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# Eshu-Elegba: The Yoruba Trickster God

JOHN PEMBERTON

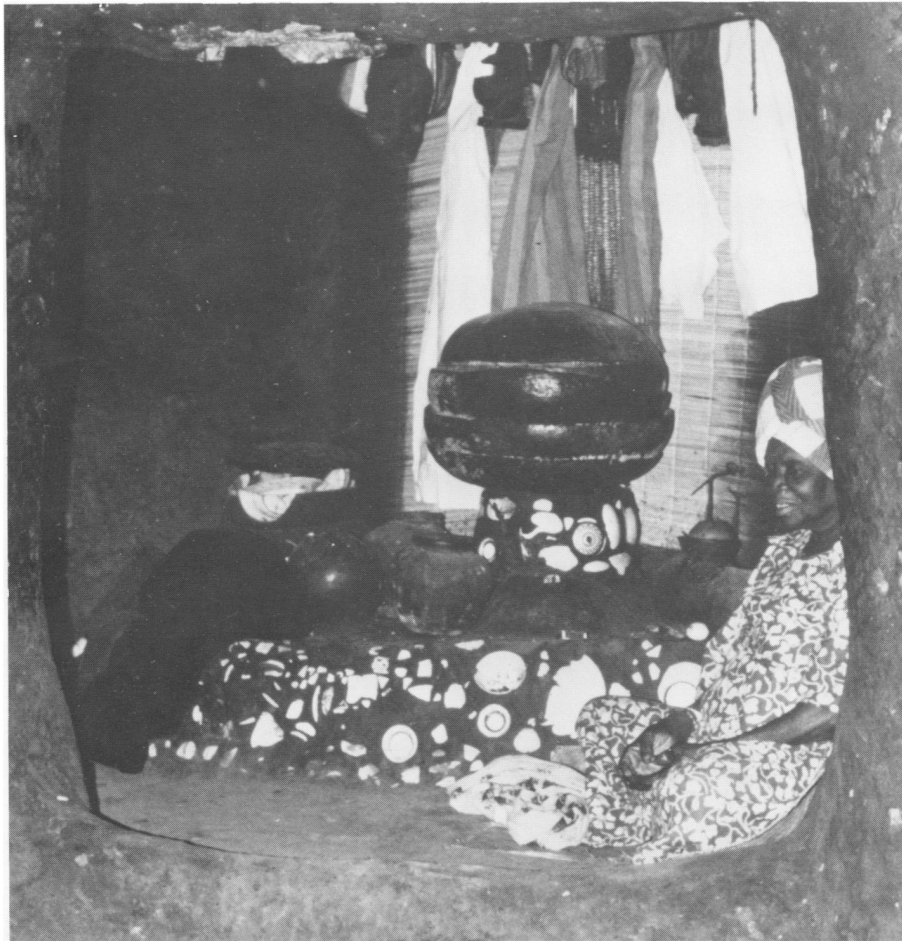
At the entrance of almost every compound in the Yoruba town of Ila-Orangun, a chunk of red laterite rock (*yangi*) protrudes from a hollow in the base of the wall on the right side of the passageway.<sup>1</sup> The rock is usually no more than ten to twelve inches in diameter with two-thirds of it exposed, and it blends with the red soil of the streets and the mud walls of the compounds. Occasionally one finds the rock moist with palm oil or topped with yam flour or a piece of kola nut. These are the entrance shrines of the Yoruba god Eshu-Elegba and are called *eshuona* ("Eshu of the way"). Their prevalence seems to confirm the Yoruba

saying cited by Fadipe that "every head of a compound must have an Eshu outside his compound and the baale who does not will have to give account to Eshu" (1970: 285-6). Similar but larger rocks, or a molded pillar of red laterite mud, dedicated to Eshu are found at crossroads (*eshurita*) and in the market places (*eshuoja*). In some instances these shrines are housed by walls and roof, yet publicly observable, while in other situations they are barely distinguishable from other chunks of rock or mud piles.

In the outer courtyard of the king's palace, not far from the entrance to the reception hall, one passes a molded

mound of cement about two feet high painted with vertical red stripes. A chunk of laterite rock is embedded in the top. It is the palace shrine for Eshu to which offerings are made by the senior Ifa diviner-priests (*babalawo*) once a year at the New Year or Igbefa festival on behalf of the Oba (king), the Orangun of Ila. They spend the night at the palace casting Ifa to learn what sacrifices are required by the principal deities so that the Oba and town may prosper in the year to come. On the following morning, the day of the festival, the *babalawo* makes the first sacrifice (a large black goat or black chickens) to Eshu at the palace shrine, chanting: "Eshu, we were sent to you by Ifa with this sacrifice which is your own." Prayers for the long life of the Oba and of the chiefs, for women in childbirth, and for the general prosperity of the town, will be offered by the Ifa priests. Then, portions of the sacrifice and other offerings, if Ifa has instructed it, will be placed by the Oba's servants on another Eshu shrine just outside the gate to the palace courtyard and on shrines of Eshu at the entrance gates and crossroads of the town. As they do so they carry the prayer of the Orangun that no evil will befall the inhabitants of the town, that their crops will prosper, that the hunter's shots will not reach them, that they will not suffer from snake bite, and that they will live until the end of the year. Thus, although Ogun is the principal *orisha* (deity) of Ila, it is to Eshu that the first sacrifice of the new year is given.<sup>2</sup>

Within the compounds of Ila there are numerous shrines for Eshu. Some are large chambers which open upon a main corridor, with raised altars that can be seen through an entrance resembling a proscenium arch. This type is often elaborately decorated with pieces of broken crockery inset in the blackened mud base of the altar (Fig. 1). Other Eshu shrines are more modest but contain emblems appropriate to the deity, such as the *igba* Eshu, which is a large closed calabash painted with three black con-



1. ESHU SHRINE OF THE ELEMOSO (*ESHU EJIBE*), THE FIRST-RANKING ESHU PRIESTESS. THE CALABASH OF ESHU (*IGBA ESHU*) RESTS UPON THE ALTAR. BLACK-PAINTED ESHU CARVINGS HANG IN FRONT OF THE RED AND WHITE CLOTHS. ORISHA POTS (*ORUOSHE*) ARE ON EITHER SIDE OF THE SHRINE.

2. ESHU DANCE VESTMENT, WORN OVER LEFT SHOULDER. THE FIGURES ARE ALTERNATELY MALE AND FEMALE. THE MALE FIGURES HOLD SWORDS AND FLY WHISKS, THE FEMALE FIGURES GRASP THEIR BREASTS.







centric circles (Fig. 3). The calabash of Eshu is seated on a large, open-mouthed terracotta pot (*ikoko*) decorated with a figure strikingly like those on the *laba* bags of the Shango priests (Wescott and Morton-Williams 1960:29). Cloths of appropriate colors, dance vestments with long strands of cowrie shells, and dance wands hang on the wall behind the calabash, enhancing the importance of the central symbol just as a dossal frames the cross on a Christian altar.

Eshu has his place on the shrines of other deities, especially those dedicated to *orisha* Shango. In the compound that houses the principal shrine to Shango in Ila-Orangun, Eshu is represented by a mound of hardened red mud inset with cowrie shells and also by a piece of laterite rock in a shallow calabash. These are called Shango's *elegbara* and are placed at the right front corner, as viewed by the worshipper, of the raised dais. On another Shango shrine Eshu is symbolized by a covered and blackened calabash which sits upon a terracotta pot painted black and white. The emblem is placed on Shango's immediate left.

It is not only at the various shrines that one finds Eshu. His face is the one necessary iconographic detail on the trays of the diviner-priests of Ifa (Fig. 4). While the *babalawo* casts his palm nuts or divining chain, the face of Eshu is directed to the face of the Ifa priest. Eshu observes

the whole proceeding as the pattern of the *Odu* of Ifa appears in the dust of the tray, revealing the divine response to the suppliant's dilemma. At times during the divination session, Eshu's dish is placed between the tray and the suppliant. When the divining session is over, the verses of Ifa having been sung and the sacrifice made, a portion of the sacrifice or a gift is given to Eshu, whose presence and power in the whole transaction must be acknowledged.

It would appear, then, that in the figure of Eshu we are confronted with an *orisha* of the utmost importance for the domestic and religious life of the people of Ila-Orangun. How are we to understand this figure who is present in so many diverse places: at crossroads, compound entrances, market places, king's palaces, shrines within compounds, and divining sessions? The answer must be sought by first examining each of these places and situations more fully in association with the *oriki*, (praise names) sung at the annual festival, and with the myths preserved in the verses of Ifa, and also by analyzing the distinctive iconographic features of the artifacts of Eshu worship. We shall then be in a position to ask whether the "trickster" designation is fitting for this deity and, if so, what it means in the Yoruba context.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the place to begin is with the Eshu shrines and the rituals that take place before them. Once a week, i.e. every fifth day, the elderly senior priestess of Eshu, the *Elemoso* (Eshu priestess of the first rank), rubs the floor of Eshu's shrine with *yunyun*, a grass which has the medicinal effect of stopping bleeding (Abraham 1958:690). She removes her head wrap and kneels before the shrine, singing:

"Eshu, I honor you because of your power.  
Eshu, you are the road maker.  
Come with kindness to me and to my family, who serve you with gifts.  
Eshu, you are the present giver.  
Make me rich and the mother of good children.  
Never allow your children misfortune.  
Come with your gorgeous appearance, you son of cowries."

