

# 'THE DEVIL': HERMES AND ÈŞÙ IN ANCIENT GREEK AND YORÙBÁ TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

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## Abstract

The history of human society reveals that belief in divinity or divinities has been an integral part of human life. Human beings have an inborn desire to identify with a supreme being or supernatural beings. However, religious beliefs differ from one society to another. Christianity and other monotheistic religions are startlingly different from other traditional religions. Notably, Èşù is the name given to Devil or Satan in the Yoruba translation of the Bible, Yoruba traditional religions, however, do not portray Èşù as the personal embodiment of evil as reflected in the Yoruba translation of the Bible, but rather as a benevolent deity and one of the functionaries of Olódùmarè. Èşù is the Yoruba counterpart of the Greek god, Hermes, who holds a unique position in Greek religion. Hermes, like his Yoruba counterpart, is a god who wears many masks; he is the herald of the gods, a trickster and the guide that leads the dead soul into Hades as *psychopompos*- soul guide. Hermes and Èşù exhibit the highest number of similar traits in the pantheons of the ancient Greek and Yoruba gods. This paper examines the positions and attributes of Hermes and Èşù in the ancient Greek and Yoruba traditional religions in comparison with Biblical perceptions of Satan the Devil.

**Keywords:** Greek, Yoruba, Hermes, Èşù, Biblical, Religions.

## Introduction

Religion has been a fundamental part of human life from time immemorial. However, in contrast to the monotheistic nature of the ancient Hebrew religion graduating into Christianity, many ancient and modern societies have a polytheistic religious system. The ancient Greek and Yoruba traditional religions believe in many divinities with Zeus and Olódùmarè at the head of the pantheon, respectively. Hermes is one of the Greek divinities who play important roles in the religious setting of the Greeks like Èṣù in Yoruba traditional religions. Èṣù, in Yoruba traditional religion like the Greek Hermes, is a divine messenger in contrast to how he is described in Yoruba translation of the Bible where Èṣù is portrayed as an epitome of evil. The name 'Èṣù', though a designated name of one of the Yoruba divinities, is used in rendition of the Devil in the Yoruba translation of the Bible. While the Greeks generally view Hermes as a god who plays an important role in their lives, Èṣù, on the other hand, has been seen in different lights. Due to the influence of the Yoruba understanding of the biblical Devil as Èṣù, Èṣù has been regarded by some as mankind's enemy; others, especially, Yoruba traditionalists describe him as a benevolent deity (Idowu, 1996:80-82). According to both Greek and Yoruba myths, Hermes and Èṣù exhibit the highest number of similar traits in the pantheons of the ancient Greek and Yoruba gods (Onayemi, 2010: 49). The objective of this paper is to examine the positions and attributes of Hermes and Èṣù in the ancient Greek and Yoruba traditional religions in comparison with Biblical perception of the Devil. In order to accomplish this objective, the paper adopted historical, analytical and critical methods.

## Ancient Greek Religion and Gods

The religion of the ancient Greece is different from Christianity and other monotheistic religions. The religion of the ancient Greeks can be traced back to the pre-Greek people of the Minoans

and Mycenaeans (Nilsson, 1971:10). According to Nilsson (1971:12), certain aspects of the religions from the people of Asia Minor and Egypt were introduced and incorporated into the Greek religious system. This religious system was organised before eight century. The ancient Greece, like every other polytheistic societies, had many gods and goddesses but certain principal ones, referred to as residing on Mount Olympus, stood out. There were hundreds of deities present in the Greek religion but the body of gods present throughout the Greek city-states was the Olympians. In different Greek literatures, these gods and goddesses are referred to as the Olympians with Zeus at the head of the Pantheon. Zeus is regarded as the king of the gods but, he has not always been the ruler of the gods; Uranus (meaning heaven) was the first ruler displaced by his son, Kronos (Cronus), while Kronos was displaced by Zeus, his son. Thus Zeus and his siblings and children were historically regarded as supreme (Lloyd-Jones, 2001:456).

The belief of the ancient Greeks in their gods was directly tied up with their cult practices. The Greeks worshiped the gods in formal sanctuaries, which usually contained a temple in which the god was thought to live. Sacrifices were made to these gods in the shrines and temples erected; the Greeks willingly did anything to obtain blessings, some sense of assurance and security from the gods. The ancient Greek sanctuaries served as the centres of worship in each individual city-state in ancient Greece. These sanctuaries were clearly marked areas on the acropolis as well as in the agora of the cities. The sanctuaries were made up of the temples of the gods being worshiped there, also found in the temple were the cult statues. There were altars where ceremonies were held with votive offerings. There were also smaller temple-shaped buildings called treasuries in the sanctuary where the offerings were kept. For the ancient Greeks, the altars were the most important building in the sanctuary because that was where the animal sacrifices took place and as

asserted by Bremmer, 1994: 56) everything the sanctuaries contain was the “culmination of the religious practices of the citizens”. Important events in the life of the city and other festivals were celebrated by one or more sacrifices for which specific rituals were laid down.

