

It has been at the very heart of my best work and success as a scholar, and I naturally am pleased to share what has been of great value to me with my students and colleagues. Perhaps even more importantly, I firmly believe that the theory and method of Indigenous hermeneutics are also of great benefit to Africans and other communities around the globe, as they offer a highly effective way of allowing them to be understood on their own terms, which has immense implications in our highly interconnected world. I also find Indigenous hermeneutics to be fascinating because it is more a set of guiding principles rather than a particular interpretive structure itself, which means it is not best served by arguing for its validity in an abstract sense, although this may help. The best evidence for its use and effectiveness is applying it or seeing it in action, as this special edition documents. The types of insights it produces and the level of sophistication it reveals in all manner of Indigenous traditions are truly exciting and compelling, which is why I believe those in attendance enjoyed the meeting at the AAR so much, and why it is such a pleasure to have these papers collected together here.

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Èṣùtumò

Indigenous Hermeneutics beyond
Indigeneity and Hermeneutics Or “How
do you say Hermeneutics in Yorùbá?”

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Abstract

Once of the most important contributions of Professor Jacob Olupona’s illustrious career is his development of the method of Indigenous hermeneutics—the inclusion and even centering of the interpretive traditions of the people being studied in the scholar’s interpretive work. In this short essay, I will argue that Olupona’s method contains

radical potentials that can lead “indigenous hermeneutics” beyond both “indigeneity” and “hermeneutics.” I will briefly trace out some of the implications of this more radical position by comparing Èṣù to the figure of Hermes in Ancient Greek myth and modern Western hermeneutics, briefly comparing and contrasting Èṣù’s methods of operation with that of major figures in the tradition of Western hermeneutics.

Keywords: Theory and Method in the Study of Religion, Hermeneutics, Yoruba religion, Ifá, Òriṣà traditions, African philosophy

Who can comprehend the òrìṣà Èṣù?

—GBADAMOSI AKANNI

For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking.

—BARBARA CHRISTIAN, “The Race for Theory”

You who translates yesterday’s words

Into novel utterances,

—ORÍKÌ ÈṢÙ

One of the most important contributions of Prof. Jacob Olupona’s illustrious career is his development of the method of Indigenous hermeneutics—the inclusion and even centering of the interpretive traditions of the people being studied in the scholar’s interpretive work. While the central insight underlying this method is hardly novel—Rowland Abiodun has pointed out that Lévi-Strauss wrote in his 1966 book, *The Savage Mind*: “as theories go, the Yorùbá seem to have been able to throw more light than ethnologists on the spirits of institutions and rules which in their society, as in many others, are an intellectual and deliberate character”¹—as Olupona demonstrated in his magisterial *City of 201 Gods* and Abiodun in his *Yorùbá Art and Language*, the importance of taking into account the theories indigenous to a particular artistic or religious tradition continues to elude many scholars of Africa. As Olupona explains in the beginning of *City of 201 Gods*:

This is in reaction to a number of works that do not take seriously or interpret adequately the depth of the African experience. In our reading of these works, we have encountered serious problems, including mistranslation and distortions of meaning. To avoid such problems, scholars must agree to go beyond phenomenology by privileging what I refer to as “indigenous hermeneutics”: that is, exploring paradigms and modes of interpretation that are explicitly embedded in the traditions we study. Because these traditions are interpretive, our understanding of them should take into consideration how they provide meaning to those who encounter them. It is our role as scholars to highlight the interpretive meanings within these traditions and to incorporate them into the larger discussion of African religion.²

In this short essay, I will argue that this “double hermeneutics”³ of Olupona’s contains profoundly radical potentials that can lead “indigenous hermeneutics” beyond both “indigeneity” and “hermeneutics,” just as its earlier instantiations have led religious studies scholars beyond phenomenology.⁴ As in so many other domains, this radical potential is embodied in the òrìṣà Èṣù. In his seminal 1977 essay, “Eshu-Elegba: The Yorùbá Trickster God,” John Pemberton compares Èṣù to Hermes, the Greek deity and mythical father of hermeneutics:

Eshu, like Hermes, has the power to bind and release. With charms, he produces sleep. Breaks locks, and becomes invisible. He is described as being able to transform himself into a bird, become like the winds, or appear as other persons. He confuses recognition by throwing dust, blinking his eyes, and clapping his hands.⁵

In an early essay, Henry Louis Gates Jr. connected Èṣù with Hermes and his theory of black hermeneutics:

In Yorùbá mythology Èṣù always limps, because his legs are of different lengths: one is anchored in the realm of the gods, the other rests in the human world. The closest Western relative of Èṣù is Hermes, of course; and, just as Hermes’ role as interpreter lent his name to ‘hermeneutics’, the study of the process of interpretation, so too the figure of Èṣù can stand, for the critic of comparative literature, as our metaphor for the act of interpretation itself.⁶

However, what I wish to argue in this brief essay is that Prof. Olupona's method acknowledges Èṣù as more than a metaphor, as something both other and more than what Hermes is for modern, Western hermeneutics. That is, I will suggest that taking "indigenous hermeneutics" seriously will take us beyond "hermeneutics" as typically understood. I will briefly trace out some of the implications of this more radical position by comparing Èṣù to the figure of Hermes in Ancient Greek myth and modern Western hermeneutics, briefly comparing and contrasting Èṣù's methods of operation with those of major figures in the tradition of Western hermeneutics (Ricoeur, Gadamer, Habermas, and Derrida).

In his introduction to Ayodele Ogundipe's now-classic *Èṣù Èlẹgbára: Change, Chance, and Uncertainty in Yorùbá Mythology*, Prof. Olupona explains the epiphanic nature of Yorùbá mythistory (*itàn*):

I have always argued that the traditions we are studying are interpretive in nature and they lend themselves to a dialogical approach to their deep meaning and understanding. *Ìtàn* [myth, history, narrative] derives from the verb *tàn*, 'to light as in light a candle or match to produce light.' *Tàn* can also be translated as 'to spread as in the spreading of a story from a source to other places where it assumes more meaning and nuances. This one reference alone to *itàn* points to the power of words, their translation and derivative meanings, and to providing deep cultural hermeneutics, similar to Olabiyi Yai's interpretation of *àṣà* (custom and tradition) [as that which we (*a*) select and choose (*ṣà*) with discernment].⁷

While many *òrìṣà* are involved in this process of *itàn*, this process is most centrally the domain of Èṣù and his close friend, Ọ̀rúnmilà. While Ọ̀rúnmilà is the witness of every being's choice of destiny (*elerí ipín*) and the *òrìṣà* of Ifá, whose complex divinatory system, oral corpus of myths, and ritual archive render the cosmos legible, predictable, and manageable through the structure 256 Odù, Èṣù is the embodiment of chaos, paradox, chance, choice, unpredictability, indeterminacy, movement, excess, crossroads, crossings, liminality, and thus, communication, translation, and interpretation. As the exception to every rule, Èṣù enforces these very rules, as the divine "policeman" (*ọlọpa*) and messenger who gets a share of every sacrifice (*ẹbọ*) since he is the one who carries each to its intended recipient.

Èṣù's unpredictability intervenes at crossroads in life, when and where people must make choices, and these dire straits and trials into which he thrusts people push them to seek out the counsel of his friend, Ọ̀rúnmilà through Ifá divination. Ifá, in turn, helps them understand the causes of their

predicament, the lessons they must learn from it, the transformations in character (*iwà*) they must undergo, and the sacrifices they must perform, which leads them right back to Èṣù, who takes their sacrifices. This close relationship is why Èṣù's face is found on every divining tray (*oṣon Ifá*), and his shrine in the compound of every babaláwo. As Ogundipe records, one babaláwo said, "Èṣù and Ifá (*Ọ̀rúnmìlà*) were friends—close friends. Wherever you found one, you found the other. They never missed seeing each other for a single day, and neither went to bed without bidding the other goodnight. No one understood how two people could be so close."⁸ On one of the few occasions when Èṣù and Ọ̀rúnmìlà quarrel in mythology, Èṣù runs ahead of Ọ̀rúnmìlà, who chases him, while people chase Ọ̀rúnmìlà, representing, among other things, how Ifá seeks order and understanding from the apparent chaos and the dynamic unpredictability of life, while people seek Ifá's understanding.⁹

Every logical or intelligible system has its boundaries or limits, even one as vast, comprehensive, and dynamic as Ifá, and Èṣù is this limit principle, representing the threshold between any system and its remainder, between the knowable and unknowable, as the intermediary or messenger between creation and the supremely transcendent Olódùmarè. Many *oríkì* of Èṣù illustrate these dynamics, for example:

Deity who acknowledges neither master on earth,
Nor lord in heaven!
Mighty calabash fruiting in the heart of a rock!
Heavy rainfall, terror of the owner of a thatched house
Poverty never angers detractors,
Plentiful stew full of fungus,
Like a generous portion of inedible soup.
Like quicksand without solid foothold,
So it swallows the entire body.
One who somersaults while licking his hand,
One who lights a fire with a mouth full of water.¹⁰

As well as:

Eshu turns right into wrong, wrong into right.
When he is angry, he hits a stone until it bleeds.
When he is angry, he sits on the skin of an ant.
When he is angry, he weeps tears of blood.
Eshu slept in the house—
But the house was too small for him.

