

Abstract:

The link between Shakespeare and Africa is consistently addressed through the play *Othello*, its depiction of a black protagonist, and its reflection of early modern travel literature. Building upon existing scholarship, this paper moves beyond generic readings of “Africa” to explore the specific parallels between *Othello* and Yoruba culture/myth and establish the intertextuality of those respective traditions. Using Leo Africanus’s *A Geographical Historie of Africa* as a key text, the paper examines the equivocal term “Moor” and its potential specificity to the inhabitants of West Africa and Yorubaland in particular. The essay also revisits early modern travel literature and eyewitness accounts in order to clarify the perception of Africa(ns) in England, while also developing a historical sketch of Yorubaland through oral and archaeological evidence. This exploration leads to a close reading of *Othello* in which intertextual tropes of Africa and specifically Yoruba myth are brought to light. These “points of axis” include the presence of magical objects/juju, the personification of the devil in a character/god, and the presence of a powerful militaristic figure that represents both hero and destroyer. Ultimately, these overlapping points disturb notions of authenticity and allow for the possibility that a specific African culture like the Yoruba is a (re)source for such elitist western traditions as Shakespeare.

From Ògún to Othello:

(Re)Acquainting Yoruba Myth and Shakespeare's Moor

In his text, *Whose Afraid of Wole Soyinka?*, Adewale Maja-Pearce records the prediction of a man called Jeremy Gavron: “‘Give Africa time,’ Gavron prophesied, ‘and one day it may even write poetry’” (qtd. in Johnson 7). This colonialist discourse reflects the skepticism of the early half of the twentieth century regarding the ability of the “dark continent” to produce poetic verse or any other form of high art that is “up to snuff.” It is not my main purpose here to contest the gross inaccuracy of the above statement or to promote “African” poetry as an Other that has been objectified at the hands of a Western discourse. Although those truths may become evident through this essay, I wish to posit a more precise notion of how Africa and its poetry have contributed to and informed the evolution of Western literary ideals.

Using Shakespeare's *Othello* as a comparative text rather than a source text, for that implies both chronological precedence and authenticity, I will examine specific Yoruba traditions and mythological figures in Yoruba culture. This exploration of the rhymes and rituals of an ancient West African people will, I hope, resonate in a critical reading of the Shakespearean tragedy and produce distinct parallels between the respective discourses.¹ My choice of *Othello* as a primary text for this essay is clearly not a random one, specifically because it is that rare example of an early seventeenth-century play that deals with a black protagonist and the trope of blackness. The possibility that such a character was born out of an awareness of Africa and specifically West African people and their traditions is not inconceivable, if only because black people in the seventeenth century

originated primarily in the African continent and European trade with Africa was limited primarily to the western coast. Through this essay, I wish to address not only the notion of a conscious African influence on Shakespeare's part, but also the parallels that can be made between *Othello* and Yoruba myth as oral traditions. The respective uses of parables and double meanings in these traditions, the power of song and poetry, and the fervent belief in supernatural powers all indicate symmetry and perhaps even mimesis between the play and Yoruba culture. This essay will draw upon historical evidence and correlations between characters from *Othello* and characters of Yoruba myth to validate this intertextual analysis.

In order to explore these echoes systematically, I will place *Othello* and Yoruba myth/culture in a historical and geopolitical context while tracking literary devices and tropes paradigmatically through the original Shakespearean verse of *Othello* and specific Yoruba mythological beliefs and characters. It will eventually be necessary to do a further mapping of these devices, tropes, and emerging themes onto other selected play texts in order to broaden the notion of textual symmetry that I am proposing; however, this paper will serve as the preliminary framework for such future exploration in which contemporary adaptations of *Othello* and contemporary Yoruba plays are addressed and factored into the equation.² Ultimately, I hope to affect a tentative balance not only between the elite, predominantly white verse of Shakespeare and the largely undocumented oral poetry of a black, sub-Saharan people, but also ultimately between modern versions of *Othello* and Yoruba myth. This balance will, in turn, prove the intertextuality of these seemingly distanced works and traditions (created across times and continents) and establish the points of axis where they meet. These proposed points

of axis, where the works intersect, is what confirms their relationship as neither binary nor arbitrary but interconnected, or axial.

