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Èṣù and ethics in the Yorùbá world view

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A-gbéni-kọluni, alánìgbá orí èṣù / Thing/agent that pushes a person to hit (another) person, lizard that sits on Èṣù[1] (Kòṣémání 1987: 45–8)

We have met the enemy and he is us.[2]

The Yorùbá and their *òrìṣà*[3]

Recent historical scholarship, particularly evidence from archaeological studies,[4] has begun to cast a confirmatory light on the antiquity of the Yorùbá people and culture, dateable to the final millennium BCE, locating the people in the sub-region of tropical West Africa that is still identified as the homeland and centre of dispersal of the people's current acknowledged diaspora.

This study focuses on Èṣù, the most important primordial bastion of the Yorùbá people's metaphysical embodiments of organizing and regulatory existential principles. Èṣù is, of course, not a lone inhabitant of the Yorùbá pantheon of the metaphorical 401 *òrìṣà*, or 'divinities', in which the odd 'one' is the ever present possibility of accretion by one.

Along with its pantheon, the Yorùbá world established, very early, markets (Akintoye 2010; Babalọla 2017) and concomitant modes of exchange and valuation – or *owó* (money). This early emergence of markets and modes of valuation is important in establishing the antiquity of Yorùbá culture for two reasons. First, it negates the supposition that the use of cowries as 'currency' among the Yorùbá began with the infernal traffic in human beings of the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. Second, the secondary use of the cowrie for the adoration of Èṣù and *Orí* (see Figures 1 and 2) cannot be anachronistic, given that both are among the most important pan-Yorùbá *òrìṣà*.[5]

If, as Akintoye (2010: 26) suggests, 'the use of the cowry shells as currency almost certainly … began in times before *Odùduwà*, that is, before the tenth century', the Yorùbá phrasal nomenclature *owó-ẹyọ*, 'elemental unit (*ẹyọ*) of

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[1]Translated by the author. The trope here is that of an innocent person hit by a missile hurled by an errant youth at a lizard perched on the laterite mound representing Èṣù, on guard at the exit from a household, or at any symbolically liminal point.

[2]See <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Walt_Kelly>, accessed 1 November 2019.

[3]Throughout this article the term *òrìṣà* refers to divinities.

[4]See Akintoye (2010), Babalọla (2015; 2017), Babalọla *et al.* (2017; 2018), Ogundiran (2002; 2016) and Ogundiran and Akinlolu Ige (2015).

[5]On *Orí*, see Abíọ́dún (1975; 1981; 2014).

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FIGURE 1 Èṣù by Lamidi Ọlọ́nàdé Fákẹ́yẹ. Source: Photograph by David R. Randell Photographics. Published with the permission of Al Gemrich.

money (*owó*)', for the cowrie as currency must presuppose a prior mode of exchange (*owó*).[6] One argument in support of this supposition is that the intricate Yorùbá numeration system most certainly predates the emergence of markets and/or material transactional exchange. In a personal communication, Ọdẹ́túnjí A. Ọdẹ́jọbí, a specialist in computational technology who works on the Yorùbá numeration system, in answer to my query 'What do the Yorùbá count?', writes: 'It turns out that the most computationally powerful number system in

[6]Compare collocation such as *ọkà bābà*, 'grain (of) copper colour', for sorghum, suggesting an earlier indigenous species of grains, *ọkà*, that is not copper-coloured.

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FIGURE 2 Ìbọrí, *Orí* symbol (centre) displayed between the top and the base of the *Ilé-Orí*.[7] Source: Abíọ́dún (2014: 33). Republished with the permission of Rowland Abíọ́dún.

the recorded history of numeration is that of the Yoruba.'[8] A powerful system such as this must have preceded and 'powered' reckoning in the early market economy. It certainly facilitated the use of the cowrie when they began to come by the shipload and needed to be counted in the millions in the service of the human traffic that began in the sixteenth century.

[7]See also Abíọ́dún (2014: 35). Abíọ́dún writes of the physical representation of Ìbọrí: 'Ìbọrí, the visual *oríkì* of Orí-Inú (one's inner spiritual head, allotment) is conical in shape.' The use of cowries to adorn both Èṣù (not necessarily the Èṣù in Figure 1) and the paraphernalia of *Orí* in Figure 2 predate the ninth century AD and the use of cowries as currency.

[8]Personal communication, 6 June 2018. Ọdẹ́túnjí A. Ọdẹ́jọbí continues:

> This is because Yoruba counting is the only one that uses a number system that combines the following computing features:
>
> I. The use of three (3) cascaded bases (base 5, base 10, and base 20) simultaneously (no other number system has this feature)
> II. The use of the over-counting strategy in number computation
> III. Extensive use of subtraction (no other number system has this feature)
> IV. Consistent reckoning of value computation from the smallest towards the largest value
> V. The computations of numbers greater than two thousand (2,000) can be transcribed in as much as ten (10) different correct renderings
> VI. Computation over the integer domain (no other number system has this feature).
>
> Beyond these, the Yoruba also developed number systems for use in other different intellectual discourse apart from counting. They developed and used the binary (complementary system) in all its forms of base extensions, including (base 4, base 8 and base 16) in the Ifá system. Base 5 is used in day reckoning and calendar, and so on. These aside, the Yoruba use of number is contextual.

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The Yorùbá primordial *òrìṣà* include *Ògún*, the lord of artistic deployment of materials, beginning with iron as early as the first century AD and arguably earlier; *Ifá*, the Yorùbá fountainhead of knowledge and information about all objects of consciousness; Ifá's inseparable companion, *Èṣù*, the arbiter among all sentient beings and custodian of the primordial *àṣẹ*, the life force for all 'motion'; and *Ọ̀sanyìn*, custodian and dispenser of the powers that inhere in all flora and every medium for medicinal and curative preparations.

The eminent sociologist N. A. Fadipẹ's inquiry led him to opine that 'the universal distribution of Èṣù would seem to indicate that it was one of the earliest of Yorùbá orìṣà' (2012 [1970]: 287). He finds that, among all subgroups of the Yorùbá:

> Èṣù, alias Ẹlẹ́gbára, is undoubtedly the most ubiquitous of all *òrìṣà* and also one of the most universally worshipped. A Yoruba proverb says that every head of a compound must have an Èṣù outside his compound and the *baálé* who does not have one will have to give account to Èṣù … nearly every *òrìṣà* to which a priest or priestess is attached has an Èṣù or Ẹlẹ́gbára linked with it. (Fadipẹ 2012 [1970]: 285f.)

Orí, 'inner head', is as distributively fundamental among the Yorùbá as Èṣù is 'universal'.[9]

Testimony with indigenous epistemological import

Studies such as those referenced above suggest that developments antecedent to the advent of the Odùduwà revolution appear to have turned the Yorùbá geo-political territory of tropical West Africa into a homologue of Ancient Greece, with a proliferation of city states, each with its own ruler, but with shared metaphysical beings and institutions.

I was born into one such city state, one that is now fast becoming anachronistic, devastated largely by the malaise engendered by the decadence born of colonial and postcolonial secularization and political and social materialism. In my youth, during every state function and every major rite of passage, such as marriage and the death of elders, and during notable communal rituals of renewal, performing artists descended on my family, striving to outdo one another in their rendering of the *oríkì* (poetic citations)[10] of individuals and families. This was so in the life of my grandfather, Ọlábọ̀dé Ọláọmọ:

Oríkì ìdílé Ọlábọ̀dé Ọláọmọ[11]

Ọmọ́ Ọmọ́sùnọ́ lá

[9]See in particular Abíọ́dún (2014), who focuses on this in the opening chapter of his groundbreaking book *Yoruba Art and Language*, titled 'Orí: no òrìṣà blesses a person without the consent of his/her Orí'.

[10]See Oyèláràn and Adéwọ́lé (2007). For Cuba, Furé (1985: 12) remarks: 'Oriki (or oyiki) are names of praise dedicated to the orisha and to men and take the form of a greeting, exalting their qualities or feats. They are also played on "bata" drums.'

[11]Excerpt from a much longer *oríkì* of the family of Ọláọmọ, Àjáàwà, Ọgo-Olúwa Local Government, Ọ̀yọ́ State, Nigeria. The text has intergenerational authorship. I acknowledge the efforts of my cousin, Adégboyè Oyètúnjí, who has done much to preserve the text handed down to us.

