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# Killed a Bird Today: The Emergence and Functionality of the Santeria Trickster, Eleggua

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Killed a Bird Today:

The Emergence and Functionality of the Santeria Trickster, Elegua

By

Meg Gauck

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
University Honors Scholars Program  
East Tennessee State University

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Dr. Thomas Jones, Reader

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**ii. Abstract**

Recognizable by their cunning exploits and gray morality, tricksters can be found in mythology, folklore, and religions throughout the world. Two tricksters were familiar to the Yoruba people in West Africa, Ajapa and Eshu, and their stories and abilities provide insight to the functions fulfilled by trickster characters. Upon the introduction of Regla de Ocha (or *Santeria*) to Cuba following the transatlantic slave trade, a new figure emerges, known for his tricks and adaptability. Due to the West African influence in Santeria religious practices, the original roles and traits of Eshu and Ajapa are analyzed for comparison, but Elegua, the Santeria trickster, has become his own entity. Through ethnographic observations, personal conversations, and a collection of various sources and manuals, this project explores Elegua and the trickster presence in Cuba. Although his role as a trickster has changed throughout the past few centuries, Elegua and the trickster identity persists in modern Cuba, visible in religious practices and secular exchanges.

**iii. Preface**

Santeria is a very private and individualized belief system. There is no “right” way to practice and any source that claims to have the definitive guide should be treated with the utmost suspicion. Practitioners have faced opposition and derision from political systems, rival religions, and ethnocentric tourists, hoping to catch a “wild” show by intruding on rituals. As a result, many priests and priestesses are hesitant to reveal their secrets to outsiders. Further “demonization” of the practices by sensationalized Hollywood adaptations and uninformed eyewitnesses damage the reputation of practitioners, leading to more distrust and misconceptions. I strive to treat this delicate subject with great care and respect and hope that those who read this paper do so with an open mind.

This analysis of Santeria practices and the “Cuban trickster” incorporate a variety of sources, including anthropological fieldwork notes, amateur eyewitness accounts, interviews, manuals published by practitioners, manuals published by scholars, and secondary academic references such as journal articles. The variety of sources collected suits the eclectic nature of Santeria well, as the belief system often incorporates personal experiences. However, because of this dependency on individualized interpretation, it is impossible to “prove” any sort of conclusion.

Instead, I will focus on the trickster orisha, Elegua, examining the influence of his West African roots and how he fulfills specific needs for enslaved Cubans. I also hope to present personal evidence on how Elegua and the “trickster spirit” is visible in Cuba today. Consequently, this project may take on a subjective tone towards the methodology and discussion sections where I describe my own experiences. I highly encourage anyone interested in learning more to explore for themselves, as I found it invaluable for this project.

## I. Introduction and Overview

Looking back, I can pinpoint the exact moment this project began: May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016. It was the moment I left the air-conditioned terminal of the José Martí International Airport and stepped into the waning Havana sun. For the next few weeks, I was captivated by the sights, sounds, smells, and everything else that accompanies an encounter with a new culture. However, a recurring object—a small stone head with cowrie shell eyes—lurked in the corner of my vision everywhere we went, whether that be homes, museums, or market stalls. I quickly learned that the concrete head served as a physical recreation of Eleggua, one of the major spirits, or *orishas*, in the Santeria pantheon.<sup>1</sup>

Despite learning more about the other members of the orisha court, I remained fascinated by Eleggua, eager to learn more about this powerful, omnipresent spirit with a fondness for playing tricks. More specifically, I was curious about how these trickster traits manifested in modern Cuba and if there were still any similarities between Eleggua and how the trickster figure operated in West Africa. For this project, I decided to examine these relationships and transitions.

There is no overarching claim that is to be “proved” in this paper, no straightforward methodology that can provide tangible data. Instead, the primary purpose of this study is to trace the trickster archetype through the development of Santeria while placing an emphasis on the incorporation of Eleggua in modern day Cuba. In the next section, the major concepts of the Santeria belief system will be addressed, including a special focus on Eleggua. The subsequent section will focus on the trickster archetype while analyzing two West African tricksters as examples of how a trickster figure may contribute to society. Lastly, the final section will

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<sup>1</sup> Various images of Eleggua as a stone head are available in the appendix.

reiterate how Elegua satisfies the trickster identity in modern Cuba, supplemented by personal observations and experiences from my time in Cuba.

## **II. Review of Santeria**

### **i. Origin of Santeria and Historical Context**

Since Columbus's arrival in Cuba in 1492, the island has become a proverbial "cooking pot" of different beliefs, languages, and cultures. Pressures to increase tobacco and sugarcane exports led to a surge in slavery towards the latter half of the 18th century (Palmié 2013). Many of the slaves during this influx originated from West Africa, coming from an area formerly referred to as Yorubaland, which now consists of modern-day Nigeria, Togo, and Benin (Bascom 1984). Although the slave trade had been present in Cuba before this mass population growth, the beliefs that the Yoruba people brought with them significantly affected the socio-cultural identity of the island.

There was no unified Yoruba empire at the time of the slave trade, although influential cities did exist in West Africa (Wedel 2004). Instead, the concept of a collective Yoruba "identity" comes from their shared languages and religious beliefs. Upon arriving in Cuba, many relied on these similar traits to form new, often religious-based communities and families. A new religion, called Santeria or *Regla de Oche* (otherwise, known as the "way of the saints"), surfaced in Cuba, drawing from Catholic and Afro-Cuban elements. Primarily focused on the reciprocal relationship between humans and spiritual deities called orishas, Santeria quickly spread throughout social classes and across ethnic groups (Sandoval 2009).

Religious conversions enforced by colonial overseers and missionaries were significant threats to the preservation of these West African traditions. To prevent losing such a unifying bond, many of the Yoruba people aligned the orishas they worshiped in Africa with images of the Catholic saints. They participated in feasts and dances sanctioned by the Catholic church, yet



the underlying purpose behind these celebrations was to honor the orishas and their ancestral spirits (Brown 2003; Wedel 2004).

There is a debate regarding how much influence the Catholic faith of the Spanish colonizers had on the formation Santeria, whether it was a temporary alignment to avoid conversion backlash or a genuine addition to their practices (Palmié 2013; Sandoval 2009). Regardless of the motive, since the early days of Santeria in Cuba, Catholic practices intermingled with the preserved African rituals, giving Santeria its designation as a syncretized religion. It is difficult to separate the two belief systems and asking practitioners result in a diverse array of opinions. For the purposes of this paper, we will operate under the assumption that modern Santeria still incorporates elements of Catholic and Afro-Cuban beliefs. This is also consistent with many of the observations I made while in Cuba.

## **ii. Basic Santeria Principles and the Orisha Pantheon**

Practitioners of Santeria believe in an omniscient, omnipotent entity whose very essence drives life. In his purest form, he is referred to as Olodumare. Although Olodumare is considered to be the embodiment of cosmic energy, he is often presented with male pronouns and viewed as the “father” of the universe (Karade 1994). This essence that he is comprised of, known as *ashe*, is the power that performs all the work done in the universe. *Ashe* can be exchanged, consumed, and created, not unlike a spiritual form of currency (Clark 2007; Bascom 1991). An unusual surplus or deficiency in *ashe* causes problems to manifest, so maintaining a careful balance is paramount. Balance and order are crucial in Santeria practices, so the concepts feature prominently in many stories and rituals.

*Ashe* is needed for prompting any sort of change in an individual's life. However, practitioners do not interact with Olodumare since he is such an unobtainable, indescribable force who cannot be represented visually (Clark 2007). He is the one who created the universe, but he does not involve himself in his creations, as they are too insignificant for his power. Instead, if an individual needs some sort of assistance, they are more likely to turn to Olofi, a manifestation of Olodumare who oversees the affairs of humans. Olofi is a central figure in many Santeria rituals and stories, always presented as the Creator God (Sandoval 2009; Brown 2003).

