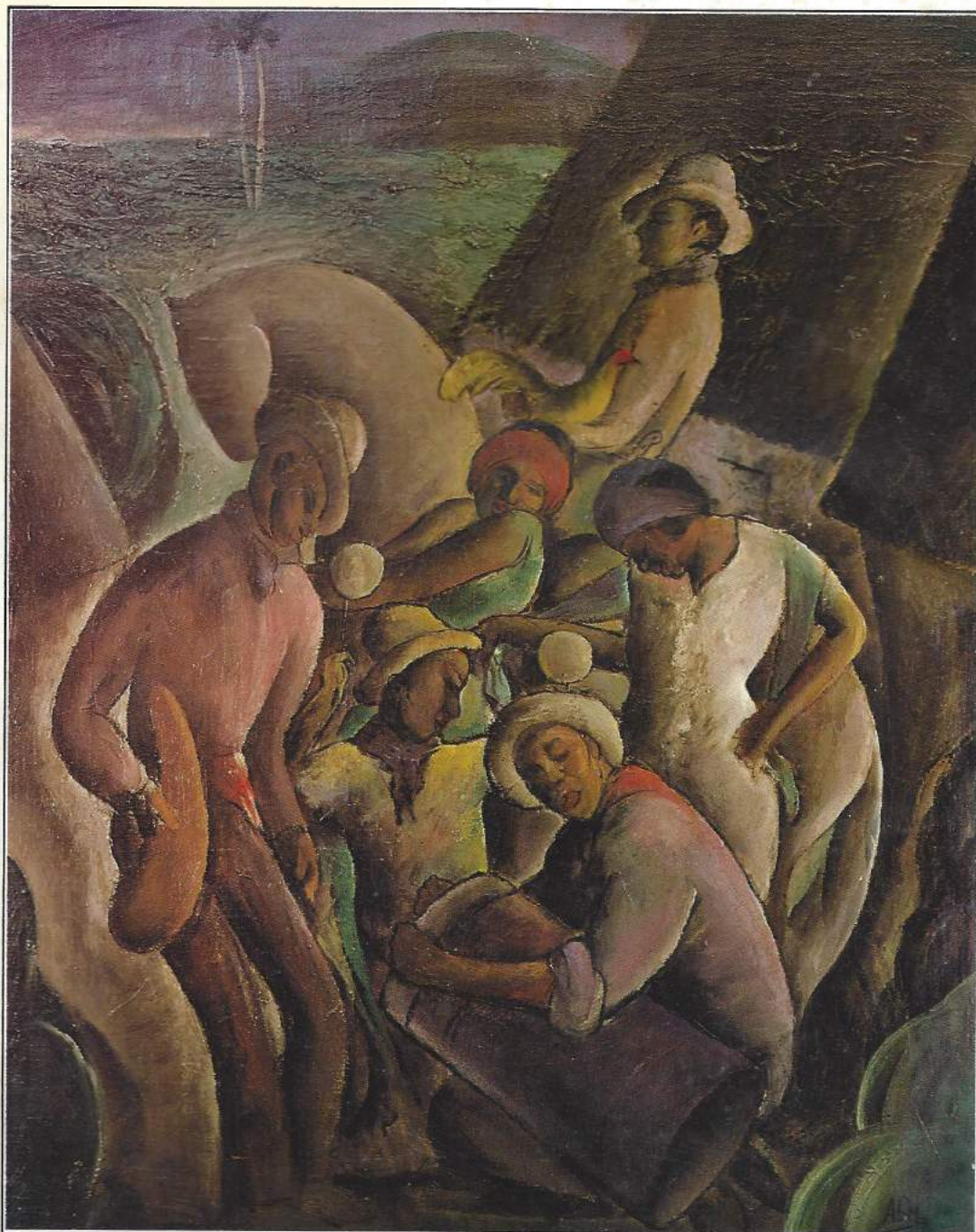




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HAVING THROWN A STONE TODAY ESHU KILLS A BIRD OF YESTERDAY

By Judith Hoch-Smith and Ernesto Pichardo

Only the trickster, **Eshu**, can throw a stone forward yet into the past, as the Yoruba proverb and title of this article suggest. This proverb concisely depicts the paradoxical nature of the God, **Eshu**, the messenger, intercessor, and precipitator of the West African religious pantheon of the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Fon of Dahomey, and their descendants in North and South America. Among the New World practitioners of West African religion, **Eshu**, is referred to as **Legba** or **Papa Legba** in Haiti, as **Exu** or **Siu Legba** in Brazil, and as **Elegúa** in Cuba, Miami and New York.

