

Esu Elegbara: A Source of an Alter/Native Theory of African Literature and Criticismⁱ

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Alo o! Alo! Oruku tindi tindi, oruku tindi tindi. My story rumbles and strikes; straight like an arrow in flight, and lands on the head of Esu, the one who is simultaneously short and tall, hard and soft; the dark short man who is yet so huge no one can encircle him; Esu, the androgynous deity; Esu, the divine messenger, linguist, and interpreter; Esu, the divine enforcer of the will of Olodumare, the Supreme Being.

In the beginning, there was the one-and-only-God-head. And the one-and-only-God-head had a farm. On his farm, there was Atunda. And Atunda was the slave of the one-and-only-God-head.

As the story goes, one afternoon—call it high noon, if you wish—having tired of doing the chores for the one-and-only-God-head, without any pay (there is no mention of a salary in the myth), Atunda came up with a plan to liberate himself. So it was that, as soon as he espied his master busy at work on his farm, in the valley below (note well how the one-and-only-God-head didn't mind dirtying His hands once in a while), Atunda, being the strategist that he was, went up the hill high above his master's farm and rolled a huge boulder down onto the head of his slave master. Atunda's aim was deadly accurate. Being a man of accurate aim, the boulder landed accurately on the head of the one-and-only-God-head. Before you could say Atunda Ajagunmolu (or Jack Robinson, if you are a thoroughbred post-colonial subject), the boulder had smashed the one-and-only-God-head into several pieces. And since you cannot kill God, each piece became a god or a goddess.

For this feat, Soyinka narrates Atunda in *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967) as the first iconoclast, the first rebel against oppression and the one whose conscious action of will gave birth to the multiplicity of divine essences in Yoruba cosmology.

The myth of Atunda explains why, today, the Yoruba people of Nigeria, Benin Republic, Cuba, Haiti, Peru, Grenada, Venezuela, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago,

the United States of America, and so on, have four hundred and one gods and goddesses, by some accounts. Without any doubt, therefore, Atunda was the first guerrilla, the first liberation fighter, the first revolutionary, and the first post(-)colonial subject. He was the primal enslaved with the will to fashion his own freedom and, in so doing, to establish that none but the enslaved can free himself/herself. Atunda is the mythic ancestor of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Amil Cabral, Nelson Mandela, Hugo Chavez, Wole Soyinka, Adaka Boro, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Gani Fawehinmi, Femi Falana, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, etc. Though a seductive metaphor, Atunda is not my primary focus today. My focus is Esu, one of the several fragments caused into being by Atunda's revolutionary/liberatory act of will.

The choice of Esu for this project was inspired by a deep-seated fascination with two iconic figures: Judas from the Christian world and Esu from the Yoruba world. As an undergraduate at what was then the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, in Nigeria, I spent more time writing poetry, radio plays, and short stories than studying for my degree. One of the miracles of my life is that I still managed to pass my examinations. I became a minor celebrity in my final year when one of my short stories ("The New Pastor") was broadcast on BBC, London in April 1974. But one of my greatest regrets from that period of literary awakening and apprenticeship was my failure to finish one of the radio plays I set out to write. I would in 1992, as my plot-line journal reminded me the other day, return to the idea in that aborted play; but, just as was the case in the early 1970s at Ile-Ife, I never made it past the basic outline stage. The working title of the play was "Saint Judas." Most of my undergraduate friends professed Christianity and one argument I delighted in having with them was how fundamentally unfair they were to Judas. The argument I propounded with my "Christian" friends and which was going to form the basis of the said play was that Christians should be forever grateful to Judas for betraying Jesus. For, if Judas had been a slacker and failed in his divine duty, Jesus would not have died his divine death to become the source of their salvation. My friends were not impressed; they accused me of blasphemy. When a few years ago the news broke of the discovery of the gospel of Saint Judas, I felt like kicking myself for not having stayed with my Judas play to the end. The urge to contemplate Judas in those terms often reminded me of the difference between the traditional and the Euro-Christian perceptions of Esu.