Olofi is too overwhelming of a being to petition directly and practitioners must instead turn to divine spirits called orishas and request they intercede on their behalf. Some historians even believe this similarity between orishas and the saints in Catholicism, who help communicate problems to God, contributed to the preservation of so many Yoruba traditions in such a difficult and demanding time (Wedel 2004). Orishas are more accessible than Olodumare and Olofi. Whereas Olofi and Olodumare reside in the heavens or the universe, orishas can be found on earth and in nature, frequently occupying ancient forests or deep pools of water (Wedel 2004).

Humans and orishas participate in a reciprocal relationship. Humans "serve" orishas by providing food and other offerings during special rituals (Clark 2007). Consequently, orishas will reward the practitioners for their dedication and respect. A successful transaction always incorporates some sort of an exchange. Each orisha possesses unique talents or skills and this supernatural aid is what is desired during rituals. Whereas some orishas specialize in healing or solving problems, others are linked with oracles and foretelling the future (Bascom 1991).

While orishas have the capability for great change in their patrons' favor, there remains the possibility for danger or misinterpretation as well. If a practitioner angers or neglects an

orisha, then his or her requests may be refused or the slighted orisha may seek retribution.

Although Olodumare and Olofi are the ultimate sources of power, the orishas are revered and feared for their abilities to manipulate that power (Clark 2007). As a result, practitioners tend to form deeply personal relationships with certain orishas during their lifetime.

Every individual is the son or daughter of a particular orisha, regardless of whether or not they actively participate in Santeria rituals. Only when an individual undergoes a personalized, secretive initiation process will they learn which orisha “owns” their head, meaning which orisha is their divine guardian (Henry Heredia, personal communication, May 2016). An initiate could be linked with an orisha due to similar personality traits or the orisha may possess a special fondness for that individual. It is usually this primary orisha who prompts a person to seek out initiation, either through dreams, oracles, or creating difficult situations that require spiritual intervention (Wedel 2004). Many practitioners cite their reason for initially pursuing Santeria to be mysterious, incurable illnesses or severe periods of bad luck, generally financial or interpersonal. In many cases, the problems subside once the initiate successfully goes through the process and becomes a fully-fledged Santero or Santera, the official title of male and female practitioners, respectively.

An inconclusive debate exists between followers about the exact number of orisha, since a Santeria practitioner may possess her own private pantheon of spirits. The proposed number of orishas that exist can be as low as sixteen or the estimate might exceed several hundred, depending on the practitioner and their personal preferences (Sandoval 2009). Initiates might borrow a familiar pantheon from their Santeria godparents (i.e. their spiritual teachers) or they may discover new manifestations of a preexisting orisha. The choice to serve certain orishas

exclusively or not at all is up to the practitioner, though it is a decision they must make with caution.

However, there are approximately sixteen “major” orishas recognized by most practitioners (Henry Heredia, personal communication, May 2016). The fractured method in which Santeria became established means that the major orishas who persist today most likely belonged to an influential sect, either originating from Africa or developing separately in Cuba (Clark 2007). While there is some debate on the specific details, the broad characteristics of these sixteen orishas are generally accepted by most Santeros and Santeras. Likewise, many of the *pataki*, or significant stories about an orisha’s accomplishments, are recognizable and familiar throughout different Santeria networks.

The following chart lists some of the most significant or popular orishas and provides information about their defining characteristics, their personality traits, and other relevant facts (González-Wippler 1992; Wedel 2004; Brown 2003; Clark 2007). The focus of this paper will be on an orisha named Eleggua, but his stories do not occur in a vacuum and his adventures often entangle other members of the orisha pantheon. A familiarity with the other significant members of the court of orishas will be crucial for understanding what makes Eleggua so unique and so influential to many Santeria practitioners.

**Table 1.** A Summary of Seven Major Orishas in the Santeria Pantheon

	<b>Obatala</b>	<b>Chango</b>	<b>Ogun</b>	<b>Eleggua</b>	<b>Yemaya</b>	<b>Oya</b>	<b>Oshun</b>
<b>Most Common Physical Representation</b>	Ancient and wrinkled old man	Extremely handsome young man	Muscular young man	Young child or wizened old man	Beautiful woman with flowing dresses	Young woman with long, tangled hair	Beautiful woman with gold jewelry
<b>Personality Traits</b>	Patient; calm; stubborn; natural leader	Brave; noble; arrogant; womanizer	Hot tempered; honest; hardworking	Mischievous; intelligent; capricious	Motherly; protective; holds grudges	Passionate; faithful; prone to jealousy	Gentle; kind; sensual; materialistic
<b>Primary Colors</b>	White and Silver	Red and White	Green and Black	Red and Black	Blue and White	All Colors, Especially Maroon	Yellow and Gold
<b>Special Abilities and Talents</b>	Creator of the Earth; important for mental wellbeing; participates in healing and divination	Skilled musician/dancer; controls thunder and lightning; involved in war or other violent incidents	“Lord of Iron”; skilled metal worker; watches over those with difficult professions	“Lord of the Crossroads”; opens and closes rituals; participates in healing rituals; messenger	Orisha of the ocean and salt water; provides guidance and comfort; assists mothers or those with children	Warrior orisha: guides dead and guards graveyards; controls wind, storms, and lighting	Orisha of fresh water and sweetness; assists with love and sexuality; provides wealth
<b>Associated Objects</b>	White clothing/cloth	Double-edged ax	Machete and other iron-working tools	Cement head with cowrie eyes	Flowing skirt that mimics ocean waves	Horse-hair whip and colorful skirt	Honey and other desirable objects
<b>Catholic Representation</b>	Virgin of Mercy (Virgin Mary)	St. Barbara	St. Peter	St. Anthony of Padua; Holy Infant of Atocha; Lonely Spirit	Virgin of Regla (Virgin Mary)	Virgin of Candelaria (Virgin Mary)	St. Cecilia or Virgin of Charity (Virgin Mary)
<b>Additional Notes</b>	Sometimes considered the father of the orishas	Often clashes with Chango over Oshun’s affections	Often clashes with Chango over Oshun’s affections	Also serves as the trickster in the Santeria pantheon	Sometimes considered the mother of the orishas		

### iii. **Eleggua: Messenger and Mischief Maker**

Like many of the popular Cuban orishas, Eleggua originated in West Africa as a member of the Yoruba pantheon, where he is commonly known as Eshu-Elegba (Fatunmbi 1995; Bascom & Herskovits 1975). As captured Africans began to adapt to their new environment in Cuba, Eshu-Elegba transformed into a separate, though similar orisha called Eleggua (Canizares 2000). Eleggua possesses many of the same characteristics and powers as Eshu, but there are also significant differences in their temperaments and personalities. However, stories about their origins and famous exploits are very similar and names may be used interchangeably depending on the teller. In instances where certain deeds can be attributed to both Eshu and Eleggua or if the distinction cannot be made, then the compounded name Eshu-Eleggua may be used instead (Canizares 2000).

Eleggua thrives in paradoxes and takes joy from the inexplicable. He may be the orisha responsible for causing chaos and disorder, yet he also warns his children of the obstacles in their path. For this, Eleggua may sometimes be referred to as the “trickster” orisha, a divine being who delights in placing people in difficult situations. Often, these situations are intended to teach a lesson or help the subject become more aware of an impending problem before it happens. Not all victims of Eleggua’s tricks can find the humor in his plots; he is not seen as evil, but rather indifferent and impartial. One of the popular requests to Eleggua is for the knowledge to understand *why* certain things happen, as it is too impertinent to ask for a specific or immediate intervention (Canizares 2000).

