



## Gender Representation in the Motifs and Literary Arts of Èṣù

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**Abstract.** This study probes the representation of gender in the motifs and literary arts of Èṣù, a revered figure in Yorùbá culture. It argues that gender representations in human beings are equally found in Èṣù literary arts. The paper observes that gender representation in Èṣù motifs vis-a-vis its literary arts have semiotic implications in the Yorùbá worldview. It also understudies the interplay between Èṣù motifs and its orature as reflected in human life. The study employs the theoretical framework of the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure of 1974 and the gender of Goffman of 1977-1978 to analyze, describe, and interpret the sign portraying gender in Èṣù motifs and literary arts. Through a semiotic analysis, we uncover the symbolic meanings and gendered connotations embedded in Èṣù's iconography and literary depictions. This study reveals that Èṣù's motifs and literary arts perpetuate and challenge traditional gender roles, reflecting the complexities of Yorùbá gender dynamics. By applying Saussure's semiotic theory and Goffman's gender framework, we demonstrate how Èṣù's gender representation influences human gender structure and cultural identity. This study contributes to our understanding of gender representation in African cultural heritage, highlighting the significance of Èṣù's motifs and literary arts as a reflection of human experience.

**Keywords:** *Gender Representation, Èṣù, Literary Arts, Semiotics, Yorùbá Culture.*

## INTRODUCTION

Èṣù is one of the distinguished divinities among the four hundred and one (401) Yorùbá pantheons. Èṣù is one of the primordial divinities who descend from invisible Earth to the visible Earth. It is scholarly argued that Èṣù is one of the top-ranking divinities and he is the one saddled with the responsibility of intermediate between human being, the Irúnmọ̀lès and Olódùmarè. Scholars like Ìdòwú<sup>1</sup>, Simpson<sup>2</sup>, Dòpámú<sup>3</sup> and Saadu<sup>4</sup> affirm that Èṣù is the messenger of Olódùmarè who reports all happening on Earth to Olódùmarè on a daily basis. He is so powerful and can be malevolent and benevolent to other divinities that is why no divinities can operate successfully without firstly appeased Èṣù. Èṣù is a fundamental Òrìṣà and of great importance in Yoruba land. There is no shrine you will get to in Yoruba land where you will not see the image or a representation of Èṣù. There is no true babaláwo that doesn't have ojùbọ̀ Èṣù and in some town in Yorùbá land, you find at the entrance of the town or area. That is to show how important and powerful Èṣù is. It is observing that Èṣù of Yoruba beliefs is different to satani and Shaitan of Christianity and Islam religions respectively.

In the rich cultural heritage of the Yorùbá people, Èṣù stands as a revered figure, embodying the complexities of gender dynamics. As a trickster

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<sup>1</sup> Ìdòwú Ìdòwú, E.B. (1962). *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*. African: Tree Press, L.I., NY.

<sup>2</sup> Simpson Simpson, G.E. (1994). *Yorùbá Religion and Medicine in Ìbàdàn*. Ìbàdàn: University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Dòpámú Dòpámú, A. (2000). *Èṣù the Invisible Foe of Man. A comparative study of Satan in Christianity, Islam and Yorùbá Religion*. Ìjèbú-Òde: Shebíotimọ̀ Publications.

<sup>4</sup> Saadu Saadu, T. (2021). *Forms and Contents of Èṣù-related Poetry in Ọ̀yọ̀ and Ọ̀sun States of Nigeria (Àgbékalè àti Àkóónú Ewì Ajemésù ní Ípínlè Ọ̀yọ̀ àti Ọ̀sun ní Nàìjíríà)*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Department of African Languages and Literatures, Obáfémi Awólówò University, Ilé-Ife.

deity, Èṣù navigates the binaries of male and female, blurring the lines between traditional gender roles. This ambiguity is reflected in the motifs and literary arts that depict Èṣù, inviting us to explore the semiotic significance of gender representation in these cultural artifacts.