The devotee then casts kola to discern the will and pleasure of Eshu (Fig. 5). Will he grant protection from illness, witches, robbers? Will he aid in the market place so that trading will be profitable? What does he wish: some palm oil poured before the shrine, a piece of kola, a cock? When his will is known, the appropriate offering or sacrifice is made. On occasion other members of the compound participate and share in the offering. Women fearing barrenness come, petitioning Eshu's help in having a child. And when they give birth, they will return with the sacrifices promised, and often continue to participate in the weekly rite.

The shrine of the *Elemoso*, known as *Eshu ejigbe* (Figs. 1, 5, 9), is revealing. At center front on the first tier is a wicker basket with a mounded clay top and a hole in the center (Fig. 5). The priestess called it *adurogbona* ("guardian of the gate").<sup>4</sup> On either side of the shrine are calabashes, *oruoshe* (*orisha* pots), for offerings to *orisha* Oya, goddess of the hunt and wife of Shango, and to *orisha* Oshun, the goddess of cooling, medicinal waters. The waters in these pots have the power to help a woman conceive. On the wall to the right of the shrine hang a dozen iron cymbal-bracelets called *aro*. These are placed on the ankles of *abiku*, children born to die, and on the ankles of other devotees of *orisha* Aro during the dancing at the annual festival in order to frighten away the spirits that entice such children from the land of the living.

At the center rear is the place of Eshu. The pedestal is called *ijoko* Eshu ("seat of Eshu") and the calabash is simply referred to as *igba* Eshu ("calabash of Eshu"). In the calabash are black cloths for wrapping and storing the artifacts of worship when not in use—especially those employed at the annual festival—cowries for divining at the weekly service, and packets of "medicine" (*oogun*). Above and behind the calabash is a backdrop of patterned red and white cloths in front of which hang a number of wooden carvings painted black (Fig. 9). One of the carvings, about fourteen inches high, is of a woman kneeling and holding an offering bowl (Fig. 8). It is a common subject of traditional Yoruba carving except for the fact that the hair is stylized at the back of the head and extends down the figure's back in a clearly phallic depiction. Three smaller carvings are of flute players, a motif commonly associated with Eshu. These are dance wands (*ogo* *Elegba*) used at the Eshu festival. Four other small carvings are attached, side by side, with three-foot-long strands of cowrie shells suspended from them. It is a ceremonial vestment worn over the left shoulder by worshippers of Eshu when dancing at the annual festival (Fig. 2). The figures are alternately male and female, the female figures grasping their breasts and the male figures holding swords and fly whisks over



ABOVE: 3. THE CALABASH OF ESHU (*IGBA* ESHU). BEFORE IT ARE OFFERINGS OF SNAIL SHELLS, KOLA, WATER AND OILS FOR ESHU, OBATALA AND OSHUN. RIGHT: 4. IFA DIVINING TRAY (*OPON* IFA). THE FACE OF ESHU APPEARS AT THE TOP AND BOTTOM.







5. DEVOTEE CASTS KOLA BEFORE THE ESHU SHRINE OF THE ELEMOSO TO LEARN THE WILL OF ESHU AND MAKE THE APPROPRIATE OFFERING TO HIM.

their shoulders. According to the priestess, this vestment is Eshu-Elegba. All else is decoration.

The carvings were given to the priestess' father by his father. Her grandfather had them carved because Eshu had enabled his mother to give birth to him. They are not, however, the oldest or foremost Eshu in Ila and are not taken to the market place at the time of the annual Eshu festival, Odun Elegba. That honor belongs to the Eshu figure of another compound, a splendid twenty-inch carving of a man on horseback, holding a spear in his right hand (Figs. 6, 10). According to its owner, this carving, "the first Eshu in Ila," was brought from Opin by a woman whom his grandfather had married. It was then that the Odun Elegba first took place. Although the owner is now a Christian and no longer dances at the festival, he continues to support the Odun Elegba in honor of his fathers, and presents his gifts to Eshu through his wives and the three Eshu priestesses of his compound.

The festival is held in late December or early January and lasts seventeen days. On the first day the Eshu figure, wrapped in a red cloth enclosed within a black cloth, is unwrapped and washed in cool water containing the leaves of the *odundun*, *rinrin*, *imi esu*, *rowowo*, and *aje* plants, all known for their medicinal properties. The Eshu figure is then painted with black "European paint" (a dark indigo dye was used in the past). Cowries and packets of medicine (*oogun*) are attached and a tri-colored cap is placed on the figure's head. Seated in a whitened calabash (or porcelain basin) (Fig. 6), Eshu is placed in a prominent

spot in the Eshu shrine. On the second day a black male goat is sacrificed in the shrine by the Elebi, the second-ranking Eshu Eshu priestess. The blood is poured on a blackened mud image which is the permanent Eshu figure in the shrine. The skull and the lungs of the goat are left with Eshu and the remainder is roasted in preparation for the next day's feast. Others come presenting gifts of kola nuts, pounded yam, cocks, and goats or pigs. The offerings and sacrifices depend upon the wealth of the giver and the demands of Eshu as determined by the casting of kola where a petition of Eshu has been made. If a cock or a goat is sacrificed, the blood of the animal is poured on the clay figure, and the head left with it. If pounded yam or kola is presented, a small portion remains with the emblem. The principal portion of the offering is used in the daily feasting of the celebrants and their guests. Late in the afternoon, on the sixth day of the festival, the Eshu figure is carried to the king's market (*ojaoba*) on the head of the third-ranking Eshu priestess, the Arugba (bowl carrier). She is preceded by the higher-ranking priestesses, the Elemoso and the Elebi, and followed by *bata* drummers and other members of the compound, who sing:

"People of the market, clear the way!  
We are coming through the market gate.  
My Lord is coming to the market.  
My husband, I have arrived.  
Laroye (Eshu), I have arrived.  
Baraye, Baraye, Baraye!

"Laroye appears like a graceful crown.  
Eshu, do not deceive and harm me;  
deceive another.

Latopa (Eshu), bless me. Eshu, bless me.  
Bara, bless me. Eshu, bless me.

"All reverence to you, Latopa.  
All reverence to you, Bara.  
Laroye comes. Eshu comes.  
All reverence to you, Lalupon.  
All reverence to you, Bara.

"We are glad that Eshu's festival has come.  
Eshu, do not harm me.  
Eshu, do not harm me."

Once in the market the Eshu image is placed on a mat. The Arugba sits next to the Eshu, *oriki* are sung, and the devotees dance around Eshu and the priestess to the rhythm of the *bata* drums. As Joan Wescott notes in her study of Eshu ritual and iconography in Oyo, the dance for Eshu is much more energetic than the slow, graceful, swaying and shuffling of customary Yoruba dancing. The Eshu dancer whirls like a snail shell used as a spinning top. Wescott cites a praise name for Eshu:

"Eshu is a snail-shell dancer  
(he spins rapidly)  
He knows dancing well  
He doesn't join in singing.

"If there are no drums  
He will dance to the pounding  
of the mortars."

(1962:344)

In its exuberance and ecstasy the dancing is similar to the Shango festival and in contrast to the more generally organized movements of devotees in the festivals for *orisha* Oko and Oshun. It is in even sharper contrast to the gracefully patterned steps and body movements of the dances for Ifa. Money, kola nuts and palm wine are given by the Oba, chiefs, and relatives, to the priestesses and devotees as expressions of goodwill and of their social status. Throughout the seventeen days the priestesses are honored with small gifts, and, freed from domestic chores, they are waited upon and addressed with praise names by other members of the compound.

Although the festival rituals of other *orisha* also include a procession to the market place, there is a special association of Eshu with the market. Some of his *oriki* refer to this association:

"Eshu quickly makes himself master  
of the market place.  
He buys without paying.  
He causes nothing to be bought or sold  
at the market until nightfall."  
(Verger 1957:117-8)

At the Oje cloth market in Ibadan, no buying or selling can begin until palm oil has been poured over the *eshujoja* (market shrine) by the priestesses and elders of the market. Among the four markets of Ila, only the large central daily market has an *eshujoja* which receives palm oil occasionally or kola nut offerings from







various women sellers of the market place. Such offerings appear to be solely personal petitions for Eshu's aid and place no restrictions on the trading activities of the market generally. The cowries with which Eshu dance wands and vestments are decorated also convey Eshu's association with the market, for cowries were money in pre-colonial Yorubaland.

Eva Krapf-Askari, in her study *Yoruba Towns and Cities* (1969), refers to the fact that unlike other *orisha*, Eshu is never referred to as the patron of a descent group.<sup>5</sup> She suggests that he appears "to symbolize all that is impersonal, superficial, transitory and segmental" and concludes that "Eshu is the most recognizably 'urban' of all Yoruba divinities" (114). While it is true that Eshu appears where a relatively large, dense, and socially heterogeneous gathering of individuals takes place, such as the Yoruba market (156), I suspect that something more than this is involved in Eshu's association with the market.