Eleggua also serves as the guardian of crossroads and entrances. A physical reconstruction of him, usually a concrete head with cowrie shells for eyes and mouths, can be

found near the front door in most residences.<sup>2</sup> His position at the threshold of the interior and exterior means he can watch the entrance for any danger while supervising what goes on in the home (Wedel 2004). When Eshu-Eleggua served as the guardian of compounds in West Africa, this extra source of surveillance was incredibly valuable. Drawings and concrete heads may also be posted at crossroads, warning travelers that Eshu-Eleggua may be present (González-Wippler 1992). He is an omnipresent orisha, known even to those who do not actively practice Santería. Indeed, I noticed this likeliness of Eleggua nestled in the corners of many homes and businesses during my time in Cuba, watching over patrons and residents alike with his unblinking cowrie eyes.

Eleggua stands at the literal crossroads, but he also supervises the intangible crossroads of fate and destiny. This is an important skill, though less unique, since he shares the talent with other orishas. Regardless, Eleggua serves as a powerful diviner and healer. Eleggua possesses the keys to the future and enjoys “unlocking” different doors for people to see how they will react to new problems (Canizares 2000; Sandoval 2009). Although the future seems distant and impossible to decipher, Eleggua possesses knowledge of all that will happen and acts in ways that humans can only retroactively understand.

One of his most famous *pataki* combines his fondness for tricks and teaching lessons. The story begins with two friends who believe their relationship to be unbreakable, so much so that they see no purpose in honoring Eleggua, the deity of unpredictability. Eleggua wears his trademark multi-colored hat and walks the road between their fields in such a way that only one side of his body is viewable to each person. He asks for their opinion on his hat, launching a heated debate when the friends cannot agree on the color. While one insists his hat is red, the

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<sup>2</sup> The *pataki* as to why he is always portrayed as a concrete head or coconut can be found in the appendix. It is not crucial to his role as a trickster, but it is still an interesting story nonetheless.

other insists that it is black. Eventually, their friendship deteriorates to the point of violence and hatred (Pelton 1980; Thomson 1983; Canizares 2000).

The story has an ambiguous ending, depending on if the *pataki* is attributed to Eshu or Eleggua. Sometimes the story ends with two friends destroying each other with their feud, offering a stark reminder of what happens when one forgets to honor Eshu (Pelton 1980). Conversely, stories with Eleggua often include him interceding and encouraging reconciliation between the friends once they have learned their lesson (Canizares 2000). Two messages are learned from this story: never forget to honor Eshu-Eleggua and never underestimate the power of communication. If the friends had stopped to discuss the colors Eshu-Eleggua wore instead of arguing, then their feud may have been avoided. When retelling this *pataki*, storytellers often remind their audience that Eshu-Eleggua's trick is not inherently evil, but rather he forces the two friends to come to terms with their own shortcomings, namely a lack of honest communication (Pelton 1980; Canizares 2000).

This example of communication involves two humans, but Eleggua fosters a greater communication between the divine and mortal as well. Eleggua is highly respected by humans and orishas alike, since his ability to mediate between the two realms keeps the flow of *ashe* from running dry (Sandoval 2009). Practitioners may call upon orishas for help, but the relationship is reciprocal in that the orishas derive their power from being served (Pelton 1980; Karade 1994). Another *pataki* about Eshu-Eleggua explains how he opened the communication between humans and orishas, preventing the orishas from starving and saving humans from preventable deaths. His gift, sixteen palm nut shells used in the first divining rituals, allows for priests and priestesses to communicate with orishas and interpret signs from oracles (Pelton 1980).



Because of his ability to open the paths of communication between humans and orishas, Eleggua is always the first orisha to be “fed” during ceremonies. No Santeria ceremony could occur without his blessing, meaning no work could be done without honoring him first. His position as Olofi’s messenger and confidant also cements his role as an influential member of the divine court, since this familiarity with the Creator God is known by no other orisha, apart from Obatala or Orunmila (Karade 1994).<sup>3 4</sup> One story that explains how he earned this right will be discussed in a later section, since it relates to his success as a trickster and healer, but it is important to know that Eleggua is always called first and treated with the utmost respect (Canizares 2000).

Like other orisha, Eleggua is syncretized with a set of Catholic icons. Paintings, murals, and other creative depictions of these saints and religious figures were commonly used in place of orisha representation, since these images might have been easier to display without alerting colonizers and missionaries during the initial colonial period (Sandoval 2009). However, many practitioners still retain Catholic elements in their practices and private altars. Although some of the alignments are superficial, based on color or appearance, some of Eleggua’s major syncretized saint counterparts also demonstrate his trickster nature.

The number of corresponding saints for Eleggua varies, with estimates ranging as high as twenty-one. There are four figures with whom he is usually identified (González-Wippler 1992). Whereas many orisha have a primary saint that most closely personifies their abilities or personality, Eleggua’s portrayal fluctuates based on the situation’s context (Sandoval 2009). As

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<sup>3</sup> Obatala: the “leader” of the orishas, often representative of purity or the mind. For more information, consult Table 1.

<sup>4</sup> Orunmila: an orisha originating from Africa who specializes in divination. Orunmila is particularly important to Babalawos, male priests who consult the Ifa oracle (Eyiogbe 2015). Ifa incorporates many practices from Santeria while emphasizing the relationship a practitioner has with their African ancestors and origins (Eyiogbe 2015; Karade 1994)

the master of disguises and appearances, it is fitting that no single saint or religious icon can serve as an all-encompassing likeness.

Eleggua's unpredictable actions, creating situations where the outcomes depend on personal choice rather than right and wrong, lead to his association with morally gray entities (Sandoval 2009). One popular "guise" is the Holy Infant of Atocha, a young child who brought forth an inextinguishable basket of food for Catholic prisoners during their imprisonment in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (González-Wippler 1992). This is a common manifestation for Eleggua, due to the child imagery and the potential for great compassion as well as the black and red coloration of the child's uniform. Another more benevolent representation of Eleggua is St. Anthony of Padua, a Franciscan monk who passionately defended justice and children (González-Wippler 1992). St. Anthony also assists petitioners in retrieving lost possessions, a nod towards Eleggua's playful fondness for hiding things in plain sight.

The remaining two alignments reflect Eshu as well as Eleggua. Religious iconography of Saint Bartholomew frequently presents him dressed in red robes and clutching a knife, a symbol of a complex duality that holds the potential to harm and help (Sandoval 2009). This manifestation of Eshu-Eleggua is a reference to his power and versatility, a warning for those who ignore him. The fourth portrayal is the Lonely Spirit of Purgatory, presented as a woman in an inferno, waiting at the crossroads of heaven and hell. This figure coincides with another path or manifestation of Eshu—either Eshu Beleke or Eshu Lagguana—and reflects a darker side to Eleggua. The Lonely Spirit may also be associated with driving hard bargains and the uncertain anticipation of final judgment (González-Wippler 1992). It is because of these aggressive, latter two portrayals that Eleggua was erroneously considered the "devil" orisha by early ethnographers and historians (Fatunmbi 1995).

No single Catholic figure can perfectly encapsulate the essence of Elegua. All four of these popular manifestations must be considered together, as they provide valuable insight into why Elegua is such a paradoxical figure. Although he may possess a childlike innocence and compassion, willing to aide his faithful followers through difficult trials, one cannot forget that he will also explode in violent tantrums like a spoiled child when he is ignored by humans or other orishas. All relationships between humans and orishas rely on this reciprocal balance, but due to the role that Elegua has in maintaining this balance, great care is taken to ensure he is properly served and honored.

