



Who Is That Fellow in the Many-Colored Cap? Transformations of Eshu in Old and New World Mythologies

Donald Cosentino

The Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 100, No. 397. (Jul. - Sep., 1987), pp. 261-275.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8715%28198707%2F09%29100%3A397%3C261%3AWITFIT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-L>

The Journal of American Folklore is currently published by American Folklore Society.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/folk.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

DONALD COSENTINO

Who is that Fellow in the Many-colored Cap? *Transformations of Eshu in Old and New World Mythologies*

Myths of Eshu Elegba, the trickster deity of the Yoruba of Nigeria, have been borrowed by the Fon of Dahomey and later transported to Haiti, where they were personified by Vodoun into the loa Papa Legba. In turn, this loa was refracted into the corollary figures of Carrefour and Ghede. A comparative study of the evolving mythology of this deity offers new perspectives on the religious imagination and modes of revelation in Vodoun.

MYTHS OF ESHU ELEGBA, the trickster deity of the Yoruba of Nigeria, have been as influential in West Africa and its New World diaspora as Greek mythology has been in Europe. Both mythologies grew out of pantheons that inspired unparalleled artistic creation in sculpture and oral tradition. Both legacies were borrowed wholesale by enterprising cultures to the West: the Greek Olympians by the Romans, the Yoruba *orisha* by the Fon Kingdom of Dahomey. From these initial direct inheritances, original mythologies have been reborrowed, transformed, and transmuted. Through epochs and from the Old World to the New, the mythologies survive in folk practices, flourish in periodic high art renaissances, persist as Odysseus has persisted in his move from Ithaka to Joyce's Dublin, or Eshu Elegba from Ife to the Vodoun¹ hounfours (temples) of Port au Prince and Miami.

It was to pursue the latter figure, the ur-trickster Eshu Elegba and his Fon counterpart, Legba, that I spent part of 1986 in Haiti. Deities and tricksters migrated along with bearers of Fon and Yoruba oral traditions during the 17th and 18th centuries. Through the course of a terrible migration and an extraordinary history, these mythic protagonists were rerooted, grafted, pruned, reborn. Today in Haiti the eponyms are no longer remembered in extensive oral narrative myth, but are constantly reflected in the ritual performance of the Vodoun service, through dramatic incarnation in the flesh and blood of their serviteurs who call them *loa*. First among the *loa* in precedence is Legba, affectionately called "Papa" by the Vodounists, who implore him, "Papa Legba,

Donald Cosentino is Lecturer, Folklore and Mythology Program,
UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90024

remove the barrier for me," so that the other *loa* may manifest themselves during a service.

That same service is performed by Eshu and Legba in Yoruba and Fon tradition. Both deities preside at the crossroads, regulating traffic between the visible and the invisible worlds. But the drastic changes wrought by the Vodounists on the remaining characteristics of Eshu and Legba constitute a kind of mythological revolution. For the most celebrated foreign observers of Vodoun, Alfred Métraux and Maya Deren, the personae of Papa Legba become the measure of Vodoun's distance from its African sources, the mirror of Haitian syncretism. The trajectory they trace moves downward as well as westward, a sweet, melancholy decline from virility to senility. What I discovered confirmed that the development of Legba indeed mirrored the development of Vodoun. But the trajectory was multidirectional and expanding. To assess the fate of Legba is to appreciate the scope and vitality of mythopoesis in Vodoun. That assessment begins with Yoruba myth.

Eshu Elegba (known to his Yoruba devotees by either name, as Christians use *Jesus* and *Christ* interchangeably) is at the nexus of a pantheon of *orisha* grouped into a dozen or so "hot and cool" cults (according to the McLuhanesque dichotomy proposed by Robert Farris Thompson 1971). His place within these cults varies. Worshipers of the hot/hard *orisha* (Ogun of Iron, Shango of Lightning, Shapona of Smallpox) say Eshu is their brother: vain, handsome, sexually prolific. Devotees of Oshun, mother of cool terrestrial waters, say she is married to Eshu and possessed of his cunning. Muslim and Christian Yoruba maintain that he is simply Satan, the devil. Yoruba oral tradition gives ammunition to all these cross-interpretations. The *oriki* (praise poetry) say he is "the biggest creature with a big wooden stick," yet he is so tiny that he must "stand on tiptoe to put salt in the soup." He is both first and last born, old man and child, cunning and capricious. Old or young, he disregards "the normal code; he enjoys the natural license of the innocent and the privileged license of the aged. As a child he is the experimenter who breaks the rules. Thus . . . the Yoruba say he is the youngest of the *orisha*, but the father of them all" (Wescott 1962:341).

The Eshu of narrative myth is also an exponent of ceaseless rearrangements. He is the counterpart to Ifa, Lord of Divination, and through his mediations sacrifices are offered and accepted, and the human and divine worlds are kept in tenuous balance. But the Yoruba regard these mediations with an ambivalence that is most famously expressed in the myth of Eshu's Cap: One day Eshu walked between the farms of two friends wearing a multicolored cap (variously described as red and white; red, white and blue; or red, white, green, and black). He also put his pipe at the nape of his neck and hung his staff over his back. As he passed back and forth, the friends quarreled about his appearance and the direction he was walking, until they came to blows. Later, when the disputants brought him to court, Eshu confessed to the trick, boasting that "sowing dissension is my great delight." Then he fled, starting

a fire along the way and mixing up all the possessions of fleeing townsfolk (Pelton 1980:141). Thus testing and exposing friendships, creating and destroying wealth, Eshu exits laughing.