With the exception of the city of Ife, the principal market of a large Yoruba town is located more or less directly across from the king's palace and is usually referred to as "the King's Market." On market day if one looks at the palace and then at the market, the initial impression is of order, on the one hand, and turbulence on the other. But the observer must be careful. To be sure, the palace is an enclosed, relatively well-ordered space, the chief resident of which, according to Ila palace tradition, is a descendant of Oduduwa, the god who created and brought order to the world, and who became the first Yoruba king. The market, however, is not chaotic. Within its open space and milling throngs there is an order, for vendors of various produce and other commodities have their assigned places. Nonetheless, it is a tumult, a place of exchange of goods and change of fortunes. Its fragile order is capable of quickly dissolving into chaos, and a story told to Pierre Verger aptly conveys the attitude of uncertainty that the Yoruba associate with the world of the market place: A woman is at the market selling her wares. Eshu starts a fire in her house. She runs home, leaving her goods



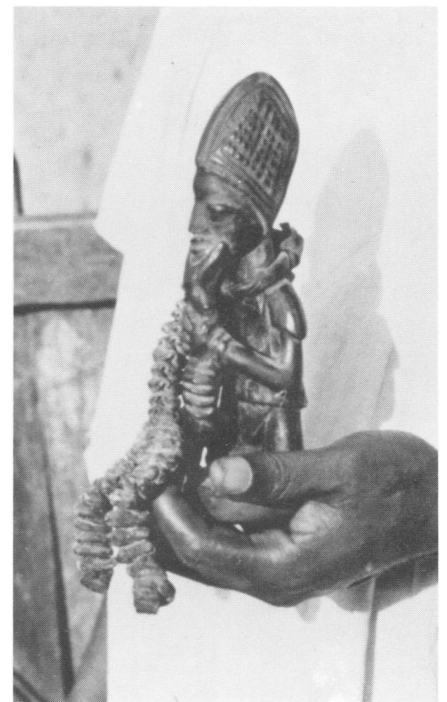
10. ANOTHER VIEW OF ESHU-ELEGBA ON HORSEBACK.

at the market. She arrives too late; the house is burned. And a thief runs off with her goods from the market (1957:113). The threat of loss is not the only aspect of disorder that haunts the marketplace. It is also the place frequented by the ghosts of the deceased from other towns, especially the ghosts of persons who have died prematurely (Bascom 1960:409).

Like the gates of the town, crossroads, and compound entrances, the market is a marginal world, a place where the unexpected can occur and fortunes can be reversed. Order is fragile and appears to depend upon the presence of the palace and the Oba. In such a juxtaposition of spaces, the market is conveyed as a metaphor for the welter and diversity of forces for good and ill, of forces of change and transformation—personal and impersonal—that pervade human experience. In such a place, as at that marginal point in time celebrated in the Igbefa festival, the entrance upon the new year, awareness of the unexpected, of the accidental, and of fate, is heightened. These are places and times where Eshu must be acknowledged.

The *oriki* for Eshu portray him as a figure of intense activity, of contrasts and reversals, and apparent contradictions:

"Eshu slept in the house—  
But the house was too small for him.  
Eshu slept on the verandah—  
But the verandah was too small for him.  
Eshu slept in a nut—  
At last he could stretch himself.  
Eshu walked through a groundnut farm.  
The tuft of his hair was just visible.  
If it had not been for his huge size,  
He would not have been visible at all.  
Having thrown a stone yesterday,  
He kills a bird today.



11. ESHU-ELEGBA PORTRAYED AS A FLUTE-PLAYER.

Lying down, his head hits the roof.  
Standing up, he cannot look  
into the cooking pot.  
Eshu turns right into wrong,  
wrong into right."

(Beier 1959:15)

"He turns quickly and walks quickly.  
When he is angry,  
he hits a stone until it bleeds."

(Verger 1957:117)

Eshu is large and small, powerful and gentle, high and low, swift and immobile, present and absent. The iconography depicts him as a figure of sharp contrasts; for example, the Elemoso's shrine (Figs. 1, 5) has pieces of white crockery imbedded in the black surface. The Eshu figure on horseback (Fig. 10) is painted black and wears a tri-colored cap—red on one side, blue and white on the other—which is reminiscent of a well-known story about Eshu:<sup>6</sup> Two farmers had long been neighbors and friends. One day as they were talking to one another, Eshu walked quickly down the road between them. "Did you see that fellow in the red hat?" one farmer asked the other. "Indeed, there was someone, but his hat was blue and white," answered the other. "Not so," cried the first. Again Eshu passed between them, going in the opposite direction. Each farmer insisted that the other had been right the first time. Then each called the other a liar and soon they fell to fighting. Neighbors dragged them to the king's palace where they told their stories. According to Verger's account, Eshu appeared at the palace as the combatants were speaking and declared that he had caused these friends to fight because they

◀ TOP LEFT: 6. THE MOST IMPORTANT ESHU FIGURE IN ILA-ORANGUN, HELD BY THE ARUGBA, THIRD-RANKING ESHU PRIESTESS. CARVING ON THE LEFT IS ESHU AS A FLUTE-PLAYER. DURING THE ANNUAL FESTIVAL, COWRIES, TRI-COLORED CAP, AND MEDICINE PACKET ARE ATTACHED TO THE EQUESTRIAN FIGURE. SEATED IN THE PORCELAIN BASIN, IT WILL BE PLACED IN A PROMINENT SPOT IN THE ESHU SHRINE. TOP RIGHT: 7. ESHU DANCE VESTMENT, WORN BY FEMALE DEVOTEES AT THE ANNUAL FESTIVAL. WORN AROUND THE NECK, THE FIGURES ARE SUSPENDED OVER THE BREASTS. NIGERIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM, LAGOS. BOTTOM LEFT: 8. FIGURE OF FEMALE DEVOTEE OF ESHU-ELEGBA. THE LEATHER THONG ATTACHES THE FIGURE TO THE WRIST OF THE WORSHIPPER WHEN DANCING AT THE ANNUAL FESTIVAL. BOTTOM RIGHT: 9. IGBA ESHU IN THE SHRINE OF THE ELEMOSO. ESHU CARVINGS AND PATTERNED CLOTHS HANG FROM REAR WALL. ALTHOUGH THE CLOTHS MAY BE CHANGED (COMPARE WITH FIG. 1), THEY ARE ALWAYS RED AND WHITE.

had not sacrificed to him when they made their bond of friendship.

The story clearly conveys Eshu as *agent provocateur*. It is this aspect of the Eshu mythology and iconography that Wescott chooses to emphasize. As the festival song suggests that Eshu is one who deceives and harms, so too the *oriki* and myths portray Eshu as the confuser of men, the troublemaker, the one who acts capriciously. So prevalent are these associations that Christian missionaries used "Eshu" as a translation of the New Testament terms "devil" and "Satan." Now, even Eshu worshippers who speak a little English, as well as Yoruba Christians and Muslims, will refer to Eshu as "the devil." It is an indefensible corruption of the tradition. Nevertheless, Eshu is a troublemaker. His own praise names attest to it.

"Eshu fought on Iwata street  
like a hundred men.  
My father comes with his club.  
Eashu is a wicked child  
who has inherited a sword.

"Eshu swings a club  
as an Ifa priest a divining chain.  
Eshu carries clubs on his head  
like bales of cotton.  
Eshu, do not deceive and harm me;  
deceive another.

(The Elebi)

"Eshu, confuser of men  
The owner of twenty slaves  
is sacrificing,  
So that Eshu may not confuse him.

"Eshu confused the head of the Queen—  
And she started to go naked.  
Then Eshu beat her to make her cry."  
(Beier 1959:15)

And Verger records a story fraught with complexity, intrigue, misunderstandings, and disaster that only Eshu would be capable of achieving: Eshu comes upon a queen whose husband has been unattentive. "Bring me several hairs from the beard of the king and cut them tonight with this knife. I will make an amulet of them which will restore his passion for you." As the queen makes ready, Eshu goes to the queen's son, heir to the throne, who lives outside the royal compound as required. "The king is leaving for war," Eshu reports. "He wants you to go to the palace this evening with your soldiers." Then off to the king goes Eshu to whisper to his majesty: "Embittered by your coldness to her, the queen wants to kill you to avenge herself. Be on guard this evening!" Night comes. The king goes to bed, feigning sleep. Soon he sees his wife approaching with a knife. The king disarms her and they argue loudly. The prince arrives with his soldiers, hears the cries from the king's chambers, and rushes in. Seeing the king with a knife in his hand and fearing an attack on his mother, he accosts the king. The king, believing his son is attempting a coup, calls the palace

guard. A general massacre follows (1957:113).

The association of Eshu with diabolic and malicious activity is certainly widespread in popular stories and sayings. Idowu cites Yoruba sayings which attribute to Eshu the origins of misbehavior. The wicked are called *omo* Eshu (children of Eshu), and neighbors will say of one who does harm to himself or to others, "It is Eshu who stirred him" (1962:83). Idowu also refers to a popular belief, which one also hears in Ila, that one may pour the taboo food of palm-kernel oil on an Eshu emblem, saying, "O Eshu, this is palm-kernel oil; I know that it is not your food and I dare not give it to you. But so-and-so has asked me to give it to you even though he knows that it is not your food, and here . . . I give it to you in his name. Go now and avenge yourself" (1962:83-4). The Elemoso claims that the leader of Eshu is Shopanna, the deity of smallpox, and that Eshu has the same mother as Shopanna, Ogun, and Shango—all *orisha* who are in some way associated with destructive powers and whose symbolization employs heat and redness. However, one must be cautious about the popular tradition that associates Eshu's mischievous behavior with the diabolic and describes his actions among men as capricious. What, then, is the nature and purpose of his trickery?