The process of historicizing a Shakespearean tragedy or the myths and culture of an ancient West African people necessitates omission and thus inadequacy. For this reason, I am focusing only on those aspects of history that are immediately relevant to the play *Othello*, the mythology of the Yoruba people, and the linking of these concepts (or signs) in a historical and geopolitical manner. An exploration of the symmetry between early modern descriptions of West Africa and *Othello* will bring to light the possibility that Gavron's Africa, destined to "one day [...] write poetry," was actually a primary source for a Shakespearean play. By comparing historical accounts of the Yoruba king of Benin, for example, to descriptions of Othello, as well as studying the term "Moor" and its application to both Othello and West Africans, we can begin to establish points of axis where Shakespeare's play and Yoruba culture intersect. Further parallels between the Yoruba belief in magical objects or juju and the supernatural handkerchief in *Othello*, as well as the symmetry between prominent Yoruba gods like Ògún and Èṣù and Shakespearean characters like Othello and Iago, will signify and substantiate the intertextuality I am positing.

Scholarship cites the composition date of *Othello* as 1604 in conjunction with its first recorded performance.³ This date sets the play on the cusp of a new century in Shakespeare's England, where an awareness of Africa and Africans was certainly present—if inaccurate. Queen Elizabeth (who died in 1602 and was succeeded in 1603 by James VI of Scotland) had, in 1601, made her well-known edict for the expulsion of black people from England:

Whereas the Queen's majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her own natural subjects, greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth, *is highly discontented to understand the great numbers of Negroes and blackamoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm since the troubles between her highness and the King of Spain* [author's emphasis]; who are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] [*sic*] the relief which these people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel: hath given a special commandment that the said kind of people shall be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this her majesty's realms; and to that end and purpose hath appointed Casper van Senden, merchant of Lubeck, for their speedy transportation. (qtd. in Little 16)

This passage illustrates the overt racism (to use a term coined in the twentieth century) that was taking place during the early seventeenth century and the perception of black people (specifically Africans, since the edict precedes the global dispersal of black people via the slave trade) as intrusive non-Christians. The edict names population, economy, and religion as primary (and seemingly valid) reasons for removing Africans (as objects) from England. It also plays upon the sympathy of the English as "natural subjects" and "liege people" who are losing their due "relief" to infidels and would stand to gain from the immediate expulsion of "these people."

As a result of its racial division, the edict produces the same series of binary oppositions that Elliot Butler-Evans sets up to establish Othello's Otherness:

The articulation of explicit and implicit bodies of binary oppositions used to identify Othello—European/African, Christian/Moor, fair/dark, civilized/primitive—establishes the textual instance in which Moorishness and blackness are fused to complete a broader and more focused discourse of racial difference and Otherness. (145)

If Shakespeare was not necessarily aware of the Queen's edict and the subsequent banishment of black people from England, he was likely aware of the categorization of black people as an Other (an awareness indicated in *Othello*). I will further state that, far from being coincidental, Shakespeare's construction of the black character, Othello, three years after the edict, was informed by the African's situation in and outside Elizabethan England. Othello, the Moor, epitomizes that category of Other established by Queen Elizabeth or, as Butler-Evans avers, "Othello [...] becomes the symbolic embodiment of the non-European outsider" (143).

