Third, the use of drums in Yoruba ritual as communication

154 Joynes, "Visualizing Salome's Dance of Death," 150.
155 Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, 325.
156 Ogundipe, *Èṣù Elegbára*, 25.
157 Liew, "The Gospel of Mark," 110.
158 Molopyane, *Displacing Power from the Dance Floor*, 65.
159 Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, 73.
160 Tolbert, "Mark," 272.
161 Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, 78.
162 Peggy, "Dance in Nigeria," 286.
163 Håland, *Rituals of Death and Dying*, 258.

"with their God and gods"[164] also creates the possibility that the music that played whilst Herodias's daughter danced was a means to communicate to a higher deity. And by taking into consideration the significance Yoruba culture places on names,[165] the fourth and final possible meaning behind Herodias's daughter's dance was to mark the end of the John the Baptist era. This Nigerian/British women's reading of Herodias' daughter has significant implications for the field of biblical studies as it offers a new framework for how Afropean epistemologies, particularly those centred on embodied knowledge, can disrupt hegemonic Euro/North-American colonial and patriarchal structures. Building on extant feminist and postcolonial reading approaches, this new framework foregrounds a new field of study within biblical interpretation termed 'Afropean women's hermeneutics', a field that for the first time takes into consideration the hybrid perspectives and worldviews of Black women descended from Africa but living in Europe.

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164 Adegbite, "The Drum and its Role in Yoruba Religion," 15.

165 Gbenga, "Yoruba Proverbs, Names and Consciousness," 52.

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