In his discussion of the god Hermes, the thief and trickster of Greek mythology, Norman O. Brown makes a number of interesting comments that may be of help to our present inquiry. The trickery of Hermes "is never represented as a rational device, but as a manifestation of magical power" (1969: 11). And this is also true of Eshu. Although Eshu is less likely to employ the trickery of cunning in the use of oaths or even the trickery of sexual seduction, which have gained Hermes his reputation, Eshu is a past master in the trickery of deception. In the verses of the Ifa priests it is told how Eshu deceived the messenger of Olodumare, who had been sent to take Orunmila back to heaven, by substituting a goat's head in a sack and telling the messenger that Orunmila had been killed by robbers and all that was left was his head.<sup>8</sup> In Ifa verses collected by Bascom (1969), Eshu tricks Earth into nakedness and into marriage.<sup>9</sup> On another occasion he blinks his eyes, making Orunmila handsome and causing the child of the Sea Goddess to fall in love with him. He deceives gods, kings, and ordinary men, as well as demons, witches, and even Death.<sup>10</sup>

But trickery must not be seen simply as deceit; it is a power. Eshu, like Hermes, has the power to bind and release. With charms he produces sleep, breaks locks, and becomes invisible. He is described as being able to transform himself into a bird, become like the winds, or appear as other persons. He confuses recognition by throwing dust, blinking his eyes, and clap-

ping his hands. He causes people to lose their way in the forest by pointing his staff, or, with the sacrificial items they have offered, enables them to avoid pitfalls. His is the "secret action," and, as Brown notes, "'secret action' means magic" (1969:19). Eshu the trickster is Eshu the magician, the one who possesses the *oogun* which has the power to transform. In Oyo, this power is depicted in the carvings that form part of the dance vestment with the figures suspended around the necks of female Eshu worshippers. In a splendid example of such a vestment in the Nigerian National Museum in Lagos<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 7) the male figure holds small gourds of power. In the Ifa verses, Eshu is often portrayed as pointing the stem of a gourd of *oogun* at the adversary and transforming the scene, usually for ill. The companion female figure in the vestment lifts up her breasts, sources of life-giving power. To follow these iconographic suggestions is, I believe, to begin to see the more positive side of Eshu symbolism in Yoruba cult life. To be sure, Eshu will be experienced by many, possibly by most people, as capricious and even diabolic, and as a skilled sorcerer. As we shall see, there is reason for all this. For the moment let me simply quote the Elemoso: "Eshu has power. He deceives and is wicked. Olodumare, who made him, is now doubtful about his creation of Eshu. He does not deceive those who worship him. The person who is a servant and worshipper will not be deceived. Eshu will not fight him."

Two further observations on the iconography of the Eshu figure are in order as they pertain to the description of Eshu as *agent provocateur*. First, there is the singular hairstyle of Eshu. Whether it is "the most important symbol of Elegba sculpture," as Wescott claims (1962:348), one may question, but one can have no doubt that it is manifestly phallic. Following the suggestion of Edmund Leach regarding "an association of long hair with libidinous energy, with power and aggression, with unrestrained sexuality, and with uninhibited instinct," Wescott argues that the phallic symbolism of the Eshu figure "is unambiguously a symbol of instinctual energy, masculine strength, and potentiality . . . The meaning is . . . confined to power, to mischievous and autonomous energy . . . Procreation is clearly not his concern" (348). This, I believe, is a much too one-sided analysis of the phallic symbol associated with Eshu. But before I can indicate why, we must take note of another iconographic detail and Eshu's association with Ifa.

Eshu figures often portray him as blowing a flute or whistle (Figs. 6, 11). As Wescott suggests, the act of whistle-blowing is certainly to be linked with thumb-sucking, pipe-smoking, and other oral activities of sexual significance, all of which appear in Eshu iconography (1962:347). But my informers, ignorant of



Freudian insights, said that Eshu goes out like the king's messenger, blowing his whistle to say that a great person is coming. "He clears the way." Once again Brown's discussion of Hermes is pertinent, for like Hermes, Eshu, the magician and trickster, is also the herald of the gods, the divine messenger. "We think of the herald," Brown writes, "as a sort of town crier—a job requiring little skill, with nothing mysterious, magical, or 'tricksterish' about it. . . . There is another side to the picture. The heralds are called 'public workers,' a term which is applied also to seers, healers, woodworkers, and bards, and which connotes a socially useful and respected craft. The special knowledge they possess is emphasized in a series of stock epithets meaning 'wise' or 'knowing.' It is a highly-paid craft: we hear of a herald 'rich in gold and bronze.' More than that, it is a sacred craft: heralds are 'dear to Zeus,' 'the messengers of Zeus and of men'; their persons are sacred and inviolate. They are functionaries in sacred ceremonies, such as sacrifices and the ritual of divination by lottery . . . . The herald's badge of office is a staff, which is respected as magically potent . . . ." (1969:26-7).

I heard strikingly similar depictions of Eshu from Ifa priests. *Babalawo* Ifatoogun of Ilobo said: "Eshu is a messenger of Olodumare. He sets the affairs of earth in order, guards and helps the children of men, and is the messenger between the *orisha* and Olodumare." Ashola, head *babalawo* of Ifa priests in Ila-Orangun, said: "Eshu is the messenger for Ifa and some of the *orisha*. He is so swift that he can be the messenger for many." When I pressed Ifatoogun on why, when sacrifices were made to other *orisha*, a portion had to be given to Eshu, he answered: "Eshu is a powerful *orisha* through whom we hear the voice of Olodumare and come to know his will. He is also a powerful being who can circle the world in an instant. That is why he was put on earth and in the realms of heaven. After Olodumare had created such demons as death, disease, loss, fighting, paralysis, coughs, boils, blisters, elephantiasis, rashes of every description, guinea-worm and deities of the hot temper, such as Shopanna and Shango, and after he had created such good things as money, wives, children, long life, and such deities as Oshun and Obatala, then Olodumare created Eshu's power. He made Eshu's power great enough to limit the wicked practices and excesses of the demons, whose atrocities would have been limitless, if unchecked. And he made Eshu's power such that Eshu could bring to men who dwell on earth the blessings of the deities of good things."

According to the *babalawo*, then, Eshu mediates between the demonic and the creative, the powers of evil and the powers of good. He aids in minimizing the presence of death and in maximizing the

possibilities of life. He has the knowledge of good and evil, and the wisdom and power to cope with such forces. He is Olodumare's own messenger and shares in his power.

It is in this context that we must now try to understand Eshu's relationship to the rituals of Ifa divination and sacrifice. For here the messenger, the herald, also becomes the enforcer and the effector of an action. As *babalawo* Ifatoogun said: "He sets the affairs of earth in order, guards and helps the children of men."

Ifa divination is the most universal and oft-performed ritual of the Yoruba. The cults of Shango, Oko, Ogun, Oshun, and other *orisha* vary in their significance from one section of Yorubaland to another. Such is not the case with Ifa divination or with the recognition of Eshu in his association with Ifa.

Ifa may refer to Orunmila, the *orisha* of knowledge and of the diviner-priests, or to what is most often referred to as the *Odu* of Ifa, the 256 figures or patterns which appear on the dust of the divining tray and which refer to a vast collection of verses. The immediate dramatic shape of the Ifa rite is relatively simple. The ritual proceeds to the occasional rhythm of gong

or drum. First there is the casting of palm nuts or the *opele* chain to inquire if the moment is propitious for divination and to discover, if necessary, what must be done to make it so. Then follows the casting to discern which *Odu* is to be chanted. There are sixteen principal *Odu* which, when combined with one another, form a total aggregate of 256. Each *Odu* refers to a collection of verses; when the pattern of the particular *Odu* appears, the verses are recited by the priest. At that moment, communication between Orunmila and mankind is taking place. The suppliant selects from the many verses the one that appears to him to address his question, which he may or may not have shared with the diviner-priest. Further divination determines the appropriate sacrifice and how it should be made. Finally, there is the sacrifice itself which is offered to the shrine of Eshu unless otherwise specified in the verses. The whole proceeding is serious, sober, methodical—above all, an expression of order, harmony, balance. It stands in the sharpest contrast to the troubled spirit, indecisiveness, anxieties, frustrations, the illness or ignorance of the suppliant.<sup>12</sup>

*Continued on page 66*



LEFT: 12. AGBA OBALUFON, A DRUM USED BY DEVOTEES OF OBALUFON. IN THE CENTER ESHU HOLDS A SNAKE ABOVE HIS HEAD. RIGHT: 13. ANOTHER VIEW OF AGBA OBALUFON. ESHU STRADDLES A SNAIL SHELL.

With these new developments, many changes have occurred within the industry. Partly because of the shortage of hands in the smitheries, women are being recruited as apprentices. Now that they are working in other metals besides the traditional ones, the *Asude* are losing their separatism and meeting with other metal workers, notably blacksmiths and goldsmiths, to compare notes and assist each other.<sup>13</sup> They share information about sources of materials, and jointly buy scrap metal to divide according to their trades.

In spite of such encouraging trends, however, this newly emerging industry is beset with many teething problems which might hamper its eventual transformation into a successful modern concern.<sup>14</sup> With the decline of male support and the rapid development of a monied economy, the most important problem is that of adequate capital for expansion. At the moment, any profit seems to be spent largely on other projects such as family commitments, and not on reinvestment in the business to stimulate its growth. Other crafts have tried forming cooperatives to solve this problem, but there is as yet no indication that the *Asude* have come together in any such formal association. The only attempt at unification is in the rather loose association of the metal-workers guild, and it is obvious from discussions with the *Asude* that they do not derive too much material benefit within a group of which they are a minority.

