

# African Figure's Journey as a Divine Trickster Character to the Political World of the Signifying Monkey

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## Abstract

Esu-Elegbara is a significant trickster figure found in black oral narrative traditions and cultures. He acts as a mediator and messenger of the gods, interpreting their will to man and carrying the desires of man to the gods. Despite the horrors of slavery, this figure has survived and transformed in Western Black cultures into The Signifying Monkey, a political character. This study examines the journey of Esu-Elegbara, from a minor role to a major one, and its metamorphosis into The Signifying Monkey, a political figure in African-American literature. The research is a library-based descriptive qualitative study, which surveys the diachronic journey of Esu-Elegbara from the Western Coast of Africa to African-American Literature in the United States.

**Keywords:** Esu-Elegbara, a trickster figure, African Tradition, Henry Louis Gates, African Literature, divine character

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## سفر شخصیت افریقایی به مثابه ی فردی الهی به دنیای سیاسی میمون دلالت گر

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اسوالگبارا، شخصیتی عیار و شاخص است که در سنت ها، فرهنگ ها و ادبیات روایی شفاهی سیاه پوستان یافت می شود. او به مثابه ی واسطه و پیام آور خدایان عمل کرده و اراده آن ها را برای بشر تفسیر می کند و خواسته های انسان را به خدایان می رساند. با وجود سپری کردن دوران دهشتناک برده داری، این شخصیت باقی مانده و در فرهنگ های سیاه پوستان غربی به شخصیتی سیاسی و نمادین تبدیل شده است. این مطالعه به بررسی سفر اسوالگبارا از نقشی فرعی به نقشی اصلی می پردازد و دگردیسی او را به میمون دلالت گر در ادبیات افریقایی-آمریکایی نشان می دهد. این پژوهش مطالعه ای کیفی-توصیفی مبتنی بر کتابخانه است که به بررسی سفر اسوالگبارا در طول زمان از ساحل غربی آفریقا به ادبیات افریقایی-آمریکایی در ایالات متحده می پردازد.

واژگان کلیدی: ادبیات افریقایی آمریکایی، هنری لوییس گیتس، اسوالگبارا، شخصیت عیار.

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### Introduction

During the Middle Passage from Africa to the New World or the United States, African Americans did not travel alone. They brought their cultures, traditions, and customs with them. They made an effort to preserve their music, myths, literature, and art. Even though they were forced to move without their intentions, they brought their forestructures with them and adapted to the new environment according to their previous knowledge and understanding.

Some believe that the Middle Passage was so harmful that it erased all memories and created a blank slate. However, this is not true. It's more like a lie that allows for economic abuses. It was impossible for the slave travelers to completely erase all traces of West African culture. Over time, Africans developed a new Pan-African culture that incorporated linguistic, institutional, metaphysical, and formal elements. Klein noted that the things that survived slavery were useful and fascinating (99).

Over time, African-American culture became influenced by the languages and traditions of English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. This cultural exchange was reciprocal, as these cultures were also influenced by African-American literature, culture, and traditions. African Americans brought various forms of literature and art, such as dramas, music, songs, myths, and statues, with them to the Western world. One of these prominent examples is the trickster figure,

which has appeared in African mythology in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. The character has become a common motif in African cultures, and this theme has survived the journey to the United States and can still be found in many countries today. Gates (1989) reported that this specific motif could have originated in the Fon and Yoruba cultures of Benin and Nigeria.

This trickster theme has been passed down through generations as a mark of wholeness and effectiveness that existed in African-American literature. It has been recreated and repeated by African Americans and African slaves based on their memories and maintained through rituals and oral narratives. While the movement of this motif has occurred, there are no written or recorded documents that can reply to the historical questions about the details of this process. Nevertheless, the existence of such a motif is significant, and authors and critics have only recently discovered it systematically.

Kenneth Warren (1990), Adeleke Adeeko (1990), Barbara Harlow (1989), and Craig Werner (1991) reviewed "The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism by Henry Louis Gates, Jr." (1990). Warren appreciated the drama enacted in the book and stated readers should remember the characterizations of the text's two central antagonists. On the one hand, there was a figure from the Black Arts movement who talked about African-American cultural essence that was essentially incompatible with white literary criteria. On the other hand, there was a Euroamerican poststructuralist theory. Warren believed these two figures exist in much of Gates's works.