I cannot now remember when my fascination with Esu began in earnest, but one thing that is certain is that my relocation to the Caribbean contributed to the sharpening of my intellectual engagement with him. The decision to

interrogate Esu (yes, let's get that post-colonial jargon in and out of the way early o'clock), as a post-colonial literary/critical trope was indirectly inspired by a local radio talk show some years ago. It was a Sunday morning and, as usual, I was minding my own business, when I got a phone call from one of the leading *iyalorisa* in Trinidad and Tobago asking if I would call into a radio talk show in-progress to correct the erroneous view of Esu as the devil that was being propagated by a number of callers to the programme, including a Nigerian born-again pastor who was speaking as the authoritative native expert on matters African. I learnt, too, that some snide remarks had been made about a Trinidadian media personnel who had adopted an African name with Esu as a constituent component in it. I quickly did a mental scan of active Esu names among the Yoruba people from whom the Trinidadian adopted her name and came up with *Esubiyi*, *Esutola*, *Esuseyi*, *Esugbayila*, *Esurounbi*, and *Esutosin*. Enough Esu names to reassure *Esuyemi* that her name was a legitimate and positive Yoruba name. But, primarily because I did not listen to the whole programme in question, I politely declined the request to call (Esu cautions against judgement based on partial information) and I sought shelter in the fact that *Orunmila*, the Yoruba deity of wisdom and Esu's riding partner, is a staunch believer in the sense of occasion. *Orunmila* chooses when to speak; abhors and avoids shouting matches. I promised the *iyalorisa* in question (no, that is not absolutely true; I promised myself, that's more like it) that I would speak about Esu as soon as the right occasion presented itself.

When it came time to deliver my inaugural lecture, I reasoned that the occasion to speak about Esu had arrived. After some deliberation, I settled on the topic, "Decolonising Myth: From Esu to Bacchanal Aesthetics," a topic that would allow me to link the Old Africa of the Continent to the New Africa of the Caribbean, with the Esu trope as the binding thread. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, friends all, I am particularly grateful that CBAAC has afforded me this opportunity to bring this discussion home to Nigeria, the source-head where it all began.

Let me start with a reassurance for the non-traditionalists in the audience: let not your heart be troubled. There shall be no proselytizing. Actually, as many of you must know, the Yoruba tradition under which I shelter to deliver this lecture does not approve of proselytizing. It scorns the arrogance of those who insist that their deity is better than a next deity. "Ona kan o wo 'ja" (There are many routes to the market) is the retort with which the Yoruba mind responds to any such supremacist arrogance. If the Yoruba tradition had not entrenched the principle of multiple options, a concept that is underscored in the retonalisation of Esu's praise name of *Elegbara*, as *Elegba ara*, that is, the one with

many manifestations, can you imagine how many religious wars we would have had to fight as devotees of four hundred and one deities go at each other's throats, each claiming that their deity is the only way to salvation?

In Yoruba philosophy, Esu emerges as a divine trickster, a disguise-artist, a mischief-maker, a rebel, a challenger of orthodoxy, a shape-shifter, and an enforcer deity. Esu is the keeper of the divine *ase* with which Olodumare created the universe; a neutral force who controls both the benevolent and the malevolent supernatural powers; he is the guardian of Orunmila's oracular utterances. Without Esu to open the portals to the past and the future, Orunmila, the divination deity would be blind. As a neutral force, he straddles all realms and acts as an essential factor in any attempt to resolve the conflicts between contrasting but coterminous forces in the world. Although he is sometimes portrayed as whimsical, Esu is actually devoid of all emotions. He supports only those who perform prescribed sacrifices and act in conformity with the moral laws of the universe as laid down by Olodumare. As the deity of the "orita"—often defined as the crossroads but really a complex term that also refers to the front yard of a house, or the gateway to the various bodily orifices—it is Esu's duty to take sacrifices to target-deities. Without his intervention, the Yoruba people believe, no sacrifice, no matter how sumptuous, will be efficacious. Philosophically speaking, Esu is the deity of choice and free will. So, while Ogun may be the deity of war and creativity and Orunmila the deity of wisdom, Esu is the deity of prescience, imagination, and criticism—literary or otherwise.ⁱⁱ