Along with other cultural furniture, the Yoruba pantheon migrated westward, being adopted by Fon priests as the Olympian deities were adopted by Roman priests. But in the process of adoption the *orisha* were reformed by new cultural patterns, a new crossroads trickster being honed from his eponym in name and attributes. Scholars such as Wescott and Pelton (1980:127–128) have noted that the Yoruba do not laugh at Eshu narratives; the yoking of such disruptive and recreative qualities in so ubiquitous a deity inspires fear as much as affection among his devotees. But the Fon Legba, grosser and randier than Eshu Elegba, capable of effecting devastating and capricious transformations, has been ritually transferred from categorical ambiguity to a central dominance in Fon mythology.

The Fon Legba also regulates the barrier at the crossroads, having been appointed divine linguist by the androgynous high god Mawu Lisa, to whom he must report daily on all the affairs of men and gods:

So Legba knows all the languages known to his brothers, and he knows the language Mawu speaks, too. Legba is Mawu's linguist. If one of the brothers wishes to speak, he must give the message to Legba, for none knows any longer how to address himself to Mawu-Lisa. That is why Legba is everywhere. . . . You will find Legba even before the houses of the *vodun* [gods], because all beings, humans and gods, must address themselves to him before they can approach God. [Herskovits and Herskovits 1958:125–126]

From further Fon myths we learn that Legba has gained this vantage from his relationship with Fa, the personification of divination, who in her female manifestation as Gbadu sits atop a palm tree with her 16 eyes closed to all but the future. Each day Legba climbs this cosmic tree and opens those eyes according to the pattern of the palm kernels thrust into his hand. Thus through Legba's intercession humans have access to the palm kernel divination system of Fa, but the myth also makes plain that his engagement does not stop with her eyes. Legba has sex with Gbadu up in her heavenly perch, and then climbs down and has his way with her daughter on Earth. This tree of life thus finds its objective correlative in Legba's penis. Furious at his philandering ways, Gbadu brings charges against him to Mawu-Lisa. Legba denies guilt, but when ordered to undress he stands before Mawu with phallus rampant. Furious with her naughty boy, Mawu-Lisa orders that Legba shall forever be priapic, but forever unsatisfied. Contemptuous of her pronouncement, Legba begins to fondle Gbadu again. When Mawu reproaches him, he answers that it is she herself, the High God, who has commanded that his phallus never flag (Pelton 1980:122–123).

And so it is that Legba is sexually insatiable. In one of the most complex of Fon myths, he is pictured as a musician in a funeral band traveling with his divine brother and sister. On the road they meet and murder three women.

Legba sneaks off and copulates with each of their corpses, as he later copulates with his mother-in-law, and then with the daughter of King Metonofi, whose entire realm was made impotent by one of his medicine switching tricks. The king is so grateful for this phallic intercession that he allows Legba to sleep with any woman he chooses and names him "intermediary between this world and the next. And that is why Legba everywhere dances in the manner of a man copulating" (Pelton 1980:87). It is crucial to appreciate this metaphysical triad: death/fornication/communication, for each of these strands is unwound and rewound as the New World Fon recreated their mythology in the performance of Vodoun.

The Yoruba Eshu Elegba is priapic, too. His most ancient and ubiquitous representatives are one to four feet long laterite pillars (*yangi*), which are found in marketplaces and crossroads shrines, or in smaller chunks protruding from the right side of passageways at the entrance to domestic compounds (Pemberton 1975:20). More graphic still is the long curved hairdress, often overtly phallic, which distinguishes his statues and sometimes the hairstyle of his priests. While noting these phallic attributes, however, Westcott (1962:339) argues from the pubic apron that shields the loins on his statues, that Eshu's concern is with erotic energy, not the male procreative act so specifically enjoyed by Legba.² Other iconographic infantilisms, such as Eshu's thumb sucking, support this interpretation. But Eshu's ambivalent image as a deity whose sexuality veers between the ineffectual priapus of the child and the bawdy impotence of the dirty old man is most clearly evident in narrative myth and poetry. Consider the following lyric sung on the sixth day of Eshu's annual festival, while priests and devotees carry his image into the marketplace, dancing with uncharacteristic kicks and contractions. The refrain repeatedly makes clear that Eshu's mischief is equated with broken sexual connections:

We are singing for the sake of Eshu
 He used his penis to make a bridge
 Penis broke in two!
 Travellers fell into the river. [Westcott 1962:131]

Legba, by comparison, is pure stud. His penis has been described by Pelton as "the mythic humanizer of sex. . . . It is Legba's penis which symbolizes, both ordinarily and most ceremoniously, the bond between the divine and the human worlds. He is a living copula, and his phallus symbolizes his being, the limen marking the real distinction between the outside and the inside, the wild and the ordered, even as it ensures safe passage between them" (1980:108-109). But Legba's penis is a symbol precisely because it is a generative organ. It is a copula because it copulates. The literal dimensions of the myth are made explicit during the initiation ceremonies for the Fon cult of Mawu-Lisa. On the last of a ten-day public ceremony, Legba manifests himself in the body of a young girl dressed in a purple raffia skirt and a purple straw hat. As Hersko-

vits observed the ceremony, the girl came towards the drums sounding "Legba's rhythm":

When she reached the drummer, she put her hand under the fringe of raffia about her waist . . . and brought out a wooden phallus. . . . This was apparently attached in such a way that it would remain in the horizontal position of the erect male organ, and as she danced . . . toward a large tree where many women were sitting watching the ceremony . . . they ran from her, shrieking with laughter, and they were made the butt of many jokes by the spectators. [1958:125-126]