Unpredictable danger faces those who anger Eshu-Eleggua; his temper is less volatile than some of his divine counterparts, but he still enjoys exacting a calculated vengeance on the disrespectful. Elegua's helpfulness may be considered a counterpart to Eshu-Elegba's perchance for malice, but they are two sides of the same coin. His unpredictability—rather, a predictability that only he can understand—is a defining trait that will resurface repeatedly in trickster tales and other stories throughout this paper.

### **III. The Tricksters of West Africa**

The trickster archetype can be found cross-culturally and in popular culture. Famous tricksters such as the Norse god Loki or Coyote from different Native American mythologies are revered and celebrated for their cunning tricks and hilarious exploits (Radin et al. 1988; Ricketts 1966). The layperson definition often refers to daring, clever individuals who outwit their rivals. However, a more academic definition of a trickster has been under debate for decades, entangling many anthropologists, folklorists, psychologists, and linguists (Hynes and Doty 2009). Since many sources already address the discourse associated with the purpose and origin of the trickster without coming to a finite conclusion, more attention will be given to the characteristics a trickster possesses and the functions he may fulfill for his people.

Tricksters are highly fluid figures, reliant on their respective societies for their powers and characterization (Evans-Pritchard 1967). Depending on their actions, they may also be called cultural-hero, jester, fool, clown, nuisance, initiator, or guardian (Ricketts 1966). They may be animals, humans, ephemeral spirits, or a combination of each, shuffling between each form as the situation demands. Tricksters often teeter on established borders, balancing between the supernatural and the mundane, the taboo and the accepted (Makarius 1969). They may possess magic of their own or rely solely on their own skills to escape hard work or other unpleasant tasks. Entirely amoral and difficult to pin down, these unpredictable habits are what give tricksters their power and their beloved reputation in society (Evans-Pritchard 1967).

Therefore, it is presumptuous to create a constrained label for these individuals under the assumption that all tricksters will act the same. In fact, it is the trickster's nature to renounce any sort of limitation in many of his stories, so it is not surprising that he would do the same to a metaphysical definition. Compiling myths and folktales from around the world, religious studies

scholars William Doty and William Hynes provide a simplified list of the basic characteristics tricksters may possess. Although the three tricksters examined in this project—Eshu, Ajapa, and Elegua—do not meet every requirement, their deeds and personalities fit most of these traits.

The first broad characteristic of tricksters is their ambiguous nature. They are blurry figures, continually transforming and changing to suit the problem at hand. They do not fall under good-evil binaries, but rather operate in ways that will best benefit themselves. Any situation that involves a trickster is likewise prone to sudden, unpredictable changes (Hynes and Doty 2009). Tricksters will do whatever needs to be done to complete a mission, including breaking societal taboos. Although they may be punished for their transgression against the established order, tricksters often provide services to their people, which cause them to be honored and loved (Makarius 1969).

Popular stories describe tricksters giving fire or other crucial tools to humans, but they may also serve as messengers between gods and humans, bringing communication instead of something tangible (Pelton 1980; Ricketts 1966). They work closely with the divine, but tend to remain largely in the natural world. Tricksters are masters of deceit and shape-shifting as well. Frequently motivated by human urges such as hunger or arousal, tricksters will undertake any daring mission to satisfy these cravings (Hynes and Doty 2009). This deceit may incorporate disguises, lying, verbal tricks, and sleight of hand. Disguises, either through changing clothes or changing forms, is a particularly popular method of tricking others.

Two major trickster figures can be found in West Africa: Eshu and Ajapa. Eshu is also an orisha, though he belongs to the Yoruba pantheon, appearing as an unpredictable entity who can initiate great change. The second trickster character, Ajapa, is a crafty yet lazy tortoise who appears in many Yoruba folktales. Their stories never cross and their abilities differ, but each

figure possesses several of the defining traits of the trickster archetype outlined by Hynes and Doty.

The “arsenal” of skills a trickster possesses is unique, so his cosmological purpose and the purpose of his stories vary as well. This project will take a functional approach to the concept, demonstrating how tricksters provide some sort of service for their society. As divine spirits, Eshu and Eleggua possess genuine supernatural powers that can work miracles or cause great harm. Significantly less powerful, Ajapa the tortoise does not influence the lives of humans directly, but the folktales around his exploits serve as sources for important life lessons and warnings (Pelton 1980; Owomoyela 1989).

The following sections demonstrate how Eshu and Ajapa each meet certain criteria of the trickster through further exploration of their traits, exploits, and reputations. Like many other trickster figures, neither Eshu nor Ajapa fall within a single, rigid category of trickster. Rather, these roles of mischief maker, trickster-fool, and cultural hero/provider fluctuate depending on the situation in which they find themselves. Likewise, due to the highly fluid nature of these characters, the setting of their stories influences their actions significantly (Pelton 1980). A greater understanding of how Eshu and Ajapa operate in West Africa will be crucial for demonstrating how Eleggua’s development in Cuba occurred and the unique roles he fulfills.

#### **i. Eshu: The Divine Trickster**

As a member of the Yoruba divine court, Eshu is an incredibly powerful and influential orisha with many duties and accomplishments. He may sometimes be considered the African predecessor to the Santeria orisha, Eleggua, but Eleggua is not a transplanted replica of Eshu. Eleggua shares many key characteristics and powers with Eshu and other practitioners instead

consider Eleggua to be one of Eshu's more tempered manifestations (González-Wippler 1992). Regardless of the specific relationship, there are significant differences between the two entities, which will be discussed below.

Eshu is the first orisha in the Yoruba pantheon to be honored during religious ceremonies and possesses a voracious appetite. Several stories exist to attempt to explain why he holds this position, though most revolve around Eshu performing an action that no other orisha can, such as opening the pathways to communication. In one of these stories, the Creator God Olofi falls ill while the other orisha attempt to cure him and fail (Canizares 2000; Bascom 1991). Eshu, who manifests as a grubby, foul-mouthed child, finally heals Olofi using ingredients from the garbage heap. As a reward, Olofi presents Eshu with the keys to the crossroads of destiny and declares that he will be the first orisha "fed" during religious ceremonies.

There exists a famous saying about Eshu that ends with the line, "Eshu threw a stone yesterday and killed a bird today" (Pelton 1980 p. 163). This phrase emphasizes how Eshu's unpredictability can transcend dimensions like time and space, which humans cannot do. This is the root of Eshu's power, which gives him the ability to anticipate all actions and react accordingly. Attempting to understand what Eshu's intentions are is an unwise and ultimately fruitless struggle. Externally, his actions may be viewed as chaotic, but there is a hidden purpose that only he knows. This unpredictability is present in Eleggua as well, but it manifests to the extreme in Eshu (Badejo 1988).

Due to this chaos, early attempts to describe Eshu incorrectly designated him as the Yoruba counterpart to the Christian devil (Sandoval 2009; Herskovits 1937). Likewise, his position as the supervisor of the *ajogun*, who are spiritual manifestations of worldly evils, further cemented his reputation as wicked (Fatunmbi 1995). Although Eshu possesses the ability to create strife

and chaos and he may retaliate severely against those who wrong or ignore him, he is not inherently evil. Instead, he is a complicated character, comprised of many contradicting layers. This is a critical characteristic of the trickster archetype, as they are amoral beings.

There are several benevolent acts linked to Eshu, which help to refute his “evil” reputation. Like other tricksters, Eshu also gave a precious gift to humanity. Divination is an incredibly important component to Yoruba religious practices as well as Santeria rituals. Eshu is honored for opening the pathways to communication by giving humans sixteen palm nut shells, which could translate the will of the orishas to the diviner (Canizares 2000). Although other, more complex methods of divination exist—and are often supervised by Eshu or Eleggua—the palm nut shells are a method that nearly every practitioner can use (Bascom 1991).