According to Lloyd-Jones (2001: 459), Greek religion is monotheistic in nature though polytheistic in practice; this is because in the last resort of every dispute among the gods, the will of Zeus always prevailed. The Greek gods were greatly anthropomorphic; each god was an individual person with his or her own particular identity. In other words, the Greek gods had human qualities and weaknesses; they could be jealous, envious and even resentful. The immortal nature of the ancient Greek gods was the only major difference between them and human beings. Since the gods were believed to possess immense power, the Greeks strongly believed that it was wise to pay honour to the gods and try as much as possible not to offend any god; a god can fight against a mortal even over trivial matters. For instance, in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus offends Poseidon by blinding Poseidon’s son in order to save himself and the lives of his companions. In consequence of his action, Odysseus gets home to Ithaca only after having lost all his crew, and then had to fight for his life against the suitors of his wife, Penelope. He survives only because of the special favour of Athena, a goddess more powerful than Poseidon.

Religion in ancient Greece was a public affair unlike the modern society where religion has become a private matter; their cult was a public, communal activity. The gods were not just separate individuals; they belonged to a pantheon that was supported by a Greek city, the polis. Each of the Greek gods represented a force of nature and was responsible for a particular city. In other words, each Greek community had its special deity, for example, Hera was the great divinity of Argos in the Peloponnese and of the island of Samos. Zeus, Apollo and Artemis

were the great divinities of Delphi and Delos, while Athena was the great divinity of Athens. But gradually, certain gods acquired an importance beyond the localities in which their cults had first developed; some cities had temples of several gods and goddesses. Sacrifice was an important aspect in the religious practices of the Greeks. Many of the Greek gods demanded animal sacrifice and the type of sacrificial animal depended on the god and what sacrifice was to be made. But the most common animals used were cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, dogs, birds and fish (Bremmer, 1994: 39-40). Festival and rituals were other features of ancient Greek religion. Many of these were based on nature such as the solstice, equinoxes, sowing and harvesting of crops (Nilsson, 1971:40). Others had to do with natural cycle of life like births, marriages and deaths (Bremmer, 1994: 53).

Greek gods are distinguished from one another by their attributes and functions, yet they form a coherent system in which each deity has his or her special relation to the others. It was customary to talk of the 12 Olympians, meaning the twelve principal divinities. Greek gods had a centralized monarchy with Zeus on top followed by Hera, his consort and patroness of marriage. Others are: Poseidon, Demeter, Ares, Hephaestus, Apollo, Artemis, Dionysus, Athena, Hermes, and Aphrodite. The early Greek poets, Homer and Hesiod, created a kind of unity in the acceptability of these gods all over Greece. With important cultural and cultic centres like Olympia and Delphi, a degree of homogeneity in worship is established throughout the Greek city-states. According to Greek myths, each of the Greek gods rule over a specific sphere which may be regional, natural or event based.

### **Hermes, the Greek god**

Hermes was one of the gods honoured by the Greeks. From the cluster of stories involving the Greek god Hermes passed down in Greek tradition as well as their literature, a remarkable kind of

human character stands out: a young handsome man of perfect physical build, sociable, swift in physical movement and eloquent, ready to serve but not to be taken for granted, inventive and intelligent, cunning and possessing sense of humour. The name, Hermes, is derived from the Greek word ἕρμα- herma, meaning heap of stone, boundary maker. In Greek mythology, the pile of stone served as an emblem of Hermes. In line with this Nilsson (1978:8) writes:

If our peasant passed a heap of stone, as he was likely to do, he might lay another stone upon it. If a tall stone was erected on top of the heap, he might place before it a bit of his provision as an offering. He performed this act as a result of custom, without knowing the real reason for it, but he knew a god was embodied in the stone heap and in the tall stone standing on top of it. He named the god Hermes after the stone heap (herma) in which he dwelt, and he called the tall stone a herm. Such heaps were welcome landmarks to the wanderer who sought his way from one place to another through desert tracts, and their god became the protector of wayfarers...