Traveling through Dahomey at the end of the 19th century, Sir Richard Burton, the great Victorian connoisseur of non-Western erotica, was amazed by a parallel display of Legba's attributes in Fon statuary: "Legba himself is a horrid spectacle. A mass of red clay is roughly molded by the clumsy barbarous artist into an imitation man, who is evidently, like Jupiter, 'a devil of a god for following the girls.' The figure is at squat, crouched, as it were, before its own attributes, with arms longer than a gorilla's, huge feet, and no legs to speak of" (Herskovits 1938:222).³

While the Fon have maintained Eshu Elegba's role as patron and paragon of communications, they have selected from his double-charged qualities (old/young, large/small, black/white, prurient/phallic),⁴ transforming contrarious erotic energy to the specific and applied male sexuality of Legba. It is vital to appreciate this Fon transformation, which is in effect a differentiation and intensification of a borrowed mythology, in order to understand the changes wrought in the realization of the Haitian Legba.⁵ These changes are so sweeping that they constitute a mythic revolution, akin in scope to the kind of revolution that appears to have transformed Yoruba twins from abomination to divinity,⁶ or the Drunken King of the Luba into the Menstruating Queen of the Chokwe (de Heusch 1982). If the Fon have applied an exponent to Eshu's erotic potential, the Haitians have reduced that same potential to zero sum. The adolescent, endlessly randy Legba of Dahomey has become the impotent old Papa Legba of Haiti.

Each Vodounist is a "horse" to be ridden by his *loa* during a service. The Haitians say, "You learn about the *loa* by watching his horses" (Courlander 1985:21). So it is that Papa Legba's horse might be bent or twisted into the shape of a crippled old man. From the sanctuary wall the houngan may hand him his special crutch, for his limp has earned him the nickname "Pied-cassé" (Métraux 1972:102). As Papa's horse stumbles in possession, his serviteurs might tenderly sing, "Alegba cannot walk straight, he is limping / Cold benumbs his legs, soon we shall see him" (Laguerre 1980:48). He manifests as an old peasant who has worked his fields hard all of his life and is now at the end of his powers. His horse is sometimes dressed in the costume reserved for him in the altar rooms of the better wardrobed hounfours: blue jeans, a work shirt, a straw hat and *macoutte* (straw sack), his 'Eshu' pipe, and, of course, his crutch. Vodoun offers such paltry accoutrements, for the serviteurs further

sing, "Papa Legba, a poor man, a poor beggar / One gives to *Atibon* only used items that nobody wants . . ." (Laguerre 1980:46-47).

He still keeps the gate, and in that role he is sometimes represented on the walls of the hounfor by chromolithographs of St. Peter holding the keys to heaven. But more often the houngan will put up a picture of St. Lazarus, dressed in rags and covered with sores, to represent the Catholic counterpart to Legba, the "concrete pun" on his "divine" attributes.⁷ Métraux says that rather than a divine messenger, "they have made a sort of doorman out of him" (1972:361). Indeed, in his tatters he does seem closer to a superannuated doorman than to the guardian of the gates of paradise.

Apropos of a very different religious culture, the poet Rilke asked, "What is the good of a used up God?" Maya Deren, the dance ethnographer and filmmaker who became a quasi serviteur herself, must have had that same question in mind when she wrote what amounts to this divine obituary: "Legba who was life and its destiny, who was the Sun, itself destined to descend from the noon of each year, from the zenith of its ardent fire, has become an old tattered man shuffling down the road, with his crude twisted cane or crutch, a small fire in his pipe, a little food in his macoutte, and sores on his body, as if the maggots had begun their work already. It is as if in coming westwards, the Africans had left behind the morning and noon of their destiny, the promise and power of their own history" (1953:101). And indeed, there is an elegiac echo in the melancholy of the following Vodoun lyric:

Kandio Legba, you are an old spirit
 And old man from Dahomey
 Walking in the public roads.
 Legba, you are an old spirit,
 An innocent spirit, an African spirit.
 You are old, an old spirit from Arada.
 Since the beginning of the world
 You have been the guardian of the entrances.
 Legba, you are very old. [Laguerre 1980:51]

Alfred Métraux, the ethnologist who worked in Haiti during the notorious "anti-superstition" (i.e., anti-Vodoun) campaign of the 1940s, extends this proposition of a dwindling divinity into a general thesis on a devolving Vodoun. He describes the pantheon of Vodoun as a "measure of the degradation suffered by the religions imported from West Africa to Haiti. . . . So it is we find in Voodoo undeniable traces of Dahomean mythology and its rich tradition, but they are traces grown faint, impoverished to the extent of being unrecognizable. Of the functions and attributes of the great Dahomean gods there remain only insignificant vestiges. The *vodu* have become genies and spirits, no longer august." He goes on to ascribe this supposed "degradation" to the disappearance of a priest caste during the horrors of the middle passage: "The priests who were among the captives sold in the West Indian markets

could not set up as teachers of theology. Life in plantations was obviously not conducive to metaphysical speculations" (1972:361).

If indeed slavery had destroyed a priestly caste devoted to metaphysical speculation, an indigenous clergy certainly has reconstituted itself. Max Beauvoir, perhaps the most quoted and certainly the most accessible theologian of contemporary Vodoun, told me there are 50,000 hougans and mambos serving the *loa* in Haiti today. Their fate, and the fate of the Vodoun religion, had become the national cause célèbre by the summer of 1986. Beauvoir rejects any assertions of devolution, maintaining rather that Vodoun is a product of fossilization: the rites of Dahomey, Kongo (and several other African) religions unaffected by post-18th-century intrusions of Islam or Christianity. Near his computer he keeps a bronze statue of Legba that he obtained in Dahomey. The figure is long, gaunt, and bald (looking more like those sentimental reproductions of Don Quixote as the *Man of La Mancha* than the phallic monstrosity reported by Sir Richard Burton). One of the statue's legs is trousered and the other is bare, Beauvoir explained, because Legba walks on the earth and skims through the air maintaining communications between *loa* and men. His baldness indicates his brain size, and his thinness that he eats no food. No sacrifice is ever offered to him because "he is so spiritual. He is one of the 401 *loa* recognized by Vodoun, but he takes precedence over the others because he is the essence of communication. When we converse, my Legba speaks to your Legba. He is our AT&T. Without him, there is no communication, no community, no life." Beauvoir attributes the post-Duvalier persecution of Vodoun to a conspiracy of Catholic bishops and American Protestant missionaries: "that is what happened here in Haiti—the Christians lost their Legba."