The definition of Esu which has, however, persisted in the popular imagination is the Euro-Christian one which maligns him as the devil/Satan. This definition was midwived by Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1806-1891) who, in his pioneering translation of the Bible into Yoruba, had chosen Esu as the Yoruba equivalent of the Christian Satan. In *A Dictionary of the Yoruba Language*, published in 1913 by the Church Missionary Society Bookshop, Lagos, Nigeria, Esu is defined as the devil, a definition that would be repeated, albeit, alongside other more traditional Yoruba definitions, in the 1958 University of London's *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba*.

The irony of the choices made by the Crowthers of the African world is that in their psychological disdain for, and rejection of, African culture, which was, in part, a response to the African involvement in their enslavement, they became a new generation of middle-men and -women who functioned as arrowheads for the denigration of African cultures. So, while a number of pre-colonial African chiefs and merchants betrayed their fellow Africans by selling them into

enslavement, the intellectual Crowthers, acting as priests, interpreters, translators, policemen, postmasters, and school teachers, were key players in the process of the religious, psychological and mental enslavement of African peoples.

If Africans had been less trusting and more cynical and suspicious, they would have wondered why the same translators of the Bible who saw nothing wrong with equating Satan with Esu did not find a near-equivalent Yoruba deity for Jesus Christ, instead of Yorubanising his name into Jesu Kristi. If Satan translates into Esu because of some perceived incidental similarities between the two, how come Jesus does not translate into Orunmila, given the fact that Orunmila is as proverbial, wise, calm, peaceful, and forbearing as Jesus? How come he does not translate to Ela, the divinity of regeneration? Of course, such a logical approach would have undermined the policy of discrediting African world-views and would have suggested a cultural equity between the West and Africa that Europe was not minded to concede. It would not be until much later in the interaction between Africa and Europe in the Americas that a democratic principle of equity between Christianity and the Orisa tradition would be initiated by Spiritual Baptists, who would erect a structure that would equate the Orisa with Christian saints, with Esu being equated to St. Peter in recognition of their gate-keeping and intercessory roles.

The translation of Satan as Esu and his deployment as a metaphor for the large-scale demonisation of African culture by Europe manifest in the works of the pioneer Yoruba writer, Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa, whose influence looms large in the work of contemporary Nigerian writers, especially in the works by those of Yoruba extraction like Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka, and non Yoruba writers like Ben Okri. In every instance in which Fagunwa introduces a Yoruba deity into his work, he manipulates the narrative to underscore the view that no matter the extent of the power of that deity, only the Supreme God is credited with the power to grant salvation. In so doing, Fagunwa subtly alters the Yoruba world-view which accords significant autonomy to such deities as God's agents in his attempt to privilege a monotheistic Christian world-view. Nowhere is Fagunwa's attempt to christianise the Yoruba world-view more glaring than in his presentation of Esu in terms reminiscent of the biblical story of the rise and fall of Lucifer.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ironically, but in consonance with the interrogative nature of the Esu principle, the very first writers to reject the views about Yoruba and, by extension, African cosmology presented by Euro-Christian Africans would come from among those who were raised on writers like Fagunwa. One such writer is

Wole Soyinka, whose admiration for Fagunwa led him to undertake a translation of one of his novels. From very early in his career, Soyinka, in spite of the constricting Christian ethos imposed on him by his parents, especially his mother whom he nicknamed the Wild Christian,^{iv} was committed to a progressive examination and valorisation of African culture.

