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**Power and Paradox
in the Trickster
Figure**

Jacob Campbell

Winter 1999

Introduction

We have only one certainty in this world - that *nothing* is for certain. The machine of Western science has relentlessly striven to discern patterns and laws which might order reality, yet much of it simply does not conform to rational classification. Of course, the yields of systematic analysis have presented for humans an unprecedented mental grasp on the universe and our place within it. The forces of chaos, however, continue to manifest in our lived experience, seemingly to check assumptions of omnipotent logic in societies which have come to worship the scientist as a messiah. Massive earthquakes unpredictably wreak devastation upon whole countries, a host of epidemic viruses remain incurable, and the actions of the clinically insane persist as unexplainable phenomena. For many indigenous societies, these mysteries of human experience, both physical and cultural, are dealt with primarily in the realm of myth. One mythic figure in particular frequently emerges to embody the ambiguity and irony of his people's encounter with the world. He is Trickster, a formal paradox – one who sows the seeds of discord, then inspires new possibilities for ritual and social reinvention. In contrast to the Western scientist, the trickster in essence celebrates that which falls through the cracks of rational classification. He reminds indigenous people that logic cannot adequately grapple with a vast array of human experiences, and it is precisely *those* elements which hold the most potential when successfully harnessed. This thesis attempts to clarify both the means by which cultural groups invoke their trickster and also the influence he has upon their daily worldview.

Trickster figures have been documented in the mythic systems of societies all over the globe. In this work, I discuss primarily the trickster's appearance in the Amazon basin of South America, Polynesia, the Caribbean, among the African-American population of the United States and in numerous regions of West Africa. Mine, however, is hardly a comprehensive study. A partial list of other cultural-geographic areas with an indigenous history of the trickster would include Siberia, aboriginal Australia, Tibet, China, North America¹, Melanesia, Andean South America and East Africa. Trickster is uniquely constituted in the specific mythic frameworks of each culture, yet a striking number of similar characteristics are commonly attributed to the figure cross-culturally as well. These over-arching traits provide a useful sketch of the trickster.

For example, nearly every Trickster I have encountered in my research has been portrayed as hugely hyper-sexual. This trait may be presented in a variety of ways, ranging from comedic to scandalous to epic, but the trickster invariably has enormous genitalia and insatiable lust. In the same vein, he is often associated with creative, generative powers. Many myth systems depict Trickster emerging from the early stages of the world, or even playing a role in Creation himself². His affinity with the forces of chaos results in an ability to determine form and substance, either by shifting what exists or forging anew. Lastly, trickster figures across cultures generally are imbued with a unique linguistic aptitude. Their speech is said to question itself, add layers of implication, and playfully introduce new meanings for the people's language system. In

¹ Exemplified in an ethnography on the Winnebago of Nebraska, called *The Trickster*, by Paul Radin (1956). Karl Kerenyi and C.G. Jung also provide commentary in this superb volume.

² See Jonathan Hill's account of the Trickster-Creator among the Wakuenai of Venezuela in *Keepers of the Sacred Chants* (1993).

the stories which tell of his earthly exploits, manipulated or “spun” language consistently turns up as one of the trickster’s favorite implements of mischief.

The lack of pre-colonial contact between most of the trickster-bearing groups noted above makes it truly fascinating to find these numerous traits which unify the mythic figure. Since Trickster’s principle attributes defy temporal and geographic constraints, I suggest he should be viewed as one of the Jungian archetypes, along with such figures as the Hero and the Maiden. This allows us to discuss the trickster on a broader, more theoretical level and still remain grounded in the ethnographic material dealing with specific cultures. One of my main objectives in this thesis is to maintain a working balance between these two planes of discourse. Similar to the zoom of a camera, I will be repeatedly moving my lens in to a particular context, then back out for the big picture. With such a method, I hope to retain the colorful subtleties of the trickster’s real impact on a culture while abstractly depicting him as a conceptual archetype of humanity.

The researcher who studies trickster figures is destined to run into several inherent stumbling blocks. I wish to outline them so that the reader may be aware of how these difficulties affect my work, and also in the hope those interested in “tricksterology” might respond with alternatives. The ambiguous space which the trickster inhabits seems to defy articulation in a Western academic framework. By his very nature, Trickster slips out of any category in which we may try to fit him, laughing all the while. Our carefully honed tools of logic do not effectively deal with him, and in his sphere, our rules are not honored. Nearly everything tricksters celebrate in their societies has been stamped out in

ours. Centuries of scientific method have created in the West an intellectual climate which has no place for Trickster's indeterminacy. Indeed, these forces are often charged as heretical to the dogma of empiricism and either sliced to pieces under the scalpel of reason or marginalized as hallucination. As an American researcher, I am firmly situated in an institution of logic and trained with the scalpel of reason. Yet, I believe that my topic could in no way be justly served if I adhered strictly to a rationalist method of ethnography. My style, therefore, is quite experimental in places as I strive to express some of the intricacies of Trickster. I have chosen to err on the side of abstraction rather than risk cementing this dynamic figure in an imposed model of reality.

The first chapter will examine the trickster in the context of ritual performance. Examples from my fieldwork among the Orisa community in Trinidad stand at the core of the discussion. I will introduce Esu, the Yoruba trickster, and elucidate his powerful influence on the Orisa ritual process. Mediation and transition are key themes which run through the essay. It concludes with an application of Victor Turner's liminality theory in an attempt to enrich our understanding of the role played by Trickster in a ritual setting. The next chapter explores the vital force of *ase* in Yoruba cosmology, and discusses Esu's control over its use. *Ase*, "the power to make things happen", is a generative, conceptual entity, also regarded by the Yoruba as a divine semen, which leads to an overview of the trickster's potent sexuality. I examine language, ritual, art and leadership to determine how each are infused with the vital force of *ase*. The final chapter views the trickster as force behind cultural hybridization. First, he will be seen as a figure who ushers in novelty and juxtaposes it within the established system. Then,

using examples primarily from New World African slavery, I will show how the trickster served as a vehicle of subtle resistance and identity formation. I will conclude with some suggestions for cultural anthropology based on the trickster's mode of language.

I. Ritual Performance and the Trickster

In many indigenous societies, the trickster figure exists primarily within the complex matrix of mythic histories and narratives. However, ritual performance is the most tangible means by which a community may interact with a trickster. Religious systems confirm and revere tricksters by such sacred action, whether the ritual strives to contact the figure directly or simply invoke his legacy. Intrinsic to a true understanding of the trickster is an appreciation of the way in which religious communities invoke him. In this chapter, I will give an overview of my fieldwork in Trinidad, focusing on the role of *Esu*, the Yoruba trickster, within the Orisa ritual context. Several case studies from West Africa also offer valuable insights into the ritual manifestation of tricksters. I will conclude with a discussion of how trickster figures often control and negotiate what Victor Turner would call a liminal space between the sacred and mundane worlds.

In West Africa and the Caribbean Diaspora, ritual performance continues to foster a dynamic relationship between worshipers and divine spirits. Problems are brought before the spirits, offerings of supplication are made and thanks given if a solution presents itself. This type of reciprocal spirituality permeates these communities today, just as it has for centuries. I spent six weeks living and researching in one such community on the island of Trinidad during the summer of 1998. A priestess of the Orisa religion named Mother Doreen welcomed me into her home and proved to be an invaluable informant for the duration of my stay. She would eventually invite me to accompany her to numerous *ebos* - the ritual feasts which summon Orisa spirits down to

the mortal realm. The nature of this divine manifestation would become the focus of my research.

The Orisa system evolved on Trinidad among West African (particularly Nigerian) slave populations as an effort to preserve their Yoruba cosmology in the face of European domination. As with Vodou in Haiti and Candomble in Brazil, Orisa was born of an Afro-Catholic union. When French and Spanish plantation owners caught their slaves practicing indigenous religions, they were severely punished and sometimes even killed. In response, the Africans made associations between their Yoruba spirits and Catholic saints, based on shared iconography and attributed characteristics. For example, Saint Michael has often been depicted bearing a sword and therefore was linked to Ogun, the god of war. Within such a system, slaves were able to venerate their spirits while maintaining the guise of Catholic worship. Through the centuries since emancipation, the Orisa system has upheld some elements and blended others to create an eclectic, dynamic religion that continues to link the worshipers to their deities.

The lifeline which most tangibly connects Orisa followers to the spirits occurs during an *ebo*, or “feast” in Yoruba. Each spiritual leader holds one *ebo* a year. Mother Doreen holds hers on the last week in April. Preparations for the feasts often run most of the year and cost an enormous amount (roughly \$1,500-\$3,300 US) for the typically low-income Orisa leaders (Houk 1995, 157). The ritual consists of five all-night ceremonies, usually with a major sacrifice to a specific deity each night. The individual spirits have particular associations and “favorite” sacrifices. For instance, the goddess Oya is venerated Thursday night, her color is green, and her preferential “food” is a female

sheep. Other spirits are called through the course of Thursday night, but the final offering at the culmination of the ritual goes to Oya. Worshippers believe they are “feeding the spirits” with blood sacrifice, which keeps them strong and able to shower blessings on the devout. Ritual reciprocity lies at the core of the Orisa religion.

Around midnight on the twenty-fifth of July in rural Trinidad, the first chants of an *ebo* were finally raised in the *palais*, or ritual compound. The white-haired priest stamped his foot as a chorus of voices echoed the ancient Yoruba prayer. A woman lit candles in the four corners and then threw oil in an arc around each one. Reverent faces continued to filter into the compound, and the song became more intense. The priest placed a candle in the center of the *palais*, with a calabash of water on one side and one containing ash on the other. Three drummers positioned themselves on a short bench and heavy polyrhythms soon infused the congregation with a new energy. Several women began to dance in a circle around the candle, singing:

Esu o; Maa je ki a nsoro fi emu ko; Esu o.

(Hail Esu; Guide the words of our mouth; Hail Esu)

As the music reached a crescendo, the priest picked up the candle and calabashes, raised them high in the air and danced out into the yard. Several minutes later he returned and a calm fell over the congregation. All hoped Esu had been pacified.

This account from my field notes exemplifies the beginning of an *ebo* in Trinidad. Esu, the Yoruba trickster, always must be “entertained” first. He is thought to be a messenger spirit who opens the gate to the divine realm. Yet, as James Houk states, Esu “is also a trickster who has the capacity to do great harm if he is not placated”(1995, 54).

Therefore, ritual leaders often go to great lengths in order to appease Esu through singing, dancing and sacrifice before continuing on with the service. From my observations, leaders would much rather be safe than sorry when dealing with Esu, and thus his offering is usually made with a great deal of fanfare. After the community feels the trickster has been satisfied, a priest carries his candle and calabash out of the sacred space with the hope that he will not linger around the feast causing problems.

From my observations and interviews, it would appear that Esu is not satisfied with his sacrifice a significant proportion of the time – perhaps even forty percent of the *ebos*. The trickster makes his chaotic presence known through mishaps of all severities and varieties. An old *mongba*, or “spiritual leader” who I will call ‘Dan’, told me of an experience he once had wherein Esu displayed his displeasure quite dynamically. The *mongba* began his *ebo* with all of the necessary chants and offerings to Esu, throwing oil around the center of the *palais* while dancing in his honor. Dan felt that he had done a sufficient job and hence proceeded to parade out into the courtyard with Esu’s ash-filled calabash. Upon his return, the congregation began to chant for Ogun, the god of iron and war. A typical song to call Ogun would be,

Ogun o, A-ko ololoko-gberu-gberu
(Hail Ogun, You who ravaged other people’s farms)

Ogun pa sotumun, O b’otun je
(Ogun killed on the right, And made the right a total destruction)

Ogun pa sosi, O bosì je
(Ogun killed on the left, And made the left a total destruction)

Osin Imale, O lomi sile feje we
(Chief of the divinities! He who has water at home but prefers to bathe in blood)

Ogun a-won-leyin-oju, Ogun o
(Ogun whose eyes are terrible to behold, Hail Ogun)

These words are complemented by thunderous polyrhythmic drumming, which Ogun is said to enjoy. When Ogun manifests himself in the *palais*, he takes up a sword or “cutlass” that has been planted in the ground, blesses the worshippers and frequently offers advice, prophecies and/or admonishment before returning the sword to the ground. This action officially begins the feast.

However, during the *ebo* Dan was recounting, things did not go according to plan. A spirit manifested itself during Ogun’s song, but it was obviously not the war god. Rather, an angry Esu “took” a man from the congregation, pulled the sword from the earth and began to swing it dangerously close to the terrified worshippers. He danced wildly for five minutes, injuring several people and causing utter chaos within the *palais*. Dan said that he was then taken by Ogun, who pacified Esu, reclaimed the sword and established order by planting it safely in the ground. The man who Esu was “riding” fell to the ground, unconscious, and the rest of the evening went relatively smooth.

Dan believed that songs to Ogun were raised before Esu’s gifts had been accepted. This haste on the part of the worshippers must have bothered the arrogant and temperamental Esu, who responded by entering the ritual to wreak havoc. Ogun must have been on the verge of entering the ritual just as Esu came, and thankfully, he followed to set things straight. As seen in the imagery of his chants, Ogun is attributed with some potent and terrible traits. Even so, Esu stands second only to Olodumare, the High God, in Yoruba cosmology(Houk 1995, 161). According to the *mongba* Dan, the

type of standoff which occurred between Esu and Ogun in his *ebo* happens quite rarely in Trinidadian rituals. He was extremely glad that Ogun came and handled things as he did; otherwise, there could be no telling what damage Esu may have caused.