If Papa Legba is in fact the ur-Legba of Dahomey, alive and functioning as the AT&T of Hispaniola, how then are we to understand why he has grown so old? Why does he no longer fornicate? In the spirit of Lévi-Strauss's dictum that a clever dialectic will always find an answer, Beauvoir explained that Legba has grown old because the trip from Africa took so long, and keeping the passages open to Guinee was so arduous a task. As for his phallic power, what need, now that Haitians no longer live in the land he kept fertile?

Most contemporary scholars would concur with Beauvoir (and Dundes 1975:17–27) that *devolution* is a suspect concept in the study of folklore. *Recombination* is a better term for the transformations wrought on Eshu Elegba, the progenitor of this trickster lineage. He contains all the oppositions exploited by the borrowing traditions. The Fon chose to articulate the first term of that inherited mythological opposition, the Haitians the second. But having chosen to articulate the persona of ancient gatekeeper (for whatever dialectical or poetic reasons) to the exclusion of almost all Eshu Elegba's other attributes, earlier Vodounists left their religious posterity with a serious mythological problem. A paralytic trickster is a contradiction in terms. By the nature of his being, trickster moves between categories, mediating through his tricks the very contradictions he embodies. Poor Papa Legba, warming himself with borrowed wood by the doorway, doesn't seem fit for the job.

But the very extremity of Legba's condition evidently suggested its own solution. If the pantheon borrowed from Fon was so finely rearticulated, it was also massively expanded by borrowings from other African mythological traditions and by a continual process of local reinvention. The absence of a state-supported priestly caste from Dahomey (or Kongo, or Ibo, or Yoruba, for that matter) and the weak presence of a French Roman Catholic priesthood with its treasury of European mythology and religious tools both liberated and fueled the imagination of the Vodounists, who not only maintained but expanded the forms of the old African mythologies. Métraux noted this kinetic process two generations ago: "As long as the general form of ceremonies is not altered, innovations of detail, particularly if they are picturesque, are well received by the public. The idea of tradition, pure or impure, is foreign to Voodoo. . . . Most houngan or mambo scarcely trouble themselves with theological speculation. When the surname and the epithet is Creole, and therefore understood by the faithful, that is enough to give the *loa* an obvious identity which the possessed try to express in movements and attitudes" (1972:91-94).⁸ This observation is crucial in appreciating the process that has rearticulated the attributes of Legba: it is in the crucible of possession during Vodoun performance that popular imagination amends tradition, directly inspiring the faithful to new understandings of divine character in the manner ascribed by Christians to the Holy Spirit in His descent upon the Apostles. Each Vodoun service is then a potential Pentecost, and the religion is always open to revelation and renovation.

So, if Legba from Dahomey was no longer able effectively to move beyond gatekeeping, it became a logical necessity for the Vodoun faithful to generate another Legba for the *carrefour*, the liminal crossroads that Eshu Elegba's avatars must dominate. And so Mait Carrefour (Master of the Crossroads) assumed his place in the Vodoun pantheon, a twinned opposition to Legba sitting at the same gate, but at the side that leads away from the other *loa*, and toward the dangers and realities of Haitian life. It is Carrefour who has inherited from the ur-Eshu mastery of ill-chance, misfortune, destruction: all the events that occur outside the structure of a balanced, ideal destiny. He complements Papa Legba by lending to the *loa* more of those qualities that make Eshu Elegba a contrarious whole: Legba's sign is the cardinal points, so the *vèvè* (cornmeal cosmographs) for Carrefour are anchored on the points in between; Legba commands the daylight divinities of Dahomey, Carrefour the left-handed demons of the night against whom the serviteurs of Vodoun find Papa Legba impotent. When he manifests himself in the body of a serviteur he is no feeble old man: "Carrefour is huge and straight and vigorous, a man in the prime of life. His arms are raised strongly in the configuration of a cross. Every muscle of the shoulders and back bulges with strength. No one whispers or smiles in his presence" (Deren 1953:101). As the Vodounists developed Papa Legba by exaggerating Eshu's weaknesses, so they generated Carrefour by exaggerating Eshu's strengths.

The generation of Carrefour was made necessary and logical by the “degeneration” of Papa Legba, but the development of the two great complementary rites of Rada and Petro within Vodoun may also have made the twinning of Legba a categorical imperative. Although much has been written and discussed contrasting the benign, African-derived rites of Rada and the assertive, autochthonous rites of Petro, the differences between the two can best be observed in the characteristics attributed to the *loa* of each rite, especially in a comparison of the contrastive Legbas made by Métraux:

To some extent they bear the same relation to each other as did in Ancient Greece the Olympian and the chthonian gods. Just as beside the Olympian Zeus there was a chthonian Zeus, so Vodou has a Legba rada and a Legba petro. These two spirits, although alike as brothers, yet have different natures. Legba petro is apparently “stiffer”, more violent than his rada alter ego. These are nuances rather than radical differences, but they do give a distinctive colouring to the way in which the faithful represent the *loa* of these two groups. The word petro inescapably conjures up visions of implacable force, of roughness and even ferocity—qualities which are not a priori associations of the word rada. Epithets such as “unyielding,” “bitter,” and even “salty” are applied to the petro while the rada are “gentle.” [1972:88]