Eshu slept on the verandah—
 But the verandah was too small for him.
 Eshu slept in a nut—
 At last he could stretch himself.
 Eshu walked through the groundnut farm,
 The tuft of his hair was just visible.
 If it had not been for his huge size,
 He would not be visible at all.
 Lying down, his head hits the roof.
 Standing up, he cannot look into the cooking pot.
 He throws a stone today
 And kills the bird yesterday.¹¹

Èṣù is the “mighty calabash that grows from the rock,” the remainder that cannot be contained by solid and stable structures (in fact he makes such rocks “bleed”), the excess of a “plentiful stew full of fungus,” the paradox of a “generous helping of inedible soup” who “lights a fire with... water.” Bigger than a house, smaller than a peanut, defying causality and time, Èṣù is the “quicksand without foothold” that paradoxically swallows and supports all. He is like the primordial waters (*omi Ọlólórè*) of creation, or the boundary (*bodè*) between heaven (*ọrun*) and the world (*ayé*)—the chaotic motion beyond stable order that paradoxically grounds all stability.

All pairs of opposites imply or require a third term that both separates and unites them, participating in both, belonging fully to neither, exceeding both, and making possible, stabilizing their opposition. Think of the threshold that is both and neither inside and outside, sunrise that is neither and both day and night, the beach between sea and land, the horizon between earth and sky, the line between shadow and light, and the present moment between past and future. In Sufi metaphysics, this principle is known as a *barzakh*,¹² while in the Yorùbá cosmos, this principle is found in Èṣù, who, as an *òrìṣà* is so much more than an abstract principle. Etymologically, Èṣù’s name has been glossed as deriving from the verb *ṣù*, meaning “to harmonize” or “to bring together,” and so his name could be interpreted as meaning “one brings things together harmoniously,” “one who unites opposites harmoniously.”¹³ Indeed, as the go-between between all of the forces of *ayé* (the world), *ọrun* (heaven), *ilẹ̀* (earth), and *Olódùmarè*, between all stages and modes of being, Èṣù quite literally holds everything together in dynamic harmony. As Kọla Abimbọla explains, the Yorùbá cosmos would be locked in intractable conflict and opposition without Èṣù. Just as *Olódùmarè* embraces all things, being the head/source (*orí*) of all heads/sources (*àwọn orí*), beyond all oppositions, Èṣù participates in all things, being both and neither each pair of opposites,

harmonizing all. His immanent “chaos” mirrors Olódùmarè’s transcendence. Olódùmarè transcends all forms; Èṣù is amorphous and can take on any and all forms all at once. Another of Èṣù’s *oríkì* describes him as *A Ẹ̀tún-sẹ̀sì láì ní tǹjú*, “he who belongs to the left and the right (two opposing sides) without any shame/discomfort.” Abiḍun writes,

Èṣù looks in two opposite directions, embodies two bodies, and inhabits two spaces at the same time. Èṣù is very independent-minded: he cannot be owned by anyone. The Yorùbá call *Idowu*, Èṣù *lẹ̀yìn ibẹ̀jì*, that is, *Ìdówú* [the child] whose birth follows the birth of the twins is likened to Èṣù, the proverbial “third leg,” without which there can be no stability. This is also corroborated by the Yorùbá saying, “*Ààrò méta kì í d’obẹ̀ ẹ̀ nù*” (A cooking hearth of three stones never spills a pot of stew).¹⁴

While Ifá divination is based on a binary logic, Èṣù is the “oddness” or “third leg” that stabilizes this logic. The moment when the *ikin* (palm nuts) or *òpèlẹ̀* (divining chain) or cowrie shells or kola nuts are tossed into the air, before they have settled into their final positions (what Soyinka calls the “fourth stage” of ritual¹⁵) is Èṣù’s time. Èṣù’s spatial home is thresholds and liminal spaces, especially the *orita méta*, the three-way crossroads where “either-or” meets “neither-nor,” where choices must be made.