Like Eleggua, Eshu also serves as the guardian of crossroads and entryways. More generally, however, Eshu’s fickle nature and his infinite knowledge of the unknown makes him an excellent guardian for all liminal spaces where transitions and transactions occur. This includes marketplaces, which were a significant component to life in West Africa preceding the Trans-Atlantic slave trade (Pelton 1980). He watches over all areas where nothing can be guaranteed and where chance plays a significant role. There is even variety in those who seek his good fortune. He assists merchants and buyers in the marketplace, yet thieves and liars also honor him in hopes of receiving protection (Pelton 1980).

Ultimately, Eshu possesses several characteristics that give him the title of “trickster” in the Yoruba pantheon. As seen in the story about healing Olofi, Eshu’s resourcefulness can lead to great good, even though he acts to spite the other orishas and to increase the food offered to him during rituals. Eshu also uses disguises to trick his victims even when there is no benefit for him, such as how his multi-colored costume caused two life-long friends to argue over the color



scheme. Lastly, his gift of the divination palm nut shells to humans demonstrates his linked roles as a divine messenger and as a generous cultural hero.

## **ii. Ajapa: The Mundane Trickster**

Few scholarly articles analyze Ajapa directly, so most information about him comes from oral stories. The translations and stories vary slightly, but Ajapa's characterization as an arrogant and lazy creature remains consistent. Though these traits are not inherently desirable and often lead him into dangerous situations, Ajapa also possesses a sharp wit and resourcefulness that allows him to wriggle out of these problems, though not without consequences (Owomoyela 1997; Lawuyi 1990).

Through disguises and cleverness displayed in his stories, Ajapa manages to avoid hard work and saves his own life, all while straddling the fine line between acceptable behavior and taboo. He is unafraid to commit blasphemous acts to achieve his desired ends, such as masquerading as a ghost-like ancestor to escape pursuers in one of his stories. Ajapa tends to rely less on supernatural intervention and circumstantial conveniences and more on his own cleverness, demonstrating the ease and skill with which he plays his part as a trickster (Owomoyela 1997; Owomoyela 1989; Ogumefu 2010).

Ajapa may be self-motivated, but he might also inadvertently help others through his cunning. His primary goal is to satisfy his own hunger or pride, but his actions may help others. In one story, he decides to humiliate Erin the Elephant after the latter terrorizes the other animals. He improvises quickly, using the dust cloud kicked up by Erin the Elephant to hide his next actions. When Erin collapses from exhaustion, it seems as if Ajapa has defeated him with

supernatural strength, but the “wounds” inflicted on Erin are simply smashed gourds (Owomoyela 1997).

### **iii. Eshu and Ajapa: Collective Aspects of the West African Trickster**

Despite Eshu and Ajapa each bearing the title of trickster, there are substantial differences between them. The mythological circles that each figure belongs to do not overlap (Lawuyi 1990). Eshu serves as an important member of the orisha court. His formidable power and the unpredictable way in which he wields it has led to his designation as a trickster figure in the Yoruba religious pantheon. He may also be considered a precursor or an early manifestation of Elegua, so references to his actions and roles as a trickster are more relevant in later discussions.

Conversely, many of Ajapa’s stories involve the supernatural, but he has no magic or special powers of his own. He is a secular figure, completely removed from any religious ceremonies. As a result, his stories are designated as folktales rather than episodes in a cosmic mythology (Owomoyela 1989; Lawuyi 1990). He does not have a relationship with Eshu nor do they share any stories. Their primary connection is that they are both tricksters with strong West African roots.

Regardless of their differing levels of power and prestige, both figures demonstrate some of the defining characteristics of the trickster archetype. These traits are common in many trickster figures cross-culturally, but it is especially important to understand how these two characters operated in West Africa prior to the emergence of the Santeria trickster. Elegua is not a combination or hybridized form of Eshu and Ajapa, though several elements of his origin are linked with Eshu. He is still his own entity, possessing important characteristics unique to him.

Stories of Eshu's and Ajapa's deeds were rarely heard during my time in Havana and Matanzas. Instead, Elegua serves as the primary trickster figure in Cuban culture, both as a member of the orisha pantheon and as a more mundane force in business and home life. However, it is still helpful to understand Eshu's and Ajapa's roles as tricksters in West Africa, as many of the functions they fulfilled prior to the slave trade are similar to the benefits Elegua provides to people in Cuba now.

Humor is a pivotal component of trickster stories, though the use of the word "humor" differs from the lighter connotation the term usually carries. Any laughter derived from a trickster tale may not be directed towards the actions of the trickster, but rather the reactions from the other participants (Hynes & Doty 2009). For example, the audience laughs at the foolishness of the two farmers who could have prevented a violent feud if they had only stopped to talk about a stranger's multi-colored hat instead of arguing. Silly humor may be present, but it is not a requirement for all trickster stories. However, these lighter stories may be a source of familiar entertainment. Lessons about the world and human nature can be learned from trickster tales, which make Ajapa and Eshu valuable teachers (Badejo 1988; Pelton 1980).

In addition to humor, both trickster figures incorporate liminal spaces in their stories. Transitional periods or environments are symbolic for the constantly in-flux trickster. In West Africa, marketplaces are especially variable as well as potentially dangerous. They are a source of exchange, where successful interactions could make the difference between surviving and starving. Quick-wittedness and a keen awareness of human nature would aid those who participate in the exchanges. In the new unfamiliarity of Cuba's plantations, the trickster's ability to adjust and adapt would be just as admirable to the enslaved Yoruba people.

Lastly, each trickster possesses certain paradoxical elements that emphasize their complexity. Paradoxes, or an inability to be fully contained or described, are a substantial component to a trickster's identity, which helps them be more relatable to humans. Ajapa is neither fully human nor animal: he carries a shell, yet he is married to a human wife and has human desires (Owomoyela 1989). Unlike his two-dimensional victims in the folk tales, Ajapa functions as a complicated character, who fluctuates between hero and nuisance depending on the story.

Joan Wescott, who helped initiate early conversations on West African folklore, describes Eshu as the "Lord of Paradoxes," who provides and destroys without any need for justification (Pemberton 1975). Even his colors, red and black, represent the coexistence of life and death in a single entity. Many of his pataki, including the titular phrase "Eshu threw a stone yesterday and killed a bird today", revolves around how seemingly exclusionary elements like present, past, and the future all fall under his control (Pelton 1980 p. 163).

Ultimately, Ajapa and Eshu demonstrate several of the archetypal roles of tricksters. They both use disguises and deceit to satisfy their appetites, whether for food or retaliation. In addition, Eshu serves as a messenger between the gods and humans, providing an invaluable gift of communication. Ajapa is a brilliant improviser, coming up with quick, clever solutions to problems that often lead to cascading consequences. Although their stories may be less common in Cuba, the traits and skills possessed by Ajapa and Eshu help demonstrate the significance and purpose of Elegua's role as a trickster in Cuba. This is reinforced by the fact that a considerable proportion of Santeria's elements come from West Africa. It is unlikely that Elegua's trickster identity developed completely independent of his West African counterparts.

#### IV. Elegua: A Response to the New World

The role a trickster plays in society depends on those who bring him to life. The environment in which Eshu and Ajapa thrived is very different from the new world that greeted the captured Yoruba people during the slave trade (Sandoval 2009). Traditional marketplaces were replaced by plantations or urbanized environments. In addition, people from different sects were forced together in ways that rarely occurred in Africa outside of warfare, trade, or special occasions (Brown 2003). Consequently, the role of the trickster adapted to reflect this new environment.

