

# ÈSÚ - ELEGBA

## Ifá and the Divine Messenger

Awo Fa'lokun Fatunmbi

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Awo Fa'lokun Fatunmbi

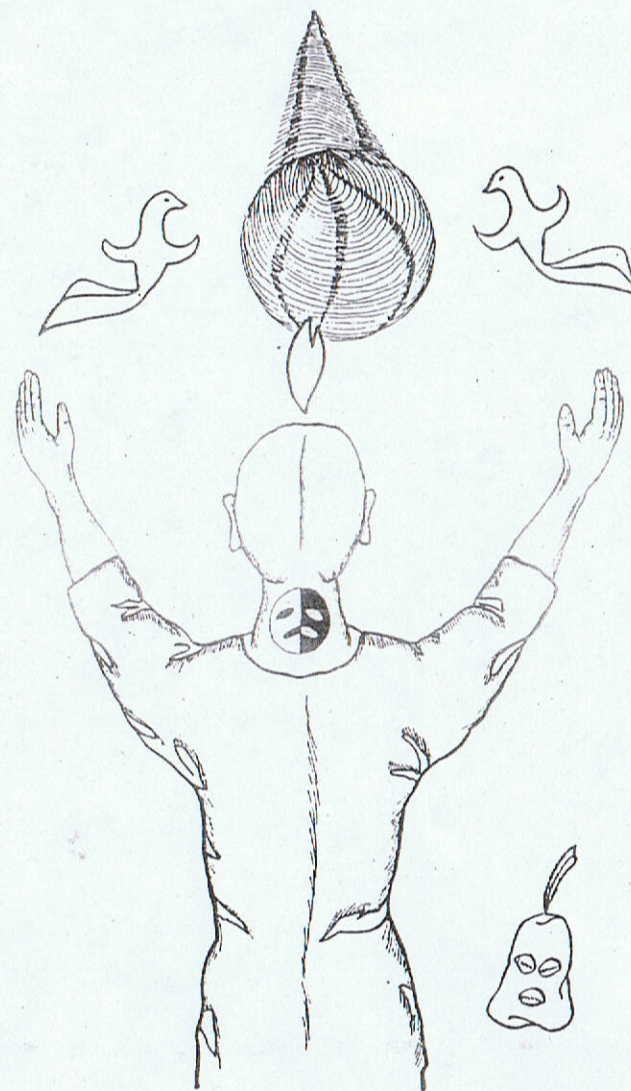


Eṣu Yangi, The Divine Messenger at the Crossroads

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*Eṣu ni bako*, The Divine Messenger is a Trickster

## INTRODUCTION

*Èṣú* is the Divine Messenger of the West African religious tradition of Ifá. The word *Èṣú* is the name given to describe a complex convergence of Spiritual Forces that are at the foundation of Ifá cosmology. There is no literal translation for the word Ifá. It refers to a religious tradition, an understanding of ethics, a process of spiritual transformation and a set of spiritual stories that are the basis for a complex system of divination.

Ifá is found throughout the African diaspora where it spread as an integral part of Yoruba culture. The Yoruba Nation is located in the south western region of Nigeria. Prior to colonization, the Yoruba Nation was a federation of city states that was originally centered in the city of Ilẹ̀ Ifẹ̀. According to Ifá history, the Yoruba migrated to Ilẹ̀ Ifẹ̀ from the east under the leadership of warrior chief named Oduduwa. It is difficult to date the time of the Yoruba move into West Africa because of limited archaeological research on the subject. Estimates range from between sixteen hundred to twenty five hundred years ago. It is likely that migration took place over a number of generations. As the population grew, each new city state that became a part of the Yoruba federation was governed by a chief called "*Qba*". The position of *Qba* is a form of hereditary monarchy and each *Qba* goes through an initiation that makes them a spiritual descendant of Oduduwa.

Traditional Yoruba political institutions are very much integrated with traditional Yoruba religious institutions. Both structures survived British rule in Nigeria and continue to function alongside the current civil government.

Within the discipline of Ifá there is a body of wisdom called "*awo*," which attempts to preserve the rituals that create direct communication with Forces in Nature. *Awo* is a Yoruba word that is usually translated to mean "secret". Unfortunately, there is no English equivalent to the word *awo*, because the word carries strong cultural and esoteric associations. In traditional Yoruba culture, *awo* refers to the hidden principles that explain the Mystery of Creation and Evolution. *Awo* is the esoteric understanding of the invisible Forces that sustain dynamics and form within Nature. The essence of these invisible Forces are not considered secret because they are devious, they are secret because they remain elusive, awesome in their power to transform and not readily apparent in their physical manifestation. As such, they can only be grasped through direct interaction and participation. Anything that can be known by the intellect alone ceases to be *awo*.

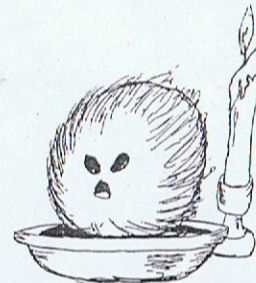
The primal inspiration for *awo* is the communication between transcendent Spiritual Forces and human consciousness. This communication is believed to be facilitated by the Spirit of *Èṣú*. Within the *awo* of Ifá, *Èṣú* is described as having twenty-one different aspects or roads. In Ifá the number twenty-one symbolizes infinity. This means that *Èṣú* identity is constantly changing and transforming the way it presents itself to human understanding.

*Èṣú* is referred to as the Divine Messenger because of the primary function of *Èṣú* in Ifá ritual. Some Yoruba-English dictionaries and some anthropological manuscripts translate *Èṣú* to mean "Devil". This translation is not consistent with the description of *Èṣú* in Ifá scripture. *Èṣú* can take the role of a trickster, but this role has the function of transforming deceptive and limited visions of self and world. It is the role of the trickster in all earth-centered religions to shake loose the limited perceptions that cause stagnation and decay. Only those who believe that they are in possession of the "Absolute Truth" view the trickster as a "demonic spirit". The function of the trickster is to remind us that no human being knows everything.