Bataille’s “third term”¹⁶ and Derrida’s *différance* develop a similar insight in contrast to Hegel’s somewhat similar sublation (*Aufhebung*) or synthesis of a thesis and anti-thesis that both negates and takes up and preserves aspects of both sides of the contradiction, resolving it into a higher, more complete understanding. For Bataille and Derrida, the third term or *différance* does not resolve the contradiction but maintains it dynamically, preserving the distinctiveness of opposing elements from being subsumed into a teleological synthesis (à la Hegel). Derrida develops this idea in his essay, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” which takes up an account from Plato’s *Phaedrus* in which the Egyptian deities Amun and Thoth debate whether writing is a poison (*pharmakon*) or a medicine/cure (*pharmakon*).¹⁷ The Egyptian Thoth was commonly identified with the Greek god Hermes, whom Plato identified with hermeneutics, speech, and interpretation, as in this passage from the *Cratylus*:

Socrates: I should imagine that the name ‘Hermes’ has to do with speech, and signifies that he is the interpreter (*hermeneus*), or messenger, or thief, or liar, or bargainer; all that sort of thing has a great deal to do with language; ... “O my friends,” says he [Homer] to us, “seeing that he is the contriver of tales or speeches, you may rightly

call him *Eirhemes*.” And this has been improved by us, as we think, into Hermes.¹⁸

Indeed, like Pemberton and Gates, Ogundipe identifies Hermes as Èṣù's closest peer: “It is my conclusion that if Èṣù is similar to any mythological figure at all, he is most similar to the Greek god Hermes. Like Hermes, the messenger god in Greek mythology, Èṣù is an errand god, the go-between for humans, deities, and God. Both gods appear more frequently in their respective mythologies than most other deities because they are associated with almost everyone.”¹⁹

However, as Norman Brown argues in his seminal *Hermes the Thief*,²⁰ Èṣù's Greek counterpart, the father of hermeneutics, was progressively domesticated as Greek society moved from pastoral to commercial economies. The early Hermes was a thief, trespasser, and smooth-talking magical swindler, but was gradually rationalized into Hermes the merchant, the god of legitimate exchange. While Èṣù helps us understand how these two aspects can actually fit comfortably together, one could trace a trajectory for Western hermeneutics that mirrors that of its father Hermes: the interpretive acts of diviners, omen readers, and scryers were disciplined into mythological and theological scriptural interpretation, which was then disciplined into method (e.g. Schleiermacher, Dilthey) and then philosophical ontology (e.g. Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur). Èṣù, however, remains undomesticatable. Hermes became a metaphorical figure in Western hermeneutics, but Èṣù is an active participant in Yorùbá ritual and interpretation (*ìtúmò*).

Paul Ricoeur (one of the fathers of modern hermeneutics)'s famous statement on the goal of hermeneutics is revealing of this difference:

In proposing to relate symbolic language to self-understanding, I think I fulfill the deepest wish of hermeneutics. The purpose of all interpretation is to **conquer a remoteness**, a distance between the past cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpreter himself. **By overcoming this distance**, by making himself contemporary with the text, the exegete can **appropriate its meaning to himself: foreign, he makes it familiar, that is, he makes it his own**. It is thus the growth of his own understanding of himself that he pursues through his understanding of others. **Every hermeneutics is thus, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others.**²¹

Metaphors of conquest, appropriation, and assimilation aside,²² while Èṣù and his close friend Ọrúnmilà do help people understand and fulfill their

orí-inú (inner head, self, destiny) through their encounters with others in ritual, myth, and everyday life, Èṣù in particular works in a more complicated way, making interpretive conquest remote, undermining nearness, and making self-knowledge the means of understanding others, while underscoring the limits of both. In short, Èṣù is the one who makes the work of interpretation necessary and perpetual; he is constantly making the foreign familiar and the familiar foreign, always creating the very conditions that require interpretation.

For example, take the widely-decried misinterpretation of Èṣù as “the Devil” or “Satan” in the Yorùbá Bible and popular Yorùbá Christian and Muslim belief.²³ As more than one babaláwo has told me, this “mistranslation” is the work of none other than Èṣù himself, who hoodwinked Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther and so many others into conflating him with the Biblical or Qur’anic Devil or Shaytan in order to reveal their own limitations to them. Èṣù wraps himself in mean disguises of misunderstandings and false certainties in order to waylay the arrogant and close-minded who fail to honor the law of sacrifice and its principal patron. Èṣù is constantly disguising himself in myths to teach people lessons of humility, and in one account, he even wraps himself in cloths in which he himself defecated.²⁴ No one is more foolish than one who thinks he is safe from Èṣù’s tricks; no one is more foolish than she who does not acknowledge the limits of her own understanding of herself and others.

