

POWER OF THE TONGUE: FROM TRADITIONAL YORÙBÁ CULTURE TO
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LIFE

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I. Role of Prophecy in My Life

“Watch what you prophesy,” my mother always said to my angsty teenage self.

With the expectation that a religious sermon would be the repercussion for a few harmless words, my teenage self prepared for the speech that would soon come after any negative talk.

Over the years, I became accustomed to hearing that ever-so-dreadful phrase– “watch what you prophesy”– whenever I said something that didn’t resemble positive thinking.

How could one be so positive in a world filled with hate and negativity?

Quite frankly, I would have instead heard my mother yell at me or send me to my room rather than cause me to channel my thoughts and emotions with a more constructive approach. I was often pretty reclusive because of this. I interpreted her words as a sign of dismissal and an attempt to silence my thoughts for being unproductive. To me, it felt as though I was being told that expressing my truest emotions was a fault that was my responsibility to rectify. After all, how could a few instances of negative self-talk here and there cause detriment to my life?

Growing up in a Christian household with two Nigerian immigrant parents, maintaining Yorùbá culture was at the forefront of every lesson imprinted on my siblings and I. Of utmost priority was always speaking with positive intentionality to use verbal manifestation as a way to express what we desired. This could be something mundane such as, “For the current school year, I will maintain an ‘A’ average” or a more career-oriented goal such as, “In 5 years, I will be named senior VP of my company.” Notice that this approach doesn’t constitute “I wish” or “I hope” statements because these desires act like declarations of what *will* be soon to come.

From a parental perspective, this belief in the power of the tongue – the ability to speak life and death into the universe and determine your reality – was crucial for better understanding

my culture as well as my sense of self. I was never one to believe much in the power of verbalizing my manifestations or an advocate for the power of words in general. One particular story recently told by my grandmother, however, effectively demonstrated to me the power of prophecy.

This winter, I had ample opportunity to sit down with my maternal grandmother who traveled from Nigeria to stay with my family in America for the past two and a half months. While I don't ascribe to Christianity or any organized religion as many elder family members do, my grandmother is a truly evangelical woman whose faith and love for others has always shown through her actions. As the Daniel family matriarch, she always makes sure to check up on her family no matter where they are in the world and prays for us every day. Until recently, I never understood why she had such a profound love for life and never failed to lead a life of happiness despite the many obstacles she had either faced or seen firsthand.

One of the first times my Grandma Daniel traveled to America after my parents got married, in 1989 she visited them in New York for a few weeks. As having children soon after marriage wasn't anything out of the ordinary, it came as no surprise to hear that my parents had made up their minds and were trying to conceive children. After returning from a doctor's visit one day, my mother and father discussed with Grandma Daniel that having children would be a complicated process in which the desired outcome may not be possible. While she didn't know to the fullest extent what such complications entailed, my grandmother kept a brave front for her daughter and son-in-law to indicate they shouldn't worry because this situation was already predetermined to work in their favor.

At this moment, she removed herself from the apartment and took a walk around Mosholu Park to process what her daughter and son-in-law had told her. The sun was shining and

flocks of birds idly chirped; she splashed her face with water from a nearby fountain to wash away her tears; the sensation of the dewy water did little however to help her recover from her sadness. She wasn't one to cry often, but tears were constantly filling her eyes as she wondered why such a complex situation was occurring for her daughter and what this would mean in terms of having future grandchildren. Unsure of what to do besides relying on the faith that carried her so far, she prayed; her prayer was a rather simple one: to be shown the outcome that was meant to happen concerning her daughter – even if it contradicted her expectations/desires. In return, she felt a wave of relief and was even more certain that her daughter –my mother– would have the children she desired in this life as it was already destined to occur. Shortly thereafter, my oldest brother was born. Over eight years, my three older siblings and I were born and have grown in our own ways to find our purpose in life and lead as examples of the greatest prophecy our family has known.

Feelings of gratitude encompassed every part of my body after hearing Grandma Daniel speak with such certainty at a time when she could have easily taken what the doctor said and lost all hope. It is quite likely that nobody would have blamed her for believing in what doctors had forewarned. But still, her insistence to speak life despite the unknown made all the difference.

When we think of the power of positive manifestation, works like the notorious book, *The Secret* (2006) by Rhonda Byrne, may come to mind. Byrne argues in this book that we have only to think positively, and we can have whatever we want. However, this is an example of vulgar positive thinking. *The Secret* is an inaccurate portrayal of how manifestation and intentionality work together. Byrne and others who adhere to this similar line of thinking fail to acknowledge that destiny is not something that just happens because one speaks life or death

onto something. A positive mindset needs to be paired with both action and an acceptance of fate. Grandma Daniel's story teaches one to open themselves up to prophecy and let divinity come to them with answers rather than projecting her own thoughts and intentions onto a given situation.