The Divine Messenger is generally known in Yoruba culture by the name *Èṣú*. Among those who practice Yoruba religion in the West, the Divine Messenger is commonly known by the name *Elegba*. It is difficult to establish for certain how and why this shift in names occurred. However, it is known that in Ifá religion as it is practiced in Africa, *Elegba* is considered a warrior aspect of *Èṣú*. *Elegba* is a derivation of the term *ele agbara*, which translates idiomatically as "The Power of Strength". As an aspect of *Èṣú*, *Elegba* is the ability to communicate with Spirit in the face of overwhelming obstacles and oppression. Given the conditions that existed during slavery, it is not difficult to imagine why *Elegba* would become the primary focus of interaction between human consciousness and Spirit within Ifá worship as it developed in the West.

*Èṣú* is considered one of many Spiritual Forces in Nature that are called "*Orisà*". The word *Orisà* means "Select Head". In a cultural context *Orisà* is a reference to the various Forces in Nature that guide consciousness. According to Ifá, everything in Nature has some form of consciousness called "*Ori*". The *Ori* of all animals, plants and humans is believed to be guided by a specific Force in Nature that defines the quality of a particular form of consciousness. There are a large number of *Orisà* and each of them has their own body of wisdom (*awo*).

The unique function of *Èṣú* within the world is to translate the language of humans into the language of Nature and to translate the language of Nature into the language of humans. The way in which this is done is the essence of *awo Èṣú*.



Coconut Elegba for prayer and meditation

# I.

## ALO IRITÀN ÈSÚ FOLKTALES OF THE DIVINE MESSENGER

### A. LOJU - KOJU MEJI - The Two Faces of the Divine Messenger

In the olden days there were two farmers who grew up together in a village located near the forest. As children they lived in the same compound sharing meals, playing games and learning the wisdom of their elders. They called each other 'Arákunrin' which means "brother".

When the two young men reached the age of *akókò ti òkunrin* (puberty), they were taken to Ifá for divination. On that day they were told that they would live their entire lives on adjacent farms. Because they were so close, their abundance depended on mutual cooperation. The *Babalawo* (diviner) told them that it was Èsú who would teach them *awo ibsepò* (the mystery of cooperation), *awo igbo* (the mystery of the forest), *awo oko* (the mystery of farming), and *awo 'fose* (the mystery of invocation).

The *Babalawo* said that if they did not make regular *ebo* (offerings) to Èsú, the day would come when Èsú would pull them apart. If that day came, they would live their lives as enemies and suffer old age in poverty.

The two young men could not imagine being separated. They could not imagine being enemies and they could not imagine living their old age in poverty. Both of them thought that the *Babalawo* had been mistaken about their destiny. They saw no reason to make offerings to Èsú. They neglected the shrine to Èsú that stood at the entrance to their village. They assumed that their life of happiness would never change.

Some years later the two young men married and started to raise families. Together they had gone out into the forest and cleared a plot of land for a farm. Both farms were the same size, both farms grew the same crops and both men continued their friendship as they worked together tending the soil. One of the young men had learned from his father the techniques for pulling weeds and clearing brush. The other young man had learned from his father the techniques for drying seeds and watering the furrows. They depended on one another to insure that each year's crop would provide enough food to feed their families with enough left over trade at the market.

Both farms were separated by a narrow path that ran from the river to the village. The path was seldom used because there were no other fields in the area. Often the two men would work for weeks and even months without seeing anyone journey along the road that divided their land.

On the day that Èsú decided to travel down the path that ran between the two farms, Èsú remembered the words of the *Babalawo*. Èsú recognized the two farmers as the men who always passed his shrine at the

entrance to the village without making an offering. Both young men continued to believe that they were skilled in *awo oko* (the mystery of farming). Between them they thought they had all the *ire* (good fortune) they needed to create a good life. They both felt complete.

Èsú hid among the trees and watched the two men at work. As they bent over the earth, Èsú removed *efun* (medicine) and *irosun* (medicine) from his pouch. He took *ewé* (leaf) and mixed the *efun* with *omi tútù* (cool water), making *òda'fun* (white paint). He took another *ewé* and mixed the *irosun* with *omi tútù* making *òda pon* (red paint). Using his fingers, Èsú painted the right side of his face *pon* (red) and the left side of his face *ofun* (white).

After placing the remaining *òda* (paint) back in his bag, Èsú walked down the path singing; "Òro Èsú to to to akoni," which means, "The word of the Divine Messenger is always powerful."

As Èsú approached the two men who were working on their farm, they both looked up to see who was singing. Èsú was directly between them when they raised their heads. Using the index finger on each hand, Èsú drew their attention back to the soil.

After Èsú disappeared from sight, *Arákunrin* on the right side of the road said: "Who was that strange man with *ojú ofun* (the white face)?"

*Arákunrin* on the left side of the road answered: "Don't you mean the strange man with *ojú pon* (the red face)?"

Each question was asked in innocence, but the discussion soon led to a disagreement, the disagreement led to an argument and the argument led to a fight. Before the issue could be settled, both men were rolling on the ground tearing up their crops and destroying the ripe yams.

The damage to the farm caused a shortage of food. There were not enough yams left to feed their families and there was no surplus to take to the market. Each of the young men became so angered by what happened they never spoke to each other again.

From that day on those who praise Èsú always say; "Èsú ma se mi o," which means "Divine Messenger do not confuse me."

**Commentary:** The role of Èsú in Ifá is multi-dimensional. In this folktale, two friends have been advised by divination to make offerings to Èsú as a foundation for good fortune. They were told that Èsú would teach them the skills needed to be effective farmers, to make use of the natural elements in the forest and to learn the lessons needed to generate abundance. At this point, Èsú is presented in his role as Divine Messenger. In all Ifá ritual, Èsú is the link between the language of humans and the language of Nature. Ifá ritual begins with an invocation to Èsú so that Èsú can direct the power of prayer to its intended recipient.