While Èṣù is decidedly different from his portrayal in Yorùbá Christian and some Muslim discourses, he does play a role that is similar to some esoteric Christian and Islamic understandings of Satan or Iblīs as a servant of God who tests and tries people, by God’s command, seemingly leading them astray as a part of a larger plan to lead them closer to God. Indeed, one babaláwo explained to me that Muslims always salute Èṣù before reciting the Qur’an, because they are commanded to recite, *‘aūdhubillāhi min al-shayṭān al-rajīm*, “I seek refuge in God from the accursed Satan,” before reciting any verse of the Qur’an, and several Ifá narratives describe Èṣù’s “temptations” of Christ as tutelary trials leading to his full empowerment.²⁵ Perhaps this is part of the lesson Èṣù is trying to teach Yorùbá Christians and Muslims: to understand both their own limits and the depths of their own traditions or risk falling prey to the very demonic forces they have mistaken him for.²⁶ When you point one finger, three point back at you. Like those gone mad, they have wrapped themselves in Èṣù’s dirty rags and accused others of the smell. As Wale Adebani explains in his review of Olupona’s *City of 201 Gods*:

In a religious culture in which the foundational source of epistemology—based on Ifá—is exemplified by Oṣunmila, whose full meaning

is “*orun lo meni ti ola*” (“only the Heavens know who will be saved”), this book shows why, despite [I would say because of] religious devotion, fundamentalism is an aberration in Yorùbá religious culture. Ọ̀runmílá [and Èṣù] symbolizes an opposition to fundamentalism: [complete,] divine wisdom belongs to Ọ̀ṣọ̀run or Olodumare (God) and not to...the adherents of religion. . . . By providing the epistemic basis of a religious culture that abhors extremism, Olupona also forces a debate about contemporary forms of devotion that affirm themselves only through an orgy of violence—as in some parts of Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa.²⁷

In brief, Èṣù teaches through productive misunderstandings and mistranslations. From the perspective of his devotees, Èṣù’s trick of getting Christians to misrecognize him as the Biblical Devil reveals the limitations of their theology and understanding of themselves, him, the Devil, God, and others, which should prompt them to transcend these limits. By better understanding themselves, by improving their character (*ìwà*), they will be better equipped understand others. Instead of the interpretation of others being a tool for appropriation and self-transformation, Èṣù’s myths and rituals suggest that self-transformation is the key and condition for interpretation and understanding others. This is not a straightforward “conquering of remoteness” or “overcoming of distance” à la Ricoeur, but rather a productive distancing of overcoming, the posing of a riddle meant to produce a profound change. Èṣù creates the very conditions that make interpretation and re-interpretation possible, necessary, and never-ending. Those too stubborn, slow, or smug to keep up with Èṣù’s endless lessons will find themselves caught in an endless cycle of compound ignorance (not knowing that one does not know), ignominy, and inhuman brutality.

This is distinct from the general trajectory of modern, Western hermeneutics, in which interpretation aims at a kind of fusion of horizons or consensus (Gadamer’s *Horizontverschmelzung*). Èṣù does not just merge horizons, he bridges them, permitting crossing between them, while keeping them distinct. For example, take the famous story about Èṣù and two best friends who swore that they would never, ever quarrel, but didn’t take Èṣù into account. One day, Èṣù rode between them wearing a hat that was red on one side and black on the other, and a shirt and trousers that were black on one side and red on the other. He greeted each friend eloquently and then rode off briskly. “What an elegant man that was,” one friend said to the other, “with a fine red cap and black clothes.” “He did indeed cut a dashing figure,” replied the other friend,

“but his cap was black and his clothes, red.” They soon fell to arguing, each accusing the other of being sunstruck, until they actually fell to blows. Just then, Èṣù galloped between them again going back the other way. The first friend rubbed his eyes in shock as he now saw what the other had described, a man in a black cap and red clothes. “I am sorry, you were right,” he apologized, “I don’t know what happened to my eyes, but the man was wearing a black cap and red clothes.” “Don’t patronize me!” said the other friend, “I also saw him just now and he was wearing a red cap and black clothes, just as you said the first time!” The friends fell to fighting again. In some versions of this story, Èṣù returns and reveals to them the cause of their confusion, but in others, he doesn’t. But in all versions, the lesson is that absolutizing relative matters, as the friends did with their friendship, without taking Èṣù into account is a dangerous business. While one reading of this myth (*itàn*) could understand the revelation of Èṣù’s two-color clothes as a kind of Hegelian sublation or Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons,” another could interpret the bi-color of his clothes as meaning that they resist any one interpretation; they are designed to produce two valid but mutually contradictory interpretations that are not resolved. Part of the brilliance of this myth is that, like Èṣù’s clothes, it can be understood or interpreted in both ways on multiple levels. That is, it can be applied to its own interpretation: these distinct interpretive alternatives: one of synthesis and one of irreducible difference can be understood as themselves constituting the colors of Èṣù’s clothes, and the myth can be understood as advocating a “both/and” and “either/or” perspective on these alternatives, and so on and so forth. Such iterative, self-referential paradoxes are Èṣù’s quicksand and dance steps. This spiraling dance is distinct from both the teleological pursuit of “universal validity” of self-transparency that characterizes much of modern philosophical hermeneutics (e.g. Habermas) as well as the insistence on difference and incommensurability that characterizes deconstruction and other post-structuralist thought (e.g. Derrida and his less-subtle disciples). The myths of Èṣù caution us against absolutizing either sameness or difference. Only Olódùmarè is absolute, being beyond both sameness and difference. Èṣù embraces both sameness and difference playing them like the two heads of his favored *bàtá* drum.