Carrefour as a distinct *loa* does not have African antecedents. Rather, he assumes a rational place in the Vodoun pantheon, created by the faithful and their priests, like the golden legends, or dogmas such as the Immaculate Conception, to fill the vacuum left by deities otherwise occupied. But even his enormous dimensions still leave unsatisfied the most salient feature of Carrefour’s trickster ancestors: the phallus. To reclaim for the Legba archetype all the overt sexuality of the Fon original, and all the mordant devilry of Eshu Elegba himself, the religious imagination of Vodoun was stretched further, removing the barrier not only to the repose of the *loa* and the crossroads of life, but to the cemetery where it located the phallus in the guise of the Cross and the spade. Through the generation of a family of *loa* called the Ghede, Haitian Vodoun has completed all the possibilities inherent in the complex figures of Legba/Eshu Elegba and created a capital addition to the poetry of African mythology in the New World.

There is no Vodoun curia to oversee orthodoxy or uniformity of doctrine. So this genealogy I propose, which would link Legba through his shadow manifestation Carrefour to the obscene family of Ghedes, might well be disputed by other scholars of Vodoun, houngans, or serviteurs. What some might dispute is the linkage of the benign, almost nostalgic character of Legba to the outrageous Ghede. But I am not alone in tracing such a family line. Santiago Legrand, a houngan from the shrine site of Saut D’Eau whose patron *loa* is Carrefour, told me that Legba, Carrefour, and the Ghedes were, “dans la même ligne,” brothers of the Crossroads and the Cross. A generation ago, Maya Deren saw the outlines of a similar genealogy: “[Legba] is linked to Carrefour, whose other hand holds firmly to Ghede, Lord of the Underworld, God of the Dead. . . . Thus, as the cosmic year of the race wanes, and Legba, the sun, droops toward the cosmic horizon which divides the upper

regions from the underworld, so even in the daily, immediate round of the day and night it is Carrefour, the moon, who has the immediate power. Daily, at the hour of midnight, his noon, he is at the zenith of his vigor, and forms . . . with Baron Cimitière—sovereign of the cemeteries—the patron trinity of the magicians” (1953:102). The only valid test of this trinitarian proposition, however, must rest in Vodoun performance. So as most Vodoun services end only after the manifestation of the Ghedes, this discussion of the fate of Legba must also end by invoking Ghede, the most singular of the *loa*, the lord of gluttony, sexual intercourse, insult, death, and resurrection.

Ghede is manifest only at the end of a Vodoun service, long after Papa Legba has lowered the barriers and allowed the other, more respectable *loa* to enter the hounfor and the bodies of their serviteurs. There is no mistaking his presence. He dons a top hat, or threadbare dress coat if available, every article of clothing in black or mauve to match the dress of an undertaker. He may also have cotton stuffed up his nose, or a strip of linen around his chin, for he is corpse as well as gravedigger, and from time to time may emit a rasping death rattle. But his favorite article of clothing is sunglasses. If he is not provided with a pair, or several pairs, he may take them from the noses of the spectators. He speaks in a nasal voice, like tricksters and monsters in West African oral narratives, and his language is foul, full of double entendres usually relating to sex. He is a notorious liar, extremely insulting, and like tricksters everywhere, a glutton. He stuffs food into his mouth with both hands, washing it all down with his favorite drink—a crude rum steeped in 21 of the hottest spices known. In one of his more malevolent aspects as Criminelle, he sinks his teeth into his own arm, and must be restrained from tearing his flesh.⁹ When he cannot put any more food in his stomach, he puffs on cigarettes and cigars. He is also accused of being a vagabond, shameless, a thief—but for all this, everyone seems to love him. When he manifests as Ghede Brave, they sing:

Call him brave-o—he’s a bold fellow
 His banana butt is bold
 His bit of chicken is bold
 His cup of clairin is bold
 His sweet potatoe bit is bold
 I call Brave-Ghede:
 Come and Save the Children! [Métraux 1972:115]

And when they sing for him he does the banda, a dance of the hips that closely mimes sexual intercourse. And he may sing for them in return:

My penis says to my partner’s clitoris
 Come and get it, my penis is erect
 I spend the whole week working hard:
 Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday.
 On Saturday I give you enough money to buy food.
 On Sunday, I must fuck you all day long.¹⁰

He is not interested in romance. That is the territory of the amorous *loa* Erzuli Freda. His turf is sex, the eternal and inevitable human erotic of which he is neither ashamed nor embarrassed, but if anything, amused. With a dumb look on his face, he may raise one finger and lead his devotees in a mock chorus of romantic love: “ ‘I love, you love, he loves, she loves, What does that make?’ [Chorus drawn out]: ‘L’aaamooooour’ ” (Deren 1953:102). When I asked André Pierre, one of Haiti’s most famous painters and a houngan, to explain Ghede’s obscene behavior, he replied with a wry grin, “Why not? He only does in public what we all do in private.”¹¹

The parallels between the sexuality of Ghede and that of the Fon Legba are too obvious to draw out further, but it is important to keep in mind that Ghede also incorporates other trickster elements, such as gluttony, thievery, lying, and stinginess, which are not manifest in either Papa Legba or Carrefour. In one story told of him in Haiti, Ghede was caught stealing cassavas while wearing a suspiciously familiar multicolored little hat: “Now as the *loa* turned to walk off with his new food, the houngan, smiling, said to him, ‘Are you sure that it wasn’t a man in a little multicolored cap who stole those cassavas?’ Ghede wheeled with enormous eyes of innocence. ‘A little cap? What man in a little cap?’ [and with a] mischievous expression, Ghede winked once, slowly and walked away” (Deren 1953:106).