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Ọmọ́sùnṣ́lá, Abínúwáyé
Ọ̀wọ́ ọ̀làrí, baba àpésìn
Ọ̀wọ́ tọ́kọ̀sín, Ọkọ Oyèfàbi
Ọmọ awíwẹ́rẹ́lawídẹ́ẹ́rẹ́-kọ̀-jálẹ̀
Ọmọ Ọjíbùkọ́lá
Ọmọ Ọba Ọdálágbe-lóhùn
Fálágbe-lẹ́wụ, falágbe-lówó
Ọmọ ọ̀sìn tí kò jẹ́ fi ìṣe rẹ̀ hangún
A bá a nígbẹ̀ẹ́ kọ ṣeémú,
Egúngún burú taṣọtaṣọ.
Mẹ̀mẹ̀fún fọwọ́ ìjà gboyè
Ọba kùkùté ga nínú, kò ga lóde
Omiwá-n-dé, baba bẹ́ẹ́kẹ́ bí odi ẹrẹ́mọ
Baba wa, ẹni tó mi kùkùté, ara rẹ̀ ló mì
Abániwíjọ́,
Ẹni tí ń ṣe Ọba Omiwá-n-dé, ara wọn ni wọn ń ṣe.
Ọmọ arówó-rọ̀wọ́n, Ọmọ arówó-rafújà
Ọ̀wọ́n là á rògo, ọ̀pọ̀ ni tọ́bùn,
Ọmọ Abínúwáyé,
Ọmọ Ọmọsùnṣ́lá, ọkọ Èṣùgúnwà
Ọdúdú-dẹkundẹkun, ọmọ Owúdá
Onigbèsè, Àtànda, ni í jí ọmọ ẹlòmîì pé pé pé
Baba, alukósó, alaro, ni í jí baba lójú oorun

Oríkì of Ọlábọ̀dé Ọláọmọ family[12]

Stock of Ọmọsùnṣ́lá
Resplendent in Ọlá [Nobility], Arrive-on-earth-in-wrath
Circle-of-attendants, surrounded by service hands
Circle-of-mobility [vehicular] facilitators, husband of Oyèfàbi
Shoot of them, soft-spoken, unshakeable in resolve
Who, by merely rising early to greet the day, enhances honourable living
Leader, who acknowledges even the mendicants
Makes available to the mendicant material resources where appropriate
Stock of the Peacock who does not reveal to the vulture the essence of its way of being
Encountered in the bush, impossible to contain/apprehend

[12]Translation by the author.

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The Mysterious, awesome in cover and soul

Mighty, to whom precedence is ceded at his slight gesture of combat readiness

Sovereign, stump of the mighty tree, deep and unfathomable internally, though unintimidating externally

Omiwá-n-dé [the *Ọrìṣà* Ọ̀ṣun come singling me out], brave, stocky and solid like the mound of *ẹ́rẹ́mọ̀* ants

Progenitor, he who shoves the stump of the mighty tree, shoves himself/herself root, branch and leaves

Anyone who has it in for you, anyone who has issues against Sovereign Omiwá-n-dé digs at his/her own well-being

Stock of those who have resources to acquire rare value, to acquire things worthy to vaunt

Glory/honour, costly to earn; the slothful/unworthy costs next to nothing

Stock of Abínúwáyé

Born of Ọmọ̀sùnọ́lá, husband of Èṣúgúnwà ['Èṣù mú ìwà gún': the divinity Èṣù assures the orderly unfolding of essence and existence]

Black-without-blemish, stock of Owúdá [the metal hammer shapes/recreates the red-hot iron]

Àtànda, creditors rouse other's children at the break of day

[My] Father, the *kósó* drummer, accompanied by cymbal clingers rouse you from deep sleep

Ọlábọ̀dé died in about 1943 and never reigned in the city state of Àjáàwà, but his son, Oyètúnjí reigned from 1968 to 1979. And the performing artists, regularly joined by accomplished women chanters in the community, came to render the *oríkì* of my family. Typically, in the early morning and from a great distance, *dùndún* professional drummers beat out an appreciable portion of the *oríkì*; women pick it up; and soon other attendant professional performers begin to vie to outdo one another for recognition and reward. Among the professional performing groups came the family of Dáraléṣù,[13] from Ọ̀yọ́, the ancient capital of the Ọ̀yọ́ Empire that was relocated (as *Àgọ̀ dỌ̀yọ́*) within twenty miles of Àjáàwà after its sack in 1832. Members of Dáraléṣù's family, as the name suggests, were devotees of Èṣù.[14] Among other skills, they distinguished themselves in the performance of *rárà*, a celebratory chanting mode for rendering *oríkì* that provokes emotion.

This early exposure to Èṣù raised, for me, nagging questions about the identity, personality and status of Èṣù during the catechism classes to prepare me to be baptized into the local church of the American Southern Baptist Convention;[15] and

[13]It is not unimportant for this study that this may be glossed as 'comely because he is [an] Èṣù devotee'.

[14]The family name means, literally, 'worthy of Èṣù' or 'exemplary as devotees of Èṣù'. Artists from the family participated in the celebration of the life of my late father, James Oyèláràn, in December 2002.

[15]Founded by Thomas Jefferson Bowen, the nineteenth-century 'St Paul' of the American Baptist Convention. Bowen, a veteran of the US–Mexico War of 1848, apparently saw God following the war and headed to Nigeria to found the Baptist mission, initially in Abẹ́òkúta.

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later still, when I began an analytical study of the Christian Bible, and particularly of the four Synoptic Gospels, for the Cambridge School Leaving Certificate.

Yorùbá xenophilia

The Yorùbá autochthonous embrace of other faiths echoes across the ocean. The observable survival and apparent dominance of the Yorùbá tradition in the Americas, among other African traditions, is not well accounted for by the relatively small number of Yorùbá among the enslaved Africans at any time and in any of the landing sites throughout the period of the inhuman traffic in African bodies and minds from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Among other things, the enslavers and the plantation owners in the Americas lived in dire fear of ethnic homogeneity of the enslaved, even when the enslavers prized certain skills and/or attributes of particular ethnic groups for their purposes. Hence, they mixed up their human herds in order to minimize the predominance of any one ethnic group.

I suggest that the survival and pre-eminence of the Yorùbá tradition in the Americas should be more meaningfully sought in its 'integrity': that is, in the cohesive articulation of the conceptual system of the tradition. One testimony to this integrity was indicated by the fact that the Yorùbá people took minimal interest in despoiling other people they got the better of in any encounter, including those they defeated in conflicts. The Yorùbá did not proselytize, and they never initiated conflicts on the basis of doctrines or tenets. Instead, in situations of encounter, the Yorùbá sought to attract the intellectual fountainheads of other traditions to their own, particularly the intellectuals and custodians of the other peoples' spiritual and ethical values. They slotted new elements into 'grooves' allowed by the Yorùbá tradition; this is encapsulated by the figure of speech that assigns to the Yorùbá pantheon 401 *òrìṣà*, where the 'one' represents the enduring possibility of accretion by one. This explains the following dictum, which gives us a diachronic insight into the tradition:

Ayé la bá Ifá	We encountered Ifá already in existence on earth
Ayé la bá Ìmọ̀le	We encountered Islam already on the earth
Ọ̀sán gangan ni Ìgbàgbọ́ wọlé dé	High noon it is that Christianity sauntered in

Ifá, the indigenous thought and information-processing system of the Yorùbá tradition, with the divinity Ọ̀rúnmìlà at its core, provided an accommodating groove for Islam with Mohammed perceived as its *òrìṣà*. Then, belatedly and, as it were, in historical time, entered Christianity, which, hubristically, claimed for itself the term and concept *ìgbàgbọ́* – literally, 'faith' – and insisted that all adherents must acknowledge one and only one central figure, Jesus Christ.[16]

This also suggests that, at their first encounter, the Yorùbá viewed both Islam and Christianity as other epistemological systems, like the one of which Ifá was

[16]Jacob K. Olupọna (2016: 169) uses the Yorùbá dictum, which he takes to be an *ẹsẹ Ifá* (a verse of the Ifá corpus), with a dissimilar translation, and comments as follows:

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the core component. This mindset, which enslaved Africans shared with those left behind, appears to have facilitated the following tendencies noted by Pierre Verger and Robert Voeks in relation to the development of the African-influenced tradition in the Americas, particularly in Cuba and Brazil. They write:

> Black Africans mostly directed their devotion at Saint Barbara, Saint George, Saints Cosmas, and Damianus, Saint Jerome, Saint Anthony, Saint Lazarus, Saint Anne, Our Lady of Candlemas, and above all Our Lord of the Good End (O Senhor de Bonfim). The true reason of this devotion to the Saints at that time was beyond the comprehension of the majority of white Bahians. They did not know that to the Nago-Yoruba these names of the Catholic Saints represented those of their principal Orisa, by a phenomenon of syncretism, and that they stood for Oya, Osoosi, the Ibeji, Sango, Ogun, Omolu, Obaluaye, Nana Buruku, Yemoja, Osun and Obatala respectively. (Verger 1977: 222–4)

> Elaborate rituals and offerings, belief in magic and divinations, ancestor worship, votive offerings and sacrifices, and the adjuration of gods to deal with real world problems – all fundamental to African religious structure – found their ready parallels within Catholicism. (Voeks 1997)

This makes sense, because, as both authors propose, the enslavers and plantation owners in both Cuba and Brazil came largely from the Iberian Peninsula, with the Catholicism of the Middle Ages, characterized by rituals and saints, homologous to those identifiable with *òrìṣà* of the Yorùbá tradition. Furthermore, it appears that the enslavers and plantation owners from the Iberian Peninsula, during the material historical period, escaped the intellectual theodicy that motivated both John Milton (*Paradise Lost*, 1667) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (*Faust: Part I* 1992 [1808]). The former introduced Lucifer, the latter Mephistopheles, each as the embodiment of evil. Later enslavers, immigrant property owners in the Americas and missionaries from Protestant Western Europe carried these embodiments of evil in their heads as templates for and measures of elements of the African tradition to promote their goal of liquidating the indigenous faith traditions. Thus, the immigrant property owners and enslavers in the Americas and proselytizing missionaries on the 'Slave Coast' succeeded in voiding the indigenous concepts of their native meaning and alienated unwary bearers of tradition from that tradition.