Moreover, ritually, each Odù of Ifá and each òrìṣà has its own Èṣù, there are even distinct Èṣù for orí (one’s head, destiny, spiritual double, divine origin, etc.), and multiple male and female Èṣù.²⁸ This means that there are distinct and different means for interpreting each Odù and òrìṣà, in contrast to the singularizing and homogenizing methods of academic hermeneutics that tend to seek to develop a singular method that is applied universally.

This brings us to Prof. Olupona's "indigenous hermeneutics"? If we take Èṣù as more than an ethnographic object, as something like what Hermes was to hermeneutics, then we have a distinct "hermeneutic" principle of interpretation that challenges certain assumptions in contemporary hermeneutic practice. Namely, *contra* Habermas, Olupona's studies show that far from being bounded, naïve, or "pre-theoretical," such so-called religious "indigenous systems"²⁹ are theories that can and have been deployed to interpret themselves as well as others (each has its own Èṣù), and that the boundaries between self and other, and thus what is indigenous and not, depend on the theoretical lens which one adopts (e.g. Islam was/is seen by some as an *òrìṣà* tradition, Èṣù can play a role in the interpretation of the Bible and Qur'an). Relatedly, Olupona's work goes beyond some of the reactionary tendencies in postcolonial or decolonial thought of only viewing indigenous African traditions as modes of "resistance" or static "alternatives" to Western traditions, to engage with them rather as coeval theoretical and ritual traditions with their own norms, forms, modes of universality, and histories in which colonization is catastrophic, but not the central event. Finally, the interpretive method and stance one finds in traditions of Ifá and Èṣù is not one of an infinite play of signs without a transcendent signified (à la Derrida) privileging difference, nor is it a progressive fusing of horizons, privileging a kind of universal synthesis or unity through a rational, academic method (à la Gadamer and Habermas), but rather a distinct ritual dialectic between Èṣù and Ifá, in which *itàn* (myth, narrative), sacrifice (*ẹbọ*), and one's character (*iwà*) and behavior reveal and shape one's destiny (*orí*) in relation to those of all the other members of the cosmos. This hermeneutics requires sacrifice and the transformation of character as the conditions of possibility for interpretation and understanding, not just its outcome.

Olupona's work demonstrates that Yorùbá myths, rituals, and festivals do not merely illustrate a hermeneutics, but rather, they *are* that hermeneutics, operating through *itàn*, orature, divination, ritual sacrifice, dance, music, sculpture, costume, processions, and sacred geography rather than discursive philosophical arguments alone. They constitute a tradition that has always theorized the conditions of its own interpretation. This important move directly parallels Barbara Christian's argument in her seminal essay, "The Race for Theory," which serves as one of this essay's epigraphs:

For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles

and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking.³⁰

In some myths, Èṣù saves Ifá from Death, and the playwright Femi Osofisan interprets this according to the dynamic outlined above:

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.³¹

In the Introduction to *City of 201 Gods*, Olupona takes up this spirit:

The Western reader must make a conscientious effort to expand the dimensions of Western thought, reaching beyond the limitations of secular humanism, modernity, and skepticism. One must be willing to develop an awareness of Yorùbá and African worldviews, imagination, and hermeneutics that allow for a culture that is remarkably adaptable, profound, and open to creative meanings and interpretation. One cannot allow Western discourse to dictate the meaning and function of religion. All useful heuristic concepts and ideas must be reexamined and relocated within their indigenous hermeneutical traditions for their proper application. This book will reexamine ritual, myth, memory, history, space, and gender. Through a creative imagination and expansion of restrictive models of thought inherited from Western tradition, we can come to a fuller and deeper understanding of the nature of this city and its culture.³²