Gender representation in Èṣù's motifs and literary arts offers a unique window into the Yorùbá worldview, revealing the cultural constructs and social norms that shape human gender structure. Through a critical examination of these representations, we can uncover the ways in which Èṣù's gender fluidity challenges and reinforces traditional gender roles, contributing to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in Yorùbá culture.

This study aims to unravel the symbolic meanings and gendered connotations embedded in Èṣù's iconography and literary depictions, shedding light on the ways in which gender is constructed, perceived, and performed in Yorùbá society. By exploring the intersection of gender and culture, we hope to illuminate the significance of Èṣù's gender representation, both in the context of Yorùbá cultural heritage and in the broader landscape of gender studies.

## THEORETIC FRAMEWORK

This research uses semiotic theory for analyse approach. Scholars like; Peirce<sup>5</sup>, Eco (1976)<sup>6</sup>, Barthes<sup>7</sup> (1961), Morris<sup>8</sup> (1980), Danesi and Perron<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rosella Fabbrichesi dan Susanna Marietti, *Semiotics and Philosophy in Charles Sanders Peirce*, Cambridge Sholars Publisihing, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Umberto Eco, *a Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes. (1961). *Elements of Semiology*. (Trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith). London: Jonathan Cape.

<sup>8</sup> Milos Bogdanovic, *Philosophical Implications of Morris' Semiotic Theory*, Philosophy and Society Journal Vol 31, No 1, 001-038.

<sup>9</sup> Marcel Danesi and Paul Perron, *Analyzing Cultures*, Indiana University Press, 1999.

(1999) and Chandler<sup>10</sup> (2003) have worked on semiotics, but this work falls within the theoretical framework of semiotics theory of Ferdinand de Saussure of 1974. The choice of this theory is based on the fact that that Ferdinand De Saussure is the founding father of semiotics theory. Sausurian conception of semiotics recognizes the linguistic signs used in human communication. Peirce (1931) is in tandem with Sausurian concept when he opined those human beings are meaning-makers who make meanings through their creation and interpretation of signs. It is worthy of note that semiotics theorist believes that man and everything in his environment are signs; thus, they are meaning potentials. Peirce even extends his philosophical semiotic position to human ideas saying that ideas are also signs.

However, Barthes (1961) opinion on semiotics bridged the gap between Saussurean and Peirecian. He employs the Saussurean lexical term “semiology” but adopts the Peircian conceptual scope of semiotics. Barthes (1961) opines that semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits, images, features, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual convention or public entertainment; these constitute, if not language, at least systems of signification<sup>11</sup>. Morris (1980) defines semiotics as the study of sign, which is initially subjective, as a result of which the discipline cannot offer any universal “theoretical assumption, model and empiricist”. He observes that semiotics did not only later become publicized and conventionalized but also interspersed with syntactic, semantics and pragmatics based on their respective reflection on language rules and meanings<sup>12</sup>. Eco (1976) conceptualizes

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<sup>10</sup> Chandler J, *The Efficacy of Various Kinds of Error Feedback for Improvemnet in the Acurancy and Fluency*, Journal of Second Language Writing, Vol 12, 2003, 267-296.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*...4.

<sup>12</sup> Milos Bogdanovic, *Philosophical Implications of Morris' Semiotic Theory*...23.

semiotics as a field that has come to teach that reality is a construction. That is, reality is a system of signs that cannot be taken for granted as purely objective, independent of human interpretation. (Eco, 1976:7), once it is imbued with meaning potentials. Sign, in semiotics particularly, is seen as a subjective or an individual property<sup>13</sup>. Because meaning is subjective, it thus takes time for members of a speech or cultural community to establish it. In other words, men create meaning out of the available forms of signs sometimes in an immeasurable gradual manner. Those meanings are based on how we interpret our world based on values and experience and make them understandable to others through representation and communicative structures.

