

'At a Crossroads': Spirituality and The Politics of Exile: The Case of the Yoruba Orisa

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The devil is not the terror that he is in European folk-lore. He is a powerful trickster who often competes successfully with God. There is a strong suspicion that the devil is an extension of the story-makers while God is the supposedly impregnable white masters, who are nevertheless defeated by the Negroes. (Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*)

Prologue: The Problem of Amputative Ambivalence

I begin this paper with the above quotation from Zora Neale Hurston because it quieted some of the unsettled tensions and questions I had been struggling with

around Christianity and indigenous Yoruba spirituality. With time I noticed that this struggle had tapered and often pivoted around one particular figure that was repeatedly evoked as evil incarnate—the devil. In many Yoruba Christian communities this figure is called, Esu.¹ While not knowing exactly what Esu meant, many Yoruba Christians had made it clear to me that “Esu was not good.” At various Churches and especially in fervent prayer, Esu’s name was often called in concert with what people prayed would not happen to them and their loved ones—i.e. sickness, failure, loss of employment, death, poverty, etc. Esu was also largely blamed for any and every form of evil or negativity in people’s lives. In attending the many Yoruba churches in the city, Esu always seemed to figure in the same way: as an eternally lurking demonic force that you, as a committed Christian, were to do everything in your might to rebuke and stay away from. As Christians, goodness, benevo-

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lence and “spreading the Gospel” were your personal and social charge, and this was often evoked with a discourse that emphasized the need to conquer and destroy all evil/malevolent forces. And these forces were always evoked under Esu’s title. At home during family prayers, Esu was rebuked and cursed. In church and other social functions, Esu was rebuked and cursed. The message was clear; Esu was the synonym for sin and evil and every effort should be made to stay away from him and all that he represented. However, interestingly, while carrying out extensive research on Indigenous Yoruba spirituality, this same name was repeatedly mentioned but in quite a different way. In these writings Esu was an Orisa, a cunning and central Yoruba deity that was the owner of the crossroads and keeper of *Ase*, the power of and the essential breath of life. I found myself in somewhat of a quandary and was not able to reconcile the very polarized positionings of this Esu. While the research I completed showed that undoubtedly this was emblematic of being a colonized people where many had converted to Christianity, this research did not speak to the present-day tensions I was feeling around how this Orisa had been positioned and was still very much demonized in contemporary Yoruba Christian life – both socially and spiritually. I was stumped at a crossroads, ironically enough. I suspected that traversing back and forth between Esu, “the Devil,” and Esu, the central Orisa and keeper of *Ase* was a “nervous condition” that could not be too healthy (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth; Dangarembga, Nervous Conditions*). For, while being at a crossroads is an important reoccurring juncture in life, it is a site that one visits; it is only temporary. It is temporary because the crossroads is supposed to propel you into making a choice, or so I thought. For, the irony of this ambivalence is that paradox, contradiction, elusiveness, freewill to choose and ambiguity are also the domains of Esu the Orisa; the deity of the crossroads that sits, stands and also does some traversing of its own between and with/in the material and spiritual worlds.

What the above narrative highlights is the problem of amputative ambivalence and how this tension operates as a metaphor for the larger problematic of religion as a site of contestation. My experience is a *contemporary* metaphor for the collision between the Yoruba and Euro-Christian metaphysical systems. I felt it was necessary to write myself into the narrative because

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it was largely provoked by my own personal experiences of spiritual negotiation. And, I do suspect that such experiences are not solely mine, but rather, could possibly emblemize the need for further inquiry into the larger phenomenon of cosmological encounter through religious imperialism. My aim in this paper is to examine, articulate and locate the contemporary implications of the historical formations of cosmological encounter as currently experienced by second generation Yoruba-Canadians, many of whom I argue, are also caught between this religious and cosmological struggle, similar to the Orisa, Esu. I situate this collision primarily through key figures in the Yoruba and Euro-Christian cosmologies: Esu and Satan. Esu is an important deity not only because of this Orisa's key role and function within Yoruba cosmology, but also because Esu is the deity that brings this particular type of ambivalence to light. It is also of significance that Esu is the *only* deity that was stripped and transposed into Christianity via the Yoruba Bible and, consequently, Yoruba social life as the archetype of evil, otherwise known as the devil.

This discussion is worthy of attention for a number of reasons: First, contemporary implications of cosmological encounter –such as spiritual ambivalence that encourage amputation of one's African Indigenous knowledges– have been paid scant attention to date, scholarly or otherwise. Second, the ambivalence that I discuss in this paper is of a specific type, one that is symptomatic of Christianization –proselytization and conversion– which continues to be a larger dimension of religious fundamentalism and “globalization”. Again, the existing consequences of this reality amongst the Yoruba diaspora in Canada is not paid much attention. Third, while on the one hand the overwhelming number of people converting to Christianity can be explained through a Marxist conceptualization of religion which posits that it is latched onto in times of social rupture –i.e. globalization– in this paper I focus on cosmological encounter and how religion becomes a site of contestation. Specifically, I explore how the problem of religious and spiritual ambivalence operates as a manifestation of hegemonic metaphysical encounter. In other words, this discussion is important because it draws attention to a new conceptualization of the problem of ambivalence by anchoring it in a cosmological context. I argue that, in doing so, we are able to garner a more concep-

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tualized understanding of what I define as the cosmological imperialism and difference. This is where Eurocentric pro-Enlightenment understandings of the world that particularly take root in hegemonic notions of race and gender are written into the Yoruba cosmos through unequal relationships of power. Lastly, what I am premising here is the need to pay attention to how knowledge is constructed and ordered within the context of worldsense or cosmology.

There are four components that are central to my argument of cosmological imperialism, difference and how the Yoruba and Euro-Christian cosmologies encounter one another. First, through the above prologue, I use my own personal experience to identify and present a glimpse into the problem of amputative ambivalence. Second, I employ a discussion of cosmological difference by outlining Esu's role and function in Yoruba cosmology and philosophy. In the third section, I engage a historical analysis of how this problem of ambivalence emerged through the key figure of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who translated the Bible into Yoruba and Esu unto the devil. This component is particularly significant because it maps how hegemonic constructions of race and gender are interspersed throughout Crowther's translation. I then build on this by showing how such constructions produce dichotomized and essentialized versions of Esu that then fix or bind this deity as hegemonically masculine and quintessentially evil. Lastly, I draw some conclusions as to what the implications of this amputative ambivalence are and why it is a problem to bear such a burden.

Cosmological Difference: A Struggle Between Two Metaphysical Systems

The term 'worldview,' which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West's privileging of the visual. It is Eurocentric to use it to describe cultures that may privilege other senses. The term, 'worldsense' is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups ...[and] will be used when describing the Yoruba or other cultures that may privilege senses other than the visual or even a combination of senses (Oyeronke 3).

To substantiate my claim of cosmological imperialism and underscore