In most forms of occult science the ability to communicate between humans, Spirits and Forces of Nature is usually related to the powers of

intuition that are generated by "The Third Eye". This idea is found in yogi tradition that identifies various power centers in the human body called *chakras*. Ifá also makes use of a system of *chakras* called *awúje*. The *awúje* that links human consciousness with *Orisá* consciousness is called *iwúje*. According to Ifá the *iwúje* is located in the central middle region of the forehead. This is slightly higher than the position associated with the third eye in yogi tradition.

When this power center is properly opened, impulses that enter the body from the outside world can be translated into intuitive impressions. The way this is done varies for different people. Intuition can take the form of strong feelings, visions, sounds and complex altered states in which the person experiences extraordinary dimensions of Being. During rituals of initiation into *Awo Orisá*, the *iwúje* is opened through the use of herbal medicine that is applied directly to the forehead.

In this folktale the admonition to make offerings to *Èsú* is an instruction for the two friends to develop their powers of intuition so they can communicate with the spirits of the forest. Ifá teaches that there are a wide variety of elemental spirits that maintain balance and order in the forest and under the earth. These spirits come under a general grouping of Natural Forces called *Ogboni*. The word *Ogboni* translates to mean "Of the Earth". The elemental spirits associated with *Ogboni* integrate the consciousness of animals, plants and minerals. They usually do not come under the classification of Spirits known as *Orisá* because they do not manifest in personified form.

The advice from Ifá to the two friends was to maintain a respectful relationship with *Èsú* so that they could enhance their ability to communicate with those elemental spirits who would have a direct impact on the productivity of their farms.

In addition to the advice from the *Babalawo*, there is a warning. The two friends were told that if they did not make regular offerings to *Èsú*, the day would come when *Èsú* would pull them apart. This a common warning in many of the folktales associated with *Èsú*. Frequently this is misinterpreted as an indication that *Èsú* is mean spirited or vicious. It would be more accurate to say that *Èsú* is functioning in his role as Divine Enforcer. Those who ignore issues of spiritual growth eventually suffer the consequences of their neglect.

The two friends believe that nothing could pull them apart. They thought that all they needed was each other's friendship to survive in the world. The folktale is making a very clear statement that those who live in Nature must respect the ways of Nature in order to take advantage of Nature's blessings. By ignoring their relationship to *Èsú*, the two men are resisting any communication from the elemental spirits who maintain ecological balance in the forest and on the farm. It is possible to temporarily disrespect the Laws of Nature, but such disregard always comes at a price. If you pollute the water in the river, the water will eventually become

undrinkable. If you deplete the soil on the farm, eventually plants will not grow. If you destroy large segments of the rain forest, the effects on climate and air quality can disrupt the fertility of large sections of the Earth. When anyone disregards Natural Law for an extended period of time, Nature has a way of reacting in the interest of self-preservation. Such reactions as drought and famine can seem disruptive and harsh. From a metaphysical perspective, natural disasters can be understood as attempts by the Forces of Nature to communicate fundamental information about the dynamics of life on the planet.

In Ifá scripture it is generally *Èsú* who carries this type of message from Nature to humans. When *Èsú* is delivering a warning from Spirit, *Èsú* assumes the role of Trickster. There is nothing demonic or sinister about the Spiritual role of the Trickster in any earth-centered religion. The function of the Trickster is always to force human consciousness into a deeper understanding of self and world.

In this instance, *Èsú* paints one side of his face white and the other side of this face red. The argument between the two former friends is rooted in the truth of their own limited perspectives. Each of the men considered himself to be right and the other to be wrong. At the heart of their dispute is their inability to consider the possibility that they both might be right. The world described in Ifá myth is seldom a world of either/or. In most instances it is a world of both/and. What this means is that consciousness is a constantly shifting reality. Information that might be true for one person on a given day, may have no value for someone else in a different circumstance. The shifting value of objective information can only be evaluated from a broad perspective and it is *Èsú* who plays a key role in providing that perspective.

When humans become too set in their ways, too ridged in their thinking and too dogmatic in their response to other points of view, it is *Èsú* who stirs up the mix and forces the kind of re-evaluation that can lead to enlightenment.

In this story the disruption caused by *Èsú* does not lead to enlightenment. Instead it leads to an argument, loss of friendship and poverty. The point here is that Nature will always respond to those who are in need of spiritual transformation, but not everyone who is blessed with instruction from *Èsú* will grasp the meaning of the lesson that is being presented. Within the context of Ifá scripture it is very clear that demons are not Spiritual Forces generated by Creation at the Beginning of Time. Demons are human inventions created and invoked by those who resist living in harmony with Nature.

## B. ÒBE ÈSÚ - The Divine Messenger's Knife

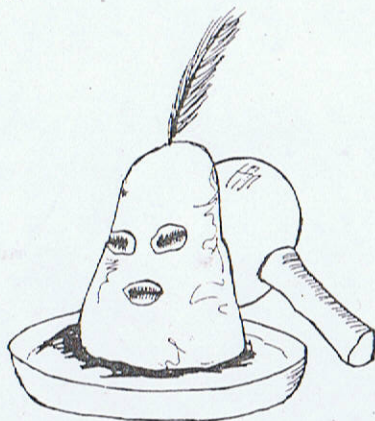
Ajá consulted Ifá on the day that he wanted a wife. He was told to take an òbe (knife) to oja (the market) and use it as ebo (offerings) to Èsú. When he arrived at the market, Ajá stopped to buy iyán (pounded yams) from Omo' lori (The daughter of the chief). As he reached for the iyán, Èsú pushed him from behind and he accidentally cut Omo' lori's hand.

The Alagbalagba (elders) of oja demanded onídajó (justice). Èsú spoke on behalf of Ajá and said that it was an accident. To settle the dispute, Èsú suggested that Ajá take care of Omo' lori until her hand healed. Ajá agreed. While Ajá took care of Omo' lori, she agreed to become his wife.

**Commentary:** In this story the main character is called "Ajá" which means "dog". In Ifá myth the dog is sacred to Ogun. Whenever a character appears in a Yoruba myth with the name of an animal associated with a particular Orisà, it is assumed that the character is an aspect of that Orisà. Ogun as the Spirit of Iron is the guardian of hunters and blacksmiths.