Management poses still another problem, especially in regard to technical skills, formal training, and marketing. The *Asude* must devise a more formal way of improving

their output if they are to survive. As a step in this direction, one of the young men from an *Asude* family is studying fine arts at a university, specializing in metal working, in the hope that he will be able to marry the new techniques with the traditional ones. His problem, however, is to win the cooperation of the old craftsmen.

The problems of the *Asude* are not too different from those of other traditional arts and crafts; because of the changes implicit in the transition from traditional to modern times, many of them are gradually declining or at best not expanding at a rate comparable to that of the newer mechanized industries. These problems, however, could be surmounted with positive government support. Formal cooperatives could be encouraged and given loans. Government could attend to the provision of trade schools which would teach improved technical skills. Such gestures would convince the gradually dwindling practitioners of the *Asude* craft that it is a worthwhile trade and would encourage others to join them. In this way, the craft might once again become a source of employment for many young men and women. □

### Eshu-Elegba: The Yoruba Trickster God

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To hear the diviner-priests of Ifa recite the verses of the *Odu* and to read the increasing number of transcribed texts is to be made aware of two factors about Yoruba life. On the one hand, one perceives in the wit, lore and wisdom of the verses a world view and cultural values that enable the individual to see his life as one of achievement amid numerous possibilities. On the other hand, the way of life that is portrayed by Ifa is singularly the life of ritual obligation.

When the verses of the *Odu* are recited in the divination rite, the world view and values of Yoruba culture are presented in images and stories that provide an informative value context in terms of which the client is enabled to cope with his problem. The cosmos is likened to a closed calabash within which a hierarchy of beings and powers—human and spiritual, creative and malevolent—struggle with one another. It is a monistic and dynamic conception of reality.<sup>15</sup> In the midst of this activity, the individual must dispose or manipulate the various powers to the best of his ability for his own well-being. Life is uncertain and, above all, a struggle; yet, for the Yoruba it is always open to new and fortunate possibilities. One's *ori* (personal, prenatal destiny, lit. "head") determines such general values as wealth, social status, wives, children, and health. But one may not be experiencing at the moment the fullest realization of these possibilities. Behind every particular question that is brought to the *babalawo* ("father of secrets") are the larger questions: "What is possible?" and "What can I do to assure an advantageous end?" In the Ifa verses, a vast array of symbolic selves is paraded before the client. Like the hearer of a New Testament parable, he is constrained to see himself in terms of a gallery of roles, to ask whether any speak to him, and to make a decision about his aspirations, anxieties, relationships, and appropriate responses. In the verses, knowledge is given of the powers that are shaping his life and of others that might be employed to better his fortunes. This is the importance, indeed the wisdom, of Ifa. Ifa provides the knowledge of who or what is making the demand and how one should respond. Ifa, therefore, not only expresses in verse and rite the ultimate order and dependability of the universe, but enables a man



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to order his life, to know security and hope in the midst of struggle.

Beyond this important psychological reordering of the client's affective and cognitive situation, there is the desire to know what sacrifices will effectively achieve the desired ends. As Bascom notes, "The objective of Ifa divination is to determine the correct sacrifice necessary to secure a favorable resolution of the problem confronting the client" (1969:60). Knowledge without ritual lacks efficacy. It is the sacrifice that reorders, that has the power to effect the desired end. Hence, in the Yoruba scheme of things, apart from the disaster of possessing a "bad head" (*olori buruku*), there is always a determinable reason for one's experience of good fortune or of suffering, and it has essentially to do with ritual obligations. To sacrifice is to meet one's obligations and to make one's way propitious. If the suppliant sacrifices and yet suffers, it may be that he either misunderstood the Ifa verses or failed to make proper or sufficient sacrifice.<sup>14</sup> Job's dilemma of unjust or inexplicable suffering is not an issue in this religious construction of reality. Sacrifice is at the heart of Yoruba religious practice.

Both Wescott and Morton-Williams treat the relationship of Ifa and Eshu in terms of the polarity of order and disorder. Such a conclusion is plausible when one has understood Eshu essentially in terms of an identification of the trickster with the capricious element in human experience, or as autonomous energy, libidinal drives. But the verses of Ifa will not permit such a singular and reductionistic view of Eshu. An Ifa priest will chant:

"The world is broken into pieces;  
The world is split wide open,  
The world is broken without anybody to mend it;  
The world is split open without anybody to sew it.  
Cast Ifa for the six elders  
Who were coming down from Ile Ife.  
They were asked to take care of Mole.  
They were told that they would do well  
If they made sacrifice.  
If the sacrifice of Eshu is not made,  
It will not be acceptable (in heaven)."

(Abimbola 1970:Vol. II Ose Meji, Chapt. 5)

The story tells of the chaos that prevailed as a result of the elder's failure to make the sacrifice to Eshu, and mocks the attempts of men to restore order by comparing their actions to one who would try to mend a torn garment with a spider's web. In other verses of the *Odu* of Ifa, kings lose their thrones, men are robbed on their journeys, and witches are permitted to torment the dreams of those who have failed to make their way propitious with sacrifices to their spiritual doubles, to the *orisha*, to the witches, or to Eshu himself. Then it is, as *babalawo* Ifatoogun warned, that Eshu will no longer restrain the evil spirits that they may strike at the arrogant soul. Eshu in turn informs Olodumare, the *orisha*, or the witches when a sacrifice has been made and may even use the sacrifice itself to enable the suppliant to prosper.<sup>15</sup> Eshu, then, is the keeper of order. He is the one who sees to the proper use of sacrifice. "Eshu rides a great horse and examines matters like the Almighty." As messenger, as herald of the gods, Eshu is the enforcer of the ritual way of life; for without sacrifice obligations would not be met, all would be in disorder, the world would fall apart.<sup>16</sup>

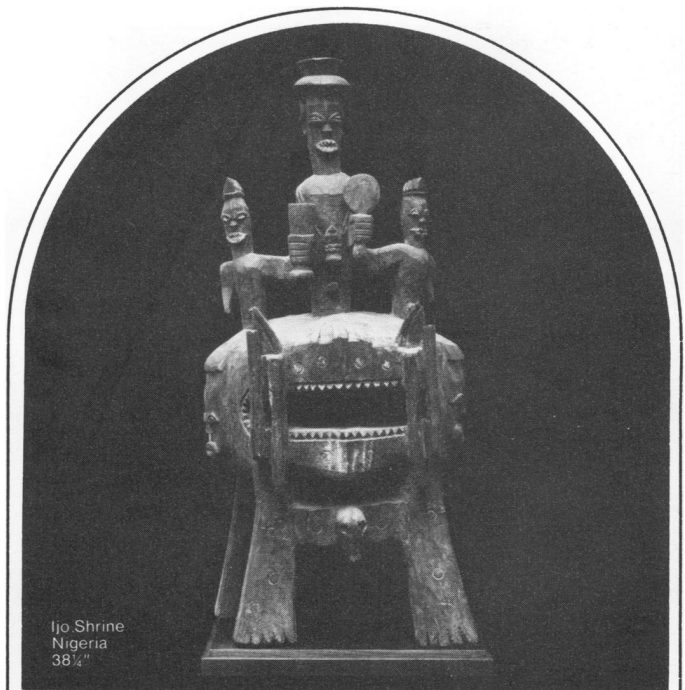
How does sacrifice preserve the order of life and hold the world together? In another *Odu* we hear that "Ifa says that

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this person should make sacrifice with a goat. . . . (He) should put the head of a goat inside the sacrifice for Eshu. He should also make sacrifice with plenty of red oil. Ifa says that Death is now ready to kill the person; but if he can make plenty of sacrifice, he will wriggle out of danger.

“ . . . ‘Exchange, exchange’ the Ifa priest  
Of the household of Elepe  
Cast Ifa for Elepe.

He was told to exchange an animal  
For his life on account of Death.”

(Abimbola 1970: Vol. II Osa Meji, Chapt. 10)

There is a Yoruba saying: “Though the offering is difficult, it is not worse than death” (Abraham 1958:172). And, as Bascom notes, in the Ifa corpus “the greatest number of verses are concerned with death, either directly or by implication” (1969:73). Sacrifice (*ebo*) has to do with death, the avoidance of death, and with experiences associated with death, such as loss, disease, famine, sterility, isolation and poverty. As Lienhardt noted in his study of Dinka sacrificial rites, sacrifice is essentially the conversion of a situation of death, or potential death in any of its manifestations, into a situation of life (1961:296-7). Hence, the underlying desire in every sacrificial rite is the desire for life, whether expressed in terms of health, children, wealth, wives or social status. Every sacrifice is an anticipation of the death to come and an affirmation of the value of life. As such, it is an expression of man’s temporality, his existence amid the interrelated contraries of life and death.

According to the *babalawo*, the conversion, or reversal of the situation of death into life through sacrifice, is Eshu’s special power and is known as *Osetua*.<sup>17</sup> The term refers to a story in the *Odu* of Ifa.<sup>18</sup> Osetua was the child of Oshun, leader of the ancestral mothers (*Iya-mi*) who possess magical power, and of the power (*ase*) of the sixteen male *orisha* who first came into the world. The birth took place at a time when the *orisha* had been rendered impotent by the power of Oshun, whom the male *orisha* had excluded from their assembly. The affairs of men were threatened with chaos and death by the inability of the male *orisha* to do their work on earth or in heaven. Orunmila as applied to Eshu’s power, is consistent with the *Odu* of Ifa and is a needed corrective to the analysis of Wescott, which depended too much on the *oriki* and popular stories with their delightful depiction of Eshu’s mischievous and autonomous energy.