Seeing as prophecy helped bring me into this world, I can attest that there is an immense amount of power behind speaking life into the universe and visualizing what you want with the belief that outcomes can be unexpected. While my past has been riddled with disbelief and struggling to understand why thinking and speaking with positive intent matters, in the future I intend to use manifestation to become a vessel for love and resilience to obtain everything that I desire out of life.

II. Crossroads as a Transition

Imagine you're awaiting a decision regarding your dream job; you've invested hours in rounds of interviews with the manager and other heads of the company. The unconscious parts of your brain never let a day go by without reminding you that being hired for this position before you reach your 30th birthday would make all the previous struggles worthwhile.

You've got this, or so you tell yourself as if to affirm that what you want is already yours to claim.

From this point forward, you believe that absolutely nothing can go wrong.

Perhaps the call never arrives and you're wondering if they've moved on with another candidate. And if so, why would they implant a seed of false hope into your mind when your time could have been more suitably given elsewhere?

This is the formation of your crossroads, the pivotal point in your life where you must make a life-altering decision based on faith rather than fear. It's intimidating to know that no matter which path you choose, nothing will ever be the same.

So where do you look for guidance on what to do next?

This is where the role of a Yorùbá Orisa comes into play. In Yorùbá culture, Orisas are spirits governed by an omniscient creator to guide humans toward a fruitful life. Temitope Adefarakan's "'At a Crossroads': Spirituality and The Politics of Exile: The Case of the Yoruba Orisa" discusses this very concept through the Orisa, Èṣù, and his role in delivering divine messages. Specifically, Èṣù carries importance as "the deity of the crossroads that sits, stands, and also does some traversing of its own between and with/in the material and spiritual worlds" (Adefarakan 32). Through his position as an intermediate between humans and the omniscient creator, Ọlọrun/Olódùmarè, Èṣù possesses an adept ability to employ chance and bring change to those who find themselves at a fork in the road.

While a common interpretation for many Yorùbá Christians is that calling on Èṣù warrants an evil, trickster spirit that shows "what people prayed would not happen to them and their loved ones – i.e. sickness, failure, loss of employment, death, poverty, etc." (Adefarakan 31), this depiction is often rooted in ignorance of what Ifá, a traditional Yorùbá religion, and system of divination, represents. More accurately, Èṣù represents the power of intentionality and reception that are required for manifestation to take place in one's life. Rather than imposing his own will on how he believes humans should conduct themselves, he acts as a mere enforcer of divine rules. In doing so, humans are left with the responsibility of using their own discernment to navigate critical life decisions, with Èṣù serving as the messenger communicating what needs to be done.

III. Èṣù as a “Master Dialectician”

In a 2018 roundtable conversation hosted by The Nexus Institute entitled, [“Is Christianity A Force For Evil?”](#) several commentators weighed in on the matter of missionaries' insistence on spreading Christianity throughout the world as a way to increase European influence. Of the individuals selected to discuss their stance on the matter was the acclaimed poet, playwright, essayist/novelist, and the first African to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, Wólé Ṣóyínká. Known globally for his unabashedness when talking about the damage done to his home country of Nigeria at the hands of British colonial rule, Ṣóyínká uses this conversation to reflect on how Christianity has often been used to negate the importance of traditional religious belief systems, as reflected in the commonly perceived outlook of Yorùbá deities such as Èṣù.

In regarding Èṣù as a “master dialectician” ([“Is Christianity A Force For Evil?”](#)) who is “unpredictable and can upset the best-laid plan of mice and men” ([“Is Christianity A Force For Evil?”](#)), Ṣóyínká acknowledges the common misconception that Adefarakan and many other scholars have observed when it comes to the deity. Yet, his hard-hitting stance goes one step further in explaining that the unpredictability Èṣù is often seen embodying is a direct result of the human condition rather than an imposition of his own will. The Christian misinterpretation of Èṣù as merely the devilish or Satan-like figure disrupts the formative ethical structure of the traditional Yorùbá religion and belief system. This is especially harmful in that it forwards the idea that traditional religious beliefs and systems of divination can only be legitimized through Eurocentrism rather than their own moral codes and ways of being. Considering possible avenues for resolution, the conversation ends as Ṣóyínká discusses the importance of establishing “ethical conduct among communities” ([“Is Christianity A Force For Evil?”](#)) by understanding the larger context of how Christianity impacted Africa as a whole.