Beyond the actual "Negroes and blackamoors" in their midst, Elizabethans relied on literary accounts to inform their ideas about the black race. The *Longman Anthology of British Literature*, for instance, addresses this question of the perception and reception of *Othello* in its day:

What would Shakespeare's audience have thought of the description of Othello as 'the Moor'? Both the play itself and the literature on Africa that was available in English in the early modern period show that 'Moor' was a synonym for 'Negro.' Two kinds of accounts of the Moors and North Africans were available to Shakespeare's audience: a kind of mythical travel literature inherited from such classical authors as Herodotus, Pliny,

and Diodorus Siculus and more recent eyewitness accounts by seamen and traders who had traveled to Africa. While there were still many completely fantastical notions about non-European peoples such as Moors, Africans, and Turks, Leo Africanus's *History of Africa* enlightened sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European and English audiences about the peoples and customs of Africa. (*Othello in Context* 1261)

This passage suggests that Shakespeare was informed by early modern ethnographic literature and asserts the implicit possibility that this awareness of Africans informed the playwright in his construction of *Othello*. The section notes the interchangeability of the terms "Moor" and "Negro," a comparison that is necessary for drawing parallels between Othello ("Moor") and Yoruba culture ("Negro" culture). The text also names mythical travel literature and eyewitness accounts as available literature on Moors.

Othello's own narration of his travels reads as an eyewitness account and mimics the prejudicial ethnography that was being circulated at the time, complete with references to the budding slave trade and "fantastical notions about non-European peoples": "Of being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence / And portance in my travel's history [...] / And of the Cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Grew beneath their shoulders" (*Othello* 1.3.136-44). Here, Shakespeare establishes a strong intertextual link between the play and the aforementioned *Historie of Africa* by Leo Africanus: "There are also people without heads, called Blemines, having their eyes and mouth in their breast" (qtd. in Jordan and Carroll 1264). Andrew Hadfield draws attention to the significant fact that the English

version of Africanus's influential text was published in 1600, only four years prior to the appearance of *Othello* (336).

Scholars have documented the possibility that both the *Historie* and the life of its author served as models for Shakespeare's play:

Leo Africanus's *A Geographical Historie of Africa* continues to be proffered as an important intertext for *Othello* because of parallels not only between the two texts but between Africanus and Othello. Both are Moors who have traveled extensively in Africa, who have been Christianized and embraced within European society, and who have become Europe's own very eloquent authorities on Africa. (Bartels 436-7)

Although the parallel between Africanus and Othello is an important factor in understanding the historical significance of *Othello*, it is the play's relation to Yoruba culture and myth that remains essential for this argument. By correlating *Othello* and historical Yoruba culture, we can establish the symmetry between two very distinct traditions and acknowledge a reciprocal nature to text and tradition, which disturbs notions of authenticity and originality. A brief study of Africanus's text would thus assist in this association of *Othello* and Yorubaland and further establish the relevance of travel literature to Shakespeare's plays and the possibility that Shakespearean text was informed by a source as seemingly distant as Yoruba culture.

It must be noted that, like other versions, the 1600 edition of the *Historie* does not necessarily reflect the original sentiments and meanings of its author, Leo Africanus. Alterations, translations, and the additions of prefaces and conclusions all signify a departure from the original Arabic and Italian manuscripts. John Pory's English

translation, therefore, is half a century removed from the first published edition (which was printed independently of the author, who had completed the work roughly a quarter of a century earlier in either 1524 or 1526). In its general description, the text divides the inhabitants of Africa into five groups: the Cafates, the Abaffins, the Egyptians, the Arabians, and the Moores:

Moreouer this part of the worlde is inhabited efpecially by fiue principall nations, to wit, by the people called Cafri or Cafates, that is to fay outlawes, or lawleffe, by the Abaffins, the Egyptians, the Arabians, and the Africans or Moores, properly fo called, *which laft are of two kinds, namely white or tawnie Moores, and Negros or black Moores* [author's emphasis]. (6)

It is the last category of "Negros or black Moores" (the same category alluded to in Queen Elizabeth's edict) to which Othello is ascribed. Shakespeare introduces Othello as "the Moor" and makes it clear that Othello is not a "white or tawnie Moore" but a "black Moore" by his references to the protagonist's "sooty bosom" (1.2.69) and "black visage" (3.3.384-5). Othello is thus an "African," a "black Moore," and a "Negro" by virtue of the interchangeability of these terms as defined in Africanus's text.