According to one Esu story, made famous in African poetry in English by selfsame Soyinka in “Idanre,” Ogun—the great warrior, exhibitionist stud, and imbiber extraordinaire—was leading his men in battle, doing what he did best—slaughtering the enemies of his people. There was a lull in the battle and Ogun sat at the base of a tree and leaned back for a snooze. Esu came by, saw Ogun in repose, planted a huge gourd of palmwine at his side, and disappeared into nearby bushes to observe Ogun’s response on waking up. When Ogun woke up and saw the gourd of palmwine, he was ecstatic; he grabbed it with his large hands and drained its content in one long unbroken gulp. The palmwine rushed to his head and he bellowed the command to his soldiers to resume the battle. As usual, he was in the lead. He made mincemeat of the enemies of his people. But the “rush of wine” clouded his judgement and made him incapable of distinguishing friends from foes. Having completed the rout of the enemies of his people, Ogun turned on his own people and decimated them.^v Through this tragic outcome of Ogun’s insatiable appetite for palmwine, Esu cautions against excesses.

While Ogun looms large in Soyinka’s works, with Esu relegated to occasional appearances, it can be argued that there are many avatars and pre-figurations of Esu operating as dynamic undercurrents, especially in *A Dance of the Forests* and *Death and the King’s Horseman*.

In *A Dance of the Forests*, Eshuoro combines the qualities of Esu and those of the spirit of the ancestors as manifested in the Oro cult and can be seen as the personal Esu of Oro. Aroni (the dissembling character in the play) is both a cognomen for Esu as well as the name for the personal Esu of Osanyin, the deity of herbs. While Aroni echoes Fagunwa’s Aroni from *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, Soyinka strips him of the biblical undertones which Fagunwa had forced on him and restores him to his traditional ritual status.

Esu’s impulse to put humanity to the test is very much evident in *Death and the King’s Horseman* although the only direct reference to Esu in this play is a throwaway comment by Elesin Oba, at the beginning, suggesting that his neglect of the market women has been caused by the fact that the day has been an “Esu-harrassed day.”^{vi} There are two major crucial Esu moments in this

play. In the first Esu moment, Elesin Oba is distracted by the figure of a beautiful virgin as he prepares for his ritual transition. Rather than turn his gaze away from the physical to the spiritual, he demands a carnal union with the girl as his parting gift. Elesin Oba's insistence on fulfilling his carnal desires at such a solemn ritual moment runs counter to traditional African wisdom, which insists on broad spectrum abstinence as a prelude to the performance of major ritual duties. If the love of palmwine led Ogun to decimate his people, Elesin Oba's philandering causes him to fail in his sworn duty to his community. The intervention of the District Officer, which is the other major Esu moment, becomes just another hurdle preventing Elesin Oba's fulfilment of his ritual duty rather than the main catalyst for his failure. When Elesin Oba suggests that his powers deserted him as he struggled to retrieve them from the "power of the stranger whose shadow fell across the doorway and left me floundering and blundering in a maze I had never encountered before,"^{vii} Iyaloja is quick to remind him that he made the choices that led to the weakening of his spiritual and psychological powers by insisting on a "one-for-the-road" moment of sexual pleasure. Elesin Oba, who boasts of being too knowledgeable to be confused by Esu's seven-way crossroads that confuses only the stranger, ends up trapped in Esu's maze. In many ways, Elesin Oba's confusion of desires (spiritual and carnal) is similar to Ezeulu's confusion of his dual roles as man and spirit in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*.

While, as a mythopoet, Soyinka embraces Ogun as his major metaphor, mainly because Ogun's personality coincides with his as an unrepentant agent of revolutionary change, and Esu as the subterranean catalyst for dialectic self-examination, the African writer who has demonstrated the most explicit fascination with the Esu trope is Femi Osofisan, a self-confessed disciple/interrogator of Soyinka. Asked about his relationship with Yoruba gods, Osofisan reveals that he sees them as "metaphors and together they form a collective image of the identity of the people" (*Excursions in Drama and Literature* 80). He, however, rejects what amounts to Soyinka's over-privileging of Ogun:

I think we need something more positive. This is why I'm advocating the Orunmila principle, but of course in constant unity with Eshu. Because Eshu is the god of indeterminacy. The god of chance. The god of revolts...If a knowledge needs to be carried forward, something must come and disturb the present stability. It is when the present stability is disturbed that we then move forward again, else we stagnate, and die. ...Revolts must come in order to have progress, which is why questioning must continue. That's the principle that Eshu represents,

constant questioning, constant challenge to authority, to orthodoxy. The restless iconoclastic spirit. But the resolution of that comes out of the Ifa principle. The synthesis, the gathering of everything together, then, that's resolved in the Ifa principle in the union of Eshu and Orunmila. Well, I believe that this is what's most crucial to us now. We have had a history, a long history of violence, of Ogun figures, violent kings, violent rulers, conquerors, empire-builders and so on. And I think it's time for us to turn away from these images to other images. Who were the healers, the doctors in ancient times? ... Who were those herbalists, who discovered those herbs in the forest? (81)

Osofisan asks that we celebrate our inventors and our indigenous intellectual class and seek the compassion and wisdom of Orunmila and the interrogative gaze of Esu. He would put his theory of the dynamic possibilities inherent in the collaborative/confrontational relationship between Esu and Orunmila into practice in his play, *Esu and His Vagabond Minstrels*.

Esu and His Vagabond Minstrels is set at a crossroads, Esu's primary favourite haunt. Five bedraggled and starving minstrels arrive at an Esu crossroads, hoping to feast on whatever food had been left as offerings to Esu. But, instead of a feasting house, the crossroads is as barren as a graveyard, echoing the harsh economic realities of contemporary Africa. An old man appears to them and promises, on behalf of Esu, to help them out of their penury and pain. He reminds them that Esu "loves to help men, only/When they show that they can live/Happily among other human beings" and that Esu "does not see into the hearts of men,/Only their actions." They all agree that they are up to the challenge and he gives a magical seed to each of them to swallow and sends them forth to each find a suffering man to cure. But the only way they would be successful is through collaborative action.

Four of the five minstrels deploy their boon in the service of men who are rich enough to reward them handsomely. The fifth one follows his heart and deploys his gift to deliver a poor woman of a painful nine-year-old pregnancy. Note well that he opts to help a woman and not men like the other four. To make things worse for the compassionate minstrel, after they expend their prescribed five wishes, a couple, afflicted with leprosy, arrives in search of a cure—an embrace from humanity. The four who had deployed their gift in helping wealthy mendicants would have nothing to do with the lepers; they warn their compassionate fellow minstrel not to embrace them. To frustrate the fifth minstrel, the other four depart so they would not be around to join him in singing the collective curative song that is mandatory to make a cure

possible. The compassionate minstrel ignores the warning of his colleagues and embraces the lepers whom he enjoins to join him in singing the curative song. The embrace cures the lepers but the minstrel contracts their leprosy and inherits their alienation from society.

As the first four minstrels glow in the promise of their impending wealth while the compassionate one writhes in pain and is rejected by his fellow minstrels and the larger society, the Old Man returns to assess their use of the boon he had given to them and to double their wealth as he had promised when he gave them the boon. As they each narrate their adventures, they soon discover that they have been victims of a series of tricks. All the mendicants they had attended to, except for the pregnant woman and the lepers, turn out to be Esu's followers in disguise. It also emerges that the Old Man is Esu, also in disguise, come to test the minstrels' strength of character and the extent of their compassion and collaborative will. But Esu's victory is a limited one because, as it turns out, even he has been tricked. The pregnant woman is revealed to be a devotee of Orunmila, and the lepers are Orunmila and Osun in disguise, joining the fray by inserting an additional factor into the equation so that the minstrels could have an opportunity to display their free will and compassion, or lack thereof.

In this play, Esu manifests all his standard traditional qualities—he is at once a trickster, a shape-shifter, an illusionist, an impartial judge, a satirist, a tester, an enforcer, an interrogator, a spinner of obstacles and options, a lover of the theatrical and lord of the crossroads.