Adeeko stated that this book began a new approach to describing African-American literature but did not openly reopen the discussion on the definitions of African-American literature. Gates believed that the blackness of African-American literature was not an absolute or metaphysical condition, but rather could only be recognized through close readings. Adeeko believed that while Soyinka found the motivation for his investigations in traditional lores, Gates located the source of African-American textuality in Signifyin(g) Monkey, which he traced back to the West African Slave Coast.

Harlow reviewed "The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism" and expressed that the book's main idea is to identify how the African-American tradition had theorized about itself and also to change the discourse of Signifyin(g) from the vernacular to the discourse of literary criticism. It also challenges post-structuralism and deconstruction. Werner argued that Gates himself had resisted simplification like the African-American Tricksters figures.

Gates had frequently been attacked for a willingness to submit the African-American literary tradition to a new group of white masters. Werner said Gates' association with prestigious institutions, university presses, and journals has separated him from the tradition of African-American literary criticism.

This study is library-based descriptive research and a qualitative one, so no quantitative findings are expected. This research surveys the diachronic journey of Esu-Elegbara, the divine trickster figure from the Western Coast of Africa to African-American Literature in the United States and its metamorphosis into The Signifying Monkey, the political figure.

### **Esu-Elegbara, the Divine Trickster Figure**

Esu-Elegbara is the divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, a West African ethnic group. The deity appears in various forms throughout black oral narrative traditions. Gibbs declares:

This topos that recurs throughout black oral narrative traditions and contains a primal scene of instruction for the act of interpretation is that of the divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, Esu-Elegbara. This curious figure is called Esu-Elegbara in Nigeria and Legba among the Fon in Benin. His New World figurations include Exu in Brazil, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba (pronounced La-Bas) in the pantheon of the loa of Vaudou of Haiti, and Papa La Bas in the loa of Hoodoo in the United States. [...] These variations on Esu-Elegbara speak eloquently of an unbroken arc of metaphysical presupposition and a pattern of figuration shared through time and space among certain black cultures in West Africa, South America, the Caribbean, and the United States. These trickster figures, all aspects or topoi of Esu, are fundamental, divine terms of mediation: as tricksters they are mediators, and their mediations are tricks. (24)

Trickster figures are significant divine mediators. As mediators, the tricks they perform are their means of mediation. Each type, shape, or version of Esu serves as a messenger of the gods (called "Iranse" in Yoruba), interpreting the will of the gods to man and carrying the desires of man to the gods. Baker writes:

Esu is the guardian of the crossroads, master of style and of the stylus, the phallic god of generation and fecundity, and master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates

the divine world from the profane. Frequently characterized as an inveterate copulator possessed by his enormous penis, linguistically Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation, and the word (as a form of the verb to be) that links a subject with its predicate. He connects the grammar of divination with its rhetorical structures. In Yoruba mythology, Esu is said to limp as he walks precisely because of his mediating function: his legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world. (44)

Scholars have studied the characteristics of Esu and identified several traits attributed to him. Gates (1989) lists some features of Esu, including “individuality, satire, closure and disclosure, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-mindedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, encasement and rupture” (22). However, it is not accurate to focus on one of these characteristics alone as significant since Esu embodies all of these features and more.

In Yoruba mythology, Esu is believed to have one leg in the domain of the gods and the other in the material world, causing him to walk with difficulty (Klein, 33). Gates (1989) suggests that Hermes is the closest Western counterpart to Esu, as both gods share the role of interpreter. Esu is known for teaching Ifa how to read signs, which are shaped by sixteen holey palm nuts, and the interpretation of these signs is facilitated by the use of a carved wooden divination tray called Opon Ifa. At the center of the upper outside of the tray is a carved image of Esu, which serves to signify his relation to the act of interpretation. Gates (1988) notes that this act can be translated either as time “to unite or unknot knowledge” or as yipada “to turn around or translate,” and the modern-day equivalent of this practice is close reading, according to Armstrong (146). Thus, Esu is considered the Black Interpreter and the Yoruba god of indeterminacy or ariyemuye (Something which cannot be held through fingers and glides).