Ajá is instructed by Ifá to carry a knife to the shrine of Èsú. Because the knife is sacred to Ogun, the story is making a symbolic reference to Awo Ogun. Èsú is telling Ajá to take the power of his Orisà with him in search of a wife. In the process of making the offering Ajá encounters a seemingly accidental series of circumstances that leads to his marriage. It is the very act of appealing to Orisà that creates the desired result.

In the previous story, Èsú caused disruption among two friends that lead to the end of their relationship. In this story Èsú causes disruption between two strangers that leads to their marriage. In the first story the two brothers failed to make offerings. In the second story the person made an offering. The suggestion here is that proper action will lead to good results in the midst of disruption and improper action in the midst of tranquility will lead to chaos.



Consecrated Eṣu

## II.

### ÌMÒ ÈSÚ THE THEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF THE DIVINE MESSENGER

#### A. ÈSÚ ÀYÀNMÓ - ÌPIN - The Divine Messenger and the Concept of Destiny

The Ifá concept of àyànmó is based on the belief that each person chooses their individual destiny before being born into the world. It is the Yoruba word for "Destiny." The choices of destiny materialize as those components that form human potential. Within the scope of each person's potential there exist parameters of choice that can enhance or inhibit the full expression of individual destiny. Ifá calls these possibilities òna ipin, meaning "fate lines". Each decision that is made in the course of one life time can effect the range of possibilities that exist in the future, by either limiting or expanding the options for growth.

It is within the context of choice or what is known in Western philosophical tradition as "free will" that Èsú has an important function. Each moment of existence includes a wide range of possible actions, reactions and interpretations. Those moments that require decisive action are described in Ifá scripture as òna padẹ which means "junction in the road". Whenever a person who is trying to build character through the use of Ifá spiritual discipline reaches òna padẹ, it is customary to consult Èsú regarding the question of which path will bring blessings from Orisà.

Ifá teaches that blessings come to those who make choices that are consistent with their highest destiny. Within Yoruba culture it is understood that an individual's highest destiny is based on those choices that build iwa-pèlẹ which means "good character".

#### B. ÈSÚ NI BAKO - The Divine Messenger as the Source of Deception

The discipline of Ifá includes training in the use of various forms of altered consciousness. In Yoruba, altered states of consciousness are called Ifáiyà and they are used to engage in communication with Orisà. Ifáiyà includes ogbón inú, which is heightened intuition, isotélè, which is the ability to see into the future, alála, which is communication with Spirit through dreams, Egúngun, which is possession by an ancestor spirit and Orisà'gun which is possession by a Force of Nature.

Training in these skills requires the ability to distinguish between ofo Orisà which is the voice of Spirit and ofo egun which is the voice of ancestors and Èsú ni ba ko which is what would be described in Western terminology as the projection of personal fantasy. When someone is beginning the process of communication with either Orisà or egun, the mani-

festation of that communication is often very similar in form to day dreaming or fantasy. By opening certain power centers in the *ori* it is possible to have visions that are influenced by external forces. The ability to interpret these visions is at the heart of Ifá spiritual discipline.

When someone mis-identifies personal projection as the word of Spirit, Ifá describes this condition as *Èsú ni ba ko*. In the West this phrase is frequently translated to mean "The Divine Messenger is a Trickster". This does not mean that *Èsú* is seen as something less than *Orìsà*. It suggests that *Èsú* in his role as trickster can generate altered states of consciousness in which self-deception is confused with either the Voice of Spirit or the Voice of the Ancestors.

According to Ifá spiritual practice, the seat of self-deception is the back of the neck where the skull meets the spine. It is at this point that the emotions generated by the power center at the heart link with the thoughts generated by the power centers in the head. Those who block their emotions or who refuse to integrate the head and the heart create a condition that is described in Ifá as *Èsú ni ba ko*.

The area at the base of the skull on the back of the neck is one of the key places to receive spiritual cleansings whenever a person is out of alignment with their destiny. The back of the neck sometimes referred to as *Ile Èsú ni ba ko*, which means "The House of the Divine Trickster".

### C. ÒGBÓ ÈSÚ - The Staff of the Divine Messenger

In Africa the wooden statues that are used to represent *Èsú* frequently show him carrying an *ògbó*, which means "cudgel". This staff is also called *Ilari*, which means "enlightenment of consciousness". The word *Ilari* is used to identify the staff carried by the messengers of the Yoruba kings.

By tradition, the *Ilari* gives *Èsú* the ability to transcend the physical restrictions of time and space. In the terminology of Western physics, the *Ilari* symbolizes *Èsú's* ability to function in the fourth dimension. This means that messages from *Èsú* are able to appear and disappear at will. In a sense, the *Ilari* represents all forms of psychic phenomena that defy Western theories of cause and effect.

Those Western scientists who dismiss all forms of spirit communication because they do not conform to our understanding of the physical world seem to be missing the point. Ifá teaches that *Èsú's* function in ritual is to make connection with those Forces in Nature that do not manifest openly in the realm of the senses.

### D. ÈSÚ ONITOJU ASE - The Divine Messenger as the Source of Spiritual Power

Ifá cosmology is based on the belief that the Primal Source of Creation is a form of Spiritual Essence called *ase*. There is no literal translation for *ase*, although it is used in prayer to mean "May it be so".

Ifá teaches that the visible universe is generated by two dynamic forces; one is the force of *indáḷ*, meaning "expansion" and the other is the force of *isóki*, meaning "contraction". The first manifestation of these forces is through *imó*, meaning "light" and through *aimoyé*, meaning "darkness". In Ifá myth, expansion and light are identified with Male Spirits called *Orìsà'ko*. Contraction and darkness are identified with Female Spirits called *Orìsà'bo*. Neither manifestation of *ase* considered superior to the other and both are viewed as essential elements in the overall balance of Nature.

In Ifá cosmology both *imó* and *aimoyé* arise from the matrix of the invisible universe called *Imole*, meaning "The House of Light". Within the House of Light there is an invisible substance that transforms spiritual potential into physical reality. The invisible substance that moves between these two dimensions is called *ase* and it is *Èsú* who is given the task of guiding the distribution of *ase* throughout Creation.