The role Esu plays in the Orisa religion is fraught with ambiguity. While he commands the respect and gratitude of the community for ushering their supplications to the spirit world, the trickster is also a deeply feared force. Each *mongba* deals with him in a different fashion. For instance, small shrines called *perogun* are maintained by Orisa leaders in their yards for as many as fifteen particular spirits. However, most leaders do not enshrine Esu since this often acts “as a conduit of sorts for Kabbalah entities—which is, for some worshipers, an unfortunate byproduct”(Houk 1995,131). Kabbalah, an ancient form of Jewish mysticism, has been incorporated by some priests into the Orisa system as a means of tapping a new spiritual resource. When they manifest themselves on a person, Kabbalah spirits are widely known to be dark, rude and even dangerous. A large percentage of the religious community views the presence of Kabbalah as a bane and disdains those who practice it. Yet Esu appears to have affiliation with these other spirits, adding to his mysterious reputation.

Due to his mischievous tendencies and multiple attributes, Esu has been perceived very differently both within and outside of the Orisa community. Muslims and Christians in Africa and in the Caribbean have interpreted Esu as being the Devil. My informants all vehemently stressed that no devil exists in the Orisa belief system; rather, all spirits have good and bad aspects, just like humans. In the case of Esu, morality and allegiance are particularly jumbled, resulting in a figure who simply plays by his own rules.

Depending on the context, the trickster may be represented in very different ways within a ritual performance. Worshippers often “ask him to watch over the feast and to guard the spiritual “doors” lest unwanted spirits attempt to gain entrance”(Houk 1995,161). If Kabbalah spirits do indeed manifest themselves during the course of an *ebo*, it is widely accepted that Esu was not properly entertained. From this point on in the feast, all mishaps will be attributed to Esu’s retribution.

In essence, Esu holds the future of an *ebo* in his hands. The efficacy of the ritual greatly depends upon how much of a role the trickster chooses to play in it. However, Esu’s presence is barely ever felt as concretely as in the example given above of *mongba* Dan’s *ebo*. Much more often, he manifests subtly as a misplaced candle, a broken drum or a participant’s doubt in the ritual itself, which I would suggest is the single most destructive parasite that could be introduced to an *ebo* in progress. If the worshipers lose confidence in themselves and in their leader, the intensity of emotion ebbs out of the ritual. When emotion goes, efficacy follows.

When Esu is unhappy with an *ebo*, the manifestation of his angst often builds steadily, even exponentially, throughout the service. I will continue with my description of the *ebo* I attended on the twenty-fifth of July in an attempt to better illustrate these notions of the trickster’s injurious influence. Drum beats for Ogun kicked up in the *palais* as the *mongba* returned from the courtyard. He raised his voice in celebration of the warrior spirit, coaxing him to manifest in the ritual. After several minutes, a tall woman wearing a green dress began to shake wildly. Two people standing nearby

supported her as she let out occasional moans and convulsed with the drums. The chants continued uninterrupted as the woman moved out into the center of the *palais*, danced momentarily and then was led into the yard. Numerous scornful glances followed her out of the *palais* as another song was raised –once again calling Ogun.

Apparently, most of the congregation was disappointed with the woman in green, and the ritual's intensity ebbed as she exited. However, the *mongba* re-orchestrated the emotional energy of the worshipers with his charismatic performance of the new chant. "Shak-shaks", or maracas and ecstatic clapping heralded the return of enthusiasm. Within ten minutes, a thin man dressed all in red began to writhe, as if in agony. He wrenched at his clothes, pulling everything from his pockets and tossing them around in an arc. Two women quickly took off his shoes and socks, which seemed to be acting as weighted shackles. Without them, the possessed man began to jump and kick feverishly to the complex polyrhythms. His movements were sharp and aggressive, often complemented with a slap to his chest or a loud yell. At one point, "Ogun" led an eight-year old boy over to the three musicians and held the child's head next to one man's drum for several minutes before returning him to his mother. Later, I learned the drummer was the boy's father and most people believed Ogun was urging the child to also play Orisa drums when he came of age. Orisa spirits commonly use *ebos* to guide younger generations towards traditional practices and vocations that will maintain the belief system in the future.

At this point in the ritual, Esu began to sow his seeds of discord. "Ogun" strutted over and peered into Mother Doreeen's face, who was standing to my immediate right.

He slapped his thighs and squatted, saying in a garbled tongue that she began with “little beasts” and now gives “large beasts”, therefore Ogun’s “belly full”. She later interpreted Ogun’s words as thanks to her for being generous with her sacrifices over the years - from when she was poor and only able to make small offerings to the present, where she can afford to slaughter large goats. A disgruntled look then spread across “Ogun’s” face as he began patting his midsection and stomping the ground. Mother Doreen immediately sent a girl to fetch a red sash and called out for the cutlass. The *mongba* produced an old machete, which he covered in olive oil and vigorously rubbed down. Doreen tied a sash around “Ogun’s” waist, then presented the blade to him. The worshipers all stood back as the spirit began to dance – swinging the cutlass around his head and dragging a hand across the edge. Anguish contorted his features as he repeatedly signaled that the blade was too dull and the tip bent. Mother Doreen barked this observation to the *mongba*, but he merely shrugged, saying there was no replacement. The spirit floundered for several more minutes, then departed from the man. Tense silence filled the *palais* as his unconscious body was carried away.

For a ritual to be efficacious, various components must be in place and a momentum must be maintained. Confidence in fellow worshipers manufactures emotion, which acts as both a social cohesive and a catalyst of the sacred. When Esu has been snubbed, he throws a monkey wrench into this religious formula for the Orisa people. The trickster exists implicitly somewhere behind, yet also within every doubt, fear, jealousy, miscommunication and dull blade which might occur in a ritual. Minute problems have an impeccable tendency to multiply until the entire ritual falls apart, as

was the case in the *ebo* just described. Doubt impedes the emotional momentum of a ritual like no other force. The first snare appeared when the woman in green was led from the *palais*, trailed by a host of scornful stares. In the absence of solidarity, worshippers have lost one of the most powerful engines of a ritual. A congregation united in faith and purpose has a much greater chance of creating a potent ritual space than one plagued by suspicion. Similarly, a lack of confidence in the leader unravels ritual efficacy. Mother Doreen was thoroughly disgusted with the *mongba* for his lack of preparation. She felt that it was a disgrace to present Ogun with a bent cutlass, and he who was responsible would feel the spirit's displeasure in the future. Most of the worshipers present appeared to share her sentiment. After Ogun's disastrous manifestation, the *mongba* tried desperately to pick up the pieces, but he failed to evoke the emotion of the congregation and no other spirits entered the *ebo* for the remainder of the evening.

Esu's location in this schema of ritual efficacy is (as usual) twisted with irony, ever shifting and generally difficult to determine. However, one might say with confidence that the trickster sets the stage for all *ebos* and then pulls the puppets' strings if not properly entertained. We would assume that the unfortunate *mongba* described above will henceforth double his offerings to Esu, and also double-check ritual materials before an *ebo*. Herein lies the key to understanding Esu's nature in a ritual context. Leaders must sacrifice to Esu and foresee the myriad troubles inherent in the proceedings of an *ebo*. Participants either pool their emotions and overlook their differences, or else Esu will call in doubts and other dilemmas which spell the doom of a ritual. It is not my

purpose in this paper to enter into a debate on whether or not Esu is merely a symbol for all that is problematic in the Orisa system. He is obviously much more than this. Rather, I will simply suggest that Esu should be viewed as a figure who straddles the mythic and the “real”. He demands a rich offering of song and oil, while simultaneously exerting a more tangible force that urges leaders to be sure in their movements and worshippers to be steady in their devotion.

In regions of West Africa, the trickster emerges in public rituals to confirm and flaunt his enigmatic nature. Among the Fon of Benin, the trickster Legba plays a crucial role in coming-of-age ceremonies for novices of the prestigious cult of Mawu-Lisa, a powerful deity figure. On the last day of the ceremony, a young girl dressed in a purple raffia skirt emerges, representing Legba. As the drummers sound the trickster’s rhythm, the girl dances with a wooden phallus attached under her skirt and after “miming intercourse” with several other young girls, Legba leads the initiates in an intricate dance which completes the rite (Pelton 1980, 101). The trickster’s hyper-sexuality is represented in this ritual as a force which moves the initiates through their liminal social status, imbuing them with personhood and power. Robert Pelton observes that Legba’s “penis becomes a moving limen through which Mawu-Lisa passes into both initiates and society, bringing together bawdiness and sacrality, holiness and humor, potency and order”(1980, 102). Once again, we find that the trickster’s unique strength lies in his ability to straddle seemingly polar entities, negotiating them into momentary alignment.

The symbolic representation of gender and sexuality in the Fon ritual requires further analysis. Legba exhibits characteristics not only of hyper-sexuality, but also of

trans-sexuality. It is a young *female* who takes up the wooden phallus and embodies the trickster's divine power of generation. Gender roles dissipate and are fluidly recast in the ritual context, resulting in a fertile arena of malleable identity. Victor Turner suggests that, "if the liminal period is seen as an interstructural phase in social dynamics, the symbolism both of androgyny and sexlessness immediately becomes intelligible"(1967; 98). The trickster has androgynous traits in nearly all of the cultures where he exists. He also challenges sexual norms, toys with innuendo and celebrates human fertility. In the Mawu-Lisa initiation rite specifically, Legba acts as an agent of transformation. His provocative dance blurs social and sexual boundaries, creating an inchoate liminal domain, from which the initiates emerge as newly "formed" and highly respected persons.

East of Benin in Yorubaland, Nigeria, a festival honoring the trickster Esu takes place every year, extending over seventeen days in late December and early January. As with most other expressions of Esu, this celebration is full of paradox and irony. While "Esu's image is carried into the marketplace, the people sing a gay and inviting song with a jaunty rhythm"(Pelton 1980, 131). Yet, throughout the year, the trickster is accused of starting fights, sowing confusion, turning wives astray and stirring up general wrongdoing. In spite of this reputation, Esu-dancers "whirl and spin" during the festival, celebrating his playfulness and creating an "image of a spirited, jocular and abandoned deity"(Pelton 1980, 132). These tricksters manage to leap carelessly between disruption and merriment, aid and hindrance, chaos and order. Mortals strive to stay out of their

mischievous plans while maintaining their blessings. This delicate balance becomes intrinsic to the success of performative rituals.

* * *

The boundaries between social, natural and linguistic entities have long been seen by anthropologists as fertile grounds for study (Gennep 1960; Douglas 1966; Turner 1967). In the social sphere, these “gray areas” often are the arenas for a community to both renew and confirm their traditions, as in the case of initiation rites. When categorical structures separate or are broken down in a system, the stage is set for significant change to be made in the mundane flow of everyday life. A break from the mundane occurs when a community establishes a ritual connection to the spirit world. However, delicate negotiation, a deep knowledge of special language and proper sacrifice are often requisite in order to traverse the gap between profane and sacred. In this chapter’s ethnographic examples, tricksters have been the mediating force which allows humans to tap the spiritual realm. In fact, the trickster usually embodies notions of ambiguity in the cultures where he exists and therefore becomes the logical choice for gatekeeper of all things transitional.

Tricksters inhabit what Victor Turner called the “liminal” spaces of society and ritual. They exist “betwixt and between” conventional classifications, illuminating “that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both” (Turner 1967, 99). Turner developed his theory of liminality in the context of Ndembu rites of passage, yet it complements and greatly informs a host of discussions on ambiguity in ritual systems. Priests and spiritual leaders of not only “indigenous” religions but also of such world faiths as Catholicism

strive to create a sacred bridge between their community and the Other. At the climax of a Catholic service, Christ's spirit is believed to infuse the priest's offering of bread and wine, which is then consumed by the congregation as the "body and blood" of their savior. When the ritual feast takes place, a new form of interaction develops among the participants. Turner calls this state, "communitas," which is a "social antistructure," or a "relation quality of full, unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities"(1969; 46). A spiritual union with Christ breaks down "antecedent" social ties and effectively creates a stronger bond within the communitas, which, according to Turner, "is a direct outgrowth of liminality"(1969, 47). By moving out of the mundane into a highly ritualized liminal state, participants gain the power to cohere in the light of their divinity. The solidarity which emerges from this ritually imbued "social antistructure" often presents oppressed individuals with very sustainable relief, not only in Christian circles but in religions all over the world.

The success of a performance, either ritual or dramatic, depends upon the emotion that it manages to conjure and how effectively it is harnessed for a specific purpose. Ritual in particular runs on emotion as if it were a fuel. Just as an engine requires more gasoline as it builds RPM, a ritual requires more emotion as it moves toward a climax. While involved with a ritual performance, a person acts without the security of a mundane reality. Interaction with sometimes terrible deities and spirits not surprisingly inspires intense emotions. Cheryl Oxford argues that participants in such performances are in a "threshold existence, a stage of reflection looking fore and aft, outward and inward" which enables them "to achieve social cohesion and emotional catharsis"(1992,

59). The liminal spaces created within a ritual are platforms for both social and spiritual transcendence – they are arenas of human agency.