Cabrera (67) believed that the Esu figures are sacred and holy among the Yoruba systems of thinking in Dahomey and Nigeria, Brazil and Cuba, Haiti, and New Orleans. These figures have similar functions to characters in narratives and are integral to sacred myths. Signifying comes from this framework. The African-American rhetorical strategy of signifying is a stylistic act and is

not involved in the game of information giving at all. Signifying turns have nothing to do with the Saussurean transcendent signified. Gates (1988) explains that, as anthropologists have revealed, the Signifying Monkey is often called the Signifier. Julie Kristeva (68) states that "Signifier as such is a presence that precedes the signification of objects or emotion".

Esu literature comprises divination verses and traditional prose narratives that encode myths about the origin of the universe, the gods, and human beings' relationship with the gods and their place within the cosmic order. The lyrics of "Esu songs" are also an integral part of this literature. Most of the literature is focused on exploring the origin, nature, and function of Esu. Kermit states,

He is, moreover, as master of the roads and the crossroads, the master of "all steps taken," be these steps taken as one walks or the steps of a process. He is, finally, a principle of rhetoric: "When he is in power," as Cabrerra reports, "he exaggerates the speech of the pure black that he is," a description that also connects Esu to the Signifying Monkey. Esu is the *deus ex machina*, but also the *dues est mortali iuvare* mortal, god who is the helping of man to man. If anything, Esu, upon his emergence from the Middle Passage, assumed more functions and even a fuller presence within black cosmogonies than he had in Africa. Roger Bastide, for example, notes that in Brazil, in enslavement, African followers of Esu represented him as the liberator of the slaves and as an enemy of the enslavers, "killing, poisoning, and driving mad their oppressors." Esu, then, assumed direct importance to the black enslaved, while retaining his traditional functions. This importance is affirmed by representations of the figure of Esu in both New World and Old World African literature . (145)

Esu, a significant character in Yoruba mythology, possesses the quality of uncertainty or indeterminacy. The Esu myth in Yoruba culture illustrates this concept through the story of "The Two Friends", which is one of the most renowned of the Esu canons. Despite the devastating Middle Passage, this canonical narrative has managed to survive and is still prevalent among Yoruba cultures in Brazil, Cuba, and Nigeria. As Ogundipe (201) explains, Esu's presence as a dynamic principle and his representation as the principle of chance or uncertainty has endured in both the Old and New Worlds.

According to Baker, Esu's different qualities originate from several sources:

What the Yoruba call the Oriki Esu, the narrative praise poems, or panegyrics, of Esu-Elegbara; the Odu Ifa, the If divination verses; the lyrics of "Esu songs"; and the traditional prose narratives in which are encoded the myths of the origin of the universe, of the gods, and human beings' relation to the gods and their place within the cosmic order. Much of Esu's literature concerns the origin, nature, and function of interpretation and language use "above" that of ordinary language. Esu is the Yoruba figure of the meta-level of formal language use, of the ontological and epistemological status of figurative language and its interpretation. The literature of Esu consists of a remarkable degree of direct assertions about the levels of linguistic ascent that separate literal from figurative modes of language use . (55-56)

Henry Louis Gates argues that Esu's characteristics are influenced by various sources, emphasizing the role of interpretation and literary language in Esu's literature.