Significantly, Šóyínká's argument highlights the role of Èṣù as what he calls a "master dialectician," ("[Is Christianity A Force For Evil?](#)") partly because of his ability to represent the duality of mankind. While he can be equated with a trickster spirit, that does not make him mean-spirited in nature. Rather, he acts as a mirror that reflects one's intentions as manifested in day-to-day activities. Similar to many Yorùbá Orisas, Èṣù is keenly aware of human desires and interactions and often relies upon logical reasoning to decipher critical situations in the most appropriate manner possible. Thus, his fundamental nature is to be neither good nor bad, as his mode of communication acts as a mirroring of the human state of mind and is determined by the disposition of others in any given set of circumstances.

Šóyínká centers Èṣù's meaning in a philosophical debate about human nature and intentionality. The power of language in this debate is not foreign to contemporary European thought. However, we see the question of intentionality and language the figure of Èṣù raises for Šóyínká more in the academic study of linguistics than in theology or religious studies. In particular, in his 1975 book, *How to Do Things with Words*, English moral philosopher and linguist J.L. Austin suggests that language itself can have trickster or prophetic properties.

In *How to Do Things With Words*, Austin refers to a concept known as "performative utterance" (Austin 4) to explain how words can also be actions in their construction of reality. A performative utterance can be defined as an expression that is neither considered to be true nor false but is rather verbally communicated through the act of doing. To illustrate this, Austin states, "When I say, before the registrar or altar, 'I do', I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it." (Austin 5). The intentional use of the word 'indulge' indicates that one fully gives themselves up, surrendering to God/universe to intercede in the couple's matrimony even as they bring this reality into being with the words "I do." This utterance from saying "I do" is an

extension of the mind because when words that connote a ‘positive’ intention are used, it can then materialize into something positive when the action follows behind it. In other words, the belief behind the statement allows for the desired action to be then generated. Just as Èṣù is manifested through human intention in the example above, here Austin’s example suggests the positive possibility of language for making an action happen.

Let’s consider an example of the power of words as action: You’ve had an unfortunate day where it feels as though absolutely nothing is going in your favor. Losing out on the promotion you thought was secured and dealing with an intense breakup with your partner of six years is enough to send you spiraling into madness, wondering when things will get better. Drinking the sorrow away doesn’t help, and getting into the car after stating that “nothing here matters anymore” causes you to verbalize the destruction of your life within a matter of seconds.

If you think otherwise, however, your fate might be different.

This is yet another example of how a “performative utterance” (Austin 4) can construct reality as words operate in conjunction with action. In other words, this is also a moment you meet Èṣù at the crossroads.

IV. Conclusion

In the first footnote of Adekunle Dada’s, “The Interaction of Prophecy and Yoruba Culture in Selected Indigenous Churches,” the African Indigenous Churches use the term “aladura” to refer to a prayerholic who “passionately believes that prayer is an effective panacea for all known ailments” (Dada 167). Popular among the Yorùbá people of the southwest region in Nigeria, an “aladura” is an essential part of the lives of those who ascribe to both traditional Christianity and the conventional Yorùbá religion. Growing up, I often heard this term used for

my grandmother and other family members who have mastered the skill of speaking prophetic ministry to others.

In this way, these people sit at a religious crossroads as they have formed their own independent churches that align with the idea of receiving divine healing through the word of God. Rather than relying on Western practices to alleviate physical and mental ailments, the congregants of these independent churches return to their traditional religious values – even as they worship Christ. While my grandmother and many other family members feel most spiritually aligned with Christianity, they embody what it means to be an *aladura* in the sense that passionate belief in the power of prayer and intentionality has manifested in several real-life circumstances that have spanned several generations.

As the church represents a celestial space for divinity to take hold in people's lives, it is vital to consider the role of prophecy. While "God speaks to them," it would be more appropriate to discuss the way God/religion uses certain people as vessels and speaks *through* them. In the same way, these African Indigenous Churches are dynamic because of how they can foster a deeply intimate connection with God, so too is my grandmother in the way that she is receptive to whatever messages are being channeled to her through prophetic ministry.

Furthermore, *Ifá* and the concept of prophecy/manifestation are fundamental to understanding Yorùbá culture. More specifically, *Ifá* is key to understanding the role of prophecy in shaping my family dynamic and broadening my spiritual understanding. As a second-generation Nigerian-American, delving further into spirituality has allowed me to grow closer to my Christian ancestors as well as those who believe(d) in traditional religion. While I now hold differing views from the heavily Christian values I was raised under and continue to be influenced by, I cannot fail to mention how integral these understandings have been to my

appreciation of both my Nigerian heritage and contemporary American lifestyle. I am a product of the “dynamic and ever-changing” (Olupona and Abiodun 1) nature of such narratives, and I can attest to the social and cultural impact established by following these practices. As I prepare to graduate from college, I know the power of creating my own destiny by opening myself up to what the world has to offer.

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