In West Africa, stories of Eshu and Ajapa may have been told interchangeably, depending on the context and purpose. Tales of the trickster tortoise and other folklore are influential and entertaining ways to teach younger children about the world and social or moral expectations (Bascom 1975; Owomoyela 1989). Conversely, tales about Eshu would be crucial for strengthening one's religious background, warning one about the dangers of forgoing proper offers to the orishas or underestimating the value of chance in the marketplace.

To a group of people who recently lost their freedom and were forced into a new life, the rebellious trickster with the wit and foresight to anticipate future occurrences would have been highly appealing (Badejo 1988). Folklore and trickster stories are often ingrained in memories and may also have served as a familiar comfort to separated families. Likewise, individuals often gravitated towards others with similar beliefs. Communal, local governing entities called *cabildos* that provided order and resources were often religiously motivated, further linking the Yoruba people through their common beliefs and language (Wedel 2004).

As previously discussed, many of Elegua's stories stem from those linked to Eshu-Elegba. Assuming a direct correlation between the two divine entities is ill-advised, as suggests

that any practices or beliefs in Africa did not change or evolve since coming to Cuba (Palmié 2013). However, examining certain stories that Eshu and Eleggua share and demonstrating how they differ based on who the focal character is can give insight to the transition from Africa to Cuba.

In the previous example of Olofi falling ill, Eshu is a spoiled, malicious child that chastises the other orishas. In a variation of the same story, the narrator instead presents Eleggua as a more easy-going individual who agrees to help Olofi voluntarily (González-Wippler 1992). This added generosity to Eleggua's character may also reflect the new challenges the Yoruba people face while navigating through an unfamiliar world. In such a tumultuous time as forced imprisonment and isolation, forming new families through uniting acts would be beneficial for all parties (Cosentino 1987).

Similar to how the Yoruba people adapted to a new world, their trickster figure did so as well, partly as a reflection of the changing conditions. Eleggua satisfies many of the same roles that the West African tricksters did, such as teaching lessons and opening the pathway of communication between the divine and mortal, but he is his own entity. The following section describes my time in Cuba, including how I observed Eleggua in religious ceremonies and in the Cuban people's daily lives. Though sometimes subtle when compared to some of the more overwhelming sights and experiences, Eleggua's trademark tricks were still a familiar constant throughout our trip.

### **i. The Trickster of Today**

My time in Cuba was brief, colorful, and incredibly impactful. As I quickly learned, Cuba itself is full of paradoxes, which made studying Eleggua as a trickster figure doubly fascinating,

since the culture reflected so many of his archetypal traits. Like Eleggua, who manifests either as an enthusiastic child or withered old man, Cuba simultaneously flickers between young and old. This sensation of being rooted in the past and present was particularly felt while looking out from the top of the Fortress of San Carlos, built during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Standing on the aged stones and feeling the ceremonial cannon rumble through the soles of my shoes, I could see Havana across the bay. The city was bright and bustling with life while a massive cruise ship rested in a nearby harbor. All of this was evidence of a modern emergence, tailored for tourism and new ventures, yet while watching from an ancient fortress, it felt somewhat removed.

This sense of being disconnected, neither fully in the past nor in the present, did not last long. The explosive energy of the craft markets and side-street vendors pulled me in quickly. Instead of selling produce or other agricultural goods, like the African markets brought to life in Ajapa's stories, these modern markets catered to eager tourists with wares ranging from wood carvings to personalized Havana license plates. Despite the change in demographics and products, the triumphant cries and the tinkling of change being handed over might not have seemed out of place in a West African folktale.

With the increased reliance on tourism to bolster the Cuban economy, the importance of these modernized markets grows as well. Even Cuban currency reflects this new dependence on tourism and skillfulness. While we were in Cuba, two forms of currency were available: the CUC (Cuban convertible peso) and the CUP (the Cuban peso). Although similarly named and colored, the CUC currency system was largely used for tourism. The CUC bills, decorated with monuments rather than faces, were twenty-four times more valuable than the more common CUP, used primarily for everyday purchases by Cuban citizens ("Cuban Peso" 2018).

Upon exchanging our money, we were given several quick lectures about the differences between CUCs and CUPs, since both currency systems were present at the crossroad between tourism and local life, where we spent most of our time. We certainly looked like tourists—blonde-haired, wide-eyed, and obligate English speakers—when we crossed in to the latter realm, wandering down narrow, uneven alleyways to the next practitioner’s house. We had to pay close attention to all financial exchanges or risk paying an exorbitant amount for basic services or souvenir trinkets.

Certain vendors or cabdrivers tried to capitalize on our nativity, switching from CUP to CUC when announcing totals or attempting to return change with the less valuable CUPs. There was no ill intention behind their tricks. After all, to them we were cash-bloated tourists, crashing in and out of their lives, just like the waves that carried the large cruise ships to Havana’s ports. Tricking an unwitting tourist out of a few dollars is relatively harmless, especially if the victim is unaware of the deceit. Instead, it provides a secondary cash flow to a fickle economy, provided that the vendors know how to deftly operate in a new materialistic world.

These areas of exchange were generally secular, driven by tourism, but there were underlying religious elements that reinforced the influence of certain Santeria beliefs in the market. Although advertised as “exotic” art for unwitting tourists, items related to the orisha court were particularly popular. Portraits and abstract recreations of the main orishas could be found at many stalls. Reproduced strings of colored beads and other sacred objects typically reserved for the initiated were fanned out for purchase. The concept of selling religious paraphernalia, especially the stalls set up outside a popular cathedral used by sickly pilgrims, perhaps bordered on blasphemous.



However, under the watchful, cowrie-shelled gaze of Eleggua, they seemed to be successful. Eleggua's stone head manifestations were frequent objects in these markets, whether marked with a price tag or tucked in a darkened corner for the vendor's benefit. Even in restaurants far from the Havana city center, tiny bowls with cement Eleggua heads could be spotted in a corner, watching diners and serving staff alike. It was this sensation of constant companionship throughout our trip that helped me grow closer with Eleggua. Ironic, since he is the orisha most often associated with unpredictability.

Despite reading sources that claimed the Catholic influence is waning due to a surge in other religious systems and an irreparable wound from Fidel Castro's targeting of institutional religions, I saw little evidence while in Cuba that supported this notion (Sandoval 2009). The need for secrecy may have passed, but faded miniatures of saints still accompanied the iron and stone elements of the personal altars. In the Church of *Las Mercedes* in Havana, there was a vast collection of miniature ex-voto houses dedicated to Mary of Mercy, some of which were decorated in the colors and symbols of the main orishas. For many practitioners, Catholic elements were not yet divorced from the Afro-Cuban roots.

Eleggua's fondness for shape shifting and an inability to be pinned down to a single visage could be seen in his arsenal of corresponding Catholic saints. His syncretized form fluctuates from the merciful Holy Infant of Atocha and Saint Anthony to the more foreboding Lost Soul and Saint Bartholomew. Likenesses of him in all four guises could be found at various altars or museum exhibits, though the Holy Child was the syncretized saint I noticed most often. Tiny paintings and artifacts associated with these saints accompanied the more common concrete heads in personal altars. These added images were especially common in altars built by the "children" of Eleggua, who revered him as their primary orisha.

Other art pieces featuring Eleggua demonstrate this flexibility in appearance. Figure 1, below, is one of the many Eleggua paintings available at the studio owned by Cuban artist, Salvador Gonzáles Escalona. This painting, created by one of Salvador's students, reflects many of the trademark characteristics of Eleggua, several of which that correspond to his identity as a trickster.