In the cultures which supplicate them, trickster-figures control a wellspring of emotional energy. Nearly every motif or characteristic attributed to tricksters draws heated sentiment out of human populations. He has an insatiable sexual appetite, he embodies ambivalence, danger, boundary exploration, paradox and mischief, and yet he often holds the keys to the spirit world for mortals. When Esu manifests himself in a Yoruba initiation ritual, the community erupts with the flamboyance and chaos that mark the spirit's nature (Pelton 1980). In other ritual contexts, a mere mention of the trickster's name draws trembles among the congregation, all fearing the disastrous influence he can have on a ceremony. The emotional outpouring that surrounds a trickster's presence in performance adds "fuel to the ritual fire."

The liminal space in a ritual exists as what Turner calls the "fruitful darkness", where worlds are bridged and traditions are simultaneously confirmed and reinvented. It is here where neophytes gain social identity, where the keys to cultural mysteries are hidden, where the mythic past touches today and where spirits enter into mortal space. When a religious community comes together for a ritual, they are often striving to hold a candle to this "fruitful darkness" and reveal some of its treasures. The liminal spaces are often taboo-laden and dangerous, yet this is due to the wealth of sacred, mythic, and traditional knowledges which they contain. As Turner says, in liminality "there is a promiscuous intermingling and juxtaposing of the categories of event, experience and knowledge with pedagogic intentions" (1967, 106). Nowhere does the trickster-figure

more prominently exist than within this liminal matrix, perched almost as a spider on his web of social interplay and paradox.

The trickster urges worshipers to peer beyond what “seems to be” in a playful search for “what is”. In a ritual context, he lurks in liminality, easing back into the darkness with enticing promises (or horrid threats) for his spiritual community. Turner notes that “as members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture”(1967, 95). Tricksters escort their faithful beyond these secular classifications, through a liminal space, into contact with the Other. In this sense, the trickster has much in common with the Greek boatman, Charon, who ferried souls over the river Styx to Hades. Both figures usher mortals into a realm very different from the mundane one, although Charon of course did not bring anyone back. Tricksters, on the other hand, help navigate and articulate the chaotic space of liminality, allowing worshipers to imbue their initiates with cultural knowledge and revive their relationships with the divine.

II. The Vital Force: *Ase* and the Yoruba Trickster

As one Yoruba *babalawo* (elder) has put it, *ase* is “the light that crosses through the tray of the earth, the firmament from one side to the other, forward and backward”(recounted by Gates 1988, 8). Olodumare, high god of this Nigerian ethnic group, used *ase* to create the universe before bestowing it upon the trickster, Esu. This divine energy continues to linger in the fabric of Yoruba life. Important people in the community harness *ase* in order to empower their speech, their objects and their status. Not only does *ase* infuse media with ‘hot’ agency, it also establishes a link to the spirits, taps their creative force, and situates mortal expression within an ancestral legacy.

The concept of *ase* weaves through nearly every facet of Yoruba expressive culture. This paper attempts to separate the channels of *ase* into four different media—language, art, ritual and leadership—with the hope to develop a clearer understanding of this complex and ambiguous force. Each system propagates and authorizes itself by tapping a divine energy source. When *ase* is infused within one of these four mortal media, a deeper, more significant meaning overtakes them. The process is captured in the Yoruba proverb, *Ohun ti o wa leyin Offa, o ju Oje lo* “What follows six is more than seven”(from Abiodun 1994, 69). That is to say, we must peer beyond what is easily observed if we are to grasp deep meanings. Esu urges his worshipers to not be satisfied with the face value of their experience. Great power resides at the trickster’s crossroads and in the subtleties of Yoruba cosmology. If an object or person is to be truly efficacious within the community, they must be imbued with this enigmatic essence, this “power-to-make-things-happen”, this *ase*.

For Yoruba language, *ase* is a force which reinvents, critiques and “piles on” layers of significance. Elements of secrecy and timelessness accentuate the speech, resulting in a dense, semantically rich form of discourse. In *Black Critics and Kings*, his groundbreaking book on Yoruba cosmology, Andrew Apter claims that “Yoruba ritual language, like Yoruba ‘art’, is in motion. It builds images, sets moods, and merges subjects and objects, nouns and verbs; it possesses and repossesses, with many voices, on multiple levels, even in different dialects”(1992, 118). The “motion” of this language often appears to be cyclical and introverting. Power fills the oration when it connects back to the *orisas* (spirits) and takes on deep, cryptic shades of meaning.

One *orisa* in particular, the trickster Esu-Elegbara, is intimately associated with the creation and interpretation of Yoruba language. He unravels, plays with, undermines, and reinvents the ‘word’ as an expression of cultural knowledge. It is this grasp on *ase*, “controlled and represented by Esu, which mobilizes each and every element in the system”(Gates 1988, 8). Yoruba *orisa* belief holds that when Oludumare finished creating the universe, he gave *ase* to Esu-Elegbara. Esu continues to carry *ase* in his magical calabash and supplications are made to him in order to draw down this divine energy. In *The Signifyin’ Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. translates *ase* as “logos” and names Esu “the indigenous black metaphor for the literary critic”(1988, 9). Esu loosens and explores the boundary of semantics in the Yoruba world.

Esu’s closest parallel in the West would certainly be the Greek god, Hermes. Both deities are thought to be messengers in their cultures. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that neither god performs their task without first twisting the information, thereby

altering its implications for the recipient. In this sense, Esu and Hermes are both trickster figures; champions of ambiguity, mischief, and the figurative voice. Esu's control of *ase* gives him immense power, second only to Olodumare. Yet rather than distributing "logos" and semiotic knowledge evenly among his worshipers, he speaks in riddles and subverts attempts to maintain a clear, literal discourse. By his very nature, Esu defies categorization. Gates says that a partial list of his "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"(1988, 6). Yet even this broad sketch fails to corner the slippery trickster. Through his unabashed disdain of 'the obvious', Esu urges the Yoruba to examine their language with a critical eye. After all, true power often lies deep within the facets of an expressed trope, and a casual listener may remain the fool.

Esu and Hermes have another common trait in their hyper-sexuality. The Yoruba and the Greeks each associate their respective god with the phallus, fertility and insatiable sexual appetites. I suggest that when we find aspects of fertility and experimental interpretation paired in a mythic figure or deity, it is not coincidence. Rather, the raw sexuality of these figures can be seen as a powerful affiliation with the creation process - the seed that 'impregnates' their language with a deeper, novel meaning. Vincent Crapanzano reminds us that "interpretation has been understood as a phallic, a phallic-aggressive, a cruel and violent, a destructive act, and as a fertile, a fertilizing, a fruitful and a creative one"(1986, 52). We may say to a friend, 'this book is pregnant with

meaning'. Such a comment refers to the work's deep structure and its attention to the figurative, implied layers of interpretation – certainly the devices of Esu and Hermes.

If Esu is the fertilizer of language, then *ase* is his semen. Yoruba cosmology holds that Olodumare breathed *ase* into the universe, filling it with living beings. An ancient Yoruba canon, *The Story of Osetua*, declares:

“*Ase* spread and expanded on earth:
Semen became child,
Men on sick bed got up,
All the world became pleasant,
It became powerful” (from Gates 1988, 7).

Esu then took up the *ase* and placed it in his calabash, where it continues to be a “hot”, formulating essence. As Femi Euba states in his work, *Archetypes, Imprecators and Victims of Fate*, “Esu is not only the Keeper of *Ase*, but also its divine enforcer, the dispenser of the fateful, fatal power contained in his “Ado-iran”, the calabash which contains the power which propagates itself”(1989, 25). The Yoruba trickster “spins” and “fertilizes” ritual language, imbuing it with a potentiality which mortals strive to harness for their own purposes. Those who appease Esu and comprehend his Significant, poly-semantic speech have greater control over their own destinies and a more pervasive influence in their communities.

The study of textual interpretation that Hermes lent his name to, *hermeneutics*, is integral to a discussion of Esu in particular and Yoruba writing in general. A deep sense of reflexivity runs through Yoruba language, resulting in what Gates calls a “meta-discourse”(1988, 4). Their speech constantly folds back over itself and offers new shades of meaning to the same trope. Esu, with his *ase*, “privileges the figurative” and injects

people's words with far-reaching symbolic references. Rowland Abiodun claims that "in literary and oral traditions such as 'Signifyin',' 'playing the dozen,' 'reading,' 'toasts,' 'loud-talking,' 'dissin,' snapping,' and 'rap,' there are reverberations of the structure and affective aspects of *ase*"(1994:71). Deep meaning takes precedence over surface meaning. Parables also exemplify the richly textured semantics discussed by Abiodun, since their impact relies upon the relation of words to broader, more profound concepts, rather than the face value of the words themselves. True mastery of this language requires a knowledge of the cultural assumptions and proverbial insight which stand at its core.

Esu, armed with his special brand of Yoruba hermeneutics, not only "encodes" speech with ambiguity, he also opens channels of semantic representation. As Jonathan Hill writes, "mythic tricksters open up the conceptual distinction between the interpretation of words and other signs as merely semantic or referential vehicles with very limited social power - and as fully encyclopedic symbols carrying a potentially infinite range of knowledges about other signs"(1996, 4). The reflexivity of Yoruba language allows for, even promotes a continuous reinvention of semiotic relationships. Yoruba speech and ritual structure have a high degree of malleability. They shift and reform so as to better serve the current socio-religious needs of the people. A close look at Yoruba ritual language "reveals an indigenous hermeneutics which "deconstructs" to empower but which also (unlike so much of our own critical theory) recovers, engages, and—when necessary—changes the world"(Apter 1992, 148). Orisa worshipers strive to

do no less with *ase*-imbued speech than call down gods, articulate power relations and orchestrate their destinies.

* * *

The implications surrounding “art” as a term commonly used in Western aesthetic discourse have little or no relevance for the study of Yoruba ritual artifacts. Therefore, I will attempt to explore the semantic boundaries of “art” so as to better situate *ase*-imbued objects within this lexical field. A task such as this promises to be a challenge, since, as Rachel Hoffman states, African “art objects perform as conduits, but even more as dynamic, complex, independent reservoirs of many types of knowledge and power”(1995, 56). Yoruba artists believe they have created a good piece of work when it holds not only aesthetic, but also spiritual and social potential. Ordinarily, the presence (or lack) of *ase* in the object determines its strength. An *ase*-imbued article will have multiple layers of association and influence - it will pulsate with a ‘life’ of its own.

At the core of Yoruba cosmology lies a deep sense of cyclical reciprocity. When sacrifices are made, good fortune should naturally follow. Artists strive to propitiate Esu with the hope that he will in turn be generous with the *ase* from his magical calabash. People often exhibit abundant generosity with their neighbors, and there is an unspoken understanding that the favor will be returned. The Yoruba word, *dahun* (“to respond”) “describes the efficacy not only of *ase* but also of art”(Abiodun 1994, 71). Art objects are expected to engender and then communicate socio- religious sensibilities. Master artists harness *ase* and utilize its energy in the creation process. In order to produce an artifact that “lives” and “works” in the Yoruba sense, craftspeople must bring to bear a

profound insight into the *orisa* belief system. *Iluti* is a term which refers to the “call-and-response” nature of Yoruba art, music and ritual activity. People search out and celebrate media or spirits with strong *iluti*, as revealed in the parable, *Ebora to luti la nbo* “We worship only deities who can respond when consulted” (from Abiodun 1994, 73).

Likewise, the Yoruba only praise artwork that communicates sacred cultural knowledge.

In the visual arts (especially in sculpture), Yoruba craftsmen commonly place emphasis on a figure’s head. Indeed, the word *orisa* may be translated either as “spirit” or “head”. This lexical relationship testifies to the paramount role human heads play in Yoruba cosmology. An elder noted during my field research within the *orisa* community of Trinidad that to touch another person’s head is a sacrilegious act. Elders, however, may bless a young person by laying a hand on their head (personal communication, June 6, 1998). Since their job is to cross this taboo, hairdressers are paid well and usually tipped generously for the cautious care with which they tend to a person’s head. Yoruba artistic representation reflects these socio-religious beliefs. As Abiodun states, “*ori-ode* (physical head) is the focus of much ritualistic, artistic, and aesthetic activity. Not infrequently the head is given a place of visual command by proportionally subordinating all other parts of the body to it” (1994, 77). The head is the link to the spirit realm.

Therefore, ritual artifacts meant to establish this cherished bond often exhibit detailed heads with ornate coiffures or crowns. The objects transcend normal limitations of form – they act as conduits of *ase*, passing through the veil between spirit and mortal worlds.