Hermes is portrayed in various ways in Greek myths and literatures. As related in Greek myths, the virtue of Hermes laid in his speed and wits. Onayemi (2010:45) asserts that Hermes “symbolised mobility and he was therefore the patron of all who lived by movement and mental agility.” She further explains that Hermes is also the patron of thieves, travellers, gamblers, orators and the deity of gain – honest or dishonest. Homer and Hesiod described Hermes as a god skilful in deceptive acts and a benefactor of humans. Homer, in the *Iliad*, refers to Hermes as the bringer of good luck, excellent in all the tricks (*Iliad*, XX). As the god that dispenses good luck and prosperity, Hermes image was

usually seen at market places, city gates and doorways as well as places where business was conducted (Onayemi, 2010:45).

Hermes as the herald of the gods was skilled in the use of speech and eloquence in general. His service was employed by the gods especially by his father, Zeus, on various occasions. There are good examples of this in *Iliad* of Homer. From the imaginative presentation of Nilsson of the stone heap, Hermes was not just the god of the travellers in this world but also the conductor of the souls of the dead from the upper world to the lower world. Homer in *Odyssey* (book 24, 10-15) states:

The ghost went squeaking that way as Hermes  
the Healer

led them a long way down the mouldering  
pathways.

They moved past Leukas Rock and that flow,  
Okeanos

past the land of dreams and gates of the Sun-  
God.

Soon their souls were approaching an asphodel  
meadow

where ghosts have homes, the shadows of  
people who've worn down.

Hermes as psychopompos emphasizes the role of the god in traversing the boundary between life and death, between the world of the living and the underworld of shades, Hades.

Berens (2009:99-100) presents Hermes as presiding over the rearing and education of the young and encouraged athletic pursuits and gymnastic exercises. As a result of Hermes' interest and encouragement, all gymnasiums and wrestling schools throughout Greece were decorated with his statues. Hermes is also believed to have invented the alphabet and to have taught the art of interpreting foreign languages. Berens further explains that Hermes was regarded as the god who granted increase and

prosperity to flocks and herds, he was worshipped with special veneration by herdsmen.

In his statues, Hermes is represented in various ways according to his attributes. Generally, he is represented as a “beardless youth, with broad chest and graceful but muscular limbs” and handsome face (Berens, 2009:104). As the messenger of the gods, he is portrayed as wearing the Petasus (winged silver cap) and Talaria (silver wings for his feet) and bore in his hand the Caduceus or herald’s staff. While he is often represented with chain of gold hanging from his lips as god of eloquence and as the patron of merchants, he bears a purse in his hand. Being the god of all undertaking in which gain was a feature, he was worshipped as the giver of wealth and goodluck, any unexpected stroke of fortune was attributed to his influence. Sacrifices were made to Hermes by his worshipers. The sacrifices to Hermes included incense, honey, cakes, pigs, young goats and lambs. The tongues of animals were also sacrificed to him as a god of eloquence (Berens, 2009:104). Hermes, as a conductor of the shades, was always supplicated and invoked by the dying to grant them a safe and speedy passage across the Styx.

### **Yoruba Traditional Religion and Gods**

The Yoruba, are deeply religious people and every affairs of life for them, begins and ends with religious practices. Like every other group of people, the Yoruba people believe in the omnipotence of divine beings and spirits, sacrifices are made, omens are sought, shrines and temples are erected, and people willingly do anything to obtain some sense of assurance and security from the gods. The Yoruba refer to these divine beings as *Òrìṣà*, who, according to Idowu (1973:170), serve as “functionaries in the theocratic government of the universe.” From Idowu’s assertion, it means that these divine beings have been assigned various duties to perform in submission to the will of the Supreme Being, *Olódùmarè*. Generally, the divinities are



believed to play the role of intermediary between man and Olódùmarè, reflecting the dynamic nature of Yoruba traditional religion. As the representatives of Olódùmarè, they are like channels through which sacrifices, prayers and offerings are presented to him.

Yoruba traditional religion is rich and heterogeneous. It can be described as a set of beliefs in a Supreme Being and divinities. Awolalu (1976: 29) isolates six key principles of Yoruba traditional religion. These principles and beliefs were transmitted orally from generation to generation by means of myths, praise songs and traditional sayings. These principles, to Awolalu, are concerned with a threefold belief namely belief in the Supreme Being, belief in the spirit and ways human beings relate to and get guidance from the Supreme Being and the spirits in order to live peacefully.