The Yorùbá cosmos and world view revisited

Figure 3 illustrates the more familiar profile of the cosmos in Yorùbá thought. However, the now well-known Yorùbá world view succinctly described by Wọle Ṣoyinka (1976) allows us to propose a cosmos with three non-linear realms as

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the above-quoted *ese Ifá* privileges the significant relationship between Ifá, Islam, and Yorùbá religion as equals and coterminous while Christianity is portrayed in the context of its missionary zeal and its regular attacks on indigenous religion, which is seen as damaging to Ifá. One is not therefore surprised that Ifá orature makes copious references to historical, cultural, religious, and ritualistic events and practices in Islam. Can we assume that Ifá and Islam have similar cosmologies?

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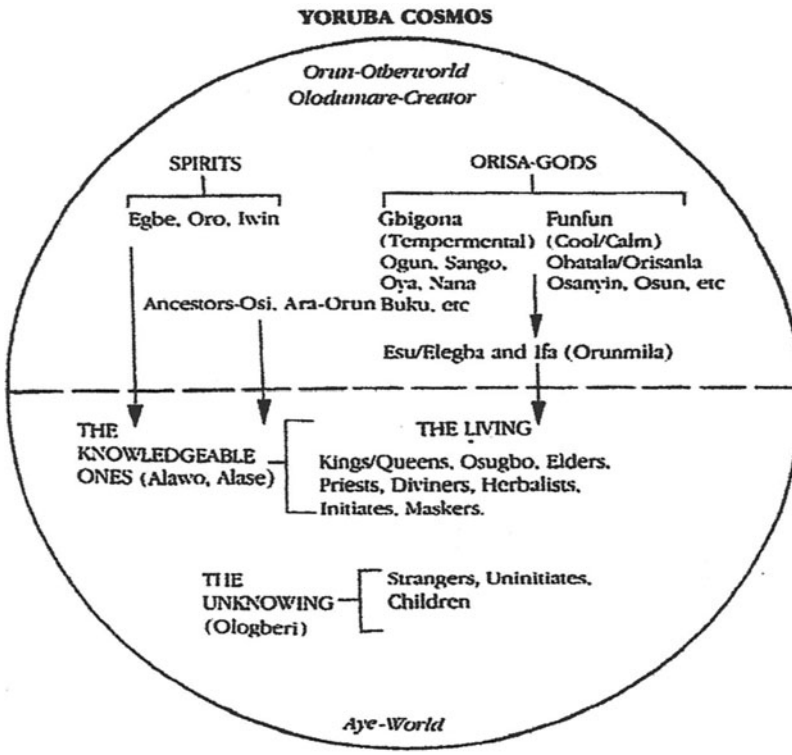


FIGURE 3 'Yoruba cosmos'. Source: Drewal *et al*. (1989: 14). Published with the permission of Henry Drewal and Rowland Abíọ́dún.

being more consonant with the Yorùbá conception of the cosmos. The three conceptual non-linear realms are: ***ọ̀run***, the metaphysical realm populated by *òrìṣà*, spirits and the unborn, all of whom are thought of not in terms of corporeal manifestation; ***ayé***, the realm of phenomena, of living things, corporeal consciousness and perception; and ***ilẹ̀***, the earth, the nurturer and realm for the departed who were once corporeal but are not yet subject to apotheosis. As Ṣoyinka puts it:

> *Past*, *present* and *future* being so pertinently conceived and woven into the Yoruba worldview, the element of eternity which is the gods' prerogative does not have the same quality of remoteness or exclusiveness which it has in Christian or Buddhist culture. The belief of the Yoruba in the contemporaneous existence within his daily experience of these aspects of time has long been recognized but again misinterpreted. It is no abstraction. (Ṣoyinka 1976, emphasis added)

In spite of their conceptual differences, however, both propositions suggest that no realm is hermetically sealed off from the others. It appears to be the case that, while the 'element of eternity' is the prerogative of the *òrìṣà*, who are not subject to restraints of time and space, only unembodied beings, including the dead, have the possibility of acceding to the realm of the *òrìṣà*. Nevertheless, earth dwellers may hold commerce with the realms of both the

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òrìṣà and the departed, *arán-ilẹ̀*, 'people of the earth', or *òkú ọ̀run*, 'the dead in heaven'. This commerce is mediated by Ọ̀rúnmìlà, the custodian of the exhaustive account and information about the essence of all objects of consciousness, and of thought. The account and information are accessible through Ifá, the enormous literary corpus of the Odù (*pàtàkìn* in Cuba or *Caminhos de Odù* in Brazil) that serves as a storehouse for Ọ̀rúnmìlà. The details of the process of human access to the storehouse of Ọ̀rúnmìlà are well documented and need not detain us here (see Abímbọ́lá 1975; 1976; Bascom 1980; 1991 [1969]; Amherd 2010, among others).

Of course, Ọ̀rúnmìlà does not perform his responsibility of mediation alone; he relies on the executive authority of his constant companion, Èṣù (Ẹlẹ́gbára; Ẹlẹ́gbá; Legba). Èṣù alone is privy to the compendium of information in the storehouse of Ọ̀rúnmìlà. Nothing, therefore, is lost on Èṣù with respect to the situation-specific information, pronouncements, injunctions, directives, advice and prescriptions proffered by Ifá through the Odù. Èṣù ensures that the spirit and letter of the directive through the Odù to the individual are met. In performing this duty, Èṣù is above all the arbiter par excellence. He is no respecter of persons, human or *òrìṣà*, including even Ọ̀rúnmìlà. It is important to emphasize again that Èṣù is privy to the totality of information in the custody of Ọ̀rúnmìlà.

Ọ̀rúnmìlà has no representational image (Abíọ́dún 1975). The only sculptural objects identified with this *òrìṣà* include *Ọpọ́n*, 'divinatory tray'; *ìrọ́kẹ́*, 'divinatory tapper, with clapper', for invoking Ọ̀rúnmìlà; *Àgẹ̀rẹ̀ Ifá*, 'a carved container with a lid that holds the *ikin*, the sacred palm nuts'; *Ọ̀pá Ọ̀rẹ̀rẹ̀*, 'an iron staff usually prescribed by the babaláwo', the master in the mystery to which only Ifá provides access, or diviner (Abíọ́dún 1975).

Èṣù, on the other hand, has a plethora of sculptural and visual representations, varying from simple laterite or clay mounds to full statues, usually placed at symbolically liminal points of access. Èṣù's face critically surmounts *Ọpọ́n*, the Ifá divinatory tray, as if to keep watchful eyes on the mediation facilitated by the diviner, but more appropriately representing the knowing and watchful eyes of Èṣù on the realm of phenomena represented by the face and centre of the *Ọpọ́n*, of which the four compass points represent the four corners of the universe.

Èṣù, too, like Ọ̀rúnmìlà, has a dedicated medium for access, a corpus in language through which the custodian of the mystery particular to him also accesses him. Èṣù's medium of communication with humans is *Ẹẹ́rìndílógún*, 'Sixteen Cowries', after which William Bascom (1980) named his book. The corpus of *Ẹẹ́rìndílógún* is organized into Odù, which are homologous to but more finite than those of Ifá. As if to underscore the robust continued presence of Èṣù in the Americas, *Ẹẹ́rìndílógún* is the sole means of accessing the *òrìṣà*, at least in both Cuba and Brazil. This suggests strongly that although Èṣù is the closest to Ọ̀rúnmìlà and his indispensable companion, Èṣù maintains his independence in this relationship.

We will revisit presently the critical players, along with Èṣù, and the concepts that have upheld the Yorùbá intellectual system for millennia, and have sustained the Yorùbá tradition as is reflected in the survival struggle of the African tradition in the Americas. We will isolate concepts and values from which the Yorùbá culture-bearers in the homeland, remarkably enough, have allowed themselves to be alienated, but which, if re-embraced, can serve us all creditably in re-envisioning the future.

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Representations of Èṣù in the Yorùbá tradition

Views about and re-conceptualizations of Èṣù in particular in both secular literature and faith-related published materials are vast; indeed, so vast that it challenges our sanity, within the scope of this article, to entertain the notion of redirecting minds already inured to them. The challenge is daunting because purveyors of these views include disciplined intellectual Yorùbá culture-bearers, even those who have powerfully and validly adopted literal but glaringly pernicious misrepresentations of the *òrìṣà*, as they have the Yorùbá tradition that provides their fundamental essence. The views called into question in this article fall into two categories: first, those that persist in identifying Èṣù with Satan, the Devil and/or Iblis of the Abrahamic faith traditions – namely Christianity and Islam. I hasten to add that views of this sort are largely absent or are severely attenuated in the *òrìṣà* traditions of Santería (Cuba/Puerto Rico), Vodou (Haiti) and Candomblé (Brazil). This category of contestable views has become increasingly challenged and weakened by systematic arguments advanced to address them by scholars such as Ayodele Ogundipe (1978) and Wọle Ṣoyinka in many well-known publications and public addresses, many of which find clear summaries in *Of Africa* (Ṣoyinka 2012).[17]

The second category of contestable views and re-conceptualizations often goes something like the following, found in Pereira, who, in valorizing August Wilson's remarkable use of myth in the African tradition, says of his source:

> Wilson was in this tradition. Devoid of their mythological dimensions, his characters, Levee, Troy, and Boy Willie, in their separate plays, *are merely destructive forces* at odds with their world instead of agents of change challenging the status quo and reordering their universe. Within the hill context of their cultural ancestry, they are the warrior spirit reincarnations of self-empowered *trickster deities*, figures which recur in myths from the *Yoruban Eshu* to the Hindu Krishna, from Bamapana the Australian Aborigine, Prometheus in ancient Greece and Sun Wukong in Chinese lore, to *Reynard* the French fox, *Coyote* the Native American, Maui in Hawaii, Susanowo in Japan, Loki the Norse god and even *Jacob* of the Old Testament. (Pereira in Bigsby 2007, emphasis added)[18]

Ayodele Ogundipe (1978) goes further than any other scholar we have encountered to put beyond argument the impeccable standing of Èṣù in the comity of the other *òrìṣà* and as a plausible anchor for individual accountability and societal rectitude, particularly in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, as if reducing Ogundipe's study to naught, there continues to be a spate of contestable tenets and re-conceptualizations that abuse Èṣù and the Yorùbá tradition. Perhaps Ogundipe herself retains some of the responsibility for this, for not going far enough and for capitulating to Bọlaji Idowu (1962) when she concludes by demurring to her informants, agreeing, in the tradition of thoroughgoing anthropologists, that 'Esu is a tempter, not Trickster, therefore, they [her informants] always explain why Esu causes dissension'. Thus, she allows herself to conclude with the apocryphal story of two friends whose dissension is used to exemplify Èṣù's duplicitous ways:

[17]See also studies in Olupọna and Rey (2008) and other publications by many of the contributors to that volume.

[18]Elam (2006: 176 *passim*), referencing Thompson (1984: 5–9), echoes Pereira in emphatically referring to Èṣù as 'a trickster figure, a mischievous spirit that plays jokes on both gods and humans'.

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> [Èṣù's] primary reasons for trying his victims include punishment for boastfulness or self-conceit and for defying the cardinal principle that life, with all its certainties, goes hand in hand with the unpredictability of chance and change. So for the two friends to boast about their friendship is to commit the sin of self-conceit. For two friends to say their friendship will endure forever was to be presumptuous about tomorrow, and to deny the unpredictability of life; therefore they committed an affront against Esu, the personification of flux and mutability. The *two friends who in their friendship overlooked the blessing of God through Esu and sacrifice asked for their troubles.* (Ogundipe 1978: 198)[19]

Ogundipe believes that she also found evidence in her extensive fieldwork to 'demonstrate that the essence of the deity Esu as Enforcer, *the embodiment of chance*, and father of sacrifice, is borne out by the folklore' (1978: 235, emphasis added). She adds:

> Nevertheless, Esu myths go beyond simple storytelling to depict a natural and social order in which fate and destiny are counterbalanced by chance and uncertainty, where moral evil is punished, and where observance of religious order is demanded. (Ogundipe 1978: 235)

> Esu provides enormous imaginative conceptual implications as deity because he is *the messenger of the gods*, the mediator *between God* [*sic*] and man, between order and chaos, *sin and punishment*, life and death, *fate and accident*, certainty and uncertainty. It is no wonder, then, that Esu in myth knows no master, that he is male and female, that he is tall and short, kind and cruel, an elderly deity of youth who lives at the crossroads. (Ogundipe 1978: 236–7, emphasis added)

As emphatically as Ogundipe, Wọle Ṣoyinka makes an unassailable case against the demonization of Èṣù by the proselytizers of the Abrahamic faiths, particularly those in the Yorùbá homeland. But he then adds:

> This was quite convenient, since Esu is the most ubiquitous of all the deities, *being their messenger*, and a complex yet '*mischievous*' one to boot. He sits at the crossroads and confuses the wisest of mortals and gods … Esu, however, is anything but evil – the notion is as absurd as to deem a high-spirited child a product of the devil. *This deity represents the random, unpredictable factor in both divine and temporal affairs.* Esu is the dialectician of reality, a cautionary spirit who teaches that reality has more facets than one. *Trust not appearances* – that is the lesson of Esu, a lesson often imparted the hard way. (Ṣoyinka 2012: 146, emphasis added)

Unlike Ogundipe and Ṣoyinka, other scholars have not redeemed themselves but give comfort to more contestable views about Èṣù and/or use Èṣù as a basis for building dubious theoretical scaffolding for poetics on tenuous premises.

It is little comfort that Wándé Abímbọ́lá (1976) and other excellent studies offer a source on which many scholars, at home and abroad, have based their representations of Èṣù. Most scholars, nevertheless, overlook the crucial positive presentation of this *òrìṣà* found in much of the non-interpretive work Abímbọ́lá has mediated as a boon to scholars of the Yorùbá tradition. More often than not, users of such work seize only on, for example, statements such as the following

[19]The term 'trying' in this context is a *double entendre*. One sense of the usage connotes putting to the test; the other putting them on the 'rack'.

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in which Abímbọ́lá apparently allows himself to be misled by published studies produced by non-culture-bearers. He writes:

> Standing between the evil powers and the good powers is the *mischievous* figure of *Èṣù* (*the Yoruba trickster god*) who is more or less a neutral force in the conflict between the good supernatural powers and the evil ones. Although *Èṣù* is believed to belong to the zone of the gods, he does not always favor his fellow gods. Indeed, *Èṣù* is prepared at any time to favor any human being or supernatural power *according to his own whims and caprices* influenced by whether or not the person or power concerned has performed the prescribed sacrifices. (Abímbọ́lá 1976: 152)

The attributive phrases 'the mischievous figure of Èṣù (the Yoruba trickster god)' and 'according to his own whims and caprices' do not find any justification anywhere in Ifá corpus, to the best of my knowledge, not even in the compendium of Abímbọ́lá's otherwise careful analytical studies.

While Bascom quite correctly chastises Christians and Muslims for misappropriating Èṣù, his presentation of the *òrìṣà* as a mischievous trickster is ominously misplaced as well. He writes:

> Eshu (Eṣu, Eṣu Bara, Ẹlẹgbara, Ẹlẹgba) is the youngest and cleverest of the deities. He is *the divine messenger* (iranṣe), and one of his roles is to deliver the sacrifices he receives to Ọlọrun. Understandably, the diviners consider his roles important. He is also a *trickster, the divine counterpart of Tortoise in Yoruba folktales, who not only delights in trouble-making but also serves Ọlọrun and the other deities by causing trouble for human beings who offend or neglect them. He is notorious for starting fights ... killing people by toppling walls and trees on them, and causing calamities to deities and humans alike; but his role in delivering sacrifices to God ... is hardly consistent with his identification with Satan by Christians and Muslims, which can only be understood as the result of the failure to find the equivalent of the Devil in Yoruba belief.* (Bascom 1991 [1969]: 105, emphasis added)

Nor does Bascom relent in his characterization of Èṣù in his work *Sixteen Cowries*, which pertinently focuses on the divinatory system identified with Èṣù, which also happens to be the one system of prognostication mostly practised in both Cuba and Brazil. Bascom writes:

> Eshu (Èṣù) is the divine messenger who delivers the sacrifices offered at his shrine, as prescribed by diviners, to Ọlọrun. He is also the divine trickster who not only delights in trouble-making, but also serves the other deities by causing trouble for human beings who offend or neglect them. He is called 'Eshu is not good' (Èṣù, Ọdàrà; …), and he is also known as Ẹlẹgba … and Júoríwà. (Bascom 1980, emphasis added)

It must be pointed out that the figure of Èṣù as trickster and sinister messenger does not ring true in the world of *Ẹẹ̀rìndílógún*/*Dilogún* (Sixteen Cowries), the subject of Bascom's authoritative study. Suffice it to note here the following: first, any systematic recognition of Ọlọ́run as a demanding 'prime mover' appears to be a doubtful component of the Yorùbá thought system. Second, Èṣù as 'the divine trickster who not only delights in trouble-making, but also serves the other deities by causing trouble for human beings who offend or neglect them' is inconsistent with his role in the system as arbiter and custodian of the *primordial àṣẹ*. Finally, Bascom's reading '"Eshu is not good" (Èṣù, Ọdàrà)' is inconsistent with even his own stricture against the identification of Èṣù 'with Satan by Christians and Muslims, which can

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only be understood as the result of their failure to find the equivalent of the Devil in Yoruba belief'. A more plausible reading suggests that the phrase '*Èṣù Ẹlégbára*' more plausibly derives from '*Èṣù Onígba-àrà*' (Èṣù capable of countless (literally *igb* or 200) wonders). Compare this to the structurally homologous attributive phrase '*Èṣù Ẹlégbèrún Ọ̀gọ̀*' (Èṣù owner/holder of a thousand (*ẹgbèrún*) cudgels), referring figuratively to the uncountable ways in which Èṣù is capable of dealing with individuals who fail his test of probity and accountability.

Following a similar internal insight into language, the term *ọ̀dàrà* is more plausibly relatable to the lexical de-predicative nominal *ọ̀-darà* – 'one who works wonders'. Compare this with *ọ̀-daràn*, 'one who commits [criminal] deeds'; *ọ̀dàlẹ̀* (*ọ̀-dà-ilẹ̀*), 'one who overturns earth' / 'one who betrays trust'; *ò-jòwú*, 'one who covets and is prone to jealousy', from the predicate *jowú* or 'express or engage in jealousy'; and *ọ̀-falè*, a promiscuous male, from the predicate *fálè* (<*fẹ́ àlè*), 'make love to *àlè,* a person to whom one is not married'.

