

ESU ELEGBARA IN YORUBA MYTHOLOGY: A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT: *Esu Elegbara is a popular deity in Yoruba religion and worldview. There have however been gross misconceptions about its identity, while many people believe that it is the same as biblical Satan, others are of the view that it is one of the divinities in Yoruba tradition. This paper therefore aims at examining the true identity of Esu Elegbara the development which it is believed will bridge the age long generational gap among different believers. Being a historical research, the work employs historical method in its analysis. The findings reveal that Esu Elegbara was a personality whose parents hailed from Ketu while Satan as described in the bible was one of the falling Angels known as Lucifer and Morning Star.*

Key Words: *Esu Elegbara, identity, believers, divinities, Yoruba Religion.*

Introduction

In Yoruba religious parlance, the word Esu has several connotations and interpretations, especially when it is spiritually used. The name is interpreted as the one given to one of the deities. In fact, the name “Esu” has a generic connotation that cuts across linguistic interpretation. Among the Yoruba, “Esu” is labeled as “Elegbara”, “Elegba” and “Odara.” The Igbo people describe him as “Ekwensu” while, among the Etsaho of Edo state, “Okhio” is translated as satan (Igbohin, 2013).

According to Olubayo (2013), before the advent of Western religions, particularly Islam and Christianity, there was no controversy on the nature, function, and identity of Esu among the Yoruba; it was after the incursion of missionaries and western religious beliefs that the nature of Esu was misconceived, misunderstood, and misinterpreted. Olubayo (2013) further submitted that the activities of local translators, and language and cultural analysts exacerbated this age long problem of interpretation.

This paper tries to delve into the past and present submissions of scholars with a view to establishing the true nature, characteristics and identity of Esu. To achieve this, we shall therefore examine in this paper the myths about Esu’s origin; Esu as viewed by the Yoruba; its true identity and then the conclusion.

The Myths about Esu’s Origin

Olumide cited by Oriloye (2006) discussed elaborately his own version of the origin of Esu, tracing it to a derivative of “Shu” the Egyptian god of space and heat who is believed to be regarded both as a benevolent and malevolent deity. Being a clergy, he was somehow bias and allowed prejudice and sentiment to becloud his judgment, hence, scholars consider most of his claims and submissions as spurious and therefore unacceptable.

Olubayo (2013) affirms that the etymology of the word “Esu” is difficult to decode but submits that the word might have been derived from the combination of the Yoruba prefix “E” and the verb “Su” (i.e. to harmonize or bring together). According to him, the combination of the Yoruba prefix “E” and the verb “Su” becomes “Esu”, which may connote “one who harmonizes” or “one who brings people or issues together for harmonious existence”. He therefore argues that Esu may be likened to an entity that makes people or things co-exist peacefully. Though the veracity of this theory cannot be ascertained, one can deduce from it that it implies a superhuman being that connects other beings and has implicit relationships with individuals. Olubayo (2013) however concludes that it may also refer to a being that consolidates and harmonizes the society which may as well imply that he is someone that is positive in nature.

Bolaji Idowu as cited in Danoye (2013) gives a mundane primordial existence to Esu like other Yoruba divinities. He was reported to have once lived in Ketu. Animasaun (1983) corroborates Idowu’s submission as he argues that there is ample evidence to show that Esu is a native of Ketu. According to him, this is found in an Ejiogbe Canto that says:

...Ifa ni ta lo to Alasan-an ba rokun

*Elegbara ni oun to Alasan-an ba rokun
Bi o ba burin burin, Bi o ba dele Ketu,
Ilee baba re nko? Bi won ba fun o lakuko adie pelu opolopo epo nko?
Elegbara ni bi mo ba ti yo tan, N o pada silee mi ni.
...Ifa asked "who is capable of following Alasan-an to the sea?"*

Elegbara responded that he was capable of following Alasan-an to the sea.

*Ifa asked again that, what if you walked briskly;
And got to Ketu land, The home base of your fathers?
If you are offered a fowl, With plenty of palm oil?*

Elegbara replied that if I am satisfied and full-bellied I would return to my home.

In the above Ifa excerpt, Animasaun (2013) concludes that Esu Elegbara's abode and earthly place of origin is brought into the limelight. It is however obvious that Ketu is associated with Esu Elegbara's place of origin. It was also speculated that Esu was once the king of Ketu as Ogun was associated with Ire Ekiti in Yorubaland. One of the praise-names of Esu: "Oba n'le Ketu", "King of Ketu land" also gives credence to his submission.