Esu's crossroads, like the market place, plays a central role in Yoruba philosophy. The crossroads is the meeting place of all realms—physical and metaphysical. African writers have also located Esu at the continent's historical crossroads. In Femi Euba's *The Gulf*, Esu presides over the cataclysmic crossroads in African history—the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In addition to Euba, a number of continental African writers (Achebe, through a cursory reference in *Arrow of God*, Soyinka in *A Dance of the Forest*, Ayi Kwei Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons*, and Ama Ata Aidoo in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*) have addressed the subject of enslavement in their creative works. In *The Gulf*, Euba reformulates the Ogun myth so that instead of the drunken Ogun turning on his own people and decimating them, he drinks Esu's palmwine and falls asleep when he should be leading his army to liberate his people from the holding bays of the slave forts in West Africa before they are shipped into enslavement in the New World. This reading of history invites us to consider the various items of trade with which slave traders tempted African leaders to encourage

them into selling their people into slavery. In this and in Osofisan's play, the playwrights interrogate the extent to which greed would lead men and women to violate those they should treat with compassion.

On another level of signification, *The Gulf* suggests that Africans on both sides of the Atlantic are suspended in the gulf of separation, too drunk on the historically conditioned stereotypes about each other to reach out to each other and negotiate Esu's monster-headed crossroads. A similar reading is to be found in Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, which focuses on the turbulent relationship between an African husband and his African-American wife, stemming from a failure to understand the impact of history on each other. The tensions between continental Africans and New World Africans are underscored in an Esu-moment embedded in the children's play that functions as a meta-narrative and meta-interpretative thread throughout the play. The Ghost in that play is trapped at the Elmina Junction or crossroads and wonders whether he should go to Cape Coast or to Elmina? While Elmina, the oldest and one of the most notorious slave forts in West Africa, recalls the painful past, Cape Coast recalls an uncertain present, a work in progress. Ato, the protagonist in this play, ends up like the conflicted ghost, unable to make up his mind whether to embrace his ancestral culture or his adopted western culture.

The unasked question in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* is: How does a society negotiate a painful past and an uncertain present so as to move forward? Nowhere is the negotiation of the past and the present more complex than in the case of the New World African. While it is possible for continental Africans to return to, and embrace, intrinsically intact tribal cultures if they are so ideologically inclined, the New World African, because of the realities of physical and cultural separation, can only reconstruct, re-member, and re-create concepts of an Africa from which he/she has been separated. However, many West Indian writers have resolved the crisis of separation in favour of aesthetic options which articulate the complexity of their location in a cultural twilight zone. These aesthetic constructs range from Kamau Brathwaite's nation/Creole language through Wilson Harris' cross-cultural fusion, Derek Walcott's federated/mulatto consciousness to Lovelace's bacchanal aesthetics.

Among the first generation of West Indian novelists to contemplate the spirit of Africa in the New World, George Lamming's effort is perhaps the most illuminating. In *Season of Adventure*, which is based on the Haitian Ceremony of the Souls, Lamming affirms the existence of a vibrant African spirit in the New World. The Ceremony of the Souls is regarded by the Haitian practitioners of

voodoo (the Dahomean/Haitian cousin of the Orisa tradition) as a solemn communication between the living and the dead. During the ceremony, the dead return to offer, through the medium of the Houngan (Priest), a full and honest account of their relationship with the living. The African antecedent of this ceremony is, of course, the Egungun Festival (the Festival of Ancestors), which manifests, in concrete and imagistic terms, the African rendezvous with the past.

Lovelace, on the other hand, especially in *Salt* (1996), reiterates the African ethos in the New World and advances it beyond the metaphorical to an aesthetic construct defined as bacchanal aesthetics. Bacchanal aesthetics, at a basic level, is the artistic practice that appropriates and radicalises the underground cultural practices fashioned by ordinary New World Africans to deal with the realities of enslavement, colonisation, deracination and exploitation. As process, bacchanal aesthetics is the aesthetics of the crossroads or the crucible of history and cultures. The greater the number of roads intersecting at a crossroads, the more vibrant (for those who understand the layout) or confusing (for strangers) it becomes. Bacchanal aesthetics is, therefore, the aesthetics of the crossroads as the meeting point of possibilities: the old and the new; official and unofficial interpretations; the cardinal points of meanings and/or the world; the secular and the mundane; and so on. Lovelace's practice of bacchanal aesthetics recognises the fluidity and instability inherent in all cultures as works-in-progress and welcomes such fluidity and instability as rationales for the artist's freedom to experiment in order to advance the frontiers of style and vision. It is Lovelace's embrace of elements of bacchanal aesthetics, for example, which drives the Carnival-inspired experiments in novels in which the narrators sing or use calypsoes as meta-narrative threads, so much so that I have described these novels elsewhere as novelypsoes.