While the head is the general link to the spirits, *oju* (translated as ‘face’, but especially ‘eyes’) is the most intense sphere of *ase*. The Yoruba believe that a powerful

oba's (leader's) stare can "shoot" tangible *ase*, resembling fire or lightening bolts. The force of *oju* has a potency that can be dangerous if not properly controlled. As Abiodun says, "because *ase* is believed to emanate from *oju*, children and young people are forbidden to look straight into their parents' or elders' faces"(1994, 77). When these young people are initiated into the adult *orisa* community, it is said that their *ori* and *oju* "open up" to the spirits. In other words, the individual may now be manifested upon by deities during ceremonies, and they may also witness the *ase* in an elder's face without risking injury. The importance of *oju* can also be seen in Yoruba artistic representations. A useful commentary comes through the parable, *oju ni oro o wa* "Oro, the essence of communication, takes place in the eyes/face" (from Abiodun 1994, 77). Ritual art, especially sculpture, tends to focus aesthetic power through facial detail. The efficacy of spirit interaction often depends upon the "communication" that channels through the *oju* of a ritual artifact. A strong *oju* heightens concentration, ignites emotion and fills a ritual space with life-supporting *ase*.

Once again, Esu-Elegbara serves as a good example of socio-religious knowledge being transmitted through artistic representation. Sculpture of Esu abound in Yorubaland, and the depicted motifs offer tangible images of the otherwise ambiguous figure. He is almost always portrayed in association with the phallus, either by the actual shape of his body or by objects in his hands. In this way, artists stress Esu's hyper-sexuality and his control of *ase*, the vital creative force. Another standard representation of Esu derives from his hermeneutic use of language. Gates notes that, "Esu's mouth, from which the audible word proceeds, sometimes appears double; his discourse,

metaphorically, is double-voiced”(1988, 7). Esu’s speech questions itself, plays upon itself and often invokes several layers of meaning; as a result, his sculpted likeness usually has two mouths. I would argue that artistic media works on an equal level with linguistic media to make Esu’s presence felt in the *orisa* community. As Hoffman states, “the performative character of goods means that they can body forth certain tenets of culture; they can enter as meaning carriers into the rhetoric of persuasion. Objects perform meaning”(1995, 59). Artists bring Esu alive in Yorubaland; they exhibit his purpose, indeed, his essence through carved symbolic representation. Once again, art “communicates” divine knowledge and upholds the mortal/deity discourse.

* * *

The most tangible and powerful means by which *ase* enters a community is through ritual action. Worshippers in the Orisa religion have an intimate relationship with their gods and goddesses. During successful ceremonies, spirits manifest themselves on individuals and spread their *ase* around the gathering. For the community members, this divine intervention is a consummation of their faith, a reward for their diligence, and an inspiration for continuing service. Blood sacrifice “feeds” the spirits, who in turn “reward” the ritual participants with manifestations, prophecy and good fortune. In this section, I will supplement the Nigerian literature by using information gathered during my summer of fieldwork within the Orisa community on Trinidad in 1998. Yoruba ritual practice has been syncretized with other systems in the New World over the last several hundred years, yet it retains the general form, language and deities of

Old World *orisa* worship. On both sides of the Atlantic, devotees draw down the sacred force of *ase* and weave it into their lives.

The concept of *ase* can act as a lens with which we may examine the spread of the Yoruba religious system. Abiodun boldly claims “we must acknowledge that [*ase*] is the most important religio-aesthetic phenomenon to survive transatlantic slavery almost intact”(1994, 71). In Trinidad, the *ebo* or “feast of the spirits” revolves around the accumulation and celebration of *ase*. Every facet of the complex ritual builds up praises to the *orisas* and invites them to the mortal realm. When a manifestation does occur, it elicits wonder, fear, joy, ecstasy, and a host of other responses among the worshipers. Divine energy fills the *palais* (main ritual congregation area) and stands as a testament to the satisfaction of the gods.

The most intimate relationship one can have with a spirit is to be possessed during a ritual. Both in the field and in the library, I have found this phenomenon to be simultaneously the most intriguing and the most complicated element of the *Orisa* religion. While there are certain distinct expectations for a manifested spirit’s actions, the perspectives on possession vary considerably among the worshipers. Some people retain a bit of their own identity when the spirit “takes” them and they view what their body is doing, as if standing next to it. Others regain consciousness after a possession and have no recollection of the experience whatsoever. The priestess I lived with, Mother Doreen, recounted her possession experiences under Ogun, her patron spirit, in the third person, suggesting a shift in identity. She said, “Ogun come on me and he pull sword, he call for rum, he call for oil”(personal communication, June 2, 1998). The

ambiguity which surrounds spirit possession has daunted researchers for decades, but this must not degrade its importance in the study of Yoruba religion. On the contrary, new perspectives and theoretical tools should be leveled on the subject if we hope to develop a better understanding of how and why deities manifest themselves among human gatherings.

Overriding all confusion and ambivalence on the subject of manifestation, however, is the strong sense of reward that surrounds the possession experience in the mind of the devotee. A portion of the spirit's energy remains in the "horse" after the possession is completed. As Robert Farris Thompson notes, "to become possessed by the spirit of a Yoruba deity, which is a formal goal of the religion, is to "make the god;" to capture the numinous flowing force within one's body"(1983, 9). The *ase* which is left behind in the medium after the deity departs often causes the person to physically shudder for several hours. The chief elder of Trinidad *Orisa*, the *Baba*, ("father" in Yoruba), said of *ase*, "it's a livewire that makes you feel superhuman"(personal communication June 6, 1998). Other worshipers also claimed that they continue to "feel like a god" after their possessions. Divine energy lingers in the voice and dance step of a newly discharged "horse" or human medium, often giving them added authority for the remainder of the ritual. If the correct supplications are made, spirits will answer the call to manifest and spread their *ase* among the congregation.

The other main source of *ase* in a ritual context is blood sacrifice. Like many indigenous African religions, *Orisa* is what Leach (1968) calls a "practical" system, which "feeds deities with offerings and sacrifices in return for requested services"(from

Apter 1992, 98). In Trinidad, most *Orisa* leaders have small stables behind their compounds. Throughout the year, they gather the animals which are associated with particular deities. Each night of the *ebo*, one major spirit is venerated through sacrifice. The *ebo* starts on Monday and ends Friday night. On the east coast of Trinidad in late May, 1998, I attended the final ceremony of a feast, which is called "Shango night". Shango is the Yoruba god of lightening, and perhaps the most powerful of the *orisas*, besides Esu. Late in the evening, after hours of drumming and numerous spirit manifestations, the leader brought in a white ram – Shango's preferred "food". While the worshippers chanted to Shango, the animal was carefully washed and fed with milk, oil, rum and corn. The first rays of dawn were entering the compound when the drummers began to pound out the heavy sacrifice rhythms.

In Trinidadian *ebos*, the sacrifice takes place in a small room adjacent to the main *palais*, called the *chappelle*. A well-adorned altar often dominates its back wall and assorted "tools" stand in the corners. These objects are the preferred ritual implements of the spirits, which they pick up and dance with during the *ebo*. The tools also aid spiritual leaders in channeling divine energy to ensure a successful sacrifice. As the devotees and I crowded into the *chappelle* on Shango night, the leader had the spirit's "thunderaxe" in his hands. Apter notes that "ritual paraphernalia transforms, transmits, and stores ritual power much as do electric condensers, cables, and batteries"(1992, 99). Shango's tool worked as a lightening rod for *ase*, pulling down energy to intensify the ceremony's climax.

With the drums and chants reaching a fever pitch, the leader stooped to hack off the ram's head. Numerous women screamed and staggered as if struck by an unseen force while blood arced across the white walls. As noted above, the Yoruba believe the color red in general but blood particularly to be heavily imbued with *ase*. When the decapitated head was placed on the altar, I myself swooned under the overwhelming presence that flooded the room. Abiodun says, "*ase* inhabits and energizes the awe-inspiring space of the *orisa*, their alters and all their objects, utensils and offerings, including the air around them"(1994, 72). Indeed, when the eyes of the dead ram snapped open momentarily and peered off the altar, I did not rationalize it away as a nervous reaction. Based on the electric atmosphere in the *chappelle*, a more relevant explanation might be that Shango was pleased by his sacrifice and bestowed a blast of *ase* upon the congregation as reciprocity. A toss of the *obi* seeds (a Yoruba divining method) confirmed Shango's satisfaction with the ceremony.

* * *

In Yoruba society, *ase* plays a major role in the definition and maintenance of power relations. Kings are *ikiji orisa*, "second only to the gods", in the cosmological hierarchy(from Apter 1992). In fact, a leader's *ase* has the potential to be dangerous, even lethal if it is not controlled and respected. Drastic measures are taken and taboos upheld by community members in order to guard against this unpredictable force. Yet, the same *ase* makes a ruler strong, aids his judgment and imbues his voice with authority. Public ritual works to channel divine energy into the king, enabling him to secure a healthy harvest, prevail in disputes and generally uphold the social system. Their

intimate relationship to *ase* elevates leaders out of the mundane realm and legitimizes their actions with divine assuredness.

Since the Yoruba primordium, *ase* has determined and empowered leadership. One ancient myth recounts how Oludumare presented *obi-ase* (the kola nut of authority) to all 401 *orisa* “who were having a dispute over who would be the leader among them”(Abiodun 1994, 76). If one of the deities succeeded in splitting the *obi-ase*, they would be declared leader and henceforth rule over the destinies of the other *orisas*. After a fierce struggle, Ori-Esu emerged as the only one who succeeded in splitting the nut. He then gathered up the *ase* from Oludumare and placed it in his magical calabash. Keeping in mind Esu’s legendary trickery, I am inclined to believe that mischief was involved in his victory. Nevertheless, he became the *ori-ase*, the leader with the power to distribute *ase*.

Just as the physical head carries deep significance for the Yoruba, leaders are viewed as the “head” of the community and evoke a parallel reverence. Kings and important chiefs have harnessed enough *ase* to situate themselves somewhere between the mortal and spiritual worlds. As Thompson notes, “their words are susceptible to transposition into spirit-invoking and predictive experiences, for *ase* literally means ‘so be it,’ or ‘may it happen.’”(1983, 7). While this immortal power does ensure loyalty and awe within the community, it also evokes a pressing fear. The king is shrouded in ambiguity, with his feet in the village and his head in the spirit realm. No one knows the extent of knowledge or the depth of influence he has on his subjects’ lives. The *ase* of the king is simultaneously energizing and terrible, for it represents a unified divine/mortal

force. Not surprisingly, the general populous often remains somewhat cautious even while they celebrate the power of their king.

The primary means by which the king restores his *ase* is through public ritual. Large ceremonies, such as the Yemoja Festival in Yorubaland, supplicate the *orisas*, draw down their *ase* and then channel it into the king. Traditional Yoruba belief holds that everything beyond their social system has the potential to be chaotic and unpredictable, yet powerful. Therefore,

“the principle task of public ritual is to harness the power which rages in the outside world by transporting it from the surrounding bush into the center of the town, where it can purify the community and revitalize the king. Thus contained, controlled, and incorporated into the community, the powers of the outside world—personified by the *orisa*—replenish the body politic with fertile women, abundant crops, and a strong, healthy king”(Apter 1992, 98).

If the king has the *orisas*’ favor, and therefor wields their *ase*, it is believed that all else will fall into place. The *ebo oba* or “king’s sacrifice” ensures the satisfaction of the gods. The king proceeds from the palace to Yemoja’s bush shrine to offer a sacrificial ram. Four days later, a priestess of Yemoja carries a sacred calabash containing the hot, explosive force of *ase* from the bush shrine to the palace. Apter was told by participants that the calabash was so “heavy with power that all the town’s hunters together could not lift it”(1992, 105). As the drummers increase their rhythms, the king, surrounded by his wives and elders, awaits the climax of the entire ceremony. When the priestess arrives, the king “places his hands upon her and, as his body trembles, absorbs the calabash’s power”(Apter 1992, 106). Like the calabash Esu carries, this one contains the forces of creation, regeneration and authority. Yoruba leaders gather *ase* so as to empower

themselves and also to maintain a healthy reciprocal relationship with their gods. If the cycle is upheld, the community will continue to enjoy good fortune and strong leadership.

* * *

No conceptual entity has a deeper and more significant presence in Yoruba cosmology than *ase*, the vital force. Yet, to the chagrin of many researchers, this presence is predominantly below the surface of the cultural system and proves quite unwieldy to non-indigenous articulation. By his very nature, Esu, the keeper of *ase*, eludes any attempt to decipher his figurative language and to unpack the meaning that he Signifies into being. Therefore, in this chapter, I have tried to meet Esu on and with his own terms - a discourse that reflects back upon itself, asks difficult questions and takes nothing at face value.

The Yoruba cosmos is a complex labyrinth, with much of its most potent knowledge hidden away in the shadows. Artists, ritual leaders and kings who know how to navigate the labyrinth may extract some of its *ase* for their own purposes or for the betterment of their community. Once it has been harnessed, *ase* can work as a ritual conduit to the spirit world or as a torch to further illuminate the meaning-rich shadows of the linguistic system. A productive, empowering cycle emerges with the use of *ase* – indeed, the force “propagates itself”. In the words of an Orisa elder, “*ase* is the energy of the gods in all of us. Yet it is also energy that we generate in the society, the universe and therefore back to the source – the spirits”(personal communication, June 15, 1998).

III. Hybridity and the Trickster

New developments in the expression of a cultural group spring forth when turbulence or necessity realigns their daily experience. Language, religion and history itself are recast when migration and innovation take hold of societies. Change occurs most visibly as a result of external forces such as the colonial slave trade, yet internal phenomena like millennium movements, renaissance periods and charismatic leaders also introduce considerable novelty. As the mythic source of raw capability, Trickster becomes a key player in his people's struggle to negotiate "progress" through hybridity. This chapter examines the relationship of trickster figures to the forces of change that sculpt societies over time.