Western science teaches that matter and energy are neither created nor destroyed, they simply become transformed. Ifá teaches that it is *Èsú* who guides this process of transformation. It is the *awo* of this particular role of *Èsú* that associates him with the principle of Divine Justice.



### III.

#### ÒNA ÈSÚ

#### THE ROADS OF THE DIVINE MESSENGER

Èsú has clear functions as Messenger, Trickster and Enforcer of Divine Justice. However, the way that each of these functions becomes manifest is dependent upon the various aspects of Èsú. These aspects are usually called *Òna Èsú*, which means "Roads of the Divine Messenger". Generally Ifá scripture describes Èsú as having twenty-one roads. In Ifá the number twenty-one is a symbol for infinity, suggesting that Èsú has an infinite number of manifestations.

The Roads of the Divine Messenger that are presented here are the aspects of Èsú as they are taught within the lineage of *Ègbé Ifá Oguntí Ode Remo*.

##### A. ÈSÚ ORO

*Èsú Oro* is the Divine Messenger of the Power of the Word. This Aspect of Èsú is related to the ability of the spoken word to create spiritual transformation through the use of incantations. Certain words that are used in Ifá ritual have no literal translation. They are used because they contain tonal qualities that resonate with particular forces of Nature. The power of resonance is the ability to create tonal vibrations that are similar to those frequencies generated by specific *Orisà*. When a similar frequency is established it has the power of attraction. In Western Occult terminology this is called "sympathetic magic".

##### B. ÈSÚ OPIN

*Èsú Opin* is the Divine Messenger of Boundaries. In Ifá ritual, boundaries are marked to establish sacred space. Frequently the space that is to be used for ritual purposes is marked with a mat. In many Yoruba homes, the space reserved for *Orisà* is a small room attached to the house that is used exclusively for ceremonial work. Ifá also makes use of sacred groves called *Igbodu*. These groves have clearly defined boundaries that are off limits to non initiates. Whenever sacred space is established there is almost always some manifestation of Èsú present as the guardian of ritual boundaries.

When *Èsú Opin* is placed at a sacred site, it also has the function of keeping that area charged with *ase*.

##### C. ÈSÚ ALAKETU

*Èsú Alaketu* is the Divine Messenger of the city of Ketu. The prefix *ala* refers to light or Divine guidance. In most instances, *Èsú Alaketu* is associated with *Osun*, the Spirit of Fresh Water, Sensuality and Abundance. The city of Alaketu is located near the city of Osoḡbo, which is the site of the original *Osun* shrine. Ifá scripture describes the transforming power of Èsú and *Osun*, and relates how, together, they transformed the city of Ketu, now known as Alaketu. This Èsú has the ability to elevate anything that suffers from moral decay.

##### D. ÈSÚ ISERI

*Èsú Iseri* is the Divine Messenger of the Morning Dew. Ifá makes extensive use of herbs as both medicine for physical healing and medicine for spiritual healing. The wisdom of herbs generally comes under the influence of *Osanyin* (The Spirit of Medicine). The initiates into the mysteries of *Osanyin* make extensive use of prayer and ritual in the planting, picking and preparation of herbal medicine. In many instances the best time to pick herbs that grow in the forest is just before sun rise. It is a time when dew lingers on the leaves, adding another source of power to their inherent qualities.

Many words in Yoruba have multiple meanings depending on the context. The word *Iseri* means "morning dew." However, it is also a contraction of *ise* and *orí* meaning "deeds of the head". As Divine Enforcer, Èsú records deeds of the head as the basis for maintaining Divine Justice through the process of *atunwa* (reincarnation).

##### E. ÈSÚ GOGO

*Èsú Gogo* is the Divine Messenger of Full Payment. This is one of the aspects of Èsú that has the function of enforcing Divine Justice. The payment spoken of here is not limited to money or the exchange of goods. Payment includes the metaphysical consequences of foolish and unjust behavior. In some ways the idea of full payment is similar to the Buddhist idea of *Karma*. All actions have consequences, including an effect on the process of *atunwa* (reincarnation).

This aspect of Èsú is generally associated with swift, sharp and precise action as it relates to the termination of a conflict or issues involving confusion and misunderstanding. The ability of Èsú to function in the fourth dimension gives him the ability to cause transformation that is generated outside the physical dimensions of time and space.

##### F. ÈSÚ WARA

*Èsú Wara* is the Divine Messenger of Personal Relationships. Ifá teaches that each person comes into the World with a specific Destiny.

Each Destiny has lines of inter-section and inter-action with the Destinies of those we come in contact with throughout our lives. In traditional Yoruba culture, there is a strong emphasis on maintaining the structure of the family and of honoring the relationships that exist in an extended family. Whenever two Ifá devotees are considering some form of long term relationship, they frequently consult with a diviner to determine the parameters of a given relationship. This is true for both intimate relationships and those relationships that would be considered informal.

Because of the subjective element that is prevalent in most personal relationships, Èṣú Wara is frequently associated with the power of confusion and the ability to bring clarity.

#### G. ÈṢÚ IJELU

Èṣú Ijelu is the Divine Messenger of the Drum. In Ifá ritual, the drums have an important role as part of the invocation process. The *dundun* drum in particular is able to mimic the sounds of the Yoruba language and is used as a tool for calling specific spirits to a given ceremony. The word *Ijelu* means "Feeder of the Drum". Most drums that are used in Ifá ritual are sanctified through the use of offerings that are presented directly to the drum. It is Èṣú Ijelu who guides this feeding process.

#### H. ÈṢÚ AIYEDE

Èṣú Aiyede is the Divine Messenger who arrives on Earth. In Ifá scripture, references to Èṣú making the journey from Heaven to Earth are references to messages sent from Spirit to humans. At times, these messages may not be in response to prayer. They may come from Spirit in the form of mystic and prophetic vision that occurs spontaneously. These visions are believed to provide guidance beyond the limited concerns of everyday life.