Oriloye (2006) appears to be in tandem with Animasaun and Idowu. According to him, Esu is associated with such towns such as Ketu, Ilesa, Ondo, Ilawe-Ekiti and Ijelu-Ekiti. Oriloye (2006) further argues that Esu-Odara was born by an Ilawe- Ekiti mother and Ijelu-Ekiti father. He further supports his claims with the popular saying among the Ekiti people that: "Esu gba k'ua m'Ijelu", (Esu accept this and proceed to Ijelu-Ekiti). Oriloye (2006) however concludes that the fact that Esu is mostly described all over Ekiti land as "Esu Ijelu", (Esu of Ijelu) as we have "Saul of Tarsus" in the Bible seems to further corroborate the claim too. Epega also corroborates Oriloye's submission in his argument for the earthly origin of Esu as he posits that Esu Elegbara was born in Ile-Ife by Oloja (Olubayo, 2013). Oral tradition also supports human parentage of Esu and that he was born at Ketu by Oloja and Ajumu who gave him the name "Laalu" (Animasaun,1983).

The divine origin of Esu is also elucidated by many scholars. Epega for instance submits that Esu Elegbara descended to Ile-Ife in company of 256 Ifa cantos at the primordial period serving as the messenger to the Odus (Olubayo, 2013). The position of Epega seems to be in line with oral tradition that says Esu was one of the 401 primordial deities who descended from the heavens into the earth at the beginning of creation. The view of Abimbola is the same with the aforementioned position as he argues coherently that Esu is not created by Olodumare, but that he co-exists with Olodumare from the beginning (Igbohin, 2013).

A critical look into the earthly and divine origin of Esu above reveals that he is a force to be reckoned with in Yoruba religious parlance. His influence is also felt directly or indirectly not only in Yorubaland but every part of the world.

Esu as viewed by Scholars:

Bolaji Idowu (1962) agrees with Mbiti (1970) as he sees Esu as the minister of Olodumare whose area of specialization is to try men's sincerity and putting their religion to test. This might be one of the reasons as we shall see later in this study why many people believe that Satan that tempted Job in the Bible and Esu are the same. Bolaji (1962) in his own assessment however warns that 'Esu' is so versatile that one must be wary of what one says about him. Fadipe as cited by Oriloye (2006) views Esu as undoubtedly the most universally worshipped. He argues further that "the universal description of Esu seems to indicate that it was one of the earliest of Yoruba divinities". Oriloye (2006) however wonders why many people believe that Esu is potentially evil. According to him, many are of the view that he spoils and destroys; and that he has penchant for mischief which portrays him as a sadist when in real sense he is believed to influence, act upon and inspire those in positions of authority to assist the less privileged or sanctions them whenever they trample on their rights.

Johnson (1921) corroborates the earlier submissions that Esu is wicked as he refers to him as 'Satan', 'The Evil One', the author of all evil. He however states that Esu is often and specially propitiated and that offerings are made to him by his devotees. It is obvious that Johnson's sense of judgment was beclouded by his new status as a Christian convert.

Awolalu (1979) disagrees with Peel (1968) & Lucas (1948) who argued that Esu is a versatile and trickish spirit, a 'deity who stands in opposition to "Olorun"', an intermediary between man and the other divinities. Oriloye (2006) also observes that among the Igbo of Nigeria, "Esu" known as "Ekwensu" is a personification of evil, quick temper and unpredictability. He reiterates that according to them 'Esu' (Ekwensu) can inspire people to commit crimes; he would first ignite their eyes with his fire. This according

to Oriloye (2006) implies that he takes over the control of their senses and self, weakens them and then sends them on his own errands and eventually puts them to shame.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the perceptions of people in respect of Esu are subject to individual mindsets, environment, orientation and belief. Nevertheless, the universal recognition cannot be denied. He can inspire people with the lure of his unpredictability. Each time he appears in a very unique and special form that the unwary may not recognize his tricks. Each time, he has something new to offer. His propensity to play tricks on people using them as his pawns to satisfy his whims and caprices is undeniable. As a result of his ever changing but never ending antics, his tricks keep changing from one episode to another.

The Worship of Esu

Shrines devoted to Esu are found in many places in Yoruba land. These shrines received offerings and libations from all the Yoruba regardless of their adherence to other Orisa cults (Allison & Joel 2013). According to Allison & Joel (2013), his devotees can readily be identified by maroon and black beads worn around their necks. The worship of Esu varies from one place to another. In some places, apart from the elaborate annual worship, the devotees cast Kola at his shrines on a weekly basis to determine the will and what offering must be provided to obtain his favour. Allison and Joel further observed that a multitude of situations prompt the Yoruba to either make a sacrifice to Esu or leave an offering at one of his many shrines. Sacrificial offerings made to him include: maize, beans, palm wine and liqueurs, black fowl, male goat, dogs and sometimes human being.