Eshu and all the other **orishas** (divinities) of Yoruba religion have many aspects which followers call by different names. Miami priests called **santeros**, who practice **Santería** or **Lucumí**,¹ the Cuban version of West African faith, say that **Eleguá** has twenty-one aspects, and often use the name **Eshu** to refer only to an aspect which is negative or evil. But other **santeros** say that **Eshu** is all twenty-one forms of the God in one. This multiplication of forms is often a confusing idea to Judeo-Christians whose religions are dedicated to deities which are abstract, formless, or unique, whereas the multiplication of forms is an idea at the heart of West African religion, both in Africa and the New World.

On the one hand, the Yoruba **orisha** represent and embody abstract forces or powers, such as Purity, Sensual Attraction, Conception, Anger, or Strength, forces which combined comprise the nature of both the universe and also the individual, macrocosm and microcosm being related in this way. In **Santería**, seven of the Yoruba **orisha** are considered as the foundation of the universe: **Obatalá**, **Eshu** (**Eleguá**), **Shangó** (**Changó**), **Ogún** (**Oggún**), **Orunmila** (**Orunla**), **Yemoja** (**Yemaja**), and **Oshun** (**Ochun**). They control every aspect of human life, and are known collectively as the Seven African Powers (**Las Siete Potencias Africanas**).

But on the other hand, these **orisha** or powers manifest themselves continuously to their followers through specific forms. **Orisha** appear in different guises in myths and legends, and also communicate directly to their worshippers through divination and possession. Thus, **santeros** say the **orisha** have "families" or different "roads" or "paths" which are the individual identities by which the powers are known. **Eleguá** has twenty-one aspects such as **Anaqui**, mother of **Eleguá**, and **Alaroye**, who lives outdoors and is a constant trickster. And yet there are commonalities running throughout the line, so that in a general discussion of the **orisha**, one may discuss the generic or family characteristics of each.² A generic description of **Eshu** is the most comprehensive way to approach this **orisha** who embodies a power or principle unfamiliar to those of non-African faith, a principle we could call 'paradoxicality.' An introduction to this complex deity is best provided by examining two of the best known stories which the Yoruba tell about **Eshu**.

Two Tales

In one constantly repeated Yoruba tale, **Eshu**, dressed on his left side in red and on his right side in black, walks down a road separating two farmers' fields. After he disappears beyond the fields, the owners of the farms, who are standing in their respective fields, walk to the road to discuss this stranger who has just passed. The farmer with the field on the left-hand side of the road says, "Did you see that stranger dressed in red who went by?" The other farmer replies that he saw the stranger but that he was dressed in black—not in red. The two farmers argue over the color of **Eshu's** clothing and eventually return to their fields. In a few minutes, **Eshu**

Eshu's principle serves as a moving mirror for what people are, and he is constantly available to point out flaws in people's perceptions of themselves, continuously goading them to recognize their arbitrary and limited perspectives.

walks down the road again, coming back in the opposite direction to the way he was walking when first seen by the farmers. The two men again watch him go by, and after he passes, rush to the road to discuss what they have just seen. This time the farmer on the left-hand side of the road says, "You know you were right, that guy was dressed in black" and the other farmer says, "No! You were right after all, he was dressed in red." Each of the men thinks the other is trying to fool him, and their discussion turns into a heated argument over the color of the stranger's clothes.³

What is the role of **Eshu** in this story? At the beginning of the story the two farmers are working peacefully in their respective fields, but as soon as **Eshu** walks down the road, everything goes rapidly downhill between them. But the trickster himself has done nothing except pass between the two fields. It is the two farmers who have interpreted the incident in such a way that it leads them to quarrel. The key to understanding **Eshu's** role in human affairs lies in the farmers' perception of the stranger. Each farmer saw only one-half of **Eshu**, and therefore only one-half of his true identity. But each farmer nevertheless undertook a debate with his neighbor based on only half the evidence, and that narrow-minded debate resulted inevitably in a quarrel. This story can immediately be appreciated for its commentary on the danger of making superficial judgments, especially by people who are closely related to one another, because such judgments often lead to unnecessary conflict. If studied carefully, **Eshu's** teachings inevitably lead one to understand the frailty and relativity of human perception.