Lovelace's journey to a consciousness of New World African culture as theme and style is both instructive and emblematic of the influence of colonial education and ethos on the colonial subject. Born on July 13, 1935 (exactly a year after Wole Soyinka), he grew up with his Methodist maternal grandparents in Tobago, in a house where there were only two activities for adults: Work and Church and where "we couldn't sing calypso, nobody played mas, carnival; all these were activities of the Devil... Everything bad was black." So far reaching was the demonisation of Africa and its philosophy that his "God-fearing grandparents had nothing to do with those aspects of what we would call our culture" (*Growing in the Dark*, 2-3). African culture in the New World was treated as devilish, inferior, rowdy, vulgar, chaotic, scandalous, disreputable,

and bacchanalia. In short, the typology assigned to African culture by the European slave masters was no different from the Euro-Christian typology assigned to Esu. It was not until Lovelace returned to Trinidad, between the age of eleven and twelve, that he would be introduced to the Spiritual Baptist church, with its Africa-inspired ethos, by a mother with a subversive/revolutionary streak. His exposure to the underground culture of the New World African would go on to inspire the novel *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982) and other works which celebrate the spirit of Africa in the New World and how the same despised culture has been central to the evolution such diverse and vibrant identity markers as the Maroon and Rastafarian sub-cultures in Jamaica, the Orisa and Spiritual Baptist faiths in Trinidad and Tobago, the *susu* banking system, the gayap cooperative system, the music, and the Creole languages of the region.

In Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979), we are confronted with a New World tradition that owes its impetus to African veneration of ancestors and its complementary masquerade tradition. Aldrick, one of the central characters in this novel, approaches his task of Carnival mask-making and mask-carrying with the determination, dedication and faith of an African priest, ritual-carver or ritual-carrier. While the possession of the faithful in *The Wine of Astonishment* is primarily a religious experience, Aldrick's possession by the dragon is both spiritual and socio-political. He becomes ideologically possessed and is set on a mission designed to let his people behold their beauty and "unending rebellion" (121).

Salt (1995) acknowledges and celebrates Africans as the people who were *forced* to lay the foundation of Caribbean culture and forced to struggle against enslavement and colonialism in such a way that they had to deploy radically new perspectives in their interpretation of the Caribbean landscape. It is a novel about the stories of the racial groups which have touched and shaped the psychology of the New World as an Esu crossroads of cultures. Hence, Lovelace raises questions about the relationship between contents of stories and the consciousness of storytellers and/or the listening community. In pursuit of the complex relationship among story, storyteller, and the contending perceptions of history, reality, and narrative techniques, Lovelace adopts the use of multiple narrative voices and a mixed-narrative pattern that echoes the fluidity of a traditional storytelling session, in which boundaries between narrator and audience and between narrator and characters are often blurred.

In addition to the use of a mixed-narrative mode in *Salt*, Lovelace employs a

multi-vocal, sublimated first-person narrator who is regularly possessed and deployed by his fellow characters to reiterate their versions and/or consciousness of their histories and stories. This narrative technique approximates the behaviour of mediums in *Orisa* rituals who lose voice and personality and are inhabited by, and sublimated to, the voice and defining personality traits of possessing deities. In spite of the desire of the narrator's mother to steer him away from his uncle's revolutionary stories, he, as the anointed inheritor and as a finely primed medium, is constantly ridden/controlled by the stories and the memory of the ancestors lodged in them. The first-person narrator becomes the living voice of the future, possessed and controlled by visions of the present and the past. This practice, which I have described elsewhere as narrative possession or narrative ventriloquism, allows the primary narrator to be invaded/mounted and controlled, or temporarily relieved of the task of narration, by the subject of the narration. The narrative consciousness in this novel is a composite consciousness, one that is modulated by intra- and inter-generational influences, cross- and multi-cultural ethos, and class consciousness. In essence, Lovelace has created multi-layered and multi-perspective narrators who are possessed by the consciousness of people who are desirous of getting their stories heard or of telling their stories.