Olumide cited in Oriloye (2006), observed that accumulated monies voluntarily thrown into his shrine by passers-by in the past were used to buy slaves which were offered to him as sacrificial animals. Their blood is poured on his emblem. Oriloye (2006) further affirms that as part of his worship, passers-by are known to pray at and throw gifts into the deity's shrine on their way to and from markets or farms. Such gifts according to him use to include portions of the wares to be sold or those bought from the markets.

It is however believed that the portions sacrificed to other deities or ancestors are first offered to Esu before considering them. Individuals do offer the first morsel or portion of their food to Esu before taking such meals. Oguntuyi cited in Oriloye (2006) confirms that the first morsel goes to Esu outside the entrance to the compound. He explains further that one or two children would take the morsel there, put a small quantity on Esu's shrine and then eat the rest. The food that is thrown aside is accomplished with the following invocations:

Esu tire leyi, Olule Orita, Esu gba, ko o'jasiku rodo

Esu, this is your own portion, Lord of the crossroads

Esu accepts this and let me enjoy the rest

Oriloye submits that the above invocation corroborates Ekiti proverb that:

Kan ba ti mu t'Esu kuro lori iyan, iyan a yun

If Esu's portion is removed from pounded yam, the rest becomes sumptuous.

Esu has his own annual celebration connected with his worship. His major festival in Ila-Orangun for instance takes place in a seventeen-day stretch from December to January. It is always a boisterous and gay celebration, a reflection of his playfulness and rebellious nature (Allison and Joel, 2013). This, Allison and Joel further observe, is expressed primarily in the wild and flamboyant dancing that takes place during his festival. On the first day of the festival, an Esu figure has to be washed in cool water with medicinal leaves and then painted black. The figure is then decorated with cowry shells and packets of medicine and a colourful cap is placed on his head. According to Allison and Joel (2013), a goat is sacrificed to Esu on the next day and the animal's blood poured on a mud image of him. The skull and lungs are then left with Esu's shrine and the meat roasted for a feast.

While palm oil is normally used as part of the ingredients needed to worship Esu, palm kernel (Adin) is a taboo to him. If anyone offers Esu palm kernel oil, he will deal ruthlessly with the person, as with an enemy, and give him a blow or stir him to some action that brings upon him calamitous consequences (Olubayo, 2013).

It is widely believed that Esu is in charge of all sacrifices offered to the deities. After taking his own share, he delivers the rest to all other deities involved. In everything therefore, Esu is accorded recognition. During a house warming, the establishment of a marketplace, the founding of a town, the start of a new enterprise and so on, Esu's portion must be given to him. In Ekiti land when boys start to learn the art of basket weaving according to Oriloye (2006), the first product thereof is always dedicated to Esu who is considered as the master craftsman. In most cases, the basket would be worn as a cap on the emblem of the

deity after the owner has worn it. The owner would dance round the shrine seven times with the following song;

*Alakerikeje, Esu j'emi magbon 'iun, Esu
Rickety (though), Esu teach me basket weaving Esu.*

The belief among the people of Ekiti is that after the dance, the owner would be spiritually trained by Esu. Hence, he becomes an expert in the act of Basket weaving.

A Search for True Identity

Scholars are not unanimous as regard the identity of Esu. While some people believe that Esu is the same as Satan or the Devil in the Bible, others claimed that Esu as unique characteristics and functions and cannot be identified as Satan. The problem arising from the misconception of natural attributes, misinterpretation of the functional role, and the mistaken identity of Esu in Yoruba religious pantheon according to Olubayo (2013) dates back to the advent of foreign missionaries in the middle of the 15th century. These foreigners came and strangled African culture and religious belief and derogatorily and arrogantly labeled it fetishistic and barbaric. In Olubayo's submission, these foreign religionists, with their bias minds and misconceived ideas and opinions, were of the view that everything in Africa was inferior, and therefore looked down on Africa indigenous knowledge and values as superstitious and irrelevant. With this mindset, these foreigners presented Esu as the Devil and Biblical Satan.

Some also argued that Esu is diabolic, mischievous and malevolent and so he shares the same characteristics with Satan. This view must have arisen out of the general belief that Esu has peculiar power and authority. It is however obvious that this type of negative opinion is sometimes leveled against anyone who exhibits certain unusual power and authority. The people with this view have also failed to realize that other divinities like Sango (god of thunder), Ogun (god of iron) and Sanpona (god that afflicts people with small pox) are also possessed with unusual power and authority yet, they are not equated with Satan.

One can also submit that Esu is not completely bad and diabolic as people claim. It is also to Esu's credit that he assists the downtrodden and helpless people. The fact that "poor men and beggars go to his temples and grooves to gather money, articles of food and clothing and other things that are offered as sacrifice to him gives credence to his benevolence and kindheartedness. Evidences abound that Esu use to assist those in difficulties whether the situation affects man or a deity. For instance, Olubayo (2013) observes that Esu at one time assisted Orunmila in brokering peace and settled a score that could have turned into a bloody conflict between Ifa and indigenes of Ilawe-Ekiti. He, according to Olubayo (2013) assisted Orunmila in averting the calamity that might have befallen him by the diabolic behaviour of the people of Ilawe. It can however be submitted that Esu showed himself as a peace broker in an ugly situation when he facilitated peace between Orunmila and the people of Ilawe.