In Yoruba traditional religion, the Yoruba name for God, the Supreme Being, is Ọlórún or Olódùmarè. Ọlórún literally means the Owner of heaven or the Lord of heaven (Idowu, 1996:34). By this name God is portrayed as the Originator, both visible and invisible, He is considered the Owner of everything in heaven and earth. The Yoruba name for God, Ọlórún, is in constant use by the Yoruba, it is used in greetings, sayings and proverbs. Expressing his view of the Yoruba popular use of Ọlórún for the Supreme Being, Parrinder (1968:34) explains that it made the name "attractive and acceptable to Islam and Christianity" and "that name has been used successfully in evangelism." He then declares that "it is wrong to suggest that this idea of God was borrowed from Muslims or Christians". Regarding the Yoruba second name of God, Olódùmarè, Idowu (1996:33) discloses that etymology of the name especially the second part, 'MARE', "has been a subject of much guess-work and debate. He however, emphatically states that by calling the Supreme Being Olódùmarè, "the Yoruba acknowledge Him to be unique in heaven and on earth, supreme over all" (Idowu,

1996:35). The Yoruba believe that Ọlórún, being the creator, is responsible for the human beings and becomes the centre of the life of every living being and things. However, Ọlórún is not worshipped directly but through mediators who speak through mediums in the context of religious practices.

The Yoruba people do not only believe in the Supreme Being but also in the existence of the spirits. Belief in spirit is an important aspect of their worship. These spirits are called Ọ̀rìṣà with many special attributes. They are believed to be the intermediaries between God and man. Though their number cannot be estimated, they are grouped as major, minor, environmental and ancestral spirits (Olowola, 1983). In African ontology, regarding the origin of the divinities, there are two main schools of thought. Mbiti (1969: 75-76), the leader of the first school of thought, argues that there is a Supreme Being who created the divinities “in the ontological category of the spirits”. The second school of thought, championed by Idowu, on the other hand, argues that the divinities were not created but were brought into being. Idowu declares:

From the point of view of the theology of African traditional religion, it will not be correct to say that the divinities were created. It will be correct to say that they were brought into being, or that they came into being in the nature of things with regard to the divine ordering of the universe (Idowu, 1973:169).

Abimbola (2006:61) in the same line of argument declares that Èṣù was not created by Olódùmarè, but that Èṣù co-exists with Olódùmarè from the beginning. According to Yoruba traditional religion, there is a Supreme Being called Olódùmarè, and other divinities that are subordinate to him. These divinities, according to Ekeke and Ekeopara, (2010: 214) are divided into two groups, one group being spirits and the other human beings of the distant past. For a long period in the history of the Yoruba,

new deities were created through the deification of important kings and leaders as they died due to their heroic activities.

Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010: 214-216) believe that the hierarchical nature of the Yoruba gods can be analysed in three categories. The first class, according to him, are the primordial divinities believed to have been with God from the creation of the world. These are referred to as "divinities of heaven" among those in this group are *Ọrúnmìlà*, the deity of knowledge and divination, and *Èṣù*, who is regarded as an intermediary between other gods and *Olódùmarè*. The second group are divinities that came into being through deified great human. Those in this group include *Ṣàṅgó*, the god of thunder and lightning, and *Ògún*, the god of war and metallurgy. Those in the third category are associated with natural objects like *Ọya*, the goddess of River Niger.

As mentioned earlier, the Yoruba deities, like the Greek gods and goddesses, have different portfolios and play different roles in the monarchical government of *Olódùmarè*. For instance, *Ọbàtálá*, who is also known as *Òrìṣà-ńlá* is the great divinity and supreme divinity of Yorubaland (Onayemi, 2010:28). In most Yoruba creation myths, *Ọbàtálá*, at the order of *Olódùmarè*, created the earth and mankind; as such he is viewed as the patron of mankind. *Ọrúnmìlà*, another divinity, is described by Onayemi thus:

*Ọrúnmìlà* whose name means "Heaven knows who will prosper," is similar to the Greek Apollo in every ways. As Apollo is the son of Zeus, *Ọrúnmìlà* is the son of *Olódùmarè*. As Apollo is an oracular god, so *Ọrúnmìlà* is the Yoruba god of divination or oracle. In this respect, he is widely known as *Ifá* (or as *Baba Ifá* father of *Ifá*). The world designates divinity and the paraphernalia of divining (Onayemi, 2010:33).

*Ògún*, the counterpart of the Greek Hephaestus, is the Yoruba god of iron, steel, smiths, warriors and all artisans in metals. There are others like *Ọṣun*, *Èlà*, *Olú-ìgbó*, *Ẹ̀ṣù* and *Èṣù*.