My modest suggestion is that this re-examination be extended to the very category and method of hermeneutics itself, that what Prof. Olupona's *oeuvre* offers is not only a fuller and deeper understanding of the nature of Ilé-Ifè or even Yorùbá religions, but of interpretation itself. I suggest that what Prof. Olupona has been doing in his scholarship, and training his students and

readers to do, is a far more radical intervention in the tradition of hermeneutics than may be apparent at first glance. The late, great literary scholar and colleague of Olupona's, Prof. Biḡdun Jeyifo's comments about what Wòlè Ṣoyinka did to and for the English language applies equally to what Olupona has done to and for the Euro-American tradition of hermeneutics, transforming it into Èṣùtumò:

Rather, his intention is to take the English language [hermeneutics] to areas of being that its owners either had not imagined or had once thought imaginable but had irrevocably lost, and they can recover it now only if they have the humility, the grace, and, let it be said, the self-interest to make themselves receptive to a fundamental aspect of world literary and intellectual history in the twentieth century. In this vein, writers like Soyinka [Olupona] . . . are doing things to and with the English language [hermeneutics] that transcend the things the English had thought their language [method] capable of expressing, bringing about the end of English [hermeneutics] as a language [method] of colonial sovereignty and dominion over large areas of the world.³³

Just as Èṣù belongs to two camps without any discomfort, Prof. Olupona gracefully brought together Western academic and traditional Yorùbá methods of interpretation; he has transformed the academic discipline of hermeneutics by teaching it some Yorùbá, and has expanded traditional Yorùbá practices of *ìtàn*, taking a fire from one place and time to light another, by bringing the narratives of Ilé-Ifè and òrìṣà traditions into Western academia at the same level as its theoretical master narratives. Like Èṣù, Prof. Olupona's work "translates yesterday's words into novel utterances."

Notes

1. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1966), 133.
2. Jacob Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (University of California Press, 2011), 1.
3. See Wale Adebani, "Religion and Indigenous Hermeneutics," *Journal of Africana Religions* 2, no. 4 (2014): 457–464.
4. In the same work, Olupona explains, "This holistic approach will combine the theoretical and methodological perspectives of the history of religion and cultural studies to create an interdisciplinary focus that transcends both hermeneutical phenomenology and traditional anthropological studies of religion." (Olupona, *City of 201 Gods*, 2).

5. John Pemberton, "Eshu-Elegba: The Yorùbá Trickster God," *African Arts* Vol. 9, 1 (1977): 26. However, I would argue that Èṣù is not really, or rather more, than the trickster trope that many have tried to affix to him. The wily tortoise Ìjàpà fits more in the trickster mold than the great òrìṣà does.
6. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey." *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 4 (1983), 687–688.
7. Ayòdele Ogundipe, *Èṣù Èlégbára: Change, Chance, and Uncertainty in Yorùbá Mythology*, (Ilorin: Kwara state University Press, 2012), xi.
8. Ogundipe, *Èṣù Èlégbára*, 204.
9. Ogundipe, *Èṣù Èlégbára*, 204–206.
10. Ogundipe, *Èṣù Èlégbára*, 145.
11. Rowland Abiòdun, *Yorùbá Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 261–262.
12. See Salman Bashier, *Ibn al-'Arabī's Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (SUNY Press, 2004).
13. Olúbáyò Qládíméjì Adékóḷá, "Èṣù Èlégbára in Yorùbá Spiritual and Religious Discourse" in Toyin Falola (ed.) *Èṣù: Yorùbá God, power, and the Imaginative Frontiers* (Carolina Academic Press, 2013), 58.
14. Rowland Abiòdun, *Yorùbá Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 74.
15. The three other domains of human experience being the world of the unborn, the world of the dead, and that of the living. Soyinka describes the "fourth stage" as the liminal realm between these three more stable abodes, the place of ritual, of intercourse between the different realms and the forces that inhabit them. See Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 140–60.
16. See Benjamin Noys, "Georges Bataille's Base Materialism." *Journal for Cultural Research* 2, no. 4 (1998): 499–517.
17. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1981).
18. Plato, *Cratylus* 408a, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/cratylus.html>.
19. Ogundipe, *Èṣù Èlégbára*, 126. She continues, "Like Hermes, who is regarded as a divine wayfarer, god of the countryside, and god of the roads, Èṣù lives outdoors, at the crossroads, and at entrances to homes and cities. He is the succour and bane of travellers and visitors. Like Hermes, who is god of the market place and patron of commerce, Èṣù wears necklaces of money around his neck and is always present at markets and at any open place where people congregate. Both Èṣù and Hermes are considered the cleverest and most precocious of deities in their respective mythologies and both are restless, energetic, deceiving nomads. Besides their speed, energy and intelligence, both guide and guard, both avert evil and bestow good. Both deities carry wooden clubs, exude male sexuality and are sometimes represented in their emblems by the phallus." Elsewhere she records a related oríkì, "Èṣù made a bridge of his penis the other day / Travellers went to and fro on it." Ogundipe, 77.