#### I. ÈṢÚ ÒDÀRÀ

Èṣú Òdàrà is the Divine Messenger of Transformation. This aspect of Èṣú is closely associated with Ifá. Most Ifá initiates receive Èṣú Òdàrà as a part of *Tefá* (Ifá initiation). The reason for this is because Ifá priests are the guardians of the vast spectrum of *Awo* (Mysteries) associated with spiritual growth and transformation. These Mysteries are preserved in the *Odu* (Ifá scripture) that are used as the basis for Ifá divination. Whenever Ifá divination occurs, Èṣú Òdàrà is generally one of the first Spirits that is invoked by the diviner.

In Ifá ritual, transformation is associated with the element of fire. When Èṣú Òdàrà is fed, it is common to use burning palm oil to raise ase (spiritual power) needed to invoke spiritual growth.

#### J. ÈṢÚ JEKI EBO DA

Èṣú Jeki Ebo Da is the Divine Messenger who sanctions Life Force Offerings. In Africa, many shrines and even homes have a place that is used for the slaughtering of animals that are being prepared for food. Many of the rituals associated with Ifá involve a communal meal. This requires that the meat be prepared in a sacred manner. Èṣú Jeki Ebo Da is associated with this process.

The media has tended to unfairly characterize Life Force Offerings as "animal sacrifice". The term "animal sacrifice" suggests that animals are cruelly treated, then discarded. That is not what occurs in Africa. Food is prepared in much the same way that Kosher food is prepared by Rabbis.

#### K. ÈṢÚ AGONGON GOJA

Èṣú Agongon Goja is the Divine Messenger of the Wide Belt. In this context, a wide belt refers to one of the Mysteries associated with the clothing that is used for ceremonial work. Clothing used in rituals for Ifá have both a symbolic function and a protective function. The way that a person dresses for a particular ritual will have the effect of drawing certain Spiritual Forces to them while repelling others. The medicine that is used for this purpose is frequently placed in a belt or sash worn around the waist.

#### L. ÈṢÚ ELEKUN

Èṣú Elekun is one of the Divine Messengers associated with hunters and warriors. The word *Elekun* means "Leopard". In Yoruba culture, the leopard is a symbol of strength, cunning and courage. These are traits generally associated with *Ogun* (The Spirit of Iron). It is priests of *Ogun* who usually guide young men through the rites of passage that occur at puberty. These rites of passage include a test of courage that prepares young men for their social roles as defenders of the family and community.

#### M. ÈṢÚ AROWOJE

Èṣú Arowoje is the Divine Messenger for those who travel the ocean. This Èṣú is associated with the Spirit of the Ocean known as *Olokun* in Africa. The word *awowoje* refers to the shore of the ocean. It is at the shoreline that the Natural Forces of Earth and Water intermingle. It is Èṣú Arowoje who guides this interaction.

#### N. ÈṢÚ LALU

Èṣú Lalu is the Divine Messenger of Dance. In Ifá ritual, the use of dance is one of the methods for inducing those altered states that result in direct communication with *Orisà*. The process of Spirit Communication involves the absorption of energy called ase from the environment into the

body. Dances used for specific Spirits have the function of opening specific power centers in the body that are closely attuned to a particular *Orisà*. *Èṣú Laju* has the ability to help guide this process.

#### O. ÈṢÚ PAKUTA SI EWA

*Èṣú Pakuta Si Ewa* is the Divine Messenger who creates and destroys beauty. Ifá teaches that all things that come into Being in the World go through the cycle of birth, growth, death and rebirth. This process of transformation includes the destruction of that which is considered beautiful and harmonious. Such destruction creates a foundation for the re-birth of that which is to come.

#### P. ÈṢÚ KEWE LE DUNJE

*Èṣú Kewe le Dunje* is the Divine Messenger who eats sweets. The use of sweet tasting food in both Ifá ritual and medicine has the function of counter-balancing the bitterness that can make life seem harsh and burdensome. Ifá scripture is clear that sweetness has a much needed place in daily life as a source of inspiration and joy.

Giving *Èṣú* sweets is frequently used as a method for invoking abundance. In Ifá abundance includes wealth, long life and children.

#### Q. ÈṢÚ ELEBARA

*Èṣú Elebara* is the Divine Messenger of Power. The power that is spoken of here is the power of the warrior. Not all warrior power is directed combat. Power also includes the tireless persistence that insures that a task is done to completion. At times this power is clearly associated with issues of personal and communal protection. In the West, this aspect of *Èṣú* has become known as *Elegba*.

#### R. ÈṢÚ EMALONA

*Èṣú Emalona* is the Divine Messenger of any means. Ifá is a tradition that is based on the development of character which, in turn, is based on a very clear set of cultural expectations. But Ifá also recognizes the reality that, at times, special circumstances require extraordinary measures. The more forceful aspects of *Èṣú* are always invoked with clear guidance from *Orisà* as it is expressed through divination. Those who use force based on personal motivation alone, frequently find themselves in violation of both communal and spiritual taboo.

The word *emalona* means "the fifth road". It is a reference to the gateway into the invisible dimension.

#### S. ÈṢÚ LAROYE

*Èṣú Laroye* is the Divine Messenger of *Osun* (The Spirit of the River) in her role as guardian of *Awo* (Mysteries), *ìwa ifekufe* (sensuality) and *letu loju* (fertility). The word *laroye* is loosely translated to mean "close to the mothers". It is one of the praise names used to invoke *Osun*.

#### T. ÈṢÚ ANANAKI

*Èṣú Ananaki* is the Divine Messenger of the past. Ifá teaches that we become who we are by standing on the shoulders of those who have come before us. We progress by remembering both the deeds of our ancestors and by remembering the lessons that are brought to earth directly through the intervention of Natural Forces of *Orisà*.

#### U. ÈṢÚ OKOBURU

*Èṣú Okoburu* is the Divine Enforcer. The word *okoburu* means "wicked cudgel". This does not mean that it is a weapon used by "evil" people. It suggests that it is a weapon used to punish injustice.