The story of the two farmers who were neighbors is, in fact, clearly about the nature of human perception. What the farmers on the road saw was not the "thing-in-itself" but only their idea of the thing; they saw only their own limited perspective. In general, **Eshu** teaches that the totality of a person's expectations and conceptions form a screen through which s/he views and perceives the world. Thus, what is seen when one looks at the world is not the world itself but the world mediated by one's concepts. **Eshu** shows how people change reality all the time to suit their concepts of what they think it is like. In looking at **Eshu** for instance, one farmer changed him to red and the other to black. Neither farmer had the perspective from which to see that **Eshu** was, in fact, a red/black being. Each idea of **Eshu** was only partial, and limited by the perspective of the observer/farmer. As such, this story sets forward a view of human perception and its relationship to objective reality which is analogous to that of modern physics.

The relationship between the observer and nature has become part of the theoretical framework of modern physics. According to this theoretical formulation nature cannot be described apart from the observer, who is linked to the event

Divination is a means of attempting to perceive the totality of the moment, a means by which an individual can see the relationship between the self and the encompassing world.

through the acts of both selecting an event to be observed and a question which is to be asked of that event. Thus, as Heisenberg says, "What we observe in nature is not nature in itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning" (*Physics and Philosophy*, Harper and Row, New York, 1958). This is the essence of the paradox with which **Eshu** is involved.

We try to understand an event in the external world, and yet our mode of understanding transforms that event into something which is as much about who we are, as what it is. **Eshu** is a Yoruba representation of this problem of perception, for when the farmers tried to apprehend reality, what they actually saw were their own perspectives, akin to seeing their own faces in a mirror. Their error was in believing they had really seen or understood the stranger who had passed by, and in basing a quarrel on this egotistical confidence. **Eshu** teaches in stories of this type that egotism and pride lead inevitably to a dualistic world, one in which you are by yourself alone, separated from the real nature of things and everyone else by virtue of your limited understanding.

Another story clearly shows how dualism is the result of pride and egotistical judgments. In this story **Eshu** creates and gives a beautiful head tie to one of two wives married to the same man. Until **Eshu** brings this head tie, the wives and husband live in peace with one another. But when the first sees her co-wife wearing the magnificent head garment, she becomes insanely jealous believing that her husband has favored his second wife in this way. But then **Eshu** makes a more beautiful head tie and gives it to the first wife. Seeing her co-wife with a beautiful head tie, the second wife surmises that her husband presented it to his first wife because he loved her more. **Eshu** secretly continues giving one wife and then the other beautiful head coverings, and the wives begin bickering over the attentions of their husband. The confused spouse tries to give his affections to the wife who complains of the lack of them—but her identity keeps changing, for first one woman and then the other beleaguers him with complaints. Finally, **Eshu** stops giving head ties when the formerly peaceful household is left in strife and disharmony.

Again in this story just as in the story about the farmers, people observe the same event but arrive at different interpretations of that event based on their own perspectives. Each wife in turn believes that the husband is favoring one of them over the other because of the gifts of head ties, and each wife becomes enraged because of the favoritism; but, in reality, the poor husband has nothing to do with the head ties. It is **Eshu** who was responsible for introducing the headgear, which the wives then interpreted as emanating from the husband. Each wife saw only herself, that is, her own conceptualization of reality in this circumstance, which resulted in the quarrelsome separation from the other wife, and from her husband. The jealousy which each wife felt for

the other was part of each woman's understanding of the world, and it kept the wives from realizing that there was more than one way to understand these mysterious gifts. Therefore, the reaction to the appearance of a beautiful head tie ultimately told more about the women themselves than it did about the head ties, which were simply the "events in nature" on which the wives chose to focus the interpretation of their relationship to one another. Another way of saying this is that the head ties crystallized the women's intrinsic jealousies. **Eshu** leaves the household in dissension, his inimitable way of illustrating the chaotic but inevitable outcome which results when people cling to their ego-centered view of things.