The sexual metaphor as expressive of Eshu’s power is boldly portrayed in the carvings on a very old drum identified as *agba* Obalufon, a drum used by devotees of *orisha* Obalufon, the god who invented weaving (Figs. 12, 13). The principal figure on each side of the drum is Eshu. On one side he holds a snake above his head; Eshu is in complete control of the serpent’s power. On the reverse side he straddles a snail shell. Between the Eshu figures are two figures representing priests of Ifa, two couples engaged in sexual intercourse, and two women pounding a mortar. Sexual vitality, while making male and female acutely aware of their radical difference, is the mediating power that overcomes the opposition. It is a gracious power which cannot be presumed upon. Those who do not honor such a power will know it in all its mischievous, libidinal energy: desires will be frustrated and fortunes reversed. But to those who acknowledge its affecting presence, gifts will be given. Such is the power of Eshu as the mediator, the guardian of the ritual process and of sacrifice, which alone brings order

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and fruition to the affairs of man among the myriad powers that frequent the world and threaten to undo him.

My argument about the nature and significance of Eshu symbolism can be confirmed and concluded by attending for a moment to the significance of the ritual symbolism of the Yoruba Ogboni society, the society of elders whose concern is with the cult of the earth. Peter Morton-Williams has commented: "One can see in the image of three, set against what we know to be the significance of four for the Yoruba, a sign of incompleteness and therefore a concern with process and time. It accords with the Yoruba conception of the stages in the existence of man: his departure from the sky (*orun*) to live in the world (*aiye*) and eventually to become a spirit in the earth (*ile*). A Yoruba has three spiritual components: breath (*emi*), a spirit that returns to the sky to be reborn (*ara-orun*), and the component that becomes an ancestor (*imole*).

"The Ogboni express their metaphysical conceptions in the simple statement . . . 'Two Ogboni, it becomes three' . . . The third element seems to be the mystery, the shared secret, itself. The union of male and female in the *edan* image symbolizes this putting two together to make a third" (1960:373).

Morton-Williams also calls attention to the lack of concern with *orisha* worship by the senior members of the Ogboni society, and observes: ". . . (I)mplicit is a denial of the ordinary man's conviction that there is an element of irresponsibility or of chance in events; implicit also is the awareness that Elegbara, the Trickster deity, cannot lead a man into misfortune unless he himself or an enemy provokes the event" (1960:373).

Implied, but not developed, in Morton-Williams' comments is that the "secret" of the Ogboni society, the union of male and female, refers to the end of time. Time ends with the end of the opposition of male and female. Implied also is the idea that the beginning of time occurred at the instant when polar opposition, male and female, was created out of initial unity. And with that opposition was created sexual vitality—that which moves between and relates, as the rain that falls from sky to earth, the seeds that fall to the ground, the semen that drops into blood of the vagina. To follow Edmund Leach's suggestion, it would appear that the sexual act itself provides the primary image of time, of man's experience of the oscillation between birth and death, death and birth (1961:111). The male dies in giving semen, his life's essence. The female dies in giving birth.

The secret of the Ogboni society is the claim of an ultimate unity over the diversities of man's experience: sexual, kinship, political and religious. The members of the Ogboni society are the elders of the community. They are beyond the time of procreative concerns. Sexual differentiation is no longer as important as it once was. The return to a state of infantile undifferentiated dependence upon the mother is expressed in the salute that each member makes upon entering the Ogboni house. Prostrate upon the ground, fists clenched together hiding the thumbs, the elder kisses the ground three times and each time declares, "The mother's breasts are sweet." As a secret society, membership cuts across lineage lines and thereby qualifies in some measure what has hitherto been the principal referent for the individual's identity. Kinship distinctions are secondary to the new world of the cult house, patrilineal norms and distinctions being replaced by the unity of the Earth Mother (Onile). In their allegiance to the unity of all life in Onile, the Ogboni participate in the set-



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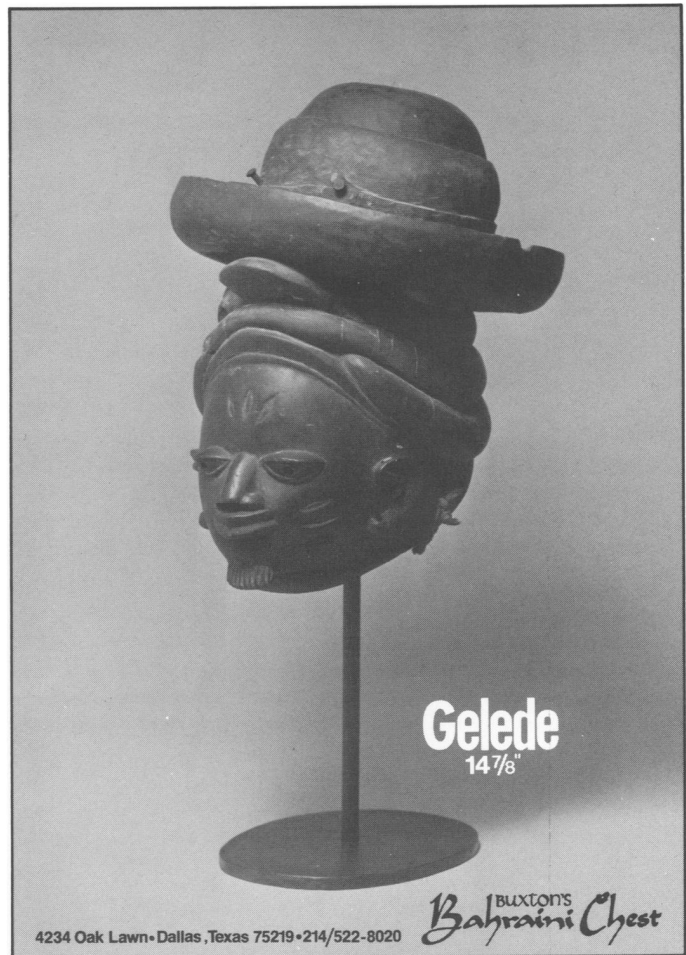
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ting of conflicts that divide the body politic. The sacred emblem of the society, the *edan* Ogboni, small brass male and female figures linked by a chain, is placed on those spots where the relationships among men have been broken and human blood spilled. Expressing the unity of male and female, they possess the power of reconciling and adjudicating differences among men and atoning for the violation of the earth.

Finally, as Morton-Williams noted, the senior members of the society appear to be less concerned with *orisha* worship. The reason, I would suggest, is that membership in Ogboni is only for the successful of the community, those who have prospered. Their lives are a confirmation of both their fortunate pre-natal destiny and of the efficacy of the ritual way of life. They have almost completed their life's sojourn and, having lived the life of ritual obligation, they have prospered. They are the ones who have acknowledged the way and the power of Eshu.

It should now be apparent why the senior members of the Ogboni society are no longer as anxious about Eshu as they once were. They have passed through the time of Eshu. Their age has moved them beyond his apparent caprice. The thumb Eshu sucks is now "hidden" in the clenched fist of the membership sign. Their secret transcends the alternations and reversals of Eshu's time and world. They have known Eshu in his power as a messenger. His secret is their secret. Knowing the mystery that is Eshu marks the end of time, the end of alternation, the end of discontinuities, the end of the *orisha's* threatening mischievous libidinal power. No longer do they have to make sacrifice to Eshu, for they have come to know him as "the



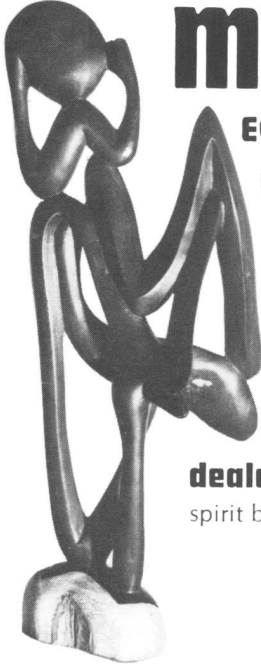
gift giver," "the child of cowries," the gift and wealth of *ase*.<sup>19</sup> It is in this context that we can perhaps discern the meaning of an *oriki* for Eshu cited by the dos Santos:

"Father who gave birth to Ogboni  
Is called by all Baba Jakila." (1971:84)

When the Elemoso offers a piece of kola or a cock at her shrine, she touches the "victim" to her head and either presses the offering or pours the blood of the sacrifice upon the "face of the *orisha*" on the altar, thereby effecting a relationship between her *ori*, that of the victim, and the power of the *orisha*. In the death of the victim the suppliant acknowledges her own death-boundness. But if temporality is the alternation between life and death, then in the death of the victim with which the suppliant is identified, the movement to death is fulfilled and the order of things, at least for the moment, may be reversed. As the man sacrifices (dies) in giving his semen, as a woman sacrifices (dies) in giving birth, in the hope that life may be renewed and continued, so the sacrificial victim dies to give life, to reverse the death-bound temporal process. This is Eshu's "power" (*ase*), the trickster's "magic medicine" (*oogun*). As herald, messenger, conveyor of sacrifice, he possesses the means to the power of life which, if not acknowledged and valued, can be known in its capricious or even destructive modes. But if acknowledged, his is the power that can bring blessings of birth and joys of life.