For the cultural systems which maintain him, the trickster figure acts as a potent conductor of transformation. He straddles the old and the new, the male and the female, the above and the below – ushering in potentiality that is both creative and integrative. Novelty in a social context requires both an impetus and a cohesive force which aligns it within the existing framework. Tricksters play a crucial role in these processes of originality and mediation. Indeed, the trickster may be viewed (albeit too simplistically) as a cultural strategy for re-energizing and fertilizing the socio-religious systems which generate them. The community sees in these figures a celebration of vibrancy, vitality and indeterminacy - forces which combat the common tendency of traditions to become stagnant and dogmatic.

Quite often, change comes about as a result of defiance, or transgression of established norms. The trickster, by his nature, toys with the assumptions and

implications of the entrenched power structure. Commenting on Esu, the Yoruba trickster, Robert Pelton notes that “as a rule breaker, he is the spanner in the social works, a generating symbol who promotes change by offering opportunities for exploring what possibilities lie beyond the *status quo*”(1980, 133). Esu challenges his worshipers to shuffle and sort lived experience in original ways. New developments may only emerge in certain cases after a break has been made from the notion of “business as usual”. Trickster is the antithesis of “business as usual”. He embodies the forces of disruption and subsequent renewal, exemplified in the natural world by the lush growth which occurs in the wake of forest fires. Dynamic social transformation often proceeds by the same model.

The mythic traditions which foster tricksters portray him as a transitional figure that brings about change through his charismatic communication. Worshipers are usually suspicious of him, however, since self-service and manipulation are two of his most notorious traits. Nevertheless, he is regularly invoked (both implicitly and explicitly) when people are having complicated or problematic interactions. Pelton articulates this ambiguous notion particularly well in his discussion of the Ashanti trickster, Ananse. He says,

“in his dealing with enemies, friends, animals, gods, spirits, his own family and body, Ananse embodies transaction. For this reason he is a mediator specializing in ‘exchanges’ – a perpetually open passageway. He transforms by no plan except the shape of his own urge to realize the act of dealing, yet because this drive necessarily creates intercourse, he establishes the social geography of the world in the very process of playing out his own inner design”(1980, 225).

The Ashanti see their trickster as an entity which influences human interaction through the social manifestation of his personal attributes. Ananse’s knack for exchange was

externalized and taken up by his people as a model of discourse. Tricksters are mythically responsible for introducing speech that is clever and has multiple layers of meaning. Ultimately, trickster figures have intrinsic significance for indigenous dialects which are fundamentally grounded in parables, poetics and symbolic referencing. Transmission of information centers upon the ability to spontaneously situate the present context within a historical framework. The trickster coheres the elements of past and present to produce a linguistic field textured with referential signposts that are commonly understood but individually manipulated.

The generative and unifying power of the trickster stands at the core of his mythic narratives. In many traditions, tricksters are deeply associated with the creation of world and society. For the Wakuenai of the northwest Amazon, Inapirrikuli, their “Trickster-Creator” emerges initially from the “mythic primordium”. He then bestows an identity upon all things when they “are raised from a hole in the ground” by giving each one a “Tobacco spirit-name”(Hill 1993, 35). Inapirrikuli unites a being with its classifier, thereby situating it within the Wakuenai taxonomy of thought. The trickster creates form out of the formless and then establishes a system of meaning by which to order it all. Ironically, he himself consistently undermines the system. Robert Farris Thompson also comments on the primeval nature of the trickster, focusing on Esu in a Yoruba creation myth. He recounts how Esu was believed to be the very first form to exist. Before him, there were only air and water, which finally merged to become liquid mud. Olorun, the high god, blew over the mud and it became laterite rock. This rock was Esu, and as Thompson notes, mud and laterite sculptures are the trickster’s “oldest and most

significant emblems”(1983, 21). For the Yoruba, Esu holds the power of genesis - the power to unite opposing forces and produce the hybrids which constitute growth.

The most dynamic and trans-cultural of the trickster’s attributes must certainly be his wild sexuality. All but universally, he is depicted with enormous genitalia and an insatiable sexual appetite. Stories abound wherein the trickster lures away wives and gets himself into trouble over his libido. There is no limit to the outrageousness of these mythic narratives, exemplified by the exploits of Maui, the Polynesian trickster figure. Arthur Cotterell, historian of world mythology, recounts the epic confrontation after the trickster seduced a consort of the eel-shaped sea god, Te Tuna. “Amid darkened skies, thunder rolls, lightening flashes and an empty sea littered with stranded monsters, the rivals Te Tuna and Maui compared their manhood. With his gigantic phallus in hand the trickster hero struck down three of the eel monster’s frightful companions, overawed his rival and claimed the day”(1986, 282). Boisterous tales such as these surround trickster figures in nearly every one of the cultural traditions where he exists.

Yet, the trickster’s hyper-sexuality represents much more than a source of bawdy entertainment. Rather, I would suggest there can be no greater example of unification and generation in human experience than our own fertility. By exploring and exaggerating the elements of pro-creation, Trickster assumes for himself the ability to transform accepted ideas in a society . In his discussion of the Fon trickster, Pelton argues that “as the mythic humanizer of sex, Legba joins together the cosmic dialectic and the social process so that the implacability of the former loses its terror, while the latter gains stability without becoming rigid”(1980, 109). The trickster mediates between

the human and divine realms, defining the boundaries while simultaneously guiding his worshipers through them.

In numerous traditions, tricksters also explore and defy the boundaries between the genders. Myths of trans-sexual, cross-dressing, female and hermaphrodite tricksters are not uncommon. Sculptures of Esu in Nigeria often depict the trickster with both a phallus and breasts. Ogun-dipe, a Yoruba woman and scholar, says concerning this peculiar motif that Esu “certainly is not restricted to human distinctions of gender or sex; he is at once both male and female. Although his masculinity is depicted as visually and graphically overwhelming, his equally expressive femininity renders his enormous sexuality ambiguous, contrary and genderless”(1983, 163). Once again, we see the difficulty inherent in defining trickster figures – unable to even confidently label them male or female! However, it is precisely this mutability and raw creativity which enables them to inspire novel configurations within their cultural traditions.

* * *

Hybridity takes on a host of other implications when viewed as a process *between* disparate culture groups, especially in the context of imperialism. Asymmetrical power relations have had a tendency to dominate interactions between Western and indigenous populations since the advent of the colonial mentality. The values, religious systems, languages and countless other cultural institutions of the oppressors were drilled into the oppressed while their labor and natural resources were being brutally extracted. Yet the African and South American enslaved populations did not fully discard their ancient traditions for the white man’s way, even when it appeared to the master that such was the

case. The oppressed societies employed enormous subtlety and wit to subsume their cultural systems beneath the colonizer's, resulting in a unique hybrid of resistance and continuity – certainly, the realm of the trickster figure. Indeed, the remaining space in this chapter will be used to discuss how tricksters were used as vehicles for or models of resistance by oppressed societies in the African Diaspora and South America.

To combat the cruelty of their masters, persecuted people in the New World skillfully employed deception and subterfuge, since direct rebellion was almost always crushed. Authority is often respected outwardly, but schemed against at the first opportunity. For instance, imagine a native person saluting the British officer one minute, then thumbing his nose when he turns away. Jonathan Hill has documented how the Wakuenai of Venezuela associate their trickster, Inapirrikuli, with this type of subversive behavior. He writes that,

“The Wakuenai are quite aware of the trickster's social meaning and openly compare Trickster's ability to turn the tables on his rivals with the coping mechanisms that men and women use in everyday social life to confront danger or difficulty. One elder explained the trickster's meaning to me by analogy with the present. If an indigenous man, he explained, is taken captive by soldiers because of some accusation against him, the man will show no fear or anger to the soldiers. Instead, he will be thinking all the time of a future moment when he will be able to destroy his captors, if necessary by resorting to witchcraft”(1996, 14).

The trickster acts as a model of opposition for the Wakuenai, as well as an inspiration to search out new ways of undermining the tyrannical power structure. A direct confrontation against these powers rarely succeeds; therefore, Inapirrikuli's mythic examples of disguise, irony and magic are taken up as the mode of resistance.

Elements of the trickster are implicit in the narration and recollection of class struggle among the Waukuenai. Hill recounts one such narrative (1996, 9), wherein the

historical figure of Venancio Camico, a charismatic leader and indigenous shaman, foiled the rubber baron turned dictator, Tomas Funes. The story holds that Funes' soldiers forced Venancio to accompany them to the military center of power, San Fernando de Atabapo, where they sealed him inside a coffin and lowered it to the bottom of the Orinoco River. Much like a trickster, Venancio magically frees himself from the coffin and returns to his village. The soldiers attempt the drowning another time to no avail and finally on the third try, the coffin is heavy when they raise it from the river. Funes demands that it be brought into his home and upon opening it, an enormous anaconda issues forth, spreading chaos and "resulting in the destruction of his military regime". A theme such as this one invokes the essence of Inapirrikuli for the Wakeunai and links the trickster to pressing concerns, demonstrating how profoundly mythic properties can influence a culture's perception of conflict and history.

Another trickster, Esu of the Yoruba tradition, also heavily influenced the mentality of resistance among subjugated New World peoples. The Africans who carried Esu with them, however, had but recently been shipped in chains to serve the colonial land owners. Their gods, like the people themselves, were forced to adapt in a new environment under horrible conditions. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that "if anything, Esu, upon his emergence from the Middle Passage, assumed more functions and even a fuller presence within black cosmologies than he had in Africa"(1988, 31). Traditional traits associated with the trickster, such as his mischevousness and indeterminacy, were embellished and given a destructive spin – not surprising, considering the rage that must have dominated the people's lives. Gates goes

on to note that “in Brazil, in enslavement, black followers of Esu represented him as the liberator of the slaves and enemy of the enslavers - killing, poisoning, and driving mad their oppressors”. New World Africans saw in Esu a force which was ancient, powerful, potentially dangerous and had a tendency to shake up the existing order of things. What better figure to inspire a glimmer of hope and resistance in a truly hopeless situation?

For the enslaved African people, Esu coalesced into an archetype of their struggle against subjugation. The nature of this struggle was multi-faceted – exhibiting extreme subtlety in one context and bloody revolt in another. Yet rebellion was the only choice for the black slaves. In America, the ideology which fueled the white master (namely, a relentless, all-consuming capitalist greed) ran utterly against the grain of traditional African notions of community and sharing. Black people saw in their masters a flagrant hypocrisy, due in part to the “pious” plantation owners who went to church, preached Christ’s compassion, then proceeded to thrash and rape their slave women. The African world view did not originally contain the referential equipment necessary to fathom the *Anglo-Zeitgeist* and matrix of exploitation that would engulf their people. I urge the reader to momentarily imagine being kidnapped, blindfolded, tortured and then ejected into an alien land which is populated by a society closely resembling a beehive. You are a drone with an existence only useful as labor. You are unable to speak the queen’s language or relate to her customs. Any expression of your heritage or thirst for freedom is punished with the lash. Lastly, you realize the land of your ancestors is now far out of reach and there is no chance of return.

To a great extent, you have just empathized with the experience of the African slave in the Americas. In their attempt to maintain cohesion and identity, the slaves held fast to old myths and divine figures, such as the trickster. Femi Euba argues that, “Esu was an ever-present consciousness among the slaves of the New World; he was the black dynamic that was violated and provoked by the white community of slaveholders, overseers, slavemasters, proslavery advocates, and so on”(1989, 103). Much of what Esu, Legba and the other tricksters embodied for the people of West Africa (such as a multi-vocal language system and a general celebration of indeterminacy) was utterly without comparison in the cosmology of the white master. Anglo-Americans were, and continue to be, driven by strict classification and Aristotelian logic. Needless to say, Esu and Aristotle would not share many views if they were to speak in the street.

The slave masters drew from the symbolic material readily at hand in their religion to deal with the complexity of Esu by mis-associating him with Satan. For the West African slaves (and many other culture groups), elements of good and evil were accepted as co-existing forces in every person and spirit – a notion articulated in the ambivalence of their trickster figures. Christian masters, however, took the propitiation of Esu simply as further evidence of their slaves’ inherent tendency towards demonic behavior. The rationale of the fervently devout white community in dealing with such issues as “witchcraft” in Salem, and Esu among the slaves comes through in the equation, Different/Confusing/Unclassifiable = Black/Inferior/Terrifying = Satan. Unified/Conforming/Logical = White/Superior/Holy = God.

In contrast to the complex mingling of semantic hue in African world views, slavemasters typically constructed their reality in terms of white and black. As boundary crosser and instigator, the trickster then was a likely candidate for the divine, implicit force behind slave revolts. Euba claims that the slaves' "violent attempts at freedom eventually led to the Civil War by bringing an awareness of the inhumanity of the peculiar institution, which justifies Esu's role as 'manumitter'"(1989, 105). Ironically, at least in mine and Euba's arguments, the master had reason to fear Esu, as it was the trickster's example of subtle and deceptive resistance that helped to eventually lead the slaves out from under white bondage.