I am relying on these equivalent terms and their geographical specificity to suggest the possibility that Othello (as African/Moore/Negro) can be identified generally with West Africa and even more specifically with Yorubaland. In order to posit this equation, it is necessary to acknowledge the equivocality of the term "Moor" and the debate surrounding its meaning. In his theoretical exploration of *Othello*, Butler-Evans states, "*Moor*, as a sign [...] was somewhat indeterminate for a seventeenth-century audience

and would in all likelihood signify a generalized and vague exotica for general European and American audiences even today” (143). Kim Hall asserts the same ambiguity of the sign in her study of blackness in England: “During the [early modern] period, the designation ‘Moor’ very often stood alternatively for many of these categories [Muslims, Native Americans, Indians, white North Africans, and Jews], especially as it became a general term for the ethnically, culturally, and religiously ‘strange’” (7). Thus, ‘Moor’ becomes an inclusive term applicable to racial and religious Others.

Nonetheless, the term can (and will for the purposes of this essay) be linked specifically to blackness and the black African. Butler-Evans goes on to note, “In *Othello* we see a specific racialization of the term, in which *Moor* signifies not only Otherness but blackness and the various negative associations culturally signified by blackness.

Othello’s ‘thick lips,’ ‘sooty bosom,’ and so forth all become signs, or more significantly signemes, of his ‘Negroness’” (144). Similarly, Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin write, “Although ‘white Moors’ and Moors who have converted to Christianity abound in writings of the period, and although not all Muslims are seen as black, the association of blackness and Moorishness becomes increasingly pervasive” (13). Thus, the parallel between ‘Moore’ and ‘Negro’ remains, as long as the former term is used in a specific context, such as ‘black Moore,’ in order to exclude various Others.

With this parallel in mind, we can return to Africanus’s *Historie* and his account of “Negros or black Moores.” Africanus describes “a diuifion of the land of Negros into feuerall kingdomes” (5) of which he names fifteen, although he acknowledges that there are many more he has not seen. The author locates these kingdoms “for the moft part fituate vpon the riuer Niger” (5) and notes that they have “many other kingdomes

bordering upon the South frontiers of them [...] the governors and inhabitants whereof are most rich and industrious people, great lovers of justice and equity, albeit some lead a brutish kind of life” (5). It is this description of numerous kingdoms and their geographical location in West Africa that strongly supports the probability that Africanus was talking (at least partially) about Yorubaland. Although the majority of the kingdoms he names are situated in the present north of Nigeria (which is Hausaland), his mention of “many more” Southern kingdoms is directly applicable to the numerous independent monarchies that comprised Yorubaland at that time.



The reference to the governors and inhabitants of these kingdoms as “lovers of justice and equity” accurately describes the elaborate judicial system that the various Yoruba kingdoms had in place and that revolved around the central ruling figure and his court: “The government of a Yoruba kingdom and its capital [...] presents a complex and somewhat confusing picture, mainly because of the fusion of political, judicial, and religious concepts and the division of responsibilities” (Smith 116). The *Historie* thus defines Negroes (black Moors) as West Africans, particularly those living along and below

the Niger River. In the specific context of this passage, the black Moor (i.e. Othello) is equated with Negro, a term for the inhabitants of the numerous kingdoms along and below the Niger. Since that geographical area includes the historical site of Yorubaland, ‘black Moore’ becomes a possible synonym for the Negroes inhabiting that locale (the Yoruba).⁴

Africanus does offer a precise description of the prominent Yoruba kingdom of Benin, in which he echoes his earlier reference to “a brutifh kinde of life” among the Southern kingdoms but also notes the almost divine status of their rulers:

Westward from the countries laft mentioned lyeth the kingdome of Benin, hauing a very proper town of that name, and an hauen called Gurte. The inhabitants liue in Idolatry, and are a rude and brutifh nation; notwithstanding that their prince is ferued with fuch high reuerence, and neuer commeth in fight but with great folemny, & many ceremonies: at whofe death his chiefe fauorites count it the greateft point of honour to be buried with him, to the end (as they vainely imagine) they may doe him feruice in another world. (42)

The allusion to idolatry reflects the Yoruba belief in gods and the personification of those gods in statues, a concept that I will refer to in my exploration of juju and fetishism.