### **Èṣù the Benevolent and Malevolent god**

Èṣù is one of the most important divinities in Yoruba mythology. According to oral tradition, as stated by Adekola (2013:67), Èṣù is one of the 401 primordial deities (*òkànlénírínwó irúnmoḷẹ̀*) believed to have descended from heaven into the earth at the beginning of the creation by *Olódùmarè*. Animasaun (1983:2), on the other hand, asserts that Èṣù is of human parentage and that he was born at Ketu by *Ọlójà* and *Ajùmù* who named him *Láàlú*. Falola (2013:4), like Adekola, declares that Èṣù is as old as the mythological stories of creation. Whatever the claim is concerning the origin of Èṣù, what is of utmost importance in this work is the belief that Èṣù as a divinity is a force to be recognized in Yoruba religious belief and practices. Èṣù is believed to hold the Yoruba cosmic system together with *Òrúnmìlà*, without both, the entire system would collapse (Falola, 2013:3). Describing how far afield the fame of Èṣù has spread, he declares:

A powerful Yoruba god in origin, Èṣù spread with other elements of *òrìṣà* (god, goddesses) to the African diaspora, reaching such places as Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, the West Indies, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Britain, and the United States. Èṣù is now part of what some may label as the Black Atlantic religion... In his ability to migrate to other lands, Èṣù becomes part of transatlantic history... (Falola, 2013:3).

Èṣù acquired different identity in names as he spread far and wide, such names include, Eleda, Cxu, Eleggua, Legba, Elegbera, Eshu and Odara among others. Each name connotes power, fear and respect.

Yoruba traditional religion views Èṣù as a benevolent god and considers him to be one of the divinities to have the closest relationship with Olódùmarè. Idowu (1996:79) describes Èṣù as the:

primarily a special relations officer between heaven and earth, inspector-general who reports to Olódùmarè on the deeds of the divinities and men, and checks and makes reports of correctness of worship in general and sacrifices in particular.

Like the Greek god, Hermes, Èṣù holds a crucial and central position among the Yoruba gods and goddesses. Èṣù is worshiped not only to attract his favour and blessing but also to forestall his malevolence. He, like Hermes, is the divine messenger between Olódùmarè and the other divinities (*òrìṣà*); he carries messages from the Supreme Being to the other *òrìṣàs* and also reports the activities of both the divinities and human to Olódùmarè. He also acts as mediator between the gods and goddesses, spying on all activities and representing Olódùmarè as his "policeman and intelligence gatherer" (Falola, 2013:5).

The nature of Èṣù is illustrated in various *oríkì* (praise poetry) accorded him. One of such *oríkì* goes thus:

Eshu (Èṣù) turns right into wrong, wrong into right.  
When he is angry, he hits a stone until it bleeds.  
When he is angry, he hits the skin of an ant.  
When he is angry, he weeps tears of blood.  
Eshu slept in the house –  
but the house was too small for him.  
Eshu slept on the verandah –  
but the verandah was too small for him.  
Eshu slept in a nut –  
at last he stretch himself.  
Eshu walked through the groundnut farm.  
The tuft of his hair was just visible.

If it had been for his huge size,  
 he would not be visible at all.  
 Lying down, his head hits the roof.  
 Standing up, he cannot look into the cooking pot.  
 He throws a stone today and kill a bird yesterday (Beier,  
 1970:28).

As revealed in this *oríki*, Èṣù is an incredibly complicated and multidimensional personality that does not have a particular nature that can be held on to. Èṣù can concurrently be opposites at the same time. He may be large and small, visible and invisible, right and wrong. The *oríki* also portrays Èṣù as a figure of intense activities, powerful, yet gentle, high and low, swift and immobile, present and absent. To the outsider, these are contradictory nature; to Èṣù devotees however, this is in perfect accordance with his essence and nature. Èṣù is worshiped by his devotees that are found almost in every part of the world especially, in areas where Yoruba people reside. His worshipers place him in a position of guardian and have faith in his protective strength and benevolent capabilities. They even bear names that show their devotion to him such names include, Èṣúbìyí (Èṣù has given birth to this child), Èṣútòsìn, (Èṣù is worthy of worship), Èṣùgbèmí, (Èṣù has made me to prosper) and Èṣùghámílà (Èṣù has saved me) among others.

Greek and Yoruba mythologies portray Hermes and Èṣù as divine tricksters, mischief-makers and enforcer divinities. Èṣù has both positive and negative attributes; on the positive side, he is believed to be benevolent and kind-hearted to the downtrodden and helpless people. Epega (1931:21) states that “poor men and beggars go to his temples and groves to gather money, articles of food and clothing and other things that are sacrificed to the god.” Epega’s idea corroborates the belief that Èṣù gives financial and moral supports to the needy and the poor (Adekola, 2013:60).