### **The Signifying Monkey, a Political Figure**

According to Gates (1989), the monkey has become a significant figure in African-American culture due to the transmission of African myths to the Western world. Although the reasons for this transformation are not entirely clear, Gates suggests that the monkey, a minor character in the original African myths, has become an essential figure in the oral tradition of New World black culture. In addition, the Monkey is one of Esu's names, like in the following

Oriki Esu:

King of Ketu,

The Monkey has no lamp at Akesan,

My mother's money its eyes serve as lamps all over the farm,

Product of today's hustle and bustle

An offshoot of tomorrow's hustle and bustle

The evil eye has stunted Monkey's growth

They call him a child of no means and position

Let him not consort with people on Alaketu's street

Let him not bring about the curse more effective than poison . (77)

The Yoruba myth about the origin of interpretation centers around the use of Esu as a critic. The presence of a monkey in Latin American versions of this myth can be traced back to the Yoruba myth, where the monkey also appears. The repetition of the monkey element, with some variations, in Cuban versions of the myth reveals Esu's influence on African-American myth. Gates (1989) suggests that this influence enables critics to explore the practical equality of Esu and his African-American equivalent, the Signifying Monkey. Thus, according to Gates, the monkey is essentially the same as Esu, but for complex reasons, the monkey has been separated from Esu. Lydia Cabrera (29) explains the key role of the monkey in this myth within African-Cuban mythology. In some of the Elegua (Elegbara) tales, he is depicted as the first interpreter who taught Oruba (Ifa) the art of divination. He is accompanied by Moedun (the Monkey) and a palm tree growing in the garden of Orungan (the midday sun). Additionally, Elegua is known as the messenger of Odu, which are the divination seeds. This is a reference to the cowry shells, which are used by the babalochas and iyalochees for interpretation. Babalochas are associated with this orisha: "he controls the largest number of cowry shells".

Cabrera (90) highlighted that it is uncertain whether Moedun was derived from the Yoruba word "omo", meaning "child", or "Edun", meaning "a type of monkey". However, it is clear that Esu, as the first interpreter, was accompanied by both the Monkey and the Tree during the Middle Passage. The monkeys lived on a tree and selected sixteen palm nuts from it, which became the sacred characters of Ifa divination. Many contemporary statues of Exu in Brazil depict him with both a large erect penis and a long tail. The Monkey appears in other African narratives and even alongside the Lion and the Elephant in the Signifying Monkey narrative poems in a famous Fon narrative entitled "Why Monkey Did Not Become Man." The Monkey also appears in a second canonical Fon narrative about divination, "Monkey's Ingratitude: Why One Does Not Deceive the Diviner" (98). However, the direct conjunction of the Monkey and Esu seems to be limited to this myth of the origins of the process of interpretation itself.

Gates (1989) stated that most of the monkey tales had been recorded by male poets, in settings that were suitable for men like bars, pools, and streets. However, Signifyin(g), which has been managed by women, should not be ignored. Women possess equal natural ability and effectiveness as men. Although only a small group of people recount Signifying Monkey tales, a



host of African-Americans are not only familiar with it but also practice it. In this sense, it can be described as a category for various sorts of amusing language games. Some of them recreate and rebuild the issue while others make them clearer. The poems are fascinating in basically three ways: first, they can be regarded as a useful source of the rhetorical act of Signification; second, they can be considered as epitomes of the black figures that might be included in the trope of Signifyin(g); and third, they can be interpreted as evidence for the evaluation of the signifier (36).

### **The Signifying Monkey and the Rhetoric of Signification**

Ferdinand de Saussure is credited with defining signification, which has since become an integral part of many contemporary theories. He proposed that a sign comprises not just a sound image but also a concept. According to Berger (112), Saussure divided the sign into two components: the signifier and the signified. However, it is surprising to note that this new usage of the word in Western tradition bears a striking resemblance to a black vernacular tradition that is almost two hundred years old. Tales and toasts of the Signifyin(g) Monkey date back to slavery, indicating that their origin goes back to that time. Hundreds of such tales have been recorded and written since the nineteenth century. Gates (1988) noted that many African-American musicians, including Gillum, Count Basic, Oscar Peterson, Oscar Browne Jr., Little Willie Dixon, Nat “King” Cole, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, and Johnny Otis have recorded songs called “The Signifying Monkey” or simply “Signifyin(g)”.