**Figure 1.** Art of Eleggua, painted by a student of Salvador Gonzáles Escalona.

The basic color scheme of this painting is red and black, which are Eleggua's primary colors and appear in the story about the two arguing friends. Henry, a Santeria practitioner and

“child” of Eleggua, could provide a more intimate explanation of these colors, possessing a deeper relationship with Eleggua than the general practitioner. Red, he explained, resembles the color of life, most notably the blood that a baby would see while in the womb. Conversely, black resembles the color of death or the nothingness that we experience upon closing our eyes for the last time. As the keeper of fate, who thrives in paradoxes, colors that represents the coexistence of life and death suit Eleggua well. Likewise, this ability to coexist between incompatible realms like life and death is a popular trait of tricksters.

Also in the painting are two “sides” to Eleggua’s face. When combined, the two profiles would make a complete face—essentially a complete figure. However, their split appearance in this painting reinforces the dual nature of Eleggua. This may be reflection of his fondness for disguises, where the “face” one may see differs from the actual face, or this may symbolize an ability to view all directions at once. Regardless of the interpretation, many of these motifs, ranging from the colors to the split appearances, were present in the art throughout Havana.

In a secular yet important experience, I also had the chance to view this strange coexistence between opposites upon our visit to a community center in Old Havana. It was a particularly sweltering day and the creased itineraries we used to fan ourselves failed to keep away the heat and the flies. I waited, glancing around at the brightly colored walls and mismatched chairs, until the sound of excited chattering caught my attention. The term “ambush” may be too aggressive of a term, especially if the individuals in question are giggling, grinning school children in disheveled maroon scarves. Nonetheless, they swarmed around us, kissing our cheeks with sticky lips in an unabashed greeting.

Taking us by the hand, the children led us to another room where silver-haired men and women relaxed, some rocking rhythmically in their chairs and displacing flies with each creaking

motion. Their wrinkled expressions brightened at the sight of the children and the center's director, Fabio, explained that the community center had been set up as a resource for students after school and elders who wanted to escape the daytime heat. It was this moment—the students returning from school—that many of the older center members waited for each day.

Despite an age gape of over half a century, the students sat down without hesitation, chattering about their day to their beloved confidants. Once their stories were exhausted, the elders responded with comments of their own, offering advice and telling stories. Unable to speak Spanish, I could only catch fragments from a few conversations, but the fondness they held for one another was apparent.

Although no rituals or religious ceremonies were taking place, there were still echoes of Elegua and the trickster motif. On a superficial level, the coexistence of the young students and seniors certainly resembled Elegua's fluctuation between his two forms. However, upon a deeper look, there was a beneficial exchange going on between the young and the old. The seniors would tell stories to the young students, provide advice, and offer warnings. Information was being communicated across generations, not unlike how stories like trickster tales would be passed from grandparent to grandchild.

Although the humor in some trickster stories may be on border of being dark, there is also the potential for light-heartedness at the trickster's more harmless pranks and actions. Neither of the West African tricksters have particularly "silly" personalities; the humor instead comes from the situations with which they involve themselves. Elegua is an altogether lighter character, not burdened by the frightening chaos of Eshu or the caustic sarcasm of Ajapa. He has great power and is respected by practitioners, but that does not stop them from shaking their head fondly as they recount some of his more dramatic or wild deeds.

Another way this humor could be seen in modern Santeria practices is through dance. Music, color, and specific movements are all defining characteristics linked to an orisha's identity. In celebrations and rituals, practitioners or performers may dress up as the orishas and re-enact famous stories through dance. Although the dances I observed during my time in Havana were primarily secular (as in, no religious elements were attached to the event and the participants were professionals who frequently performed in festivals for tourists), there were similarities to how an actual ritual would proceed.

In the first performance I witnessed, the dance began with the sound of slow, deep drumbeats that gradually rose in tempo and volume. Only the musicians, dressed completely in white, likely as a petition to Obatala for guidance and harmony, were visible on stage, though they played in the far corner. A singer initiated a lilting call and response, repeating the same phrases with his voice building until it could be heard over the drum. After the proper tempo was set and the musical introduction was presented, Elegguá appeared on stage with an eager bound. The first to be called in any religious ceremony, he would also be the one to start the dances.

Elegguá often manifests as a male orisha, but the performer who wore his costume was female. She represented the fresh-faced, youthful manifestation of Elegguá, the one who is linked with mischief and playfulness. She wore the traditional clothes associated with Elegguá: a red and black colonial-style suit with puffy sleeves and pants that pooled around the knees. The sound of her bare feet striking the wooden stage was drowned out by the drums, heightening in their power as the introductory dance for Elegguá continued. Elegguá spun, ducked, and darted around the stage, her limbs shaking and flailing with an exhausting intensity.

The most captivating element of her performance was the facial expressions. Even distanced from us on the stage, the exaggerated expressions on her face were clearly visible.

Usually she wore an open-mouthed grin, but sometime her lips would pucker in an amused “o”. Her wide eyes were the most active feature on her face. Eleggua’s gaze flicked back and forth, landing on the audience members or focusing on something in the distance.

However, the true extent of Eleggua’s trickster nature became evident when the other orishas made their appearances on the stage. Whereas Eleggua’s motions had suggested an enthusiastic dismissal of decorum, the other orishas had slower, more intentional movements. Chango postured, rolling back his shoulders with haughty glances to the side, and Oshun ruffled her golden skirt with a demure tip of the head, but they largely stayed in the same position for most of their introductions.<sup>5 6</sup>

During the introductions for the other orishas, Eleggua had milled through the musicians and had even leapt off the stage to sit near the audience when the stage became too crowded. Although fascinated by the unfolding drama between a rash Ogun and a flexing Chango, my attention was repeatedly drawn towards Eleggua, who perched on the edge of the stage, hands cupped to her mouth as she pantomimed calls to goad the two warriors into battle. According to the story, Eleggua had nothing to gain from their feud, but his performer still instigated the fight for obvious pleasure.

Eleggua even flitted between the other orishas while they waited patiently for their turn to dance, playing with Yemaya’s flowing skirt and Oya’s trademark whip.<sup>7 8</sup> While they remained still and silent, Eleggua was a blur of activity, drawing all eyes towards her. She

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<sup>5</sup> Chango: Orisha responsible for dancing, warfare, and thunder. He is often viewed as a womanizer and will fight Ogun for Oshun’s attention. For more information, consult Table 1.

<sup>6</sup> Oshun: Orisha known for love, sexuality, and finer things. In this story, she appears as a flirtatious young woman who causes a fight between Ogun and Chango, both vying for her attention.

<sup>7</sup> Yemaya: Orisha responsible for the oceans. She is known for being motherly and protective, yet prone to stubbornness.

<sup>8</sup> Oya: A warrior orisha who controls the wind and guides the dead to the afterlife. She frequently carries a horsehair whip, which she swings with great intensity.

navigated through the performers in a way that no other orisha could follow. As the clash between Ogun and Chango concluded, the other orishas performed their final dances and left the stage. However, Eleggua remained behind, reclaiming the stage with a shuffle of feet and wide grin. Just as Eleggua is orisha who initiates the ceremonies, he is always the one to end them.

The second performance was presented in a way to make it seem less staged, springing up along a side street as we exited a museum. There were obvious signs of being prepared for us, such as having the convenient number of chairs lined up, but it was still substantially different from the choreographed stage performance from the day before. The performers were all female and each dance focused on its respective orisha rather than following a story. The female musicians began the performance with rhythmic chanting and drum beats. Another shook a gourd covered by a net of beads as Eleggua initiated the first dance.