Henry Louis Gates Jr, in his powerful and seminal work *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), proposes a profound hermeneutics for African and African-American poetics. However, he unnecessarily falls victim to the usual infelicitous characterization of Èṣù early in his otherwise important work. He writes, rather deceptively, as if to attribute the view he presents to other authorities:

> Scholars have studied these figures of Esu, and each has found one or two characteristics of this mutable figure upon which to dwell, true to the nature of *the trickster.* A partial list of these qualities might include individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture. But it is a mistake to focus on one of these qualities as predominant. (Gates 1988: 6, emphasis added)

A charitable judgement of Gates' characterization of Èṣù may take him to task only on how his position undermines the world view that assigns ethical integrity to the *òrìṣà.*

The distinguished scholar of the dramatic arts Femi Euba valiantly seeks to re-originate satire as a literary and dramatic genre in his important work *Archetypes, Imprecators, and Victims of Fate* (1989; see also 2002; 2013); this work was based on a dissertation supervised, not surprisingly, by Gates. An attentive student of satire from the Graeco-Roman classics will also easily impugn Euba's proposal of 'Origins and developments of satire in black drama' for unaccountably mischaracterizing Èṣù. Euba describes satire's prime mover as an Èṣù, a mischievous trickster and near sadist, always ready to do the biddings of any and all modern Archilochus with their wounded honour. Euba proposes a 'trinity' made up of Èṣù, *Orí* and *ìpín* (see below) and suggests an implausible, monstrous conceptual union of this trio with 'Fate' and 'Destiny' of the Graeco-Roman tradition. In doing so, Euba gives only a nod to the following felicitous observation by Melville J. Herskovits, a careful and attentive student of Dahomey, a Yorùbá cognate culture in which Èṣù also looms large. Herskovits writes about his observed veneration of *Fá* (Ifá) and *Légba* (Èṣù), held to work in communion in the pantheon of Dahomey's primordial divinities:

> In all probability, this deity was derived together with Fá cult from the Yoruba, among whom he takes the name Elegba, Elegbara, or Eshu. The usual translation of the name of this god, found above all in missionary literature, is 'the Devil,' and, in consequence, the native when asked by a European for an explanation of the nature of this deity contents

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> himself with this characterization. Yet enough has been described of Dahomean religion to make it obvious that a concept such as that of the Devil of Christian theology, who represents the forces of evil in contradistinction to those of good, represented by God, is entirely foreign to Dahomean thought. (Herskovits and Herskovits 1958: 222–3)

Instead of seeing Èṣù as a plausible godhead for satire, the dramatic scourge of the incongruous in human behaviour, Euba announces that he has come to terms '[w]ith Esu not only as a god of fate, master of peripeteia, ironist, and satirist, but also, in his New World manifestations, as the *fateful/fatal* satiric complex and concept in black drama' (Euba 2002: 167, emphasis added).

He wants us to believe that in Brazil and Cuba in particular:

> The strong retention has been effected in the first place through the adaptive (and adoptive) *dissembling* of the slaves; a *dissembling* that points back culturally to the *dissembling qualities of the trickster god, Esu-Legba.* (Euba 2002: 170, emphasis added)[20]

The sardonic sadism of Euba's 'trickster god, Esu-Legba' is assuaged by the enslavement and expatriation of Africans to the Americas, because:

> Slavery, the 'racial burden' that needs to be expiated, was the fate imposed on the African by Esu through exploitative aspirations of the white slavers. As Africans did not seem to deserve this, it was a catastrophic practical joke and inscrutable action of Fate. (Euba 2002: 169)[21]

Impugning contestable representations of Èṣù

I argue, first, that Èṣù is by no means a sinister *òrìṣà*, however one may seek to understand the word 'sinister'. Second, Èṣù does not belong in the comity of tricksters and trolls, whether human or non-human.

First argument from Yorùbá names and naming

By tradition, names and naming in the Yorùbá language have an epistemic foundation.[22] The lexical item *orúkọ*, which is not entirely captured by the gloss 'name' in the English language, expresses the constitutive essence of the Yorùbá person,[23]

[20]By 'retention', Euba means the retention in both Candomblé and Santería of the Yorùbá tradition complete with singular reverence for Èṣù, untainted by the proselytizing predilections of the 'Abrahamic' faiths manifested in West Africa after the middle of the nineteenth century.

[21]The presentation here of Femi Euba on Èṣù is by no means a self-evident sympathetic acknowledgement of his generosity in 'gifting' to me a copy of Iyunolu Osagie's masterful exposition *African Modernity and the Philosophy of Culture in the Works of Femi Euba* (2017). I wished that Osagie's erudite study would salvage Euba's haunting attempt to motivate satire, the art's incomparable (as hinted above) scourge of the incongruous in human behaviour, with an agent totally alien to the Yorùbá world view, a dissembling trickster god of destiny, a fateful/fatal relentless pursuer of humans, whom, among all sentient beings, the Yorùbá lore endows with free will.

[22]This acknowledges the characteristic Yorùbá incorporative disposition in contact with other peoples and traditions. Thus, one now encounters names borne by Yorùbá persons that are scandalously devoid of any empirical reference.

[23]On *orúkọ* and *oríkì*, see Oyèláràn in Oyèláràn and Adéwọ́lé (2007).

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people and culture. *Orúkọ* is not given *in vacuo* or by happenstance. This is captured by the expression '*Èyìnkùlé là á wò, ká tó ò sọ ọmọ lórúkọ*' (We must look into all the surrounding circumstances before assigning a child a name). This is because, once named, the *orúkọ* becomes the rein for controlling the bearer: '*Orúkọ ọmọ ni ìjánu ọmọ*' (A child's name is the rein for 'controlling' the bearer). Also, a person's *orúkọ* determines the existential lot and comportment of the person: '*Orúkọ máa ń roni*' (A name tells/impels the person).[24]

This allows us to understand why, in the Yorùbá tradition, a child is named after a particular *òrìṣà* or a propitiatory supernatural agent recognized by the family and for the child at birth. Usually, *orúkọ* encapsulates the hopes and aspirations for and the potential of the child; it references events antecedent to the birth of the child for which the family recognizes a particular propitiatory agent. Sometimes *orúkọ* is a charm to ward off present untoward events or to guard against redoubtable access by sinister forces, *Ajogun*, such as death, *ikú*. Such names reflect dire circumstances (see below).

The Yorùbá, in short, assign *orúkọ* based on benevolent forces and to memorialize and encapsulate, for a child's benefit, significant existential conditions of the child and of the family at the time of the child's birth. As Rogelio Martínez Furé (1985) carefully illustrates, the Santería tradition in Cuba embraces this critical significance of *orúkọ* as much as the homeland Yorùbá does. The data that follow from Furé provide supporting evidence.

*Examples of Yorùbá proper nouns (*orúkọ*) in Cuba*[25]
Relating to Elegba:

> *Eshu alai bodé, Eshu bi, Eshu dina, Eshu lari, Eshu laniwé, Eshu migbá, Oba gbe sí, Omó ako jú,* [*Eshu*] *Osiká,* [*Eshu*] *Towá*

Compare with other *òrìṣà* (underlined) that appear as agency in naming:[26]

Ogún: *Osha niwe*	*Ọrìṣà Ọgún* vindicates
Shango: *Oba dina*	*King* (*Ṣàngó*) block access to evil
Obatala: *Adé bi, Alá bu mi*	*Ọbàtálá* birth, give (me)
Oshún: *Olóshun de, Oshun funké*	Person of *Ọ̀ṣun* comes; *Ọ̀ṣun* gives me to cherish
Oya: *Oyá lesí, Oyá fu mi te, Tokí*	*Ọya* has answer; *Ọya* gives (to) me; *Ọya* deserves reverence

If *àṣẹ* is the primordial life force for effective motion of any sort, whether transitive, intransitive, reflexive or ergative, then *orúkọ* serves as the key that unlocks the *àṣẹ* that inheres in the entity or being whose *orúkọ* is asserted, by virtue of the enabling agent (*òrìṣà* or other).[27]

[24]In the double sense of 'announcing' to others who a person is, and modelling oneself to the person.
[25]Taken from Furé (1985: 37).
[26]Taken from Furé (1985), with the name gloss provided by the author.
[27]See Furé (1985) for a copious illustration of this point.

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Paradigmatic occurrences of names

Turning to the Yorùbá homeland, we begin with the appellation *Dáraléṣù* of the performer Èṣù family in Ọyọ́. The name invites a paradigmatic list of names, as does that of Ọláọmọ's wife *Èṣúgúnwà* (see below).