Peirce (1931), semiotics entails a triangular relationship among sign, its object and its interpretation Semiotics signs objects Meaning interpretation. Peirce states that signs are in forms of words, images, sounds, odors, flavors, acts or objects. He maintains that signs are what they are – ordinary, until they are invested with meaning! Peirce asserts that nothing whatsoever is a sign until it is interpreted as a sign. Interpretation therefore is a meaning-investing mechanism which relates a sign form to a familiar system of conventions or concepts. Peirce's scope is wider than Saussurian linguistic aspects of signs. This is because the former does not only subsume graphitic code but also go beyond to encompass all objects that have meaning-potentials. It is deducible therefore that "everything .... can be taken as a sign, even though could be a sign". Peirce opines that a sign is any communicative code system; linguistic and non-linguistic. He views signs from triadic angles.

Peircian perceptions of semiotics heavily rest on signs, objects, and meaning. The meaning of a sign in a certain motif is interpreted as its spiritual

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<sup>13</sup> Umberto Eco, *a Theory of Semiotics*...45.

meaning. The relation between the symbol and the meaning of the motif has a spiritual implication on either of sender or receiver. Our focus in this paper entails icons, symbols, and indexes. Each of these three passes through his earlier mentioned trio-semiotic processes; the sign (form) the object and the interpretation. Icons: This type of sign resembles its objects in a way. It shares one or more characteristics or properties of its object.

Peirce (1931) classifies icons into three and refers to them as hypo-icons. These are images, diagrams, and metaphors<sup>14</sup>. Signs are therefore any perceptible or non-perceptible signifier shared by a community. Indexes: In this type of sign, the relationship between a sign and its objects is not resemblance-based. Rather, an index shares a direct physical connection with its object. For instance, a clock is an index of time and money is an index of wealth. Indexes could be inferred or observed. Consider the following indexes (i) Natural signs. (Smoke, echoes, footprints) –indexes of life. (ii) Medical symptoms (pain, rash, pulse rate) – indexes of disease or ill health. (iii) Instruments (a mace, directional signpost) – indexes of authority and existence of a place respectively. (iv) Personal trademarks (handwriting, catchphrase) – indexes of an individual. This work is not meant to review semiotics in detail, but to relate the semiotic and spiritual interpretation Àrokò within the confined of Yoruba cultural belief system.

## **RESULT**

### ***Èṣù in the Yorùbá Mythology***

Èṣù is an emissary of Olódùmarè. Èṣù, the prime negotiator between negative and positive forces in our lives and the World. He was trustworthy, kind, and loyal to Ọ̀runmìlà. Èṣù is a divine messenger, A channel that takes

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<sup>14</sup> Rosella Fabbrichesi dan Susanna Marietti, *Semiotics and Philosophy in Charles Sanders Peirce...*Hlm 17.

all iwure and Ebo to Olódùmarè. Èṣù is the approver and bearer of sacrifices to Orun, he is the gateway. That's why it is on Ọpón Ifá to show how relevant he is and strong bond between Èṣù and Ọrunmíla (Babaláwo). There is no place you see Ifa that you won't see Èṣù, they work hand in hand. Èṣù is the right-hand man to Ọrunmíla; Èṣù makes it his duty to see perfect completion of all Ọrunmíla does and always there to help Ọrunmíla run errands. Èṣù is a law enforcement officer, He is the “inspector general” or the confidential secretary of Olódùmarè, which makes the final recommendation to Olódùmarè for approval. He also reports on regular basis to Olódùmarè on the deeds of men and divinities, incorrectness of worship in general and sacrifices in particular.