If it is Eshu Elegba’s Yoruba cap Ghede is wearing, he also matches the ur-Trickster in impudence. One story is told of a delegation of Ghedes in their funereal clothes and sunglasses who came to the National Palace on All Soul’s Day, when they traditionally emerge from the cemetery, to demand money from an embarrassed and obliging President Borno. And for this brazen *lèse-majesté*, Ghede is remembered in one of the most popular lyrics sung of him:

Papa Ghede is a handsome guy
Ghede Nimbo is a guy
He is dressed all in black,
He is going up to the Palace. [Deren 1953:106]

According to many Haitians, that joke was returned on the nation when President François “Papa Doc” Duvalier consciously copied the clothes, nasal intonation, and funereal trappings of the Ghedes, as did his sunglassed, infamous praetorian guard, nicknamed the “Ton Ton Macoute” (or “Uncle Straw Bag,” an allusion to the bogeyman in Haitian folktales who steals away naughty children).

There are two symbols of Ghede associated with his altars. One is a huge wooden phallus, like that worn by the Fon maiden in Herskovits’s description of Legba’s initiation dance, should the *loa* need it for his obscene dances or other prurient fooling (Métraux 1972:113). The other, and far more familiar symbol, is the cross—the cross of the graveyard—for above all, Ghede is death. In this guise he is associated with the Baron Samedi as a member of a *loa* family that lives in the cemetery and guards its barriers in a fashion parallel

but opposite to that of Papa Legba. Ghede's relationship to the Baron Samedi is a matter of much debate among scholars and Vodounists. Laguerre says that the Baron and his wife, Gran Brigitte (formerly a ritual prostitute) are the parents of all the Ghedes, and together with their children have surveillance over all the dead (1980:95). André Pierre essentially agreed with this genealogy. Pointing to the cross in his own yard, he explained that Ghede served as "Executive Secretary" to the Baron. Herskovits, however, describes the Baron as a sort of evil amanuensis of Ghede, a ghoulish dwarf dragging chains with whom deals can be struck for the death, and even the zombification, of one's enemies. The Baron kills, but it is Ghede who must dig the grave. He must consent to the judgment of death, and he is just. Even if the Baron has marked a victim, Ghede can refuse to concur. "If you do not merit death, Ghede will refuse it," say the Haitians (Herskovits 1937:247-248). Deren agrees that Ghede is the last recourse against death, but in this and in all his other aspects, she maintains that the Baron and Ghede are one: "The Cross of Baron Samedi (as Ghede is sometimes called), is in every cemetery. . . . Just as one must first address Legba for divine counsel, so whoever would seek ancestral counsel or support must first address Ghede: 'Ghede Nimbo, behind the Cross, Ghede; Before Baron, Ghede . . . Today I am troubled; Gedevi, call Ghede . . . I am troubled . . . Cease to sweep, sprinkle, hoe; I am troubled, Baron Samedi . . .'" (1953:103).

The profusion of epithets in this prayer is indicative of the ambiguity of Ghede's relationship not only with the Baron Samedi, but also with his siblings: Métraux says there are at least 30 Ghedes, and differentiates such bizarre manifestations as Captain Zombi; Ghede Double; Ghede the Spider; Ghede Linto (who walks like a baby, babbles, and cries for food), Ghede Caca (mercifully not further defined), and Suffering Ghede (1972:115-116). In this last guise, the *loa* is represented by chromos of Jesus Crowned with Thorns. I found such chromos in several Petro shrines, sometimes called "Baron," sometimes "*Jezy*," sometimes "*Diable*." The parallels between these sacred figures seemed obvious to the serviteurs. Such proliferation is no doubt inspired by the corollated proliferation of praise names for the saints and the Virgin in Catholic litanies. But parallel manifestations of Ghede are also a refraction of the confounding range of his powers: tattered and chic, sensual and brutal, mixing even life and death.

Theories of Ghede's origin are appropriately and predictably bizarre. Following the fancy (and often fanciful) etymological footwork of Rigaud (1953), Huxley (1966:99ff) connects one of Ghede's epithets to the Pharaonic cult of Osiris's severed penis.¹² In the Rigaud tradition, Max Beauvoir explained to me that the Dahomeans also know this Ghede as *Allo*, referring to his children as *Allo-wini*, from whence anglophones derive "Halloween," and franco-phones the telephone greeting, "*Allo!*" Herskovits makes a more reasonable claim for a Dahomean origin, deriving his name from a group living in the Abomey plateau who called themselves *Guede-vi*, or children of Ghede (Métraux 1972:116).

Theories of New World origin are not less imaginative. One Haitian myth has him found as a stone in a package picked up near Miragoane by the *loa* Loco. The stone is transformed into Ghede Nimbo at a hounfor. He is then baptized and adopted by Ogun-Badagry. But Badagry (and in fact all the other *loa*) come to loathe and avoid him—a correlative of Ghede's marginal place in the Vodoun hierarchy, and his appearance at ceremonies only after the other *loa* have departed (Métraux 1972:114). Maya Deren retells another myth that says Loco first reclaimed Ghede from the waters of the abyss—the first resurrection of the dead by the quick, which established Ghede's relationship with the cemetery, and placed him at the crossroads of all matters pertaining to life and death (1953:149). She goes on to assert a Ghede-Baron Samedi complex, accepting an African etymology for Ghede's name, but claiming an American origin for the Baron Samedi, deriving his name *and* the word *zombi* from the Indian *Zemi*, which connotes both the spirit of the dead, the soulless living, and the fetish stone from which this magic is contrived. For this reason she maintains that Samedi/Ghede is a mythological hybrid, straddling the Petro/Rada categories of Vodoun, fusing the African and New World experiences that have shaped the psychic heritage of Haiti.¹³