Eshu as Divine Messenger

Eshu's archetypal role in human affairs is best portrayed by his relationship to **Ifa**, the system of divination which is central to Yoruba philosophy and world view.⁴ In this role, **Eshu** is part of the Yoruba Divine Triumvirate which includes **Ifa** or **Orunmila** (*Santeria*: **Orunla**), lord of **Ifa**, and **Olodumare**, the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent One. **Olodumare** is Infinite and beyond the comprehension of finite beings, yet it is this ineffable essence which is responsible ultimately for everything. **Olodumare** seals an individual's destiny at birth, and this destiny includes both a person's psychological and also his social unfolding in time and space. One would not be amiss in saying that West African religion in both Africa and the New World is primarily devoted to illuminating and fructifying the personal destinies of its community of worshippers. And this is why **Ifa** is of central importance. Through **Ifa** the will of the Infinite is rendered into multiplex symbolic images which are intuitively interpreted by the **babalawo** or **italero** working for a client.

A **babalawo** consults **Ifa** by manipulating sixteen palm nuts, the **italero** sixteen sea shells. The particular "fall" of these nuts or shells, refers to one of 256 ($16 \times 16 = 256$) figures in this complex and rigidly defined system of divination. Each figure is said by the **italero** to speak for one or several of the **orishas**, and is interpreted according to verses, legends, and proverbs associated with it. The enigmatic or symbolic statement referred to by the figure is then applied to the client's particular problem through the insightfulness of the **italero**.

Eshu is linked inextricably to **Ifa**. **Eshu** carries the Word of **Olodumare** to the oracle, and in turn carries the supplications of the client back to **Olodumare**, and he also functions for all the **orisha** in this way. (Thus, it is said by **italero** that every **orisha** has its **eshu**.) **Eshu** in this role is the Divine Messenger, who is known in Dahomey as the Linguist because he is able to transmit effectively or translate information between planes of reality. In Miami, just as in Cuba, it is said that **Eshu** "opens the roads," he is the "gatekeeper" who is behind or just outside of every door emphasizing his identification with thresholds. He is always the first to be "fed" with all sacrificial articles and also the first to be called down in possession rituals, again emphasizing his role as the one who goes first in any exchange between planes. Thus, if we say that **Ifa** is the Holy Word of the Infinite, we must also say that **Eshu** is the medium through which that word is realized. Without **Eshu** there would be no transaction between the gods and people.

A story which is derived from the **Table of Ifa** bears this out. One day the **orisha** decided to visit **Orunla** (**Orunmila**, **Ifa**) to find out what he did for a living. **Orunla** answered the

queries of his divine guests by saying that he solved problems for people through the use of his divining board. The **orisha** laughed at **Orunla**'s improbable career and considered ways through which they could ascertain whether this was true. Unbeknown to the **orisha**, **Eshu** overheard everything and decided to help his friend, **Orunla**. First, he caused a mortal man to fall ill, and this sick person was sent to consult **Orunla** in full sight of all the doubting **orisha**. **Orunla** advised the extremely ill person about his condition and the specific cure, and the person following his directions subsequently recovered. Observing **Orunla**, his fellow **orisha** concluded that he did indeed make his living by solving problems with his divining board. However, what these **orisha** did not know was that **Eshu**, after initially causing the illness, began to advise both **Orunla** about the condition, and also the patient about the cure. Thus, the **orisha** celebrated **Orunla**'s expertise, but it was **Eshu** who had saved his friend.

The **italero** who understands **Eshu**'s role as the Preparer of the Way, explains that this story proves **Eshu**'s transliterative role, and also the hegemony of this role in the world. **Eshu** created the initial illness, although this should be understood as an instance of **Eshu** materializing or crystallizing an aspect of that person's destiny. He then described to **Orunla** the actual and specific nature of the person's illness. **Eshu** then communicated with the ill person, prescribing a specific remedy matched to his unique condition.

Eshu in his involvement with **Ifa** is never thought to act arbitrarily, but rather is always the arm of Divine Justice. He expedites justice by continuously verbalizing or humanizing divine discourse which would otherwise be beyond human understanding. **Eshu** has a foot in two worlds, the divine and the human, and as in the case of the sick man, he is constantly opening doors and windows between these worlds so that they may be harmonized. This is why the Yoruba think of **Eshu** as the Civilizer, the one who opens your eyes to the way things really are, and why they say he is always "working in the world."