Èṣù is very sincere and always brings the truth to light in every situation, very knowledgeable, full of wisdom and fortune. He makes sure things are done appropriately and stands in place of justice. He prosecutes defaulters and sees that the other party gets proper justice, he is never biased or unruly as described by people of other faith. Mistakes were made during the translation of bible in English to Yoruba by Samuel Ajayi Crowther. That is the notion we want to change about Ọrìṣà Èṣù. I implore everyone to stop seeing African spirituality as evil or labelled idol worshippers, Isese lagba and has been in existence since creation. We are peace loving, we don't segregate, we clamour for peace everywhere and every time, we believe in humanity, we believe in Olódùmarè the supreme being. Èṣù is not Satan, Èṣù is not Lucifer, Èṣù is not evil, Èṣù is not troublesome, Èṣù doesn't bring ill luck, Èṣù is not responsible for terrible things people do. Èṣù is a truth seeker, Èṣù is a divine messenger, Èṣù stands for equity and justice. Èṣù is very important not only for humans, but each Ọrìṣà, Èṣù is very important also. Who else would take our prayers and rituals to Olódùmarè and all Ọrìṣà? Who else would bring our

blessings from Olódùmarè and all Òrìṣà to us? Understand Èṣù role in our lives and his duties as assigned by Olódùmarè.

### ***Concept of Motifs and Literary Arts***

A motif is an element or idea that recurs throughout a work of literature. Motifs, which are often collections of related symbols, help develop the central themes of a book or play. For example, one of the central themes in *Romeo and Juliet* is that love is a paradox containing many contradictions. As part of developing this theme, Shakespeare describes the experience of love by pairing contradictory, opposite symbols next to each other throughout the play, such as night and day, moon and sun, crows and swans. All of these paired symbols fall into a broader pattern of "dark vs. light," and that broader pattern is called a motif. The motif (in this case "darkness and light") reinforces the theme: that love is paradox. Some additional key details about motifs: Because motifs are so effective in communicating and emphasizing the main themes of a work, they're common in political speeches as well as in literature.

There are actually two working definitions of motif: one that defines motif as a special kind of symbol and one that draws a greater distinction between the two terms. We'll explore both definitions below. You may have heard the word "motif" used to describe repeating patterns outside the realm of literature. In music, for example, a motif is a short series of notes that repeats throughout a song or track. In art, a motif is a design or pattern that repeats in different parts of an artwork, or in different works by the same artist. While these additional meanings of motif are useful to know, motifs in literature function differently and have a slightly more specific meaning. **Motif Pronunciation** Here's how to pronounce motif: moh-teef **Motifs in Depth** In order to understand motifs in more depth, it's helpful to have a strong grasp of a few other literary terms related to motif. We cover each of these in depth



on their own respective pages, but below is a quick overview to help make understanding motif easier. A theme is an abstract and universal idea, lesson, or message explored throughout a work of literature. It's what the writer is trying to say about life and human experience in general, beyond the scope of what happens in a particular story. Motifs, while they often reinforce themes, are different in the sense that they are both more concrete and more specific to the work in which they appear than themes. A symbol is anything that represents another thing. We encounter symbols constantly in our everyday life: a red light is a symbol for stop, a dove is a symbol for peace, and a heart is a symbol for love. A literary symbol is often a tangible thing -an object, person, place, or action -that represents something intangible, like a complex concept or emotion. For instance, in Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, the "two roads (diverging) in a yellow wood" are symbols for two different life paths

### ***Èṣù Motifs***

Èṣù motifs are his emblems that described him physically and metaphysically. According to Yorubá myth, the first emblem of Èṣù is Yangi (a kind of stone). It was gathered that Ọ̀rúnmìlà borrowed orí (destiny or lucky) from Èṣù and this helped Ọ̀rúnmìlà to become famous. When Èṣù asked that his orí be returned, Ọ̀rúnmìlà instead gave him a Yangi (Èṣù stone) putting it outside to be worshipped (Simpson 1981). Another fashion of Yorubá myth about Èṣù learned from Ifá Corpus (Èjì-ogbè) as narrated by our informant Babaláwo Awólówò Awógbílè the Àràbà of Ìkà-Ọ̀ràngùn in Èjìgbò Local Government of Ọ̀sun State in Southwest Nigeria, claims that when Ọ̀rúnmìlà pretended to have died in order to know who among all divinities that is truly love him. It was only Èṣù Ọ̀dàrà that stood by Ọ̀rúnmìlà and decided to die with him. While Èṣù was about to bury himself alive in the front