Thus, each week the Elemoso, senior priestess of Eshu, prays: "Eshu, I honor you because of your power. Eshu, you are the road maker. Come with kindness to me and to my family who serve you with gifts". □


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fashion is marvelous. From a few paragraphs the student begins to get a glimpse of the division of labor in some African societies; of the importance of nature and the positive African attitude towards the environment; of the important place of proverbs in traditional African societies. New insights are added as the author discusses the appliques of Dahomey and the historical events, proverbs, and scenes from daily life which the banners, state umbrellas, etc., depict.

The chapters on clay and metal sculptures expose students to the pre-colonial history of Nigeria and prove that there are many different ways to teach about Africa which challenge traditional historical approaches. Students can get from these two chapters alone an appreciation of sculpture that is multi-dimensional: the masks which are so essential to rituals and ceremonies involving funerals, initiations, festivals and secret societies; the figures which graphically portray the ancestor relationship and the importance of ancestors whose spirits play a central role in everyday life; and the protective figurines which guard against misfortune as well as those which are decorative and ornamental. This portion of the text is spiced with interesting bits of information. Students discover that Brass in the Niger Delta was named after its principal import; that Ife had an enormous artistic and political influence on Benin, and that ancient trade routes linked distant areas and encouraged the free flow of goods and ideas. A great deal of learning is possible when art is presented in this way. The results excite the student studying Africa for the first time and enrich the knowledge

of the more experienced student as well.

The final chapter, "Artists of the New Age," is very interesting in its assessment of the impact of modern technology on traditional art and artists. It is also quite controversial. It is indeed true that traditional African art in its broadest ramifications is very much alive. All of the "good" art is not gone! New pieces, in the traditional style, are created daily. At the same time, however, some of the old ways are being eroded. Women, long the traditional potters, are beginning to share this task with men. Artists work in cement and other Western materials to create works which are very modern and simultaneously very African.

It is the scholar in me which responds favorably to so much of *Made in West Africa*. It is the teacher in me which sees its limits as well as its strengths for my largely pre-collegiate audience. The vivid imagery of the descriptions of the Gelede dance is diminished by the failure to identify the dance as the elaborate Yoruba masquerade performance which honors the special powers of women. The discussions of the processes of creating masks would be enriched by giving equal treatment to the importance of animals and explaining why they appear so frequently in this medium. The manifold uses of traditional art are stressed but the inspirations behind the art could be more clearly delineated. The captions could be clearer. Often the novice could confuse the ethnic group with the city/area which it inhabits. Occasionally cities cited are not included on the map. The bibliography ought to have included the marvelous short texts, *Yoruba Blue: Symbols*

*on Cloth and Yoruba Brown: Gods and Symbols*, which the Educational Development Center developed as part of its African Art and Culture Project in 1972. Maude Wahlgren's *Contemporary African Arts* which the Field Museum (Chicago) published in 1974 would help teachers and students with special interests in contemporary African art.

But all of these are minor when compared with the major contribution this text makes. It is a clear, concise, exciting and well-written presentation of an area which has eluded the layman and student audience at the pre-collegiate level, written not in a condescending manner but in a way which stimulates and informs.

Evelyn Jones Rich  
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ESHU-ELEGBA. Notes. from page 69.

1. The research for this paper has been pursued over the past four years and supported by a cross-disciplinary grant from the Society for Religion in Higher Education, a summer faculty research grant from the Ford Foundation, and a grant from the Social Science Research Council. The study of Yoruba religion began with extended visits to the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1971 and 1972, which included investigations in Oyo and Iwo, and residence in Ila-Orangun throughout June and July of 1972. The data for this essay was gathered while living in Ila-Orangun during the summer months of 1974. I wish to acknowledge the support of Dr. Robert G. Armstrong, Director of the Institute of African Studies at Ibadan, in making available the services of Robert Awujoola, who translated the Ifa recitations of *babalawo* Ifatogun. I am most grateful to his highness, the Orangun of Ila, for his support of my research in Ila-Orangun. The patient and sensitive assistance of Mr. D. G. Taiwo as interpreter of my inquiries in Ila-Orangun was indispensable.

Ila, 45 miles north of Oshogbo in the Western State, is a town of about 45,000 Yorubans, whose life is shaped by its outlying farms and has yet to be transformed by the arrival of electricity. Approximately 70% of the populace are followers of Islam and 20% are Christian. Nevertheless the traditional religious cults continue to play important roles in the lives of the majority of the people. Ifa divination is widely relied upon and therefore Eshu-Elegba remains a lively figure in the world of Ila-Orangun.

2. The Igbefa festival takes place in mid-September, when the last of the late rains and pre-harmattan begins. The date is fixed by the date of the Oro festival, the one-day Igbefa festival following exactly 33 days later. The festival calendar of Ila suggests that the liturgical year is intimately related to the rhythm of the farm year. The new year festivals of Oro and Igbefa are coincident with the end of the harvesting of the yam crop and precede by a month the festival for *orisha* Oko, the *orisha* of the farm. At the festival for Oko the priests and priestesses of many of the cults eat the new yam for the first time. What is interesting is that the new year festivals of Oro and Igbefa are not themselves agriculturally significant. The new year is announced with rituals that focus on the Oba and chiefs, i.e. on the political history and leadership and the social well-being of the town.

3. Melville J. Herskovits refers to "Legba . . . the divine trickster" and notes that "in all probability, this (Dahomean) deity was derived together with the Fa cult from the Yoruba, among whom he takes the name of Elegba, Elegbara, or Eshu" (1938:223). Herskovits is the first, I believe, to use the designation "trickster" to refer to Legba or Eshu. Joan Wescott's study of the sculpture and myths of Eshu worship in Oyo (1962) appears to be the first use of the term in accordance with Radin's analysis of the trickster figure in the myths of the American Indian (1956).

4. Idowu (1962:85) and Abraham (1958:166) refer to

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similar objects on Eshu shrines without giving the Yoruba name.

5. It is a mistake to limit this observation to Eshu. It holds true for Ifa as well. See Bascom (1969:87ff).

6. Froebienus first reports the story after his trip to Ibadan in 1910 (1913:241-2). Verger notes it in his study of the Yoruba cults in Dahomey (1957:112). Bascom records the story in his collection of Ifa verses (1969:48-1). It was the tale most often told to me about Eshu in Ila-Orangun.

7. Odowu (1962:80). Abraham's references to Eshu are almost all drawn from Lucas, Farrow, and Parrinder, all of whom uncritically associate Eshu with the demonic and satanic. Hence, Abraham's definition of the word Eshu begins: "The devil, Satan . . . 'as the supreme power of evil'" (1957:166). See Herskovits' comment in 1938 regarding the "confusion" in missionary literature of the Dahomean "legba" with "the Devil" of Christian theology (1938:223).

8. Recited by *babalawo* Babalola Ifatoogun of Ilobu.

9. See Bascom (1969:105-6) for references to Ifa verses referring to Eshu.

10. In this respect Eshu is not unlike tortoise, the delightfully deceitful figure in Yoruba folk stories. Bascom refers to tortoise as "the trickster" and to Eshu as tortoise's "divine counterpart" (1969:122); an observation given some credence by the fact that the tortoise often appears in the decorative border carvings of Ifa trays. However, D. LaPin, in a private communication, has pointed out that there is a great difference between a figure like tortoise and that of Eshu. In her opinion, Eshu is a representative of ambiguity, the all-important foundation concept in Yoruba philosophy. Eshu embodies the fact that no one knows anything with certainty. His libidinal qualities are probably quite old and perhaps refer to a time in Yoruba mythology when Eshu was a figure similar to Radin's Winnebago trickster. Tortoise, on the other hand, teaches one how to survive in a society where everyone is trying to get the best of you. The image of tortoise as the "wiley deceiver" contains a positive value. The moral judgment that tortoise's behavior is wrong is foreign to Yoruba self-understanding and social behavior. Deception may not be the best way to cope with problems, but the Yoruba will say that adversity forces one to stoop to such devices occasionally and one may as well know how to do it. That is what the folk tales teach, namely, how to be tricky, not that trickery is wrong. Whether or not this judgment is correct about the tortoise figure in Yoruba folk tales, I agree with LaPin that the Eshu and tortoise figures are very different images in Yoruba symbolization.

11. The vestment is catalogued as 51.16.136 in the collection of the Nigerian National Museum, Lagos.

12. Bascom's "Introduction" in *Ifa Divination* (1969) is indispensable for a detailed analysis of Ifa verses and divination rites.

13. N. A. Fadipe's discussion of the "Social Psychology of the Yoruba" (1970: Chap. 9) is noteworthy at this point. He begins his analysis with the observation that, "Life under the conditions which exist in compounds would have been intolerable if ways and means had not been devised for living together in harmony in such comparatively confined places where large numbers of men and women are thrown together. There is an elaborate code of manners and etiquette, the observance of which serves to reduce the strains and frustrations of interpersonal relationships" (1970:301). Fadipe has little to say about ritual and does not refer to the parallel of social and religious obligations as hallmarks of Yoruba life style. Nevertheless, his discussion of the "elaborate code of manners and etiquette" as a means to "harmony" in the relatively confined life of the compound is helpful for understanding the Yoruba response to life as one of meeting obligations.