Èṣù, like the Greek Hermes who was the messenger of the gods, is a messenger of Olódùmarè and other divinities. He has a wide array of divine responsibilities. He carries messages of

Olódùmarè to the òrìṣà, and reports back to Olódùmarè the activities of all the divinities as well as that of humans. Falola (2013:5) declares that Èṣù "represents God on earth, administering to the universe and offering the reports of his own activities, and those of the other divinities and humans." Èṣù, in Yoruba traditional belief, is the mediator between the good and evil forces of the world; he is also an intermediary between humans and deities. He has the power to impede the wickedness of the wicked forces as well as bringing blessings of the gods to humans (Awolalu, 1996:29). According to *babaláwo* (ifa priest), as asserted by Pemberton (1977:27), Èṣù assists "in minimizing the presence of death and maximizing the possibilities of life." He is believed to have the knowledge of good and evil, and the wisdom and power to deal with such forces. Describing the nature of Hermes and Èṣù's power, Pemberton (1977:26) explains:

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

Although Èṣù is viewed as a benevolent god by his devotees, on the other hand, he is also a god to be dreaded. The dread of Èṣù inspired a common saying among the Yoruba that '*Èṣù má ṣe mí, ọmọ ẹlòmílú ní o ṣe*' (Èṣù do not harm me; harm another person's child). Yoruba oral tradition holds it that Èṣù is equally dreaded by other divinities. He is believed to possess a power which no divinities can control with the exception of Olódùmarè. Idowu (1996:81) relates an incident between Ṣàṅgó and Èṣù, he said that Ṣàṅgó was making a boast that there was no divinity he could not subdue. Èṣù immediately challenge Ṣàṅgó demanding if he (Èṣù) was included, Ṣàṅgó promptly apologetically responded that Èṣù could not have been included. Èṣù is believed to possess

great power that both his devotees and non-devotees in reverence and fear offer a common prayer as quoted in Falola (2013:11) as follow:

Èṣù ma se mi	Èṣù, do not tempt me
Iwọ lo se olowo to di mekunu	You tempted the rich who fell from grace to grace
Iwo lo se joye to so irukere nu	You tempted a chief who became a commoner
Iwo lo se oba ti won yo loye	You tempted the king who lost his throne
Iwo lo se eniyan ti omo araye so di	You tempted the person who incurred the wrath of were others and became mad
Iwo lo se igi inu igbo ti won fi dana	You tempted the tree that became firewood
Èṣù lo se eniyan to binu pokun so	You tempted the individual who committed suicide
Èṣù to se onifa, o sa pelu opon ifa sodo	You tempted the diviner who fled with his
Oya fun ojo metadinlogun	Divination apparatus to the goddess Oya for seventeen days

Èṣù is also considered as both instigator and master of conflict. He instigates conflicts between humans and among the divinities. There are abundant myths about the roles played by Èṣù in conflicts between husbands and wives, parents and children, priests and gods as well as among the *òrìṣà*. The Yoruba also have the strong belief that Èṣù could be sent on an errand



ready in a suitable place for the blow. Again, he must learn to know by some sign when it is all over! When Èṣù is employed this way, he is called Sigidi or Elegbara (Idowu, 1996: 82)

Apart from invoking Èṣù to deal with one's enemy, Èṣù is also strongly believed to be kind hearted and ready to avenge various injustices done to an individual or a group of people who are powerless to fight back.

### **Hermes and Èṣù in Greek and Yoruba Theologies and Biblical Devil**

The names, Satan and Devil, as used in the Holy Scriptures refer to an angel who rebelled against God. The Bible clearly shows that the creature that came to be known by the name Satan, the Devil, did not always have the names (Insight, 1988:866). He was given these descriptive names because he stands in opposition and resistance to God. The name he had before is not clearly given in the scripture but it is evident that before becoming Satan, he was a perfect and righteous creature of God (Insight, 1988:866-887). The account of the book of Job, chapters one and two, portrays Satan as appearing before God, thus supporting the belief that he is a spirit creature. He is described as the father of lies and source of all evil. Before his rebellion, there was no evil in heaven and on earth. But after he induced Adam and Eve into rebelling against God and later some other spirit creatures called angels, the birth of evil into the world was heralded (Insight, 1988:866).

Èṣù, the Yoruba counterpart of the Greek god, Hermes, has been equated to Satan in the Biblical narratives as completely devilish in behaviour and action. Johnson (1960: 28) refers to Èṣù as 'Satan', the Evil One, the author of all evil. Johnson's notion is contrary to the Yoruba belief of source of evil. Generally, the Yoruba believe Olódùmarè to be the architect of both good and evil, hence the sayings: *tibi tire la dá'lé ayé* (the earth is created

against one's enemy. In order to do this, a ritual method is followed. According to Yoruba oral tradition, Èṣù loves drinking palm-oil while he hates palm-kernel oil (*àdín*). The suppliant pours the palm-oil on the emblem of Èṣù and plea for favour and protection for himself and his family. Then, he takes the *àdín* and says: 'Èṣù, this is palm-kernel oil, I am aware that this is not your food and I dare not give it to you, but so- and- so (the name of the enemy is mentioned) has demanded that I give it to you even though he is aware that it is not your food.' And there he pours the palm-kernel oil on the emblem and asks Èṣù to go and avenge himself (Idowu, 1996: 82). It is believed that Èṣù would react immediately the ritual is carried out. However, Idowu explains that the suppliant has to observe certain precautions in case it backfires, he declares:

He (the suppliants) must not go to sleep until he has made sure that Èṣù has completed his errand. There are two ways of making sure of that. He must prepare a 'tip' ready for when Èṣù returns from his errand. This he will know by a certain sign. It is when Èṣù has returned and received his 'tip' that he as the suppliant is free to give his attention to anything else. But supposing the enemy is stronger and has protected himself against the suppliant's propitiatory remedy which may change the wrath of Èṣù into favour towards him. Then, since the cudgel of Èṣù raised must not be lowered unused, Èṣù will return to demand why the suppliant has sent him out on a fruitless pursuit, and that means that the blow will now be dealt at him. The suppliant therefore should anticipate the probability of this happening and prepare an acceptable substitutionary victim – a fowl or an animal –

with good and evil). The notion of dualism of good and evil here is that the world is created in pair of opposites and one cannot exist in the absence of the other. With this concept of dualism, in Yoruba traditional belief, Èṣù is not conceived as the source of evil.

Many Yoruba scholars have different opinion concerning the nature of Èṣù; some argue in support of Johnson's notion that Èṣù is the same as Satan in the Bible, while others argue against the concept. Oguntola-Laguda (2013:93-94) argues in opposing the notion of equating Èṣù with Biblical Devil, he asserts:

Before Christianity and Islam arrived in Yorubaland, Èṣù was worshipped by the people as a divinity who must be properly propitiated for Olódùmarè to be at peace with humanity. Thus, the worship of Èṣù is universal among Yoruba, whether in Africa or in the diasporas. The universality is due to the belief that all rituals and worships directed to Olódùmarè through all divinities must pass a critical inspection by Èṣù who is the personage in charge of rituals and worship. As the bailiff of heaven, even divinities are afraid of Èṣù as he is well-trusted by Olódùmarè... With advent of Christianity and Islam into Yoruba religious space, the conversation on Èṣù changed. It became affected by these religions' conceptions of the Devil or Shaytan. To the Christians, the Devil is against the salvation plan of God. He tempts people and leads them astray against the plan of God for mankind. The misidentification of the Devil with Èṣù is further strengthened by the translation of the Bible into the Yoruba language. Èṣù is taken as the equivalent of the Devil and Satan...

From the above, Oguntola-Laguda believes that the advent of Christianity and translation of the Bible from English language to Yoruba brought about the misidentification of Satan, the Devil of the Bible, with Èṣù of the Yoruba.

Idowu (1996:81), on the other hand, argues that even though there is an unmistakable element of evil in Èṣù for which reason he has been “predominantly associated” with evil things, he cannot be called the Devil in the New Testament sense. Put in another way, Idowu tries to bring out a conceptual difference between Èṣù and the devil in the Bible, claiming that “what element of ‘evil’ there is in Èṣù can be found also to some degree in other divinities” and juxtapose Èṣù’s nature as follow:

The most that we can gather from the evidences of our oral traditions is that he takes mischief-making as his ‘hobby’, just as any person corrupted by power which seems uncontrolled may find sadistic relish in throwing his weight about in unsympathetic, callous ways. He is not the personal embodiment of evil standing in opposition to goodness (Idowu, 1996:81).

Here, Idowu tries to justify the elements of evil nature of Èṣù that equates him with the biblical devil as those that can be found in other divinities, but going by the biblical standard, other divinities with such evil nature are not considered to be on the side of God, rather they are viewed as rebels and are called ‘the demons’ (Insight, Vol. 1; 1988:61). Idowu is not alone on this notion; it appears Awolalu is in tandem with him. According to Awolalu (1979:28), Èṣù is not outright evil in the sense that the Devil is portrayed in the Bible and Qur’an. He declares:

Èṣù is neither the ‘devil’ of the Christian concept nor the ‘shaitan’ of the Muslim faith. The ‘devil’ or ‘shaitan’ in the two religions is

outright evil, but this is not so with Èṣù in the Yoruba belief... Èṣù is not the personal embodiment of evil standing in opposition to goodness (Awolalu, 1979:28).