of Ọ́rúnmìlà's house, it remains only his head when Ọ́rúnmìlà surfaced from his hideout but Èṣù said he has decided to die because of Ọ́rúnmìlà thus he cannot change his decision. Èṣù buried himself alive in the front of Ọ́rúnmìlà's house. This giant stride taken by Èṣù Ọ̀dàrà made Ọ́rúnmìlà love Èṣù and mandated all his Ifá apprentices to; put Yangí at the spot to mark where Èṣù Ọ̀dàrà died. And that they should also have Èṣù emblem (yangí) at front of their house. They should worship Èṣù and always sacrifice for Èṣù before embarking on anything. Since then, Yangi has become a famous emblem of Èṣù Ọ̀dàrà. Other emblems of Èṣù are clay, wooden figure or stuffed figure and mention but few. Wooden figure as one of the emblem and motif of Èṣù is our topic of discussion here. These motifs represent the person of Èṣù both in figure and character.

The debate about Èṣù's gender is a fascinating aspect of Yoruba cultural and religious studies. While some scholars argue that Èṣù is masculine, others, like the Babaláwo in Lálùpọ̀n, believe that Èṣù is feminine and the wife of Ọ́rúnmìlà. In Yoruba mythology, Èṣù is often depicted as a messenger between the divine and human realms, responsible for conveying sacrifices and prayers to the Orishas. The gender of Èṣù may influence how we understand their role and relationships with other Orishas. Simpson's research (1980) highlights the diversity of perspectives within Yoruba culture, and the importance of considering multiple viewpoints when exploring complex cultural and religious beliefs. Simpson (1980:18) opines that:

*Èṣù is Ọ́rúnmìlà's wife, a rascally Ọ̀rìṣà used by Ọ́rúnmìlà to cause trouble especially to stimulate quarrels and enmity between people. At one point she becomes so crafty and wayward that Ọ́rúnmìlà sent her away, but he had no peace of mind. He consulted a diviner who told him that unless he found where Èṣù was hidden, he would not cease to have trouble. He was told to*

*make a drum. Ọ̀rúnmìlà took the drum to the home of Alára and said "Taragba, taragba, taragba, taragba aragaragba takuta, Ìwà ni à n'wá o, ìwà níbo ni e ti rí ìwà fún mi, o ìwà? (Mystical sounds that cannot be translated, iam looking for ìwà (Èṣù) Do u see ìwà?). He did not find her there. Whenever the heard the drum people gathered around him. He went to the home of Ajerò and repeated the song but he did not find her there. He went to the home of Ọ̀ràngún and repeated the song. When Èṣù heard the song, she ran out and followed Ọ̀rúnmìlà home.*

In the excerpt above, our focus is not on the myth's authenticity but on supporting the notion that Èṣù is Ọ̀rúnmìlà's wife, as Simpson suggests. By examining the metaphorical comparison between Èṣù and ìwà, we can conclude that ìwà brings out the Èṣù qualities in everyone. This perspective has shaped the Yoruba view of women, as seen in the common saying "Èṣù ni obinrin" (Women are Èṣù), which describes women's clever and cunning behavior. This characterization is also reflected in Èṣù orature and motifs, which portray women's physical and personality traits.

Although Èṣù is considered a male divinity, like Ọ̀rúnmìlà, Ọ̀gún, Ṣàngó, and Ọ̀bàtálá, but yet it is imperative to note that there are certain significances in his image that distinguished him from other divinities. Notably, Èṣù Ọ̀dàrà stands out among Yoruba divinities, as his representation encompasses both sexes in his image, character, and orature - a unique feature not found in other divinities. This work demonstrates that the gender representation in Èṣù motifs extends beyond artistic or aesthetic value, holding profound semiotic implications for human life.