That so many theories exist on the origin of this most complex of *loa* argues for invention, not diffusion. In a fashion absolutely typical of Vodoun and Haitian culture, I believe that the figure of Ghede was generated from an attribute here, an etymology there, a work of holy *bricolage* constructed out of the detritus of the inherited images of Eshu-Elegba and his Fon avatar. I have argued that the diapositive Ghede is developed out of all the unexploited possibilities inherent in the contrarious Yoruba negative that were not included in the manifestations of Legba/Carrefour, especially his lordship over death prefigured in the Fon myth of Legba's rape of the three women's corpses, and in Eshu's patronage of the marketplace that is frequented by the ghosts of people who have died early (Pemberton 1975:83–84).

But Vodoun is a living religion with an evolving theology, open to popular revelations through the possession experiences of its devotees. So I have also argued that Ghede is a mythological extension of Legba into the underworld; Ghede is now what Legba once was in the promise of his life and the prime of his sexuality. To Legba's lordship over life, the Haitians have conceived Ghede's Lordship of Resurrection. He is their addition to the poetry of a trickster deity, their cultural dividend paid back to West Africa. As Huxley brilliantly observed, "No other *loa* is so close to man as Ghede, for no others are so knowing, so active and so intimate. The other major *loa* all idealise some part of man's nature, and thus have to have a heaven to live in, but the Ghedes have no heaven other than the body of man, whether in the grave or out of it" (1966:99).

"What good is a used up God?" wonder those who conceive of Vodoun as the final junk heap of African beliefs and misappropriated Catholic ritual. But the Vodounists have shown that such a question is born out of a fundamental

misconception of their mythology. Gods are derived from matter that can be neither created nor destroyed, only endlessly transformed. This paraphrase of Lavoisier is not my invention but that of another Port au Prince Vodounist named Aboudjia, seeking a simile to explain the phenomenon of trance possession to me. It was not at all unusual that he should have chosen such a seeming anachronism, or that later in the discussion he should claim that $E = mc^2$ was the formula that caused manifestations of the *loa*. Mythopoesis is alive in the hounfours of Haiti. Even now the figure of Legba, syncretized with St. Peter and St. Lazarus, shadowed by Carrefour and brilliantly elaborated into Ghede, is expanding. In some hounfours December 25 is now celebrated as the birthday of the Baron Samedi, the symbol of the Crossroads and the Cross having found a congenial parallel in the *Jezy* of the French missionaries. As André Pierre observed, "What is the message of Jesus to the Vodounists but Death which makes Life on Earth so dear?"

And across the Windward Passage and up the Gulf Stream, the same *loas* arrive with the boatpeople into American society and consciousness. Russell Banks's superb new novel, *Continental Drift*, begins with an invocation to Papa Legba, and ends with the tragic hero, a young loser of the Reagan revolution, dying under the uncaring gaze of an incarnated Ghede Nimbo. And perhaps most pleasing to the relentlessly trendy *loa*, Papa Legba was manifested before Don Johnson and his millions of adoring TV fans in a 1986 episode of *Miami Vice*. As Lavoisier and Aboudjia observed: Nothing is created, Nothing is destroyed.

Notes

I am indebted to the National Endowment for the Humanities for supporting my research on Vodoun through its Independent Study and Research Program and to the UREP researchers who worked with me in Port au Prince, Saut d'Eau and Plaine du Nord in July 1986.

¹There is still a confusing profusion of spellings (*voodoo*, *voudou*, *voudoun*, *vodu*) for the name of the religion. This profusion is reflected in several of the references cited in this article. The spelling I use is consistent with that used by most other contemporary American scholars and writers (cf. Courlander [1985], Davis [1985]). The etymology, however, seems clearly to derive from the word for deity (*vodu*) in Fon, though a more imaginative folk etymology was offered to me by the houngan Santiago Legrand: the religion and its name were derived from the worship of the Golden Calf (*Veau d'Or*) by the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. Although I came to appreciate the resourcefulness of metafolklore in the Haitian religious imagination, I suspect the intervention of Christian missionary interpretation in the equation of a Vodoun service with worship of the Golden Calf. If so, Legrand took the simile as a compliment to his religion. Vodounists are not thin-skinned.

²It is instructive to compare Eshu's nongenerative phallus with that of the Winnebago trickster who carries about his prodigious organ in a box on his back, unable to put it to any use until it is carved up into more useful units and made available to man. See Radin (1973).

³These mud sculpture representations persist and have spread further west to the Ewe, where they still decorate town gateways. See Gilbert (1982).

⁴For a further discussion of these dichotomies, especially the color coding, see Wescott (1962) and Pemberton (1975).

⁵Harold Courlander (1985:29) has described the process in all its complication thus: "The Haitians have taken over, built upon, and diverged from a Dahomean system that contained its own contradictions. In adding to it the system of the Yoruba, with its parallelisms and similarities, they have made the whole picture more complex than ever."

⁶A position they also hold in the Haitian hagiography, where twins (*marassa*) form a trinity with the dead and the loa as the chief sacral powers.

⁷Of the identification of *loa* with saints, Métraux remarks, "The cases of common identity which we have just given are, in the apt phrase of Michel Leiris, 'concrete puns.' The same poster can represent different loa, according to whatever detail may have struck the attention of the faithful or, reciprocally, the same loa can be represented by several different pictures" (1972:328).