One of the greatest challenges the New World African faced was to maintain kinship ties, cultural values and religious systems in a living climate designed by the elite class specifically to strip them away. Plantation owners and colonial governments harshly punished the practice of traditional religions and customs by Africans, resulting in a large-scale scheme of deception which worked to mask black beliefs from white eyes. "Violently and radically abstracted from their civilizations", says Gates, "these Africans nevertheless carried within them to the Western hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose by acts of will not to forget"(1988, 4). In the Caribbean Diaspora for instance, African slaves refused to fully discard their ancient spirits for the Catholic system forced upon them by missionaries. They found similarities between Catholic saints and Old World spirits, slipping the later beneath the former so that a master might not even notice Shango, the Yoruba god of lightning, was being venerated rather than St. John. Over time, this

process of syncretization created novel religious systems such as Orisa in Trinidad and Vodoun in Haiti. Yet at the outset, the oppressed Africans were striving simply to maintain the favor of their deities through continued sacrifice and worship. Esu, with his astute cunning and duplicity, was surely invoked to help bring about this vital celebration of tradition, literally in the face of the persecutors.

While discussing this hybridization of Catholic and African religious systems with Funso Aiyejina, a Yoruba scholar at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad, he noted how “it was *there* that New World Africans demonstrated the notion of masquerade – at a sublime level”. Masquerade, as it was imported from Africa, consists of a public ceremony during which people dance in elaborate costume, usually under possession by a particular spirit. In the New World, masquerade was elaborated upon and made the central core of what is now called Carnival. This four month long party originated in Trinidad but now occurs (usually in modified form) in cities such as Rio de Janeiro, Miami, New York, New Orleans (as Mardi Gras) and other places with a considerable Afro-Caribbean population. What Mr. Aiyejina refers to in his comment above is the satirical and subversive qualities originally associated with masquerade. For centuries, Carnival has been a phenomenon of the lower classes, a time when the power hierarchy topples and the poor control the streets. The masks, some of which take months to construct, often express social and political commentary that would warrant severe punishment any other time of year. Masquerade for the New World African embodies the notion of critique and resistance through *selective* assimilation to the dominator culture.

Certainly, the most dynamic element of expression for the Africans as they were forcibly assimilated in the New World was their language. The mode of speech taken up by the slaves situated their current struggles within an established linguistic tradition. As with the example of religion, black slaves created a language which spoke on more levels than the one heard by the master. They subtly critiqued the white oppressor while appearing to reassure him, and upheld identity while promising conformity. Once again, Esu emerges from the closely guarded ancestral consciousness of the African people to color their voices with irony and foster in them multi-semantic inflections. Language, to a great extent, stands at the core of the trickster figure. He adds layers of meanings to words, toys with their interpretations, creates paradox and celebrates the fertility of communication. Considering then what I have noted about slave language use, Esu becomes very important in understanding the development of the black vernacular tradition in the New World.

One of the key facets of this black vernacular is the privileging of a figurative or implied meaning over the literal, face-value interpretation. Gates devotes much of his book, *The Signifyin' Monkey*, to exploring the roots of this concept and its implications for African-American speech. The figure after which he titled his book embodies the subversive, ironic language system of the black slave as it moves up through history and becomes ingrained in the American population. Gates suggests, "the Signifyin' Monkey emerges from his mysteriously beclouded Afro-American origins as Esu's first cousin, if not his American heir. It is as if Esu's friend, the monkey, left his side at Havana and swam to New Orleans"(1988, 20). Monkey in effect becomes a specifically Afro-

American trickster, grounded in folklore and other vernacular expression. He ushers in Esu's legacy from the Old World and applies it to new contexts, new media, and new struggles in the lives and language of blacks.

Trickery in African-American speech has long been an indicator of socio-political relations with the white ruling class. Up until a relatively recent period, black people in America had little influence over their government, education or social status. Most attempts by blacks to critique and manipulate the power structure were dismissed or used as grounds for persecution. Hence, ever since the slave era, much of what African-Americans truly wanted to say had to be couched in ironic, ambiguous terms. This is the realm where Signifyin' takes place, a concept which Gates defines as "black people colonizing a white sign". The capitalization of the term distinguishes it from its use in standard English. He goes on to argue that,

"some black genius or a community of witty and sensitive speakers emptied the signifier 'signification' of its received concepts and filled this empty signifier with their own concepts. By doing so, by supplanting the received, standard English concept associated by white convention with this particular signifier, they (un)wittingly disrupted the nature of the sign = *signified/signifier* equation itself"(1988, 46).

Language became the principal vehicle of resistance for the slave (and later the oppressed black citizen), since white people rarely understood the mechanisms of Signifyin' enough to realize they were being scorned, laughed at and plotted against. Haughty whites mistook Signifyin' as the fumbling of African-Americans with a language too complicated for them – further bolstering the stereotype of them as ignorant and inferior. Ironically, the African-Americans were in fact adding complex layers of implication to white English, which resulted in a black vernacular better suited to their own ends.

The duality embodied by Esu and other trickster figures courses through the language of the Signifyin' Monkey. W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of a "double-consciousness" does well to articulate the complicated nature of African-American discourse – a discourse which takes root in the fact that not all is what it seems (1915, 231). More than one agenda is played out in an expression that Signifies. The Old World legacy which Esu imparted upon Monkey had everything to do with a mirrored – perhaps even holographic-projection of reality, a juxtaposition of meaning and a rich layering of interpretation in language. We can see then how these cultural heirlooms were dusted off and brought to bear by blacks in the climate of racial oppression here in America.

The black linguistic consciousness of Signifyin' has both borrowed from and reacted against the "standard" English system. It is more instrumental to view the black vernacular tradition as *perpendicular* to standard English, rather than running parallel with it. Regarding this interesting relationship, Gates notes that, "the play of doubles occurs precisely on the axes, on the threshold or at Esu's crossroads, where black and white semantic fields collide"(1988, 46). The rhetoric of Signifyin' is more than an information transmitter. For one, it has subtly encoded some important intricacies of the West African cosmology (Esu, for example) so that, in spite of slave masters' attempts to eradicate these ancestral forces, they may continue to influence black people's lives in America. Also, the Signifyin' voice resonates with undertones of satire and parody. Early African-Americans took up the language of their oppressors, yet they manipulated certain tones and implications in such a way that it would lash back with finely honed

wit, masked in the subterfuge of *itself*. Up through the centuries, this element of the black vernacular has continued to be a cohesive and empowering force in the black community, constituting in a very real sense how identity is formed and struggle mobilized.

The two forms of expression which most clearly demonstrate the trickster's presence in New World African consciousness are music and comedy. Rooted in the slave era, the social commentary and biting satire embedded within these media still retain integral importance for the black community today. Listen to nearly any true hip-hop album, or Public Enemy's "Don't Believe the Hype", and the language of Signifyin' will shine through in one of its modern incarnations. Hip-hop, like jazz and blues before it, creates a novel dialect by selecting tropes from the musical and linguistic landscapes at large and re-presenting them in a manner which speaks specifically to the contemporary African-American situation. Music is one of the primary vehicles by which individuals may contribute to a greater struggle for identity and racial equality.

The legacy of resistance through music stretches back far and wide in the New World African experience. Calypso, for example, emerged from the black population during the early nineteenth century in Trinidad as an entertaining form social satire. During my field session in 1998, I was afforded the opportunity to speak with Hollis Liverpool, a.k.a. "The Mighty Chalkdust", a historian of Caribbean music and arguably the most respected Calypsonian still alive in Trinidad. Mr. Liverpool argued that Calypso is essentially a "twisting" of language and its meaning. Charismatic singers did improvisation for white soldiers and officials as they made their rounds and came into the

slums for prostitutes. The colonizers enjoyed the bawdy tunes and tossed coins to the early Calypsonians. Mr. Liverpool notes that “slave masters and Brits would laugh – not knowin’ they were laughin’ at themselves”.

Over time, Calypso developed into a lower-class institution of sorts, with a broader field of commentary. Before 1924, only white people (comprising 10% of the population) could vote in Trinidad. Therefore, Calypso songs took on the role of political critique, social satire and tabloid. Singers often registered black opinion, then formulated it into sharp, satirical verse. With the introduction of radio during WWI, popular Calypsos were heard all across the island, informing the black community of social issues, uniting people around a cause and occasionally stirring them to action. In their struggle against political oppression, black Trinidadians have found the subversive language of Calypso to be a unique weapon – one both enjoyable and effective.

Humor and music also played a key role in the experience of black slaves in America. Zora Neale Hurston, in her groundbreaking African-American folklore writings of the early 40’s (*The Sanctified Church* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*), carefully explores the significance of the savior/trickster figure – High John De Conquer. She recounts,

“There was High John playing his tricks of making a way out of no way. Hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick. Winning the jackpot with no other stake but a laugh. He could beat it all, and what made it so cool, finish it off with a laugh. So they pulled the covers up over their souls and kept them from all hurt, harm and danger and made them a laugh and a song”(1983, 70).

The slaves told tales of High John to lift their spirits and maintain hope through the drudgery of their everyday lives. In the fields, folk songs passed the time, as well as affording the slaves a discourse usually misunderstood by white masters. The songs often made use of a Signifyin' humor, wherein the master and his hypocritical ways were parodied. Most importantly, a figure such as High John and the laughter he invoked from the slaves bolstered their resolve. We see this in Hurston's account of a tale in which High John reassures some slaves after their master promises them a night of hard labor.

“Don't pay what he say no mind. You know where you got something finer than this plantation and anything it's got on it, put away. Ain't that funny? Us got all that, and he don't know nothing at all about it. Don't tell him nothing. Nobody don't have to know where us gets our pleasure from. Come on. Pick up your hoes and let's go'. 'Ain't that funny?' Aunt Diskie laughed and hugged herself with secret laughter. 'We got all the advantage, and Old Massa think he got us tied!'"(1983, 78).

Strength comes to the slaves through their maintenance of Du Bois' "double-consciousness" – a mentality of secrecy filled with barbed jokes, Signifyin' songs and dreams of the Promised Land.

Barbed jokes, like Signifyin' songs, did not disappear with slavery. African-American comedy as a source of social critique has persisted through the last several centuries. In fact, I would argue that there exists an unbroken genealogy of black Signifyin' comics, beginning with Esu in West Africa, then moving to High John and Monkey, Red Fox, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock today. All of these figures are "provocative challengers who play the fool", in the words of Father Joseph Brown. Armed with their scathing wit, black comics wage war on the racial injustice in

our country. Ironically, the cuts are quite often so quick and clean a white audience does not even realize it was hit. Those elite comedians most in tune with Esu's charisma can combine elements of bawdy sexuality, social satire and self-degradation – weaving them seamlessly into a commentary that resembles a piece of Halloween candy concealing a razorblade. As with the Calypso of old, black comedy which Signifies often brings white audiences to hysterical laughter, even though we Caucasians are in effect laughing at ourselves.

Esu, the African trickster, surely smiles when circumstances such as these continue to emerge from the precedent of irony and duality which he first celebrated in the consciousness of his Old World followers. Here in America, the plight of those followers demanded that his legacy become more applicable to pressing concerns. In all of the cultures where he exists, Trickster is believed to facilitate the transition from old to new, and promote the creation of novelty out of established traditions. As Robert Pelton aptly notes, “he is always betwixt and between, but even when the friction caused by his agility sets the world ablaze, its heat offers the possibility of a fusion of opposing forces”(1980, 148). The trickster juggles elements of experience in order to produce more relevant or meaningful hybrids within his culture.

As a result of colonialism, hybridization also began to occur on a large scale in oppressive interactions between cultures. Some of the subjugated peoples indigenous to West Africa and South America viewed their tricksters as models of resistance to the imperialist forces. By taking up the multi-vocality of Esu, American slaves and later black citizens managed to maintain their identity while subtly critiquing the power

structure at the same time. Trickster figures are central to an understanding of how their cultures manipulate the various processes of change that invariably determine history, both on societal and global levels.

Concluding Remarks on the Utility of “Trickster Theory”

As unlikely as it may seem, I suggest that elements of the trickster offer a provocative model for cultural anthropology as it moves into a new century. The discipline itself is very much in a liming state, striving to maintain relevance after the splintering self-critique of post modernism. Various theorists have presented ways to navigate this turbulent passage, though none have rivaled the clarity and depth of Bruce Knauff in his *Genealogies for the Present in Cultural Anthropology* (1996). Many of the tenants Knauff urges ethnographers to embrace in this book I believe are very much in the nature of Trickster. This mythic figure embodies the forces which mediate and juxtapose the segments of our lived human experience. Similarly, Knauff asserts the need for “complementarity” in ethnography, wherein multiple perspectives and theoretical influences are mediated so as to best articulate a subject (1996, 3). Only by carefully weaving together the myriad strands of existing interpretation and our own observation may we further a truly informed scholarship.