In all reality, Satan or Devil as portrayed in the Bible is completely evil. In both old and new testaments, there is no record of his good deed. Unlike Satan who has been described as an individual who constantly rebels against God's will, Esu has been described as one of the ministers of Olodumare and a close associate of Orunmila and that he carries out Orunmila's instructions at will. Esu is one of the principal divinities that assist Olodumare in the maintenance and control of the universe (Olukoju, 1997). Olukoju further corroborates the claim of other scholars that Esu cannot be the same as Satan in the Bible since he is not completely bad as he argues that Esu is known by his praise Epithet "Bara tii fun ni kun towo eni" (Bara who adds more to what one has) . He is believed by his devotees to be capable of bringing them fortunes and providing children for them. No wonder such children are usually named after him and such names include "Esugbami" (Esu delivers me), "Esuyomi" (Esu liberates me),"Esubiyii" (Esu gives birth to this), "Esuleye" (Esu has honour). His compassionate nature is further revealed by his praise epithet:

*O b'elekun sunkun k'eru b'elekun. Elekun sunkun, Laaroye n sun'je.
O b'onimi mi, k'eru ko b'onimi. Onimi n fimu mi, Laaroye n fi gbogbo ara mi bi ajere
He assists the crier who was shedding tears' Laaroye was shedding blood.*

He assists the person who is breathing to the extent that the person who was breathing was gripped with fear. The person who was breathing was breathing with nose, Laaroye was breathing through the whole body like a sieve.

According to Awolalu as cited in Olukoju (1997), individuals employ Esu to help them ward off evil things and bring them prosperity and peace. In view of this functional role, it has been argued that without Esu, Yoruba cosmos would have been in a state of perpetual conflict. He is an errand divinity appointed to serve the interest of man and other divinities.

As a matter of fact, Esu's existence is clearly a way of making sure that in the cosmos of humans there is orderliness and peace. It will however be misrepresentation of

facts to equate Esu with Biblical Satan.

As a result of his benevolent nature, he has devotees who worship and adore him since they believe in his capabilities. He enjoys the widest popularity and acceptance throughout Yoruba land. Shrines and altars are built for him in almost all towns and villages. Many towns and villages accord the deity elaborate annual worship. According to Oriloye (2006), at Ayedun-Ekiti and Ikakumo-Akoko, annual bonfires are held in his honour. He is also worshipped at Ijelu-Ekiti. The annual Oloye festival is devoted to Esu at Ipao-Ekiti.

From the foregoing discussion, it is obvious that Satan as presented in the Bible is completely evil. He is not only described as one of the fallen Angels but a being whose activities are antithetical to the will of God. If Esu on the other hand completely shares the same characteristics with Satan or the Devil in the Bible, how would Esu be appointed by Olodumare as a minister saddled with the responsibility of supervising other divinities? If Esu is the same as Biblical Satan or Devil, he would not have gotten devotees who constantly worship and adore him after all there is no record in the Bible or anywhere that Satan is popularly worshipped by his devotees. The perceived characteristics Esu share with Satan or Devil might have arisen from his attempt and effort to perform his assigned duties faithfully and strictly to ensure that both divinities and men conform to order by fulfilling their necessary obligations to God and mankind

Conclusion

In this paper, we are able to delve into the archival submissions of the past with the view of complementing and juxtaposing them with the present claims of the scholars. We can therefore arrive at a conclusion that it is a gross misconception to interpret Esu in Yoruba religious pantheon as Satan or Devil in the Bible. Esu as a Yoruba divinity is not completely evil and bad as he has been portrayed, for if he were, he would not have had devotees.

We must therefore disabuse our minds of the interpretation given to Esu by the bias foreigners and shed the idea of interpreting him as Satan or Devil. We must see him as a prominent divinity in Yoruba land and an important functionary of Olodumare, the Supreme Being. Though Esu may share some characteristics with Satan and may as well be both benevolent and malevolent in his activities, one should however realize that Esu, in Yoruba theology should be identified along with other primordial deities as a naturally imperfect being and that only the supreme deity should be considered as the most perfect and righteous being. Esu becomes malevolent when he is provoked as a result of divinities or men's failure in their responsibilities.

Instead of equating Esu with Satan or Devil in the Bible and instead of putting him in the same pedestal with fallen Angel of God, he should be credited for being alive to his responsibilities as he stands an arbiter between man and the spiritual beings.

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