20. Norman O. Brown, *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth*, (Lindisfarne Press, 1990).
21. Paul Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," in Charles E. Reagan, and David Stewart eds., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work* (Beacon Press, 1978), 101. Emphasis my own.
22. These metaphors are, however, highly significant, as Olupona highlights, summarizing Charles Long, "One of the dominant ways in which scholars of Western cultures tried during the modern period to formulate a science of the human was to turn to an examination of foreign and exotic cultures (the primitives) and discuss and analyze these cultures in terms of their religions. Furthermore, they tended in their work to emphasize the irrational nature of religion in these cultures. The unexamined assumption contained in these investigations was that primitive cultures represented an early stage of human development, an irrational stage gradually being supplanted by the rationality of modern thought and life. What they failed to grasp was that their ideals of rationality and objectivity, rather than being the self-evident properties of critical method, reflected an ideological bias which prevented them from seeing and understanding the phenomena they were studying." (Olupona, *City of 201 Gods*, 4). While Ricoeur was an outspoken opponent of French colonization and nationalism in general, his essays evince a naïve Eurocentrism and lack of investigation of the ways in which the racial, religious, and colonial "other" was integral to the formation of the European and Euro-American "self." As Baldwin wrote, "What slavery and white supremacy did to White Southerners was worse than what it did to African-Americans in the South . . . this cowardice, this necessity of justifying a totally false identity and of justifying what must be called a genocidal history, has placed everyone now living into the hands of the most ignorant and powerful people the world has ever seen. And how did they get that way? By deciding that they were white. By opting for safety instead of life. By persuading themselves that a black child's life meant nothing compared with a white child's life... And in this debasement and definition of black people, they debased and defined themselves." (James Baldwin, "On Being White . . . and Other Lies" in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. R. Kenan, (Vintage, 2011), 168-169).
23. See Toyin Falola (ed.), *Èṣù: Yorùbá God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers* (Carolina Academic Press, 2013) for many discussions of this issue.
24. Ogundipe, *Èṣù Elégbara*, 224.
25. See Ayodeji Ogunnaike, "Ifa and Traditional Yorùbá Interpretations of Christianity" in Afe Adogame, Ebenezer Obadare, and Wale Adebaniwi eds., *Topographies of African Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Jacob K. Olupona* (Taylor & Francis, 2025): 221-237.
26. The common misunderstandings of the term *makr* (scheme, plot, plan, arrangement) in the Qur'an, (e.g., "They plotted, and God plotted, and God is the best of plotters" (3:45), "Did they feel secure from God's plotting? None feels secure from God's plotting, save the people who are losers," (7:99), and "Indeed those who were before them plotted, but unto God belongs plotting altogether. He knows what

every soul earns, and the disbelievers will know whose is the Ultimate Abode.” (13:42)) by both Islamophobes and modern Muslims testifies to the need for such lessons.

27. Wale Adebani, “Religion and Indigenous Hermeneutics,” 464.
28. I am grateful to Iya Robin Garcia for drawing my attention to these important facts.
29. Wale Adebani, “Religion and Indigenous Hermeneutics,” 463.
30. Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987), 52.
31. Femi Osofisan and Muyiwa Awodiya, eds., *Excursions in Drama and Literature: Interviews with Femi Osofisan* (Kraft Books 1993), 81.
32. Olupona, *City of 201 Gods*, 7–8.
33. Biodun Jeyifo, “Oguntoyinbo: Wole Soyinka and Igilango Geesi.” *Philosophia Africana* 11, no. 1, 2008, 30.

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Water as Method

Articulating Osun Hermeneutics Through Sound, Surface, and Ritual

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Abstract

Water as Method articulates what I call Osun hermeneutics: an interpretive orientation shaped through a sustained relationship with water and ritual practice. Drawing on Jacob Olupona’s account of Indigenous hermeneutics and Rowland Abiodun’s critique of Western aesthetic frameworks, this paper argues that interpretation must emerge from within the epistemic systems it comes from. Rather than treating water as metaphor, I approach it as organizing intelligence, one that teaches through porosity, repetition, timing, and consequence. Through verbal and visual oriki, breath, brass implements, and the river itself, knowledge is activated, tested, and carried forward across