This view is different in emphasis from one which stresses that **Eshu** is the Divine Confuser responsible for the troubles of men. According to this view he is equated with the devil, or at least feared as a "trickster." It is easy to see why some people might think this is true just based on his role in the stories about the farmers and the polygynous household. But it was not **Eshu** who "caused" the discord which abruptly concludes each story; rather, it was the people's own covert conflicts which he merely precipitated. He was the catalyst through which those characters ultimately discovered more about themselves, because he helped them to see hidden aspects of their characters or situations. Another way of saying this is that he illuminated their fate.

And this is precisely his role in divination. Divination should be understood at its most abstract level as an act of perception. It is a means of attempting to perceive the totality of the moment, a means by which an individual can see the relationship between the self and the encompassing world. But an individual can choose not to see this relationship and end up in the predicament of separation and dualism. For as the **italero** says, **Ifa** is never wrong, it is only clients who fail to accept its explanation of their lives, that is, they refuse to accept **Eshu**'s transliteration. This is why every Yoruba divining tray of **Ifa** depicts **Eshu**'s eyes staring clearly and coolly past the diviner and into every human mind and heart. As the Dahomean says, "... **Legba** is found everywhere. To go to a **Vodu** (god) one must pass **Legba**, to consult **Fa** (**Ifa**), one

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must pass by **Legba**, and every man and woman must have a **Legba** as guardian. . ." In other words, to get anywhere one must confront one's own self, and it is **Eshu**'s (**Legba**'s) function to illuminate the self.

In **Santeria** in Miami, just as in Dahomey, every individual, prior to being incorporated fully into the religion, receives what is known as a personal **elegúa**. A **santero** prepares this personal **elegúa** after divining for his client. The figure which divination reveals contains basic information about a person's temperament, character, and guardian spirits. This information will be symbolized in the selection of ingredients from which a **santero** will form the **elegúa**. The **santero** proceeds to shape with cement mixed with these symbolic ingredients representative of the client's specific psychic and social situation, an image of **elegúa**'s head, a conical shaped mass whose eyes and mouth are formed with seashells. The image is consecrated through sacrifice and offerings, and eventually given to the client to keep at home where its constant watchfulness guards his/her well being. As mentioned before, **Santeria** is in the main dedicated to helping an individual to unravel his destiny and thereby to understand himself better. The preparation of this **elegúa** is one of the first steps in the process, for it makes manifest in a very concrete way certain important aspects of a person's destiny, and animates them by investiture with the spirit of **Elegúa** himself. Therefore, just as every **orisha** has its own **elegúa**, so does every man. The Yoruba understand this function of **Eshu** by saying that he knits together a person's destiny. The personal **elegúa** is a powerful reminder of the inward and outward search for illumination that a client has undertaken, usually at some point of crisis in his life.

Eshu as Divine Child

In West Africa, **Eshu** is conceived as being very old and very young, male and female, bestial and divine. He is, in short, a representation of all the paradoxical and dynamically opposed elements which comprise human life. But he is always characterized by a purity of delivery, a perfect rendering of justice from realm to realm, and an unspoiled innocence which allows him to time and again point out frailty in human perception without angering anyone. Indeed, he is looked on with affection. Thus, it is not difficult to see why in Cuba and Miami, **Eshu** is often regarded as a Divine Child.

Children have a habit of seeing through their elder's self-deceptions and falsehoods, and of telling the truth as they see it, unaltered by circumstances. **Santeros** say that when a child has an invisible playmate, this playmate is often **Eshu**, himself a child, who loves other children. And in keeping with his childlike quality, **Eshu** is often offered candies and other sweets which he is thought to prefer.

Eshu in this role is the Divine Messenger, who is known in Dahomey as the Linguist because he is able to translate information between planes of reality.

Santeros offer a story about Eshu in explanation of both his preference for children, and also his association in ritual with the coconut. In this story, Eshu is a prince, but yet a young child who one day goes out riding in the forest. During the ride he sees a coconut which is shining with a brilliant white light, and he picks it up in order to show it to his parents upon his return. But when he gives it to them they see an ordinary coconut, without the luminescence which the young prince describes to them. The parents are furious and order the young prince to throw away the coconut and refrain from making dangerous excursions into the forest. The prince throws away the coconut, and in so doing, dies. While the people are mourning, some villagers suddenly see a coconut at the edge of the forest which is shining with a tremendous light. They are then forced to believe what the young prince had said, and they bring the coconut back to the village and honor it as a god. Some of them wonder whether Eshu has not turned into the coconut, while others are unconvinced and do not know where he has gone, or what he is.