Dáraléṣù	Comely, fitting, appropriate in relation to Èṣù
Dáraníjọ	Desirable in/for association/community
Dáramọ́lá	Desirable, associated with *ọlá* (integrity/reverence)
(A)dáralẹgbẹ́	Desirable as companion/peer
Èṣúgúnwà	Èṣù rectifies/renders orderly existence
(I)fágúnwà	Ifá rectifies/renders orderly existence
Fámúwàgun	Ifá makes existence orderly/perfect
Adémóyègún	*Adé* (crown) makes ruling/title orderly
Ọlámóyègún	Integrity/reverence gives governance or the incumbent aura of propriety
Èṣùgbàyíbí[28]	Èṣù causes this to be born
Ọ***gúnbíyìí***	*Ọgún* gives birth to this
Ọ̀ṣunbíyìí	*Ọ̀ṣun* gives birth to this
Ọlábíyìí	*Ọlá* gives birth to this
Adébíyìí	*Adé* gives birth to this

Adeboye Babalọla and Olugboyega Alaba (2003) provide the following dictionary entry as the stem for personal names relating to Èṣù:

> Esu: Èṣù: Àgékúrú orúkọ b.a. Eṣubankẹ: Abridgement of name e.g. Eṣubankẹ

Fifty-three entries for such names then follow (Babalọla and Alaba 2003: 286–8), including those with the enabling metaphysical agents in Table 1. In that table, the *òrìṣà* are among the benevolent 'supernatural powers' whom Wándé Abímbọ́lá (1976: 151) rank among benevolent powers who 'aid Man in his daily life'. He, however, unaccountably categorizes Èṣù as more or less a neutral force in the conflict between the good supernatural forces and the evil ones.

[28]The name of a distinguished figure in the history of the Yorùbá:

> In northern Ekiti, a fairly formidable power emerged in the person of Esugbayibi, founder of a new kingdom named Aiyede. Esugbayibi was born in the small town of Iye in far northern Ekiti. As a young man, he won renown as an intrepid fighter against the Nape and then the Ilorin invaders of his homeland. (Akintoye 2010: 303)

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TABLE 1
Non-human agency in Yorùbá personal names

Òrìṣà		Non-Òrìṣà	
Òrìṣà name	*Àṣẹ expression*	*Agency name*	*Social/ritual expression*
Eégún	Male ancestors	Ibí	Commonalty of the birth essence
Ẹgbẹ́	Ancestors/companion spirits	Ikú	Essence of finality; 'death'
Èṣù	Custodian of àṣẹ	Ònà	Òrìṣà of the arts
Ewé/Òsan-ìn	Òrìṣà of Healing Herbs	Orò	Customs, rituals
Fá	(I)fá	Owó	Currency; material base of
Ifá	Òrìṣà of Information		
Iwin/Òbàtálá/ Ṣa/Ẹfun	Òrìṣà of Creation		
Odù	Compendia of Ifá corpus – metonymically Ifá		
Ògún*	Òrìṣà of the Arts		
Omi*	Waters		
Ọṣó/Ṣó	Avatar of Òrìṣà of Creation		
Òdẹ	Hunter Òrìṣà		
Òṣun*	Òrìṣà of Fertility and Creativity/River Òṣun		
Òya*	Òrìṣà of Fury and Storm/ River Òya		
Ṣàngó*	Òrìṣà of Energy		

Source: Babalọla and Alaba (2003). *See also Furé (1985).

Ajogun:[29] *supernatural forces evil in essence, restricted as agency or absent in naming*

The evil connotation of the *Ajogun* as militantly inimical to wholesome existence proscribes their serving as an agency or purveyor of desirable *àṣẹ* for personal names. It is remarkable that *Ikú* is not entirely proscribed; rather, as an inevitable concomitant of motion and, therefore, of existence, the Yorùbá seek to risk, control and mark it in naming with the objective of invoking and checkmating it. We know of no other enabling agent for naming that is similarly restricted as *Ikú.*

[29]Abímbọ́lá (1976: 151f.). The core of *orúkọ* is the 'predicate', since *orúkọ* is almost invariably a sentence in structure. '*(I)kú*', on the other hand, connotes 'finality' and/or 'closure' of essence or motion of any sort. It negates predication or process. As expected, predicates that collocate with '*(I)kú*' to derive personal names invariably either: (1) neutralize the negative connotation of 'finality'; or (2) project a sense of undesirable deprivation inflicted by inevitable 'finality'. Examples are as follows: (1) *(I)kú-kọ̀-yìí* – *Ikú* has rejected this, and *Ikú-fèyí-jì-mi* – *Ikú* has spared this as a favour to me; and (2) *Ikú-bọ́lá-jẹ́* – *Ikú* 'has vitiated/ruined our noble family' (Babalọla and Alaba 2003: 398), *Ikú-kò-mọ-ẹni-kan* – *Ikú* 'is no respecter of persons' (*ibid.*: 398) and *Ikùpolúwùsì* – death stops/takes away one who prospers (our) existential conditions.

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TABLE 2
Ajogun types and manifestations

Ajogun type	Manifestation of Ajogun
Àrùn	Disease; affliction
Èṣe	Pain/suffering inflicted by sentient beings
Ẹgbà	Palsy; neurological dysfunction
Ikú	Finality; the primordial power that may effect finality
Òfò	Loss; ruin

The data above on *orúkọ*, 'names and naming in Yorùbá', emphasize that the people enlist Èṣù among the exclusive category of benevolent forces and agencies with which they identify positively when assigning names that control and may be deployed to control an individual's person and lot in life. The Yorùbá include *Ikú*, 'Death', in naming only to mark events that display its deleterious power and therefore to ward it off.

Èṣù is neither a dissembler nor a trickster

The second argument against contestable representations of Èṣù considers the set of beings and entities that traditions count as 'tricksters'. Any defining feature or features of the trickster ought to apply empirically to traditions all over the world, allowing for particularities, but without confusing different types. To begin with, for an agent to be considered a 'trickster', it must be capable of initiating transactional motion in itself and in other entities. Furthermore, it must be capable of intentionality. We recognize that, in folklore, traditions often endow agencies intended to serve as tricksters with both of these attributes, among others.[30] But in order to pass for a trickster, additional psychosocial conditions must be fulfilled.

I wish to borrow first from Susan Niditch's *Underdogs and Tricksters* (1987) and see a trickster as 'a subtype of underdogs' who brings about a change in status via trickery; and who typically progresses from low to higher status, making 'their way with magical or human helpers or through their own wisdom or savvy'. By implication, a trickster is therefore a 'deceiver, creator, acculturator, unmasked liar, and ethically ambiguous survivor' (*ibid*.: 45). Niditch sketches a trickster hero's evolving morphology as made up of 'low status, deception planned to improve conditions, improved status; deception uncovered; reduction of status or survival' (*ibid*.: 46). 'The trickster morphology has an antiestablishment quality at the very sources of its being … Success is achieved in an irregular, roundabout way, by deception, a trick' (*ibid*.: 49).

Malcom Gladwell uses the story of David and Goliath to characterize ingeniously the trickster, one who meets Niditch's prescription. Gladwell writes:

> At the center of many of the world's oppressed cultures stands the figure of the 'trickster hero.' In legend and song, he appears in the form of a seemingly innocuous animal that

[30]See Owomoyela (1997) for the trickster in Yorùbá folktales.

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> triumphs over others much larger than himself through cunning and guile. (Gladwell 2013: 170)

Gladwell's trickster enjoys 'the unexpected freedom that comes from having nothing to lose. The trickster gets to break the rules' (Gladwell 2013: 173).

If we comb through all recorded Yorùbá folktales, no trickster in the Yorùbá tradition is an *òrìṣà*; rather, the tortoise, *ìjàpá* or *alábahun*, has a 'morphology' that tallies with that proposed by Niditch and Gladwell – a seemingly innocuous underdog who enjoys the freedom to break rules and conventions, and triumphs under impossible circumstances through trickery, cunning and guile.

None of the 'trickster attributes' described above fit the *òrìṣà* Èṣù of the Yorùbá pantheon. We must, therefore, look into the Yorùbá thought system in order to identify the requisite elements that Èṣù embodies and sustains in all circumstances, and that undergird probity and ethical rectitude.

Yorùbá thought system for ethical rehabilitation

The following, then, outlines a reconsideration of the critical elements of the Yorùbá thought system, and I propose that these must have impelled enslaved Yorùbá culture-bearers in the Americas to engage in what historians refer to as 'slave risings'. The self-determination that inspired these risings for self-liberation produced autonomous enclaves such as the Palmares (Brazil) and Maroon communities (the Caribbean). It may be a stretch, yet not farfetched, to attribute even slave risings in North America, such as the Stono Rebellion and the Nate Turner Rising, to the kind of consciousness that the elements of the Yorùbá thought system identified below collectively allow us to identify with Èṣù. I describe these elements in turn, beginning with the foundational concept of *àṣẹ*.

Àṣẹ

In *àṣẹ*, the Yorùbá conceive the 'essential' and 'motive' force that inheres in all objects of consciousness: material; non-material; physical and metaphysical; all objects of perception and of thought, including those we may apprehend by means of any and all of the senses.

This conception of *àṣẹ* resonates cross-culturally and surprisingly with the English poet William Wordsworth's musing on Tintern Abbey:[31]

> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,

[31]Taken from 'Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey' <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45527/lines-composed-a-few-miles-above-tintern-abbey-on-revisiting-the-banks-of-the-wye-during-a-tour-july-13-1798>, accessed 2 November 2019.

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And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things …

As has been noted in this article, Èṣù is the custodian of the primordial *àṣẹ* of the Yorùbá world view, and dispenses his authority as impartial arbiter under strict conditions specified below.