14. See Bascom (1969) for Ifa verses which warn against such possibilities: 5-3, 18-9, 18-10, 33-1, 33-2, 33-4, 35-3, 54-1, 244-1.

15. See Bascom (1969) for Ifa verses in which Eshu makes the way propitious of the one who sacrifices: 1-11, 6-2, 14-1, 17-1, 33-2, 101-1, 123-1, 131-1, 170-1, 170-3, 246-3, 256-3. According to Abimbola (1970:394), a phrase often found in the verses of Ifa is "Eshu favors only those who have performed the prescribed sacrifice."

16. Although Idowu accepts the opinion that "there is

an unmistakable element of evil in Eshu" he correctly notes that this popular assessment is not shared by the *babalawo* (1969:80-3). See Bascom's (1969:105-6) brief discussion of Eshu as "the divine enforcer," Abimbola's (1970:393) passing reference to Eshu as "an impartial police officer, punishing those who have disturbed the order of the universe," and the dos Santos (1971:87ff) analysis of Eshu as "the stern controller of sacrifice . . . which is the essential basis of harmony between the various elements which govern life."

17. Odowu notes without comment that "Eshu as the approver and bearer of sacrifices to heaven is known to the *babalawo* as *Osetura*" (1962:81).

18. See dos Santos (1971:66-82).

19. After writing the present essay I read Victor Turner's *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*. The following observation was particularly noteworthy with regard to the sexual metaphor in Eshu symbolism. "To digress briefly, it seems to make more sense of the facts if we regard sexuality not so much as the primordial source of sociality and sociality as neutralized libido but as the expression, in its various modalities, either of *communitas* or structure. Sexuality, as a biological drive, is culturally and hence symbolically manipulated to express one or the other of these major dimensions of sociality. It thus becomes a means to social ends, quite as much as an end to which social means are contrived. Whereas structure emphasizes and even exaggerates, the biological differences between the sexes, in matters of dress, decoration, and behavior, *communitas* tends to diminish these differences" (1974:247).

At first glance it seemed clear that Eshu, guardian of the ritual way which alone provides cosmic and social order and makes one's way propitious, is expressive of structure and that the *Ogboni* society is expressive of *communitas*. In relationship to one another this is indeed the case and a helpful way of understanding the place of each in Yoruba ritual symbolism and cult organization. However, the sexual metaphor in Eshu ritual symbolism suggests the pos-

sibility that in the acts of offering and sacrifice structure and *communitas* are to be seen as inextricably related. The male and the female are distinct opposites. Yet it is only in their coming together, their mutual sacrifice, their being for one another, that the creative activity of community can be known. Eshu ritual symbolism is expressive of both structure and *communitas* and their inextricable bond as that which gives shape to what is distinctively human experience.

ESHU-ELEGBA. *Bibliography*

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## THE MOFOLO-PLOMER PRIZE

A new literary prize will be available to Southern African writers as from this year. Nadine Gordimer has initiated the prize for 1975-76. It is envisaged that the prize will become an annual event, with the prize money in future being contributed by Miss Gordimer and a group of Johannesburg publishers, Bateleur Press, Ad. Donker and Ravan Press.

The initial R500 prize will be awarded to a Southern African writer from the Republic of South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, or Namibia, resident or presently living abroad and aged under 36, for a novel or collection of short stories in English. The work must be unpublished as an entity, although sections of any novel or individual stories from any collection may have been published previously. A novel is understood to be a work of not less than 35,000 words. A short story collection is understood to be a work consisting of a total of not less than 30,000 words, or a work consisting of not less than 15 stories.

The three judges for the founding year will be Chinua Achebe, Nigerian novelist and short story writer; Alan Paton, novelist and short story writer; and Adam Small, poet and playwright. The judges shall have the right to split the prize, giving it jointly to the authors of two different works, if they see fit to do so. The decision of the judges will be final.

Entries must be typewritten in double spacing. Two copies of each entry must be submitted. The age restriction is understood to mean that the writer who submits a manuscript will be under the age of 36 on the day that entries close: 31 May 1976.

Queries and entries should be addressed to:

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ASUDE, *Notes, from page 66*.

For most of the information for this paper I am grateful to the informants in *Asude's* compounds at Ibadan, Iwo, Ogbomoso and Ilorin who patiently explained to me the various aspects of their trade.

1. Archibald Callaway, "From Traditional Crafts to Modern Industries," in *The City of Ibadan*, edited by P. C. Lloyd, A. L. Mabogunje and B. Awe, C. U. P., 1967, pp. 153-171. Also K. C. Murray, "Arts and Crafts of Nigeria: Their Past and Future," *Africa*, Vol. XIV, No. 4, 1943, pp. 155-164.

2. Cf. P. Lloyd, "Craft Organisation in Yoruba Towns," *Africa*, Vol. XXIII, No. 1, pp. 30-34, 1953, who divides the smiths into those working in "black metal-iron" and those working in "white metal-silver and brass."

3. Cf. Frank Willett, "Recent Archaeological Discoveries in Ilesha," *Odu*, VIII, 1961, pp. 4-20.

4. J. D. Clarke, "A Visit to Old Oyo," *Nigeria Field*, Vol. VIII, No. 3, 1938.

5. S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, 1897, 1926, Lagos, p. 259.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

7. Ut supra.

8. Dennis Williams, "Art in Metal," in *Sources of Yoruba History*, edited by S. O. Biobaku, O. U. P., 1973, p. 163.

9. Cf. also Eva Krapp-Askari, "Brass Objects from the Owe Yoruba, Kabba Province, Northern Nigeria," in *Odu, University of Ife Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, July 1966, pp. 82-87.

10. D. Williams, "The Iconology of Yoruba Edan Ogboni," *Africa*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 2, 1964.

11. Cf. R. Mauny, "A Possible Source of Copper for the Oldest Brass Heads of Ife," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1963, pp. 393-395.

12. Cf. W. H. Clarke in *Travels and Explorations in Yorubaland 1854-1858*, edited by J. A. Atanda, Ibadan, 1972, p. 268, who noted that by 1858, silver coins were in great demand in Ijaye and Abeokuta. See also A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, "The Major Currencies in Nigerian History," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1960, pp. 132-150, for an earlier introduction of brass and copper bars, brass wire hoops and the manilla copper pieces to certain parts of the coast.

13. See Lloyd, "Craft Organisation . . ." pp. 30-44, for the modern development of the guild system among Yoruba craftsmen.

14. See R. A. Akinola, "The Industrial Structure of Ibadan," *Nigerian Geographical Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 115-130, 1964.

KONGO POTTERS, *Notes, from page 31*.

1. Michael Cardew, "Pottery Techniques in Nigeria," Introduction to *Nigerian Pottery* by Sylvia Leith-

Ross, Nigerian Federal Department of Antiquities and Ibadan University Press, 1970, p. 9.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

3. Margaret Trowell notes that moulded animal decoration is found on the West Coast of Africa and in Zaïre, and one of the pots from the Lower Congo in the Musée du Congo, Tervuren, Belgium, is decorated with a moulded snake. See E. Coart and A. de Haulleville, *Annales du Musée du Congo, Tervuren. Série III: Ethnographie et Anthropologie. Tome II: Les Industries Indigènes. Fasc. 1: La Céramique*. Brussels, 1907. Plate III, No. 34. Mayivangwa's work recalls the snake coiled around the neck of an Ashanti ceremonial vessel of black earthenware (Margaret Trowell, *African Design*, Praeger, New York, 1960, Pl. LXXII), and a small-necked Ibibio pot from the Cross River area, described by Keith Nicklin ("The Ibibio Musical Pot," *African Arts*, Vol. VII, No. 1, Fig. 16).

4. Michael Cardew, *Pioneer Pottery*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1969, pp. 76-77.

5. The blackening process seems to be the same as that used in Nigeria by the Igala Bassa Nge, as described by Nicholas Hawkes, "Note on Pot-firing among the Bassa Nge," Appendix in Leith-Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

6. Cardew, in Leith-Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 13. In Nigeria, locust bean liquor as well as tree bark preparations are used to blacken pots. In Manianga, north of the Zaïre River, a pinkish-brown ware is produced. I was told that these pots are given a single hot firing and are not pre-heated in the ashes. They are taken from the fire and dipped hot into a big basket of hot liquid vegetable dye, which gives a streaked, swirling pattern of browns on pinkish-fawn background.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

8. In general form, both potters' multi- and stirrup-handled pitchers are similar to Ekei water pots from the Cross River area of Cameroon and southern Nigeria. See P. Amaury Talbot, *In the Shadow of the Bush*, Heinemann, London, 1912, p. 288.

9. In this characteristic, Mayivangwa's three-handled pitcher resembles pots made by the Anaguta, east of Jos, Nigeria, for carrying gruel to hunters. See Leith-Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 54, no. 259.

10. Mayivangwa's version resembles Hausa water coolers. *Ibid.*, p. 20, no. 244.

11. Coart and de Haulleville, *op. cit.*, p. 76 and Plate XIX, no. 274.

12. One of her earlier elephants is in the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass Institute, Washington, D.C.

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OPPOSITE PAGE: (TOP) KENTE CLOTH DESIGN TATA KORO, ALSO CALLED ANKONAM (ONLY CHILD). (BOTTOM) OBI NKYEN OBI EKWA MUSI (ONE IS NO BETTER THAN ANOTHER IN GETTING INTO THE ROAD). (SEE PAGE 36).