The end of the story describes the common situation of many who fail to understand what Eshu is about. For it is irrelevant whether Eshu "turned into a coconut" or disappeared into the forest, or died, for that matter. What is important is the bringing to "light" of the parent's intolerance and closed-mindedness. They were convinced that their child could not have seen a shining coconut, and acted on this certain, yet erroneous judgment, which resulted in the death of their child. The parents' idea of what the world was like, prevented them from seeing it as it really was. The inflexibility of finite cultural concepts stifled the innocence and purity of the universal vision of the child, and thus, the parents, cynical, world-weary adults, killed that part of themselves which was still fresh and original, that part which could have led them to truth.

This then is the thread which runs through the principle of Eshu in both West Africa and the New World, the choice which he symbolizes of seeing and not seeing, the paradoxical element of the human predicament. In mythology and legend, Eshu composes situations out of a people's view of themselves to bring to light elements which may be hidden and not consciously acknowledged, as when he composed a situation in the polygynous household which revealed the co-wives' latent jealousies. In composing these scenes, Eshu often acts in ways or makes people act in ways which they are loathe to recognize. He or they may be greedy, lustful, willful, irreverent or all of these things at once. As such his principle serves as a moving mirror for what people are, and he is constantly available to point out flaws in people's perceptions of themselves, continuously goading them to recognize their arbitrary and limited perspectives. For this reason, it is impossible to define Eshu more precisely, because a person's experience of him changes as that person's identity unfolds in time. Totally defining him could

only be accomplished outside the realm of time, where he would no longer be an active principle.

For as long as he is in the world, Eshu continuously offers people the choice of seeing themselves as they really are, or of seeing only who they think themselves to be, and Eshu/Eleguá changes as quickly as people themselves change. When you think you recognize Him, He suddenly transforms Himself to black and red, or to a limping beggar, a child, or an old man. If you think that you stand on the earth because of the law of gravity, He will walk on the ceiling to show you that you are mistaken. He is Eshu-Eleguá of whom a Yoruba playwright Odatunde Ijimere, sings,

*The newly wedded wife sacrificed to Eshu;
She thought he would not confuse her head,
Until one day she stole the sacrifice from the altar*

*The newly installed queen sacrificed to Eshu;
She thought he would not confuse her head,
Until one morning she walked naked in the market.*

Notes:

1. Santeria comes from the Spanish word **santo** (saint) which recalls the syncretization of the Catholic saints with African divinities (Yoruba: **orisha**) which occurred when African slaves were brought to Cuba. A **santero/a** is thus a priest (priestess) of **santeria**. **Lucumí** is another term for Yoruba religion in Cuba. It is said that Yoruba slaves on the ships bound for the Americas would ask in the horrible holds, "S'oluku ni" (anyone here a friend? Lit.: Are you my friend?) to find out who on board was from a Yoruba village. Allegedly, the phrase was creolized into **Lucumí**, which became the term to describe both those people of Yoruba ancestry and also the Yoruba religion.

2. The personal manifestations of saints to their Catholic worshippers is analogous to this religious principle whereby the Infinite Divine comes to have finite meaning. Thus, we could approach an understanding of Mary either through an analysis of her historical manifestations as the Virgin of Charity, the Madonna of the Miraculous Medal, the Lady of Lourdes, etc., or we could analyze her divine generic role as the Mother of God.

3. This myth is told in many different versions. Cabrera tells a Cuban version in which **Elegba** causes two friends to quarrel when they disagree as to whether they saw a bald, black stranger, or a bearded, white stranger. **Elegba** prepared himself by changing half of his body to white, and shaving the black side, in order to incite the quarrel (*El Monte*, Rema Press, 1968).

4. The Fon of Dahomey call this oracle, **Fa**. Among practitioners of Santeria, it is called the **Table of Ifa**, and also is known as **diloggun**. The **Table of Ifa** is read by **babalawos** and **italeros**, the two highest ranks of specialists in the religion. An **italero** is second in rank to the **babalawo**, but is in charge of ceremonies and is a specialist in divination.

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