Ènìyàn*: being human*

The Yorùbá conceive of the human being, *ènìyàn*, as a being distinguished by a unique *àṣẹ*, endowed with the *Mind* that 'houses' the faculty of reason and serves as the seat of consciousness. The handmaiden of the Mind in humans is articulate language, *èdè*, which is not clearly isolable in any other sentient being. The *òrìṣà* are anthropomorphic sentient beings. They, too, however, are endowed, metaphysically and figuratively, with attributes of the Mind, reason and *èdè*.[32]

Some aspects of the Yorùbá conception of the attributes of *ènìyàn* resonate with Goethe's characterization of Man, who is unique because he is endowed with the Mind. In the 'Prologue' to *Faust*, we encounter the following cynical retort about Man to The Lord by Mephistopheles, Goethe's embodiment of evil.

The small god of the world will never change his ways
And is as whimsical – as on the first of days.
His life might be a bit more fun,
Had you not given him *that spark of heaven's sun*;
He calls it reason and employs it resolute
To be more brutish that is any brute. (Goethe 1992 [1808], emphasis added)

Òrìṣà[33]

Each *òrìṣà* of the Yorùbá thought system is a metaphysical sentient being who embodies a discrete and definable set of primordial principles of *àṣẹ*. Within the limits of his/her *àṣẹ*, each *òrìṣà* may have an effective impact on any and all objects of consciousness, including other *òrìṣà*.

Since the *àṣẹ* attributable to a particular *òrìṣà* is discrete and definable, the scope of 'influence' – not to mention the 'power' or 'authority' of each *òrìṣà* – is

[32]See Oyèláràn (1988), according to which, in the Yorùbá world view, language, *èdè*, is the handmaiden of Ọ̀rúnmìlà at the reception of the compendium of information about all things, and serves as Ọ̀rúnmìlà's storehouse for information. As such, it seems plausible to suggest that Èṣù has unfettered access to that storehouse.

[33]As surmised by Akintoye (2010: 31f.), the Supreme Being of the Yorùbá pantheon was, in the tenth century AD or earlier:

> first given the name Orisa – roughly meaning 'the source from which all things emanated.' Later, to his name was added Olorun (king of heaven) and Oluwa (king over all).

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delimitable, although it may overlap with that of other *òrìṣà*, like circles in a Venn diagram. This makes it possible for different devotees to approach different *òrìṣà* as supplicants for the same outcome.

Òrìṣà are not normally bound by time or space; indeed, they may traverse time and/or space at will, unlike other entities and sentient beings with physical bodies. Each *òrìṣà* is also capable of multiple manifestations, in consonance with and reflecting local prevailing existential conditions, but subject to the arbitrative *àṣẹ* of Èṣù, and the guidance and counsel of Ọ̀rúnmìlà.

Ọ̀rúnmìlà

Ọ̀rúnmìlà is the *òrìṣà*, who, alone, is privy to and is the custodian of the exhaustive store of the information that constitutes the essence of all things, all objects of consciousness. It is, perhaps, not unimportant that Ọ̀rúnmìlà has no bone in 'his' body and has a complexion that is black, the union of all colours. Ọ̀rúnmìlà is:

Òdodo ilé ayé, òpìtàn ilẹ̀ Ifẹ̀	Fundamentals of existence, custodian of the founding account of Ifẹ̀ of origin
Ẹni mọjọ́ alaṣìré máa tán	One who knows the day the player on the stage will cease
Ọkùnrin dúdú òkèè Gẹ̀tí	Black Man of Mount Gẹ̀tí
Òdúdú kó o dúrí emèrè	Black, you blacken the head of the spirit child (make the child human)[34]
Ó tún orí ẹni ìn sunwọ̀n ṣe	He set right the *Orí* of one whose is misshapen[35]

Ọ̀rúnmìlà being 'black' allows one to conceptualize him, from the point of view of entropy, as the optimal source of information. Ọ̀rúnmìlà is accessible and communicates through the Odù of Ifá, as described above.

Èṣù in the Yorùbá pantheon

Èṣù has custody of *àṣẹ*, which inheres as 'tributaries' in all entities, material or incorporeal, including elements of thought and language. Èṣù is also the arbiter in the exercise of *àṣẹ* by all sentient beings, including by the *òrìṣà* and spirits. That is why all access to *àṣẹ* goes through Èṣù for efficacy.

As arbiter, Èṣù takes as given the position that all sentient beings are endowed with consciousness and the 'mind'. The mind has, as unique attributes, reason and will, as mentioned above. To all intents and purposes, therefore, Èṣù holds that any exercise of the will by a sentient being must of necessity be based on an exhaustive act of consciousness and reason, the human psychokinetic faculty. By the same token, any disposition of one's will engages one's *àṣẹ*. Accordingly, each sentient

[34]Rowland Abiọdún, in a personal communication, offered another version of this citation for Ọ̀rúnmìlà, which he had personally collected, also from Olóyè Fábùnmi, as '*Òdùdù tí í durí emèrè*' or 'Builder/moulder, you mould the *Orí* of the spirit child' (translation by author).

[35]Taken from Fábùnmi (2007: 25), with translation in brackets added by the author.

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being should exercise their will, based only on impeccable, exhaustive consciousness, and is accountable for all outcomes of that exercise.[36]

In the Yorùbá myths of origin, Èṣù is the constant companion of Ọ̀rúnmìlà. In that role, Èṣù has unmediated access to all information of which Ọ̀rúnmìlà is custodian. That enables Èṣù to have inside knowledge on all tropes and all *òwe*,[37] Ọ̀rúnmìlà's paradigmatic mode of communication. It should be noted that not all *òwe* are epigrammatic. Indeed, more often than not, they are extensive narratives, as in *Patakín* (Cuba) and *Caminhos* (Brazil).

Much remains to be said about how Èṣù arrives at his role as the custodian of *àṣẹ*; how he becomes the constant companion of Ọ̀rúnmìlà; how he facilitates the deployment of *àṣẹ* for the benefit of those who meet his rigorous conditionality; and how he sanctions those who fail to measure up to expectation, particularly with respect to the exertion of consciousness in the exercise of their will. For this article, I have benefited from material made available by careful students of primary sources of Ifá texts.

I assume that all the Odù collectively stand metonymically for Ọ̀rúnmìlà.[38] I follow Rowland Abíọ́dún (2014; Abíọ́dún *et al*. 1994) on that premise and accept that seventeen Odù are present at the beginning of essence. Ọ̀ṣun, the lone female among them, stands for womanhood. All of the sixteen male Odù experience futility in the exercise of their *àṣẹ* until they recognize Ọ̀ṣun as an indispensable peer. They offer to include her in all they do in order to prosper. Ọ̀ṣun decides to maintain her dignity and gives her only offspring, Ọ̀ṣẹ́turá – that is, Èṣù – a male child, to join the comity of the other Odù as the indispensable facilitator of the exercise of *àṣẹ*.

In the *Odù Ọ̀sá Méjì*,[39] Èṣù facilitates, perhaps next to Abíọ́dún's narrative of Ọ̀ṣun's maternity of Èṣù, the most important grounding of the indispensable presence and power of women in human affairs through the instrumentality of Ọ̀rúnmìlà. Ọ̀rúnmìlà, of all the *òrìṣà*, with Èṣù's *àṣẹ*, provides the *Ẹlẹyẹ*, 'womanhood', with the critical cover and security of his own body in their descent to earth.

Bascom (1991 [1969]) also enriches our imagination about empirical ways in which Èṣù facilitates the ways in which humans and all *òrìṣà* who deserve it deploy *àṣẹ* for their benefit. Thus, in *Ogbè Méjì* (10; 154–7)[40] with a *clap of his hands* Èṣù revives the sacrificial rodent that wears around its waist precious beads, and causes the princess, *Ayé* (literally, 'the entire realm of consciousness'), who covets the beads, to chase it. The princess loses all the clothes around her

[36]This suggests a misapprehension or misuse of the apocryphal story of Èṣù donning a cap or garment that is red on one side and black on the other to walk between two friends or among other disputants in order to intentionally cause dissension (Abíọ́dún 2014: 261; Osagie 2017: 49; Vega 2002: 163; Euba 1989).

[37]See Oyèláràn (2015).

[38]Abímbọ́lá (1975: 13) offers us 'Odù, the mythical wife of Ifá' in a union that is, arguably, consummated only in that the term, for all practical purposes, constitutes the unfathomable repository of the mystery of the information system identifiable with Ọ̀rúnmìlà, into which all accomplished exponents of the system (Babaláwo) must be initiated.

[39]See also Abímbọ́lá (1976: 179–206), where he provides a translation, although the Odù is not explicitly identified.

[40]In each paired reference to Èṣù's performative gesture, the first element (here 10) refers to Bascom's verse of the named Odù; the second element (154–7) to the page or pages in Bascom (1991 [1969]).

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waist, exposing her nakedness to Ọ̀rúnmìlà, whom the princess must marry as the first man to see her nakedness.

In *Ogbè Méjì* (11; 158–61), Èṣù bats his eyelashes at Toro, the daughter of Olókùn, of fabled wealth and sources of riches, to make her see in Ọ̀rúnmìlà the most desirable suitor among all *òrìṣà*. In *Ọ̀yẹ̀kú Méjì* (10; 254–7), it is with his wand that Èṣù brings down illness on two friends who ignore their due observances; and, in *Ọ́fún-(Ì)rosùn* (5; 512–15), with his staff of authority, Èṣù causes Ojúro to lose his way in the woods. Only the ensuing community's vicarious atonement and enhanced acuity of consciousness enable Ojúro to find his way back home. This suggests a remarkable tone of Èṣù-inspired ethics: namely, that the individual is never alone and must never lose sight of that fact.