## IV.

### OJUBO EBORA

#### THE SHRINE OF THE DIVINE MESSENGER

##### A. OJUBO EBORA ADURA - Shrine for Prayer and Meditation

In Traditional Yoruba homes, the shrine for *Èṣú* is usually outside near the place where animals are prepared for cooking. Many villages have a communal shrine for *Èṣú* that is located either near the entrance to the town or near the entrance to the market. Also, most *Igbodu* (sacred groves) have some aspect of *Èṣú* located within the boundaries of the shrine area.

The art of making a consecrated *Èṣú* is very complicated and within the tradition of Ifá the task of making an *Èṣú* belongs to those who have been initiated into the priesthood. For those who do not have access to elders, it is possible to set up a shrine for *Èṣú* that is used as a focal point for prayer and meditation. Such a shrine should not be used for the invocation of *Èṣú*. The difference is that use of prayer and mediation is a way of respecting the power of *Èṣú*, while invocation is the process of making use of *Èṣú ase*. Invocation is limited to those who receive a fully consecrated *Èṣú* from an elder who gives instruction in the invocation process.

For those who want to build a shrine for *Èṣú* that can be used for meditation and prayer, start by purchasing a coconut. Every coconut has three small circles on one side. These circles often resemble two eyes and a mouth. They form, what is called, the face of the coconut. Be sure to select a coconut with a face that is both clear and appealing. Some stores cover the surface of the coconut with wax, so it might be necessary to remove the wax with a knife.

Select a place either inside or outside your home that will be used as a shrine for *Èṣú*. If the shrine is to go inside the house, it is traditional to place a mat near the front door. If the shrine is to go outside, it is traditional to build a small house for the shrine that provides a roof and four walls with a door that can be locked. Such a house can be two feet square or smaller depending on space.

When you have selected the place where the shrine is to be seated, place the coconut near the spot along with a bowl of water, a candle and either palm oil or protection oil. Light the candle, then clean the surface of the coconut with water. At this point you will say a simple prayer that is not an invocation. The prayer is as follows:

*Iba a se Èṣú.*

I respect the Spirit of the Divine Messenger.

*Iba a se Èṣú.*

I respect the Spirit of the Divine Messenger.

*Iba a se Èṣú.*

I respect the Spirit of the Divine Messenger.

*Ase.*

May it be so.

Now sit with the coconut and ask *Èṣú* to reveal the form that is best suited to the work that you need to do. You may feel that the coconut by itself is adequate, or you may feel that it needs to be painted. Traditionally the colors associated with *Èṣú* are either black and red, black and white or black, red and white. Continue sitting with the coconut until you see the colors that are to be used and the types of images that should go on the face. Once this is clear, paint the image on the coconut.

I recommend that once the face is painted, the *Èṣú* be placed in a basket filled with dirt. The dirt should be from either a sacred site or from your favorite place in Nature. When the paint has dried, rub either the palm oil or the protection oil over the surface of the coconut. While you are doing this, ask *Èṣú* to protect your house and to place you firmly on the path of spiritual growth and transformation.

Whenever a prayer is said, it is appropriate to make an offering. The coconut representation of *Èṣú* can be given either a few drops of rum, popcorn or candy.

##### B. OJUBO EBORA ORIKI - Shrine for Invocation

When a person is given *Èṣú* by an initiate, the *Èṣú* is generally presented in association with *Osun, Ogun and Osoposi*. Together these four Spiritual Forces are part of a group of Spirits called *Ebora*. The *Ebora* are considered to be Spirits that have a responsibility to protect those who are on the path of building good character.

The symbolic representation for *Èṣú* is either a rock, a small face or a carved statue of a man carrying a cudgel wearing a long flowing cap. The methods for making *Èṣú* are considered *ohun ikoko*, which means "secret". Most aspects of *ohun ikoko* are taught orally and passed from teacher to student through direct transmission. In Ode Remo those who care for consecrated shrines of *Èṣú* invoke the Spirit of *Èṣú* at the shrine on either a five day, or a seventeen day cycle. The reason invocations are said on a regular basis is because Ifá teaches that the power of *Orisà* only remains in a given place for as long as it is called to that place.

There is a complex collection of prayers and invocations that are used

by those who are initiated into Ifá. Many of these prayers are used for specific seasonal celebrations or for specific rituals of transformation. Prayers that are used for invocation of Spirit are general called *Oriki*. Most *Oriki* tend to follow a certain format that allows for some variation depending on the circumstances. The format is as follows:

1. First comes the call to *Èsú* which includes a recitation of some of *Èsú's* praise names, preceded by the words *Iba a sè*. Names may be chosen from the following examples:

*Okàràràhó*  
*Ayànr`rkátá - awo -'lè - ojà*  
*Oyinsèsè*  
*Èsú oga nílúú*  
*Agongo ogo*

2. After *Èsú* has been called by his praise names, it is customary to call him by some of the descriptive names that speak of *Èsú's* powers. Praise names may be chosen from the following examples:

*Èsú lanlu ogirioko.*  
 Divine Messenger speak with power.

*Okunrin orí ita.*  
 Man of the crossroads.

*Onimini nf'imu mi Èsú n fi.*  
 I respect the Spirit of the Divine  
 Messenger with all of my soul.

*Torí gni Èsú ba nse ki imo.*  
 The Divine Messenger is the first one who  
 I praise.

3. Following the use of the qualities of the Divine Messenger comes the actual call or invocation. Each part of the call is generally repeated three times for emphasis:

*Èsú o pe o.*  
 Divine Messenger I greet you.

*Èsú o pe o.*  
 Divine Messenger I greet you.

*Èsú o pe o.*  
 Divine Messenger I greet you.

*Èsú pèlé o.*  
 Divine Messenger I am greeting you.

*Èsú pèlé o.*  
 Divine Messenger I am greeting you.

*Èsú pèlé o.*  
 Divine Messenger I am greeting you.