⁸Métraux notes further how this process has created additional manifestations of Legba: "For instance . . . possessions induced by Legba atibon are not the same as those provoked by Legba-avarada. The former walks leaning on a crutch, the latter, weighed down with illness and old age, lies stretched on a mat and touches the faithful with closed fists" (1974:94).

⁹Compare this behavior to that of the Winnebago trickster, Wadjunkaga, who punishes his own flatulence by eating his anus and entrails. See Radin (1973:4-53).

¹⁰De-bawdlerized from Laguerre 1980:107.

¹¹Port au Prince, July, 1986. It is also true, as Deren (1953:102n) observed, apropos of foreign research on Vodoun, "Ghede's unflinching discernment of attitudes toward sexuality accounts, I believe, for the sexual emphasis which visitors have found in vodoun, for nothing will more quickly provoke Ghede's appearance and his defiant, overt obscenities than the presence of white visitors, particularly those of Puritan tradition. Sexual obscenity and the breaking of taboos is characteristic of the death figure in many mythologies, including that of the American Indians."

¹²See Huxley (1966:99ff). Rigaud's etymologies are more dependable for their imagination than for their reliability. His texts, however, are well known by some enterprising and fashionable houngans intent on exploiting the theosophical possibilities of an evolving Vodoun theology.

¹³See Deren (1953:69ff). Why the obvious French etymology is disregarded by Deren is not explained. Folklorists may recall the tale of the Wisconsin maiden who told her friend that the town of Fond du Lac was named from a Winnebago Indian word meaning "Bottom of the Lake."

References Cited

- Banks, Russell. 1985. *Continental Drift*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Courlander, Harold. 1985[1960]. *The Drum and the Hoe*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Davis, Wade. 1985. *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- de Heusch, Luc. 1982. *The Drunken King*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Deren, Maya. 1953. *Divine Horsemen*. New York: Thames and Hudson.
- Dundes, Alan. 1975. The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory. In *Analytic Essays in Folklore*, pp. 17-27. The Hague: Mouton.
- Gilbert, Michelle. 1982. Mystical Protection Among the Anlo Ewe. *African Arts* 15(4):60-66.
- Herskovits, Melville J. 1937. *Life in a Haitian Valley*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- . 1938. *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*, vol. 2. New York: J. J. Augustin.
- Herskovits, Melville J., and Frances S. Herskovits. 1958. *Dahomean Narrative*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Huxley, Francis. 1966. *The Invisibles*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Laguerre, M. S. 1980. *Voodoo Heritage*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Métraux, Alfred. 1972. *Voodoo in Haiti*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Pelton, Robert D. 1980. *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Pemberton, John. 1975. Eshu Elegba: The Yoruba Trickster God. *African Arts* 9(1):20-27, 66-70.
- Radin, Paul. 1973. *The Trickster*. New York: Schocken.
- Rigaud, Milo. 1953. *La Tradition Voodoo et le Voodoo Haitien*. Paris: Editions Niclus.
- Thompson, Robert Farris. 1971. *Black Gods and Kings*. Los Angeles: Museum of Ethnic Arts.
- . 1983. *Flash of the Spirit*. New York: Random House.
- Wescott, Joan. 1962. The Sculpture of Eshu-Elegba. *Africa* 32(4):336-354.

LINKED CITATIONS

- Page 1 of 2 -



You have printed the following article:

Who Is That Fellow in the Many-Colored Cap? Transformations of Eshu in Old and New World Mythologies

Donald Cosentino

The Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 100, No. 397. (Jul. - Sep., 1987), pp. 261-275.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8715%28198707%2F09%29100%3A397%3C261%3AWITFIT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-L>

This article references the following linked citations. If you are trying to access articles from an off-campus location, you may be required to first logon via your library web site to access JSTOR. Please visit your library's website or contact a librarian to learn about options for remote access to JSTOR.

Notes

³ **Mystical Protection among the Anlo Ewe**

Michelle V. Gilbert

African Arts, Vol. 15, No. 4. (Aug., 1982), pp. 60-66+90.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9933%28198208%2915%3A4%3C60%3AMPATAE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-A>

⁴ **The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba, the Yoruba Trickster. Definition and Interpretation in Yoruba Iconography**

Joan Wescott

Africa: Journal of the International African Institute, Vol. 32, No. 4. (Oct., 1962), pp. 336-354.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9720%28196210%2932%3A4%3C336%3ATSAMOE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R>

⁴ **Eshu-Elegba: The Yoruba Trickster God**

John Pemberton

African Arts, Vol. 9, No. 1. (Oct., 1975), pp. 20-27+66-70+90-92.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9933%28197510%299%3A1%3C20%3AETYTG%3E2.0.CO%3B2-A>

References Cited

NOTE: *The reference numbering from the original has been maintained in this citation list.*

LINKED CITATIONS

- Page 2 of 2 -



Mystical Protection among the Anlo Ewe

Michelle V. Gilbert

African Arts, Vol. 15, No. 4. (Aug., 1982), pp. 60-66+90.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9933%28198208%2915%3A4%3C60%3AMPATAE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-A>

Eshu-Elegba: The Yoruba Trickster God

John Pemberton

African Arts, Vol. 9, No. 1. (Oct., 1975), pp. 20-27+66-70+90-92.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9933%28197510%299%3A1%3C20%3AETTYTG%3E2.0.CO%3B2-A>

The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba, the Yoruba Trickster. Definition and Interpretation in Yoruba Iconography

Joan Wescott

Africa: Journal of the International African Institute, Vol. 32, No. 4. (Oct., 1962), pp. 336-354.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9720%28196210%2932%3A4%3C336%3ATSAMOE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R>