As an ethnographic model, the trickster would also instill upon the researcher a heavy dose of reflexivity, both in the actual fieldwork process and in writing. We have seen, in numerous examples from this thesis, that all is not what it appears to be. In Trinidad and Haiti, African slaves developed subtle and deceptive religious systems which maintained their ancestral beliefs – right under the masters’ noses. American slaves fostered their hidden resistance in the songs and laughter of High John. This is not to say that an ethnographer will always elicit a deceptive response from the people s/he studies. However, in numerous societies observed by anthropologists (certainly those

which imagine trickster figures), a celebration of irony and trickery continues to color individual consciousness. Whether for political reasons or simply for a laugh at the outsider's expense, it is not uncommon for an ethnographer to be hoodwinked by indigenous informants. Malinowski outlined this problem in his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) by stressing attention to three separate levels: what people say they do, what they say they should do, and what they actually do. Therefore, the trickster through his example reminds ethnographers to be shrewd and cautious in their observation.

In writing, careful attention to reflexivity keeps the researcher aware of implications his or her voice may have on the subject. Knauff also praises “a reflexive critique that examines the history, politics and strategic voicing of authorship and the voices and texts we rely on. It now seems crucial if not axiomatic that ethnography must be critically aware of its own relationship to power and representation”(1996, 46). To push a step further, I suggest it should be a goal of anthropology to expose the injustices of the colonial mentality (and any injustice, for that matter) whenever they are found. Far too often in the history of the discipline, ethnographers have allowed assumed positions of power over their subjects to shape the research or even detrimentally influenced them by selling out as glorified spies to imperialist governments³. In order to fully bury this tainted legacy and move on more honorably, anthropology must resurrect DuBois' notion of double-consciousness. Knauff suggests that, for ethnographers, “culture and life can provide a double consciousness informed by complementary goals that have ethical as

³ Ethnographic data collected by early twentieth century British anthropologists, for example, was used by the Crown to more efficiently enforce domination in their colonies.

well as intellectual value: the appreciation of human diversity and the critique of inequality”(1996, 61). I view this as a charge to take up the trickster’s duality, empty it of its deceptive thrust and resculpt it as a tool for sensitive subjective fieldwork observations.

I can confidently state that Western Academia is one of the most vocal proponents of individual freedom in the world. Even as Ronald Reagan was determining the political climate of America, most universities continued to be institutions that celebrated diversity, and spoke out for the oppressed in our global society. Knauff claims that the unique intellectual vigor of the University “affords opportunities for marshaling and encouraging resistance against disempowerment in the absence of sufficient power to overwhelm it directly”(1996, 269). This should sound strikingly similar to the mentality Trickster inspired among the African slaves in the New World! The oppressor has transformed from the predominantly white European slave owner to the predominantly white European multi-national corporate CEO. These neo-colonialists essentially continue the legacy of slavery by entering third-world nations, raping their ecosystems, bribing the government officials and siphoning out what little capital the economies may provide. One need only look to the affects of the Shell and Mobile oil companies in West Africa for examples.

A significant percentage of the research conducted by anthropologists occurs within these societies which are oppressed either by foreign corporate entities or tyrannical rulers supported by the American government. As cultural anthropology attempts to redirect itself in this coming century, I suggest that more credence be given to

the power ethnography holds in the struggle to ensure basic human rights for those who have had their hopes and voices imprisoned. The dedicated and compassionate anthropologist can *be* that voice and continue to produce valid, intellectually stimulating material. They need not be conflicting interests.

One might argue, 'but how can a host of social scientists impact the juggernaut forces which maintain the oppressive systems in question?'. Unfortunately, a vast majority of the leveled accusations will scatter like so many arrows off a tank. However, with the information revolution in full swing, more incriminating evidence is being distributed to a greater number of people across the world. This results in vivid photographs of oil spills, cover stories of Nike sweatshops in Korea and documentaries on impoverished Brazilian coffee farmers – in various media, but always on the Internet, updated every minute. Action is often mobilized when atrocity presents itself repeatedly and unmistakably in front of a large enough percentage of the population. The cigarette industry stands as a solid example. Only in the past several years, information regarding the subversive advertising and addictive chemicals used by this parasitic corporation (a perfect model of the capitalist force I have been describing) finally proliferated enough to elicit a response. The government had previously found no fault with the multi-billion dollar industry, undoubtedly due to their huge tax revenues and lobbying bribes. Yet in 1998, the public outrage grew to a proportion which flipped the balance and gave U.S. officials no choice but to come down on the side of the people.

There is no way to estimate the scale of this information explosion as it moves into the next century, nor its effects upon the way people will demand and assert power.

I find it safe to assume, however, that as shared knowledge of inequality grows, so will activism. Journalism coverage of oppression is quick and often effective, yet a much more validated, and therefore compelling account must come from the anthropologist, who situates the argument in more deeply rooted historical, social and political processes. As anthropologists, if we were to wield language as a weapon, if we used our scholarship as a torch to expose injustice *while* it broadens knowledge, if we engaged the essence of the trickster –an essence which ignited resistance among the people with words and wit – then our discipline would champion the true spirit and purpose of the *humanities*.

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**Power and Paradox
in the Trickster
Figure**

Jacob Campbell

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The Reciprocal Nature of Spirit Possession in the Orisha Religion

The cornerstone of every religious system is the relationship between the divine and the devotees. All across the globe, this interaction takes myriad forms. In this essay, I will be dealing with the question of how this sacred link is constructed and maintained in the Orisha religion of Trinidad. Coming into this project, I hoped to develop a better understanding of spirit manifestation and its significance in Orisha. Another goal was to examine the place of Orisha within the context of Trinidadian culture. Finally, I wished to explore the “living”, dynamic quality of Orisha as a belief system which exists relatively free from constricting dogma and entrenched power asymmetry. I will begin with a brief review of the existing literature pertinent to my research, followed by a discussion of the problem of self in ethnographic data collection. Then I will present my findings from five weeks of living in the household of an Orisha family, participant observation in ‘ebos’ or feasts, and interviews with various devotees. Next will come an examination of my data in the light of earlier research. In the last section, I will draw together the various threads of my work with some insights on the powerful bond between spirits and mortals in Orisha.

The African Diaspora in the Caribbean and the place of spirit possession within these communities have been researched extensively over the last half-century. Trinidad in particular has not drawn an extensive amount of attention in this context, but several very thorough studies do exist. Most notable of these is Spirits, Blood and Drums by James Houk, which was published in 1995. This work is a fairly comprehensive study of the Orisha religion in Trinidad. Houk discusses the syncretism of religious forms in Orisha, claiming the fusion of Catholic, Spiritual Baptist, and Hindu beliefs with the

Yoruba base has created a completely unique and iconographically complex religion in Trinidad. Maureen Warner Lewis's article, "Yoruba Religion in Trinidad", is based on an informant of hers, Titi, who Lewis uses as a case study and window into Orisha ideology. The focus of the essay is an examination of the various deities' aspects and how the worshipers incorporate them into daily life. Another useful Trinidadian study is Frances Mischel's dissertation from 1958, "A Shango Religious Group". In this work, Mischel closely analyses spirit possession and stresses the importance of this phenomenon to the Orisha system. He gives several detailed accounts of spirit manifestations, followed by a discussion on the distinctiveness of each deity in their "working" of the "horse".

On a broader level, Herskovits' classic article, "African Gods and Catholic Saints in New World Religious Belief" from 1937 is useful in understanding the syncretism of Catholic and Yoruba ideologies in Trinidad. The article begins with a analysis of historical and cultural aspects of the New World African's religious evolution. Herskovits' concludes with implications of the African and Catholic merge in sacred imagery, suggesting the similar aspects of both entities (saint and spirit) are united and celebrated in New World African religious systems. Lastly, I will utilize Joseph Murphy's book, Working the Spirit in order to better understand the nature of spirit possession. This work, published in 1994, examines numerous case studies of African-based spiritual religious systems in the New World. For one, it explores the role that spirit interaction plays in these religious communities. Murphy also digs into the "reciprocal" relationship between the spirits and worshipers, stressing the means by

which the spirit is “made” in everyday life and in the feast. All of these sources will be incorporated in order to develop a more useful picture of the Orisha belief system in Trinidad.

However, I must first discuss the effect my subjective lens has had on the painting of this picture. It is simply impossible to serve as a pure filter of observations when one is conducting field research. Subconsciously and (less often) consciously, our individual conceptions and identities color the way in which information is garnered. The goal of the ethnographer is to put his/her own religious, social and moral codes on the back burner while absorbing those of the culture being studied. Many things challenge this process, however. For example, I arrived in Trinidad with only the personal experience of a western, Anglo-Saxon concept of the role religion plays in people’s lives. Yet, rather than donning good clothes for an hour on Sunday and calling it religiosity, Orisha worshipers foster a spiritual relationship wherein their beliefs, service and deities themselves permeate every facet of their lives. This realization required a dramatic shift in my scope of reference and mindset in general. Also, I found that events I witnessed and people I spoke with were constantly challenging my personal concepts of the supernatural and faith in the Other. It is very difficult (as well as I believe somewhat alienating and counterproductive) to cling to a fierce skepticism while integrating oneself into a different belief system. Therefore, I have chosen to take a more insider-oriented stance in my research, rather than what Houk calls a “scientific and empirico-deductive” perspective(1995:120). Even though it is often tempered with empirical objectivity, my

description will incorporate elements of the spirits confronting me personally as well as other worshipers. I cannot ignore the relevance of my own interaction with the spirits or my difficulties in dealing with this interaction, so these components are carefully incorporated into my work.

Another aspect in which ethnographers must be wary of skewing their research is in balancing the weight of various informant's information. This was perhaps my greatest challenge throughout the course of my fieldwork, due to the conditions of my residence in Trinidad. I spent four weeks living in the home of Mother Doreen and Mr. Alvarez, an Orisha practicing couple who not only do spiritual work for the religious community but also hold a large annual ebo in the compound or 'palais' which was adjacent to the house. Throughout this time period, I learned an enormous amount about the structure of the religion, aspects of the deities and the Alvarezs' own personal beliefs. The information was invaluable; however, in order to develop a useful empirical account of my topic, the picture had to be drawn from a variety of sources. Therefore, while my intimate proximity to the Alvarezs allowed for a valuable case study, I strive in this essay to balance their views with those of my other informants in order to arrive at a more inclusive concept of the religion.

Through my interaction with the Orisha community, I developed a better understanding of the complex belief system and its links to Trinidadian culture. Orisha has been deeply intertwined within the nation's culture since African slaves first arrived on the island in the late 1700's. I quickly learned that many aspects of Afro-Trinidadian cultural heritage are closely bound to one another. Mr. Alvarez commented on this

association during an interview at his dining room table one evening. He is a thick shouldered man in his late sixties, with a white beard and deep-set eyes. His speech comes carefully chosen and well thought out. Mr. Alvarez emphatically stated that the Orisha religion is Afro-Trinidadian culture – all is related. Kalinda stick fights and Carnival, for example, began with the freed slaves, who were practicing their ancestral Yoruba religious beliefs under the guise of Catholicism. Therefore, the roots of Carnival and Orisha are buried in the same ground. According to Mr. Alvarez, drumming was and continues to be the thread that weaves through all of the African-based facets of Trinidadian culture. The tempos are often very similar, whether it is for an Orisha ebo or Carnival jam in the streets. The colonial government banned these drums, due to the sensual nature of the rhythms and also as a means of repressing the Orisha worshipers.

In an interview with Funso Aiyejina, he discussed the consistent subversion of these repressors throughout the African legacy on Trinidad. Mr. Aiyejina is from Nigeria, lectures in literature at the University of the West Indies and is also an Orisha devotee. He claimed that the African knack for masquerade contributed to many aspects of their cultural evolution in Trinidad. Yoruba religious beliefs were embedded within the Catholic framework so that the slaves could maintain their form of worship without persecution. By the turn of the nineteenth century, this African-based religion had incorporated aspects of Catholicism to the point where a new meaning system was born, called Orisha. However, the Yoruba deities and concepts of spirit interaction remains at the core of the religion. Mr. Aiyejina said the hidden meanings of Calypso songs, the unspoken commentary of Carnival dancers and the veiling of the Orisha beliefs all show

how “the New World African demonstrates the notion of masquerade – at a sublime level”(Aiyejina 1998). From the examples discussed by these men, we can see how Orisha has been and continues to be an important element of African cultural evolution in Trinidad.

The lifeblood of the Orisha religion is a palpable relationship between the spirits and worshipers. This relationship exists in two very different forms- in everyday life and in an ebo. I will deal with these aspects separately, beginning with the former. As I mentioned above, spiritual belief runs through every part of a devout Orisha worshiper’s life. This was made most clear through interviews with and observations of my host, Mrs. Alvarez. Mother Doreen is a sharp-featured woman of about sixty years with warm eyes and a ready smile. She always wears her head tied with a red ‘dodo’, in veneration to her patron spirit, Ogun. A gold star stud also lays against her nose, which she says was given by Ogun to “mark” her. I soon realized that Mother Doreen’s identity was intrinsically bound to Ogun. Their bond is one of reciprocity.