4. When the invocation is completed identify yourself as follows:

*Ini* (your name)  
 I am (your name)

*Omo* (name your spiritual family)  
 Child of (name your spiritual family)

5. Say a prayer asking for good fortune. This section should include a request to resolve whatever problems are being brought to *Èsú*. For example:

*Ire omo.*  
 A blessing of children

*Ire owo*  
 A blessing of money.

*Ire agbo ato*  
 A blessing of long life.

6. When the invocation is completed make an offering directly to the Divine Messenger.

*Èsú jeun* (identify the offering), *a dupe.*  
 Divine Messenger eat my offering of  
 (identify the offering) I thank you.

7. After the offering has been made, make further prayers of praise:

*Oro Èsú to to to akoni.*  
 The word of the Divine Messenger is  
 always respected.

*Èsú ori mi ma je nko o.*  
 The Divine Messenger guides my head on  
 the path of transformation.

*Èsú ohun ni' ma wa kiri.*  
 The Divine Messenger has the voice that  
 roams the universe.

*Èsú ma sè me o.*  
 Divine Messenger do not confuse me.

## V.

### ÈSÚ OLOTOJU ENU ONA ORUN THE DIVINE MESSENGER AS GATEKEEPER TO THE INVISIBLE REALM

The Ifá symbol of Creation is a circle that has been divided into four quadrants by an equal arm cross. The top half of the circle represents *Ikole Orun* which is the Invisible Realm of Spiritual influence and the primal Source of Creation. The bottom half of the tray represents *Ikole Aye* which is the visible dimensions of Earth. The right side of the tray, both top and bottom represents *àyànmó-ipin* which is Destiny or the future. The left side of the tray, both top and bottom represents *iwe itan* which is the past.

Ifá teaches that all of these dimensions influence and literally create each new moment in time. The center of the circle at the juncture of both arms of the cross represents *Ita Orun* which is the pathway to the Invisible Realm. According to Ifá the only way to receive the blessings of Creation is to live life in balance and harmony with all those Forces that form the Circle of Creation. Symbolically this occurs by standing at the center of the Circle in a state of harmony with all those aspects of reality that produce time as it exists in the present. Standing on the road of *Ita Orun* is believed to produce *iwa-pèlè*, which means good character. The doorway to *Ita Orun* is called *olotoju enuouna Orun*, which means owner of the mouth of the road to Source. It is Èsú in all of his manifestations who is the guardian of this gateway, which is why all rituals in Ifá and *Orisà* worship begin and end with prayers to Èsú.

## VI.

### ORIN ÈSÚ SONGS TO THE DIVINE MESSENGER

- A. Call: *Ibara'go ago mo juba, Ibara'go ago mo juba, omo de ko ri koyi, ibara'go mo juba, Elegba Èsú lona.*

(Divine Messenger, I salute you, I salute you by giving thanks, Divine Messenger, I salute you, I salute you by giving thanks, children rise, do not become drowned in misfortune, Owner of Power, Divine Messenger of the Road)

Response: Repeat

- Call: *Ishon shon abe ishon ishon abe Odara kolorire eyo babase mi.*

(The point of the knife, the point of the knife, Spirit of Transformation do not bring misfortune, instead use your medicine to save me.)

Response: *Ishon shon abe.*

(The point of the knife.)

- Call: *Odara koloriri eyo baba semi.*

(Spirit of Transformation do not bring me misfortune, instead use your medicine to save me.)

Response: *Ishon shon abe.*

(The point of the knife.)

- Call: *Odara koloriri eyo.*

(Spirit of Transformation do not bring me misfortune.)

Response: *Ishon shon abe.*

(The point of the knife, the point of the knife, Spirit of Transformation do not bring misfortune, instead use your medicine to save me.)

- B. Call: *Iba Orisa iba la yeo ase mo juba.*

(I respect the Immortals, I respect the power of Spirit and we give praise.)

Response: *Iba Orisa iba la yeo.*

(I respect the Immortals, I respect the power of Spirit.)

Call: *Aloro mo juba.*

(For pure words we give praise)

Response *Iba Orisa iba la yeo.*

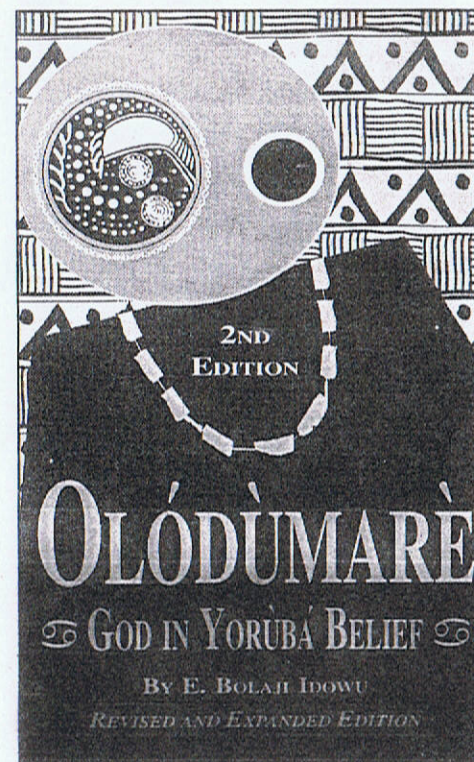
(I respect the Immortals, I respect the power of Spirit.)

Call: *Iworo mo juba.*

(For good words we give praise).

Response *Iba Orisa iba la yeo.*

(I respect the Immortals, I respect the power of Spirit).



In this book a Yoruba scholar studies the traditional belief of his people. Late Professor Idowu, who was a minister of the Methodist Church in Nigeria, sees the history and ritual of the religion of the Yoruba from a theological, rather than an anthropological, viewpoint. One of the author's chief aims is to interpret the Yoruba concept of the supreme God and to explore the relationship between Olodumare and sub-ordinate deities. Apart from the special merit of having been written by one who knows the ground thoroughly, the book also provides a fresh approach to the study of religion in West Africa. It contains a considerable amount of new material - songs and verses quoted in English translations - which have never before been recorded.

There are few books on this subject available and none written from a Yoruba viewpoint. Late Prof. Idowu's work should provoke a good deal of controversy and valuable discussion.

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