

Handout - Yoruba Folk Legend, “The Two Friends”

The Yoruba are an ethnic group found primarily in Benin and Nigeria, as well as neighboring West African nations. There are more than 37 million Yoruba people in these two nations alone and millions more Yoruba and Yoruba-descended people reside in the Americas as a result of the Atlantic Slave Trade that spanned the 16th-19th centuries. Migration from West Africa led to large Yoruba communities being established in Europe and North America in the 20th and 21st centuries. Yoruba spirituality and philosophy is monotheistic- organized around a single deity that created the world. Yoruba share this belief with other major faith traditions including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Along with the earth and the humans, animals and plants that live within it, the creator, Olódùmaré, also made the Orisha, beings that appear in human form but possess supernatural power.

Sometimes appearing as a child and at other times as an old man, Eshu-Elegba, a mischievous character, was the first of the Orishas to be created. Eshu-Elegba is present at all beginnings and endings and his image usually appears at the front door of a home.

Eshu-Elegba, the trickster, entered the world with a calabash (a gourd which can be dried to create various instruments or containers) full of stones. He visited the houses of the rich, saying, “Come to the crossroads and leave money there so the poor can get something to eat.” Those who ignored him watched their houses strangely burn, for the stones in Eshu’s calabash caused fires to begin wherever they fell. Those who were generous were saved. From the money they left—in those days handsome cowrie shells were used as currency—the poor were rescued and markets began. Sometimes Eshu-Elegba attached spoons to his clothing, to symbolize the food. At other times his clothes were decorated with strands of the white cowries that were left for him at the crossroads, which has become a symbol of the Orisha.

In the story below, Eshu-Elegba demonstrates his mischievousness to two friends in the fields:

Everyone knows the story of the two friends who were thwarted in their friendship by Eshu. They took vows of eternal friendship to one another, but neither took Eshu into consideration. Eshu took note of their actions and decided to do something about them.

When the time was ripe, Eshu decided to put their friendship to his own little test. He made a cloth cap. The right side was black; the left side was white.

The two friends were out in the fields, tilling their land. One was hoeing on the right side; the other was clearing the bushes to the left. Eshu came by on a horse, riding between the two men. The one on the right saw the black side of his hat. The friend on the left noticed the sheer whiteness of Eshu’s cap.

The two friends took a break for lunch under the cool shade of the trees. Said one friend, “Did you see the man with a white cap who greeted us as we were working? He was very pleasant, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, he was charming, but it was a man in a black cap that I recall, not a white one.”

“It was a white cap. The man was riding a magnificently caparisoned horse.”

“Then it must be the same man. I tell you, his cap was dark-black.”

“You must be fatigued or blinded by the hot rays of the sun to take a white cap for a black one.”

“I tell you it was a black cap and I am not mistaken. I remember him distinctly.”

The two friends fell to fighting. The neighbors came running but the fight was so intense that the neighbors could not stop it. In the midst of this uproar, Eshu returned, looking very calm and pretending not to know what was going on.

“What is the cause of all the hullabaloo?” he demanded sternly.

“Two close friends are fighting,” was the answer. “They seem intent on killing each other and neither would stop or tell us the reason for the fight. Please do something before they destroy each other.”

Eshu promptly stopped the fight. “Why do you two lifelong friends make a public spectacle of yourselves in this manner?”

“A man rode through the farm, greeting us as he went by,” said the first friend. “He was wearing a black cap, but my friend tells me it was a white cap and that I must have been tired or blind or both.”

The second friend insisted that the man had been wearing a white cap. One of them must be mistaken, but it was not he.

“Both of you are right,” said Eshu.

“How can that be?”

“I am the man who paid the visit over which you now quarrel, and here is the cap that caused the dissension.”

Eshu put his hand in his pocket and brought out the two-colored cap saying, “As you can see, one side is white and the other is black. You each saw one side, and, therefore, are right about what you saw. Are you not the two friends who made vows of friendship? When you vowed to be friends always, to be faithful and true to each other, did you reckon with Eshu? Do you know that he who does not put Eshu first in all his doings has himself to blame if things misfire?”

And so it is said:

“Eshu, do not undo me,
Do not falsify the words of my mouth,
Do not misguide the movements of my feet.
You who translates yesterday’s words
Into novel utterances,
Do not undo me,
I bear you sacrifices.”

Source: Ayodele Ogundipe, EsuElegbara, the Yoruba God of Chance and Uncertainty: A Study in Yoruba Mythology, II, 133-35.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think is the meaning or message behind this parable? What lesson might Eshu-Elegba be trying to teach?
2. What are some of the symbols of Eshu-Elegba?
3. What aspects of Eshu-Elegba’s character are related to the crossroads?
4. Why might it be important in this story that the two people were friends, rather than strangers or simply neighbors?
5. What kind of feelings do you feel this passage evokes? Is Eshu-Elegba portrayed positively, negatively, or neutrally? What about the two friends?