Henry Louis Gates’ theory of interpretation is derived from African-American cultural networks and is a theory of formal revisionism that is tropological. It emphasizes imitation and repetition of formal structures and their differences. Signification is a theory of reading that is rooted in the African-American tradition and culture. Gates notes that learning how to “Signify” is an important part of African-American youth education. He further adds that he had to go beyond his cultural boundaries to defamiliarize the concept. To accomplish this, he analyzed the principles of interpretation that were concealed in the Ifa oracle, and by decoding the signs, he revealed their potentiality in critical theory. These texts are still prevalent among the Yoruba tribe in Nigeria. Joyce states,

Perhaps only Tar Baby is as enigmatic and compelling a figure from African-American mythic discourse as is that oxymoron, the Signifying Monkey. The ironic reversal of a received racist image in the Western imagination of the black as simian

like the Signifying Monkey—he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language—is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus itself, repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act. [...] Signifying is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole and litotes, and metalepsis (Bloom's supplement to Burke). To this list, we could easily add aporia, chiasmus, and catechesis, all of which are used in the ritual of signifying. [...] The black rhetorical tropes, subsumed under signifying, would include marking, loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens, and so on. (432)

The figure of the trickster and its myths play a significant role in African-American theories about language usage. They act as important points for understanding the formal usage of language. The myths of Esu and the Signifying Monkey represent the tension between oral and written forms of narration. This tension creates a voice in writing that is unique to the vernacular tradition.

Esu and the Signifying Monkey represent the two dominant narrative voices in this tradition. They are in search of a voice that is portrayed in many African-American texts. The tension between them results in a double-voiced discourse that is common in this tradition. The role of the figurative in the myths of Esu and the Signifying Monkey is also significant. It weakens the preference for rhetorical principles that are commonly used in critical traditions.

The third conclusion that critics and readers confront by reading these myths is the indeterminacy of interpretation. Esu is considered a principle of language, specifically written discourse. Therefore, indeterminacy is an essential part of interpretation, determined by the vernacular tradition. As Gates (1989) observed, these three ways summarize Esu's function in Yoruba texts and contexts.

## **Conclusion**

Gates introduced the concept of "signifyin'" in his books "Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self" and "The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism." Signifyin' refers to the practice of indirectly representing an idea through commentary that is often humorous, boastful, insulting, or provocative. Gates argued that signifyin' is pervasive

and central to African and African American literature and music, making all such expression a form of dialogue with the literature and music of the past. Gates traced the practice of signifyin' to Esu, the trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, and to the figure of the "signifying monkey," with which Esu is closely associated. He applied the notion to the interpretation of slave narratives.

African Americans who survived the Middle Passage did not endure the journey alone. They brought with them their cultures, traditions, and customs. They did not wish to completely eradicate the traces and elements of their traditional West African cultures, which would have been extremely difficult if not impossible. Instead, Africans gradually developed a new Pan-African culture that incorporated linguistic, institutional, metaphysical, and formal elements. The elements that survived slavery were both useful and fascinating, and they blended with Western culture. One notable example is Esu-Elegbara, a trickster figure found in African mythology, Caribbean tradition, and South American culture. This character appears so frequently in African cultures that it can be regarded as a common motif. The trickster theme survived the Middle Passage and still exists today in many countries. This motif may have originated in the Fon and Yoruba cultures of Benin and Nigeria. Over time, its form has changed in Western African cultures. Nowadays, this figure has transformed into the Signifying Monkey, a political figure. Esu is an important divine mediator between gods and men. Esu interprets the will of the gods to man and carries the desires of man to the gods. Scholars have studied various forms of Esu and have found that his features incorporate individuality, satire, closure and disclosure, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-mindedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, encasement and rupture. It is important to note that it is not right to focus on one of these features as important. Esu possesses all these features and more. Gates explains that for reasons that are not easy to reconstruct, Esu-Elegbara has turned into the Signifying Monkey in African myths in the United States and has simultaneously attained an essential role. In other words, throughout this transmission process from Africa to the Western World, the monkey, who was a minor character, has become an important one in the surviving oral tradition of a New World black culture. Some critics state that the Monkey has been one of Esu's names. Lydia Cabrera's account of this myth within African Cuban mythology made the key role of the Monkey obvious. Finally, Henry Louis Gates concluded that the monkey is the same as Esu, in other words, for complicated reasons, the monkey has been displaced from Esu.

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