Eleggua, the only “male” orisha involved in the second show, wore a more feminine costume than the performer from the first performance. Instead of the common colonial-style breeches that cut off at the knees, the bottom portion of her costume was a tattered red, white, and black skirt that easily picked up the wind as she spun. Tiny cowrie shells were stitched in decorative patterns around the collar and sleeves of her shirt. Perched upon her head was a frayed straw hat, painted the same way as it was described in the quarreling farmers’ story.



**Figure 2.** Elegua performing a traditional dance. Note the exaggerated movements, such as the swinging elbows and wide stance (Allie Copeland, personal communication, May 2016).

Her movements were very similar to the first Elegua performance. Her movements were fast and often, kicking out with her feet or swinging back her elbow. When the other orishas were performing their dance, Elegua pretended to grow bored with an ostentatious yawn and mingled with the audience. She sat cross legged on the ground beside us, plucking the sunglasses off our noses and sticking her tongue out at the camera (Figure 3). She even passed around her upturned hat for an offering, pouting whenever someone shook their head.

The tricks played by the Eleguas in these performances were minor—stealing sunglasses, disrupting the musicians—but the playful nature each performer emphasized through their actions is a major characteristic of Elegua. The behaviors fit with his most common



portrayal as a mischievous child who is always eager to meddle. These youthful mannerisms are even more obvious when compared to his stoic counterparts.



**Figure 3.** Elegua displaying a more playful side (Allie Copeland, personal communication, May 2016).

Elegua's ability to transcend boundaries that others cannot was also apparent through these performances. While the other orishas remained on the stage, literally removed from the audience, both Eleguas broke through the performance barriers to interact with us. A key characteristic of the trickster is being able to operate in both the natural and supernatural realms, which the Elegua performers demonstrated. Although I only had the chance to witness two examples, the similarities in how Elegua was portrayed in each lead me to believe that his characterization as a playful trickster is considerably consistent across performances and practitioner perceptions.

Eleggua was also present during more intimate religious ceremonies as well. While observing a spiritual cleansing, I noticed a tiny stone Eleggua lurking by the ankle of the recipient. His presence in and of itself was not surprising, especially considering the prominent role he plays in guarding the opening to physical thresholds and major ceremonies. However, it was interesting to hear the main priestess utter Eleggua's name repeatedly through the ceremony, even after the initial opening had been completed.

Only after speaking to her afterwards did we learn that her head "belonged" to Eleggua. She explained that he would help reveal the specific ailment each patient suffered from during the cleansing in a process similar to divination. I had assumed Eleggua's presence there was due to his position as an auxiliary healer and an initiator of the ritual, but he also acted as a messenger between the priestess and the supernatural. Without his assistance in opening the lines of communication with the right orisha necessary for healing, she might not have been able to successfully treat her patients.

However, my most intimate and unexplainable interaction occurred during a personal spiritual cleansing, performed by the priestess whose "head" was owned by Eleggua. Most members in our small group participated, each coming away with their own reactions, ranging from shrugs to tears. As I stood in front of the priestess, feeling her leathery yet firm grip around my wrists, I offhandedly wondered how I would react, if I would be just as emotional. Once the cleansing ritual began, my curiosity quickly shifted to a more alert apprehension.

Perhaps it was the overwhelming heat, bolstered by the thick scent of burning candles and perspiration. Perhaps it was caused by the clenched tension in my knees and shoulders as I strained to hear each of her murmured words. Regardless of the cause, either entirely natural or supernatural, I felt some sort of reaction to the cleansing ritual come over me. Gradually the

priestess's words faded to my periphery as my attention was drawn to shifting shadows in a far corner. They were indistinct and blurry and I had not noticed them previously, though I had been facing the opposite direction for most of my time in her house.

To an unknowledgeable observer, I probably resembled a startled rabbit, with wide, unfocused eyes glued to nothing. Ironically, I cannot even recall if there was a stone Elegua guarding that specific corner, but I can still remember the eerie sensation, even after the cleansing concluded with a jolting yank of my arms. As a visitor whose relatively uninformed relationship with Santeria barely exceeded a few months at the time, it would be presumptuous to assume any sort of authority on what I experienced.

The fractured light patterns I saw and creeping, chilling sensations I felt may have been entirely benign—brought on by reflections from passing traffic or tingling nerves—but I am not eager to ignore other possibilities. Santeria is a religion that does not require active participants, as the orishas interact with humans indiscriminately. Although I will retain my status as an outsider observer, this inexplicable experience was enough to prompt me towards investigating more.

Eleggua was called on to initiate the ceremony, but it is impossible to know what further role he might have played beyond that. However, I imagine teasing burgeoning anthropologists with strange, hazy visions to pull them deeper into a new world would be a very *Eleggua* thing to do.

## V. Conclusion

Eleggua shares several crucial traits with two tricksters from West Africa, the homeland of those who introduced the orishas to Cuba. For example, all three tricksters are complex figures, able to bridge gaps between mutually exclusive realms, such as the divine and mundane or the past and present. Likewise, Eshu and Eleggua possess omniscient knowledge and power that allow them to initiate rituals and intercede on their petitioners' behalf. Eshu and Ajapa are not necessarily direct "predecessors" to Eleggua, but they nonetheless demonstrate the importance of the trickster to the Yoruba people prior to the slave trade.

Although the centuries following their arrival to Cuba have yielded many changes to how Santeria is practiced and perceived, the significance of Eleggua and the trickster archetype in both religious rituals and daily life can still be recognized in Cuba today. General trickster elements, recognizable by paradoxes and an emphasis on making clever exchanges, can still be felt even in situations removed from religious rituals, such as adapting to rising tourism. Ultimately, the trickster greatly influenced the daily lives of the enslaved Yoruba people upon their initial arrival to Cuba. As I discovered during my brief time in Cuba, this identity is still alive and visible.

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## VII. Appendix

### “How Elegua Came to be Associated with the Coconut”

(Canizares 2000; González-Wippler 1992; Sandoval 2009)

Long ago, there was a king and queen who loved each other very much, but they could not have children. Ashamed, the queen fled the palace and ran until she was too tired to go any farther. She stopped at a crossroad and noticed a fallen nut on the ground. The queen cracked open the nut, drank the pale milk inside, and fell asleep. Many hours later, she was awoken by a loud voice informing her that she would give birth soon. However, she had to dedicate her son to the coconut tree within three days of his birth or he would die.

The queen returned and gave birth to a son named Elegua, but their joy and the subsequent festivities caused the new parents to forget their obligation to the coconut tree. Many years passed and Prince Elegua encountered the coconut tree at the crossroads while on a hunt. Enchanted by sight of a coconut with three glowing eyes, Prince Elegua brought the nut back to the palace, where he kept it in the corner of his room. Soon after, Prince Elegua mysteriously began to waste away and died three days later.

After the prince's death, a horrible famine fell upon the kingdom. The king and queen remembered their broken promise to the coconut tree and returned to their son's room to find the discarded coconut. By this point, it had grown old and worm-infested, so they constructed a new coconut out of stone and cowrie shells. The king and queen discovered through divination that Prince Elegua's spirit was now present in the new coconut and he had become an immortal orisha who would guard entryways. From then on, stone representations of Eleguas were created by his petitioners for protection.



Below are images of Eleggua as a stone head. Note the cowrie shell eyes and proximity to a corner or entrance.



**Figure 4.** A collection of various Eleggua figures in a museum. Note the variety in their forms.



**Figure 5.** Eleggua figure at a fortune teller's residence (Lindsey King, personal communication, May 2016).



**Figure 6.** Eleggua figure at the entrance to Salvador’s art studio (Lindsey King, personal communication, May 2016).