In short, Èṣù depends on the good-faith agency of sentient beings to effect all acts for which he holds *àṣẹ*.

Orí Àtèténíran[41]

Every individual is endowed with an *Orí*, which embodies the fundamental specificities of one's essence. Rowland Abíọ́dún (1981; 2014; Drewal *et al.* 1989) refers to *Orí* as 'inner head', but it also may be conceived as the liminal, symbolic encasement for one's *àṣẹ*; this would be consistent with the perspective of this study. *Orí* receives the existential lot, *ìpín*, for the individual sentient being, and guards it jealously throughout the terrestrial sojourn of the individual. An individual's *Orí* remains accessible to him or her throughout life and to his or her survivors even after 'death'. Ọ̀rúnmìlà is witness to the allocation and reception of *ìpín*, the lot of the individual. That is why Ọ̀rúnmìlà is referred to as *ẹlẹ́rìí-ìpín*, 'witness at allotment of *ìpín*', and why Fábùnmi's (2007) citation of him is appropriate as:

Ẹni mọjọ́ alaṣiré máa tán	One who knows the day the player on the stage will cease

The following celebrates the personal and particularistic nature of *Orí*:

Orí, pẹ̀lẹ́ o	Hail, *Orí*
Àtèténíran	*Strategically prominent and constant from* generation to generation
Atètè-gbe-ni-kòrìṣà	One who prospers a person before any *òrìṣà*
Kò sóòṣà tí í dá ni í gbè	No *òrìṣà* singles one out to prosper
Lẹ́yìn in orí ẹni	Except one's *Orí*[42]

Ìpín

Ìpín refers to a conceptual 'script', the 'musical score' for the unfolding of an individual's existential possibilities. How individuals act or play it out in life depends on the 'paths' they take as functions of how they deploy their will in

[41] See above where *Orí* has been mentioned as Èṣù's pre-eminent primordial peer in the Yorùbá pantheon.

[42] See Abímbọ́lá (1975); translation added by the author.

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the exercise of their inherent *àṣẹ*. This tremendous responsibility is acknowledged in the following:

A kúnlè; a yan èdá	We genuflect as supplicant to choose/receive essence
A dáyé tán	Once we arrive on earth
Ojú ń yán ni	We become dazzled by diverse options[43]

Compare this with Abímbọ́lá (1976: 113):

A kúnlè, a yan èda	We genuflect to receive essence
A dáyé tán	We arrive on earth
Ojú ńkán ni	We become impatient [eyes propel us] in haste.

Since Ọ̀rúnmìlà is witness to the allocation and acceptance of *ìpín*, the individual will benefit in life by seeking guidance from Ọ̀rúnmìlà on every life option.

Furthermore, since no one steps into the same river twice, there can be no end to turning to Ọ̀rúnmìlà to ascertain what plan one's *Orí* holds for one's next step. Again, this explains the injunction:

Bí òni ṣe rí, ọ̀la lè máà rí bẹ́ẹ̀	As today looks, tomorrow may not look so
Ni babaláwo fi í dÍfá a ọ̀ọ̀rún	Reason why Babalawo interrogates Ifá every four days [traditional calendar week]

Èṣù, the arbiter, the assiduous companion of Ọ̀rúnmìlà, holds the individual accountable for the scrupulous observance of the act of consciousness required by each step in the dance of existence, how one plays out one's lot.

The Yorùbá conception of *ìpín* and the injunction that each individual must never tire, but must be constantly aware of the paths it lays before him or her to tread in all matters, at all time, underscores the position that the Yorùbá do *not* accept *ìpín* as immutable.[44] Indeed, three options present themselves to each individual: conserve your *ìpín* by diligently observing relevant directives from your *Orí* through consultation with Ọ̀rúnmìlà; ameliorate your *ìpín* by means of duty of care, industry, attention to all sources of information, keen consciousness and exercise of judiciousness in all circumstances that impinge on your life options at all times; or deprecate your *ìpín* by choosing neither of these two options.

The Yorùbá principle of *Orì* and concept of *ìpín* put every sentient being in the saddle and hand over the reins to him or her. Every sentient being is, therefore, accountable for how they play out the life script accepted on their behalf by *Orí*.

Implications for ethics in the Yorùbá world view

The Graeco-Roman concept of fate, accepted in the Euro-American tradition as 'destiny', is conceptually immutable, as already noted. It undergirds a world view

[43]This is due to 'desire', which is usually alienated from 'reason'.

[44]Unlike the Graeco-Roman fate (see <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/fate>, accessed 2 November 2019).

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that externalizes accountability for all life's vicissitudes and all personal options. To this extent, it suggests a culture that assigns authority and responsibility to a higher being to whom the individual must not only supplicate, but must also constantly seek to please. Neither the external authority nor the individual has any influence on fate or destiny, which is both pre-ordained and inaccessible. It is conceptually inaccessible to the individual for whom an instance of fate or destiny is predicated – it is even inaccessible to an intercessor on behalf of the individual.

Fate and destiny, so conceived, are both alien to Yorùbà thought. That explains why the Yorùbá embrace the advice:[45]

Ọwọ́ ẹni la fi í tuń ìwà ẹni ṣe	One ameliorates one's existential options with one's own hands

Also

Òrìṣà bí o ò le gbè mí	*Òrìṣa*, if you cannot prosper me
Ṣe mí bí o ti bá mi	Leave me as you encountered me

And

Òrìṣa tí a sìn, sìn, sìn	*Òrìṣa* whom one serves, serves, and serves
Tí kò gbe ni	Who does not prosper one
À á padà lẹ́yìn in rẹ̀ ni	Only option is to turn away from behind him

In the Yorùbá pantheon, Èṣù, the custodian of the primordial *àṣẹ*, is the *òrìṣà* that never tires in dealing out just deserts to individuals in accordance with how they exercise their options with regard to consciousness, vigilance, industry and assiduity as their *ìpín* unfolds and becomes manifest.

Setting aside, but not ignoring, the 'satanized' Èṣù of the West African Abrahamic religions' evangelism,[46] how do we reconcile the Èṣù whom Femi Euba systematically espouses as the eponymous originator of satire with the Èṣù of the Yorùbá tradition, whom I have argued is neither a trickster, a deceiver nor the Devil, the Judaeo-Christian Satan or the Islamic Iblis? If satire is the preeminent dramatic art form that imaginatively exposes the incongruous at the expense and discomfiture of its perpetrator, be it a person or even an institution, this article proposes that the Èṣù of the Yorùbá pantheon would better motivate satire, because, like satire, Èṣù does not gloss over unjustifiable foibles in human behaviour. The Èṣù of the Yorùbá pantheon is not a prevaricator, or a dissembler who denies or overlooks individual accountability for one's acts or omissions to act. On the contrary, the Èṣù of the Yorùbá tradition operates on the premise that every sentient being is endowed with *àṣẹ* and the will to deploy it; the individual is not helpless in life, and may not externalize responsibility for his or her unfolding existential reality.

Chastened by a system that guarantees Èṣù's role as the custodian and arbiter of primordial *àṣẹ*, the fulcrum of human dignity vested in individuals, one is hard put to imagine a compelling reason why people of African descent should not enjoy

[45]This is *not* a precept.
[46]This has already been shown to be alien to the Yorùbá world view.

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the capacity and the self-confidence to re-envision a future without any fear of injustice for anyone; indeed, if we embrace Èṣù, one must be so disposed, with a clear conscience of consistently safeguarding social justice and common good in the most humane sense. The status of Èṣù in both the Santería and Candomblé *òrìṣà* traditions suggests that this vision may not be impractical in an inclusive social, economic and political atmosphere that vouchsafes access and common good.

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Abstract

Èṣù of the Yorùbá tradition, the custodian of the primordial *àṣẹ*, embodies the principle of perspicacity and pragmatism that is crucial for the exercise of responsibility by sentient and thinking beings. As such, Èṣù demands the ultimate in consciousness as a basis for just living and for a just measure of reward or sanction. Èṣù calls for painstaking commitment to rigorously distilled information and keen consciousness as preconditions for action of any sort, especially for the exercise of judgement, a compelling gesture of the human will. Scholarly and/or zealous traditions have, however, persistently alienated Èṣù from his native Yorùbá cosmology. This article argues for a need for rehabilitation.

Résumé

Dans la tradition yorùbá, Èṣù, le gardien de l'*àṣẹ* primordial, incarne le principe de perspicacité et de pragmatisme qui est essentiel à l'exercice de la responsabilité par des êtres doués de sensibilité et de pensée. En tant que tel, Èṣù exige le summum de la conscience comme base pour simplement exister et pour une juste mesure de récompense ou de sanction. Èṣù exige un attachement minutieux à une rigueur de distillation de l'information et une conscience vive comme préconditions à l'action de toute sorte, en particulier à l'exercice du jugement, un signe irréfutable de la volonté humaine. Les traditions savantes ou ferventes ont donc aliéné Èṣù de sa cosmologie native yorùbá de façon persistante. Cet article plaide pour un besoin de réhabilitation.

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