### ***Gender Representations in the Motif of Èṣù***

The motifs of Èṣù feature gender representations that depict stereotypical gender roles and displays. However, the gender of Èṣù remains ambiguous, as the available images in the Yoruba public domain do not clearly indicate the deity's gender. This ambiguity has led to controversy among Yoruba divinities, making it challenging to categorize Èṣù as exclusively male or female. Instead, Èṣù can be considered transgender, as the imagery and motifs do not conform to traditional gender binaries. Interestingly, Èṣù's behavioral patterns, particularly cunning nature, that is often associated with feminine qualities, as evident in the Yoruba saying "o ni obìnrin nílẹ̀ o so pe o ko ni Èṣù" (you have a woman at home, yet you claim you don't have Èṣù) highlights the association between Èṣù and feminine qualities. Interestingly, despite this cultural reference, some depictions of Èṣù, such as the image below, show the deity in a masculine form, further blurring the lines between gender representations.

**Fig. 1**



The motifs above feature a distinctive phallic hairstyle at the back of the head, suggesting Èṣù's masculine gender. This masculine representation

is echoed in the excerpt from Èṣù's praise poem, where a chanter proclaims that:

|                          |                            |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| Èṣù Láàlú                | The Èṣù láàlú              |
| Láàlú ògiri òkò          | Láàlú the one of brick and |
| stone,                   |                            |
| Ògiri okó                | The brick-like phallus,    |
| Ò-sùn-sílé-fògo-tìkùn    | The one who sleeps at      |
| home and blocks the door | with a sacred staff (ogo). |

The phallic image of Èṣù, as seen in the excerpt above, reinforces the notion that Èṣù is male. This phallic representation is sometimes substituted with a sharp knife tip (*sonso abe*), which holds significant meaning in the Èṣù song below:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Lílé: Àfí sónsò abẹ                     | Lead (Lílé): Unless it's a sharp knife |
| tip (sónsò abẹ)                         |  |
| Egbe: Àfí sónsò abẹ                     | Chorus (Egbe): Unless it's a sharp     |
| knife tip (sónsò abẹ)                   |  |
| Líle: Barákéré ò lórúkú èjò             | Lead (Lílé): Barakere has no case      |
| Egbe: Àfí sónsò abẹ chorus:             | Chorus (Egbe): Unless it's a sharp     |
| knife tip (sónsò abẹ)                   |  |
| Líle: Èṣù Ọ̀dàrà ò lórí à n gbẹ̀rù lé o | Lead (Lílé): Èṣù Ọ̀dàrà has no         |
| burden on his head                      |  |
| Egbe: Àfí sónsò abẹ                     | Chorus (Egbe): Unless it's a sharp     |
| knife tip (sónsò abẹ)                   |  |

Fig.2



The image of Èṣù playing a flute, depicted as a male figure, reinforces his masculine gender representation. This image holds significant symbolic meaning in the worship of Èṣù, showcasing his role as the coordinator of ritual activities. As a central divinity in Yoruba religion, Èṣù plays a crucial role in inspecting worship and rituals, making his approval essential for any act of worship to be accepted by Olodumare. His worship is therefore vital and can be either spontaneous or organized. While people may pray to avoid Èṣù's wrath, saying "may God never let us face the wrath of Èṣù," the Babalawo must perform his worship in a systematic and organized manner.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Èṣù's motifs and literary arts reflect the complexity of human experience and his spiritual role, which transcends gender boundaries. As the most universally revered figure in Yorùbá belief, Èṣù possesses deep knowledge of human life and challenges binary gender norms through iconography and poetry that depict both masculine and feminine characteristics. By highlighting the intersection of gender, mythology, and spirituality, this research demonstrates that Èṣù not only represents complex gender identities but also embodies the diversity of gender expressions in African cultures. These findings challenge Western gender assumptions, open new perspectives in gender studies, religious studies, and

African cultural studies, and emphasize that a nuanced understanding of gender is essential to appreciating the rich heritage of Yorùbá traditions.

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