The democratic and free-wheeling nature of the narrative style of *Salt* grows out of the eclectic and versatile nature of the Esu/bacchanal/Creole aesthetics, which allows for the coexistence of the profane and the profound, the highfalutin and the jagabat, the educated and the uneducated, the divine and the human, and so on. More importantly, Lovelace's democratisation of narrative voice and spectrum permits him to create a novel with multiple narrators and stories, similar to moments in New World *Orisa* ritual moments when there are simultaneous multiple manifestations or when two or more deities are simultaneously jostling to possess and speak through the same devotee. In such ritual moments, any uninitiated outsider looking in may see and hear only confusion, but those who can read the signs will understand the vibrant dynamics at work/play.

With the obliteration of the distinction between third-person and first-person narrations, and with his use of mixed narrative patterns and the possession of the narrators by the narrated, Lovelace proclaims his arrival at an aesthetic practice which is versatile enough to articulate the complexities of the Caribbean psyche as a New World phenomenon with an Old World spirit. In *Salt*, Lovelace enters the dialectic domain of Esu—the multi-personed, multi-coloured, multi-storied, and androgynous dissembler. So, while like Soyinka, he

has an affinity for characters who exemplify Ogun's warrior temperament, the Esu/Orunmila principle is always present. The most successful Lovelace characters are, therefore, like Osofisan's, those who have been put to the test by Esu and have been found worthy.

And, so, in closing, what have I said all of this to say?

What, indeed?

What I set out to do is to establish, using the Esu motif, that our writers have courageously mined our cultures for bold and unique aesthetic paradigms with which to return us to the centre of our stories and/or our stories to the centre of our life. The questions that follow are: Have our critics embraced the need to match our writers with interpretations that are equally bold and native to our persons? If our writers write of, and for us, do our critics practice their art of criticism in our interest? It would, of course, require another lecture to answer these questions. Suffice it, then, to say that the challenge for our aspiring literary critics today is how (while mastering the plethora of imported cosmopolitan literary theories) they can generate their own theories that can speak to us as a people with a unique history and experience.

Crick! Crack! Monkey break he back for a piece of pomegranate. Wire bend, story end. *Itan mi re o*. I thank you for your attention. To, abala Esu.

ⁱ This lecture is an excerpt from a larger work-in-progress with the working title of "Decolonising Myth: From Esu to Bacchanal Aesthetics".

ⁱⁱ For a detailed discussion of the myth of Esu, see Ayodele Ogundipe, "Esu Elegbara, The Yoruba God of Chance and Uncertainty: A Study in Yoruba Mythology," Volumes I and II (PhD Dissertation, Indiana University, 1978); Robert D Pelton, "West African Tricksters: Web of Purpose, Dance of Delight" in *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Context, and Criticism*, edited William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993, 122-140); and Danoye Oguntola-Lagunda, "Determinism and the Activities of Esu in Yoruba Traditional Religious Beliefs: A Philosophical Appraisal" (PhD Dissertation, Lagos State University, 2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ See D.O Fagunwa, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* (Lagos: Thomas Nelson (Nigeria) Limited, 1950 and *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* (Lagos: Nelson (Nigeria) Limited, 1954).

^{iv} See Wole Soyinka, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (Rex Collings, 1981).

^v Wole Soyinka, "Idanre" in *Idanre and Other Poems* (London: Methuen, 1967) 57ff.

^{vi} Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975) 9.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 68.

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