Along the inside of a cement wall which stands in front of the house, the Alvarezs have ten ‘perogun’ or stools devoted to individual spirits. Each stool is painted the shade attributed to that deity and also has a bamboo pole flying a specific flag overhead. The Alvarezs, along with the other Orisha shrine owners, maintain these perogun daily. Depending on the tastes of the spirits, this requires a constant supply of rum, wine, oil and candles to be on the stool. Mother Doreen calls this “feeding the spirits”. She gives a majority of her energy to Ogun’s stool, over which stands the tallest of the bamboo poles – nearly thirty feet high. A statue of St. Michael, the Catholic equivalent to Ogun,

sits back within the blood red alcove. A bottle of rum and the horns of numerous goats that were offered to the spirit during the last ebo also characterize the dominant perogun. Lastly, the hilt of a cutlass protrudes from the center, marking Ogun as the god of war and steel. In return for this dutiful veneration, Ogun showers many blessings on Mother Doreen. She recounted a time when she was in the hospital with a fractured ankle and the doctors were having trouble. She said Ogun then came in the room and directed the proceedings so that it was properly set and casted. Health and strength are her main blessings. With Ogun's help, she states confidently that she will live to be one hundred years old and judging from her youthful vigor presently, I would not be at all surprised. One other facet of Mother Doreen's link to Ogun is her evening meditations. As I would retire some nights, the thick scent of tobacco smoke would waft out of her darkened room. She explained later that Ogun had given her a pipe to smoke and he comes to her with advice through meditation. This is when she often receives help in dealing with the problems of her spiritual children. By heeding Ogun's call, Mother Doreen has stepped into a give and take relationship which is reconfirmed daily in a host of powerful ways.

This reciprocal interaction between deity and human is most dynamically manifested during an Orisha feast, called the ebo. Months of preparation go into these annual events, which normally last for five nights. Each night is associated with specific spirits and their sacrifices are made accordingly. The first ebo I attended was the opening of a feast in Sangre Grande, which is called "Ogun night". Smoke from a large fire at the gate rose up as a beacon in the moonlight and several men limed near the flames as I approached. The main ceremonial structure is called a palais. This evening, palm fronds

and white flowers adorned the walls and numerous support beams of the tin-roofed edifice. Benches lined the four walls and candles stood in each corner. People began to steadily fill these benches - mostly middle-aged women with their heads tied with red dodos for Ogun. After a short litany of Christian prayers, the drums kicked up in a frenzy and calls for the spirits to join us rang out through the ancient Yoruba songs.

When a spirit manifests itself in an ebo, the Orisha worshipers have their faith confirmed and feel their sacrifices rewarded. Mr. Aiyejina said that the ebo serves to “concretize the relationship between human and spirit which is always present”(Aiyejina 1998). Great precision and energy goes into making the offerings required by the spirits. Serious problems can occur when these sacred mandates are not properly carried out. In the ebo described above, for example, Ogun finally settled on a wiry man dressed all in red. He danced with vigor to the drumbeats for some time, occasionally pausing to lock someone in a fierce embrace. Before long, he began to call for a cutlass, which is his preferred “tool”. An old machete was produced and the spirit danced with it for several minutes before a pained expression spread across his face. With quick, ecstatic movements, he pulled his hand across the blade to show that it was dull. I also noticed that the tip was bent badly. Mother Doreen struggled to find a better weapon, but none were available and the spirit fled displeased as the wiry man dropped to the ground, unconscious. Since Ogun is expected to plant the cutlass in the palais floor to open the ebo, this was a very inconvenient and even dangerous failure in service on the part of the feast holders. As a result, I could feel the energy of the ceremony ebb for the remainder of the evening and no more spirits manifested themselves.

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While the accommodation of the spirits as they are manifested is important, the true veneration in an ebo is the blood sacrifice. Many shrine owners maintain small stables or pens for hoofed animals and fowl year-round in their compound. This results in a substantial monetary and physical strain for the worshiper. Mother Doreen stated that due to the huge toll the yearlong feast preparation was taking on her, she had once nearly given up, but a spirit came and asked her to persevere. Two nights later in the Sangre Grande ebo I witnessed the offering. It was Shango night, so a sheep was to be slain. Seven women holding roosters danced in a circle, along with the *mongba*, or shrine head, who led the sheep. The songs and drums whipped into a crescendo as the animals were carefully anointed with oils and fed corn, rum, milk and water. A procession then led into the adjoining *chappelle*, which is a small, dimly lit room where the altar stands and the spirits' tools are stored. Candles were placed in each of the corners or 'stools' and the *mongba* moved over to one in the back that was associated with Shango. The sheep was forced to kneel and its head was severed over the stool. Shouts of "Shango!" rang out and nearly every person in the chapelle convulsed after being "hit" by a spirit. The smell of fresh blood, pale dawn light and driving drumbeats filled the air. The women then filed towards the sacred corner, first having the fowl rubbed over their bodies before seeing it slain. Before long, the *obi* seeds were cast and it was interpreted that Shango had accepted the sacrifice.

One of the main means in which the spirits show their gratitude for the offerings and their general interest in the worshipers is through interaction during an ebo. The devotee benefits from the spirit's presence in two ways: a manifested Orisha initiates an

exchange with them or the person actually may serve as the “horse” of the spirit. In regards to the first context, worshipers often utilize the opportunity of meeting with divine forces for prophetic purposes. Mr. Alvarez recounted several instances in which the spirits had worked to help a devotee. Shango came to one woman and asked her not to proceed with a flight she was booked on. When the evening arrived, lightning and thunder raged through the sky (which are the aspects of Shango) so the woman did not board. She learned later that the plane had crashed, killing numerous people. In another case, a girl was approached by a spirit during an ebo and was warned emphatically against something nobody else present but she could understand. A week later, word spread that she had been arrested on cocaine charges. She apparently did not heed the warning. Spirits also uplift the ebo participants. During the first night of the Sangre Grande feast, Ogun (‘riding’ the wiry man in red) came to Mother Doreen and put his arms on her shoulders. With wild, glassy eyes and garbled speech, he explained how she had started with “small beasts” but now gave him “big beasts” and his “belly is full”. He stressed that good things are in store for her. This not only imbues Mother Doreen with hope and affirms that her heavy sacrifice is acknowledged, but it also reinstates her position of power in front of the Orisha community. When Ogun’s favor is openly displayed in such a manor, her status is reconfirmed as that of an elder Mother.

The most intimate relationship one can have with a spirit is to be possessed during an ebo. Through the course of my fieldwork, I found this phenomenon to be both the most intriguing and the most complicated facet of the Orisha religion. While there are some distinct expectations of a manifested spirit’s activities, the perspectives on

possession and the way in which it occurs varies considerably among the worshipers. Some people retain a bit of their own identity when the spirit “takes” them and they view what their body is doing, as if standing next to it. Others regain consciousness after a possession and have no recollection of the experience whatsoever. Therefore, it appears as if spirit manifestation exists as a highly ambivalent, but equally sacred occurrence.

Overriding all confusion and ambivalence, however, is the strong sense of reward and privilege which emanates from the possession experience in the mind of the devotee. According to a variety of my informants, a portion of the spirit’s energy remains in the “horse” after the possession is completed. This life force is called *ashe* in Yoruba. *Ashe* can have various effects on a worshiper, but it is always empowering. In an interview with the *Baba*, who is a chief elder in the Orisha religion, he described *ashe* as “a livewire that makes you feel superhuman”(Baba 1998). Mr. Alvarez also commented on the divine nature of *ashe*, claiming it “makes you feel like a god”(Alvarez 1998). During the offering on Shango night at Sangre Grande, I felt the *ashe* building in the *chapelle*. After the sheep head had been placed on the altar, roosters were slain and their blood smeared on the foreheads of the women who had held them. Fierce ecstasy controlled the faces of these women as they danced with their *ashe*. It led their steps and filled their hearts with the energy of the spirits.

Ashe also serves as a source of sustenance and healing in times of need. One afternoon Mother Doreen explained the role spiritual energy plays for her during the week of her ebo. She said, “the spirit dance in me, so my body don’t feel hungry”(M.D. 1998). Other than liquids, she consumes no nourishment – the spirits sustain her

throughout the five day feast. This is phenomenal, considering the amount of constant preparation, concentration and general exhaustion that is involved in holding an ebo. After a manifestation, she feels “lighter” and “refreshed”. Mr. Alvarez related a story of an old crippled man who once attended their ebo. At one point, a spirit came on him and he threw away the stick to dance! The *Baba* also stressed the healing effects of the *ashe* imparted by the spirits. Overall, it seems Orisha worshipers find *ashe* to be the gift of the gods.

The incorporation of previous research will serve to shed light on the findings presented above. In regards to the African religious evolution on Trinidad, Herskovits claims that it was brought about by “a syncretistic reaction which takes over the outer forms of the European religion but retains for a long time the inner and deeper meanings of the native religious practices and value systems(1937:492). As I noted, these “retained” aspects of culture permeated through nearly every facet of the Afro-Trinidadian’s life. The Orisha religion worked to fuse together against the winds of oppression that raged through much of the island’s history. Murphy argues that members of New World African spiritual members “share an elevated sense of solidarity against injustice and a commitment to the protection and advancement of their communities”(1994:2). This is evident in the cohesive and subversive nature of the masquerade which Mr. Aiyejina has depicted in various aspects of Trinidadian culture.

Not only is the Orisha religion an intrinsic strand of the Trinidadian cultural web, but James Houk also argues that spirit possession links the worshipers to their culture. He claims that “a large pantheon of possessing spirits also provides a variety of roles

through which individuals may express themselves in ways that mirror the various sociocultural and gender-based roles that exist in the society”(Houk 1995:115). In various instances, I witnessed moral codes and cultural norms upheld through spiritual mandates. The Alvarezs often commented on the fact that the spirits favored them on account of their “living the clean life”, which is as much a cultural concept as a spiritual one. Overall, the secular and spiritual aspects of the Orisha devotees’ lives do indeed reflect and merge with one another.

One of the main currents in the literature on New World African spirit possession is the concept of human worshipers “making” the spirit a part of this world. As Murphy notes, “the spirit is manufactured by human action, ‘worked’ from more basic spiritual force into the special force or personality to be revered”(1994:180). This suggests that a vast and powerful responsibility is placed on the devotees, which I believe is confirmed by numerous elements of my research. The cost and inconvenience of maintaining sacrificial animals is one such example. Many offerings, large and small, are made to the Orishas daily, but all is given from the heart with the faith that blessings will be returned to them. These blessings are seen, heard and felt when the spirits come into a feast. Lewis calls the ebo “the pivotal expression of man’s relationship with the divine”(1978:26). It is here that the devout worshiper is lifted up by the interaction with the spirits and imbued with hope.

Just as there are many ways to serve the spirit, there are also many ways they serve the worshipers. Mischel claims that the most common helpful activities of a benevolent spirit are to “do divining, deliver messages, give advice and prescribe

medicines”(1958:78). He also discusses gifts of power that are bestowed to devout worshipers in dreams and visions by spirits, which is called “falling (under the spirit) without the drum”(Mischel 1958:81). This seems to be the interaction that Mother Doreen has in the evening with Ogun. Due to her steadfast resilience in serving him, Ogun comes to her outside of the *palais* and without drums, which is relatively rare.

The other form of reward that I dealt with in my work is the *ashe* bestowed on worshipers in an ebo. Lewis defines *ashe* as “a vital force or energy – everything which exhibits power, whether in action or in passive resistance like that of the boulders”(1978:21). This last concept works remarkably well when applied to the plight of the African community throughout most of Trinidad’s history. *Ashe* would have been a treasured force indeed, as a wellspring of “passive resistance” to the repression of a ruling European minority. In today’s Orisha community, *ashe* is received from the spirits and spread between people. Murphy states that “one grows in the spirit only when one shares it with others in ceremonies”(1994:182). Unless everyone joins in wholeheartedly to sing, dance and drum in an ebo, the spirits will scorn the gathering and nobody will receive their energy. Yet through the positive “work of rhythm, song, and movement, the spirit is manifested through a person’s body to gladden, guide and heal the community”(Murphy 1994:195). This is the ideal outcome of an Orisha feast.

The Orisha religion is a living, changing set of beliefs which maintains a close bond between the spirit and mortal worlds. I found the lack of a prescribed, entrenched code of dogma to be more of a blessing to the religion than a detriment. The spirits are fluid and malleable, as is the natural world. Mr. Aiyejina epitomized this with his

comment that in Nigeria, Shango, the god of lightening, is used as the symbol of the national electrical company. This is not a corporate sell-out; it is an incorporation of the old with the new; which goes to say that Orisha deities are evolving along with humanity. I would suggest that the worshipers work hard to maintain a constant mode of exchange with their divinity, thereby modifying the religious system perpetually in order to keep it relevant to the needs of the people.

I found that a steady cord of faithful service was wrapped around much of the lives of Orisha devotees. Murphy skillfully sums this up by saying “the reciprocity of Diaspora spirituality is affirmed: service to the spirit is service to the community and service to the community is service to the spirit. Service is revealed to be the central value of communal life”(1994:7). Mr. Aiyejina stated that he harnesses his *ashe*, serves the community and venerates the spirits all through his writing. Mother Doreen spends any energy she has left over from “feeding the spirits” on the problems of her spiritual children.

This reciprocal interaction of the Orishas and mortals spins in a cyclical motion, which accomplishes several things. First, it fosters respect for and veneration of ancestral heritage. Secondly, the cycle is never the same twice. It shifts and evolves with every new element of the worshipers’ lives. Also, the religious community is brought closer together through shared interaction with the spirits. Finally, the devout worshiper can feel the actual energy of divinity course through their being. They gain strength, insight and hope from the spirits. In return, the deities are supplicated and Orisha lives on for the people of Trinidad.

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