Both Idowu and Awolalu use the account of the book of Job chapters 1 and 2 to defend their thoughts concerning Èṣù and Satan. To Idowu especially, Satan could not do anything without the permission of God. Since Satan was permitted by God to test Job's faithfulness with calamitous affliction, Satan here cannot be tagged evil. As far as Idowu is concerned, "Satan has no absolute will of his own. He is not independent but acts with the express permission of God (Idowu, 1966:24).

Dopamu does not agree with Idowu and Awolalu that Èṣù is not outright evil or that Èṣù is concurrently good and bad. For Dopamu, Èṣù is Satan. He defends the choice of the missionary of Èṣù as Satan and concludes that declaring Èṣù as Satan is not the "figment of their imagination" but:

the factual basis of the evil tendencies associated with Èṣù made it more reasonable to identify him with Satan, and render it more compatible with the devil. In the same vein, the Yoruba Muslims identify Èṣù with Iblis or shaitan (Dopamu, 2000: 40).

With this, Dopamu believes that with the gamut of evil things connected with Èṣù, there is no point distancing him from Satan and Devil of the Bible. For Dopamu, it is safe to equate Èṣù with Satan. Abimbola (2006: 49-50) disagrees totally with Dopamu and the missionaries' notion of connecting Èṣù with Satan the devil. He is of the opinion that:

Èṣù is a neutral element in the sense that he is neither good nor bad... Because of Èṣù's neutrality and the fact that he is neither

benevolent nor malevolent, he is regarded as an *orisa*.

He believes that Samuel Ajayi Crowther intentionally adopted Yoruba traditional names in his translation of the Bible into Yoruba. In agreement with this view, Falola (2010:27) suggests that in the process of translating the Bible into Yoruba, some words were either transcribed or transliterated and one of such casualties is Èṣù. He declares:

One god was particularly unlucky, the respected gatekeeper to heaven, the king of the crossroads, Èṣù, the chief, the rebel was retained in the Bible as Satan. Èṣù can never mean the biblical Satan – their homelands and power are far different. As Èṣù got into the Bible and spread with Christianity, the old Èṣù suffered in the process, with his name soiled and damaged, destroyed forever. The Supreme Being is luckier than His subordinate officer, Èṣù (Falola, 2010:27).

Here, Falola is of the opinion that the Yoruba Èṣù has been maligned by equating him with the Biblical Satan. Dopamu (2000: 52) agrees that Èṣù fights against humanities and not against God, Satan, on the other hand, fights against God and humanities. With Satan's stark opposition to God, conceptually, he cannot be the same as Èṣù of the Yoruba traditional religion that attracts devotees. Falola believes that Èṣù is a victim of evolutionary accretions which altered human knowledge of reality and cosmos. Hence, he states:

All religions respond to change, including indigenous ones. New prophets and religious leaders can appear on the scene; new movements can be born; new ideas can influence the interpretation of religious

When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they cried out in the Lycaonian language: “The gods have become like humans and have come down to us!” And they started calling Barnabas Zeus, but Paul Hermes, since he was taking the lead. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance of the city, brought bulls and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifices with the crowds.

This Biblical reference now depicts Hermes, who has earlier been traced to share so much with Èṣù, to be of a benevolent identity and personality and evidently different from the Biblical Satan while Èṣù, on the other hand, has been identified as the Biblical Satan. This differing accounts and narrative perspectives make one ask the question: Are, the Yoruba Èṣù, the Greek Hermes and the Biblical Satan possibly one and the same entity? A logical response will be a no, given the dissimilar representation of Èṣù and Hermes in the Christian theology. This article therefore submits that the three socio-religious entities should be captured as being unique personalities of their respective socio-religious domains.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the personalities of Hermes and Èṣù as socio-religious divinities among the Greek and Yoruba people respectively in a sort of comparison with the Devil of the Christian theology. Hermes and Èṣù exhibit the highest number of similar traits in the pantheons of the ancient Greek and Yoruba gods. Both of them are considered agents of a supreme God in whose service they are and to whom they are answerable. They both have their strengths and weaknesses as divinities who have been vested with power by the supreme God. Literatures on Hermes and Èṣù do not generate arguments and will make both

entities pass as likely counterparts of their respective communities.

The bone of contention in this essay however is the differing representation of this similar entity in the Christian theology. The Christian theology has represented the Yoruba Èṣù as the Satan of the Bible with the attendant bad image and surprisingly reckons with Hermes, whose personality has been likened to that of Èṣù in many regards. This article therefore aligns with the existing thoughts that the description of Èṣù as the Biblical devil is the consequence of misrepresentation by the personage who translated the Bible into Yoruba, especially given that the Bible reckons with Hermes with whom Èṣù shares so much in personality. Therefore, this paper posits that the socio-religious entities are best appreciated uniquely as variously depicted in their theologies.

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