Benin is also the subject of the following excerpt from an English seaman’s eyewitness account, published in 1555 in Peter Martyr’s *Decades of the New World*. This description of the royal court of Benin is consistent with Africanus’s account (which indicates some measure of accuracy) and could easily have served as a blueprint for Othello’s character:

When they came they were brought with a great company to the presence of the king [of Benin], who being a black Moor (although not so black as the rest) sat in a great huge hall, long and wide, the walls made of earth without windows, the roof of thin boards, open in sundry places, like unto louvers to let in the air. And here to speak of the great reverence they give to their king being such that if we would give as much to our Saviour Jesus Christ, we should remove from our heads many plagues which we daily deserve for our contempt and impiety. (qtd. in *Othello in Context* 1263)

The passage describes a “black Moor” (previously defined as a Negro, a West African, and in this context, a Yoruba) in a role of power and the adulation he receives from his court. Shakespeare’s *Othello* parallels this passage as a play about a black Moor who is also in a powerful role (that of general) and who is equally revered by the people of Venice and Cyprus as a valiant and noble leader. When summoned to the council chamber of the Venetian elders, Othello seems to hold court, much like the Yoruba king described above, as he retains the attention of all present with his tale of love: “Yet, by your gracious patience, / I will a round unvarnished tale deliver” (*Othello* 1.3. 89-90).

The staging of *Othello* is, therefore, notably similar to the description of the Moor in the passage. The formal introduction to Othello’s tale and the performative aspect of his narration reflects the orality of African culture, which “writes” history through the art of storytelling. Elizabeth Isichei notes the importance of oral tradition in reconstructing African history:

Historians are increasingly conscious of the way in which oral traditions are shaped both by the way in which human memory operates and by the fact that they are always related for an audience. The tendency for the concrete rather than the abstract to be remembered contributes to the crystallizing of event and processes as clichés. Feedback from an audience helps make the testimony a collective product. (11)

Once more, there is the clear possibility that Shakespeare's knowledge of Africa, informed by such texts as Africanus's *Historie* and Martyr's *Decades of the New World* (whether first or second-hand), was a key factor in the composition of *Othello*.

Africanus's description of Benin goes on to discuss the established trade between that kingdom and a number of European nations: "There hath bin great quantite [of pepper] fecretly conueied from thence by the Portugals: as *likewife the Englifh* [author's emphasis] and French nations, and of late yeeres the Hollanders haue had great traffique into thofe parts" (42). The English seaman's account also addresses this trade, specifically between the king and Portuguese merchants. These references to commerce reflect not only European relations with the West African coast but also the progressive state of West African and, specifically, Yoruba kingdoms in and prior to the sixteenth century.

The trouble with juxtaposing Yoruba history alongside English history is that both were conceptualized by the same historians. As Isichei points out, "African history has been written either by westerners, or by Africans trained in western traditions" (21). This factor necessarily affects my attempt to place Yoruba myth in a historical context, because citations of Western discourse cannot be countered by recorded observations

from the Yoruba perspective.⁵ Thus, my presentation of Yoruba history and its correlation to Shakespearean text unintentionally but necessarily becomes a product of Western discourse. A lack of literary records, however, does not mean a lack of records. In his study of Yoruba kingdoms, Robert Smith asserts, “The past of the Yoruba of West Africa [...] must be reconstructed, so far as the period preceding the penetration of their country by Europeans from about the mid-nineteenth century is concerned, almost wholly from tradition, or ‘oral evidence’ in the cumbersome phrase” (ix). Although there are discrepancies between “European sources and [...] indigenous traditions” (Law 47), scholarship and oral/archaeological evidence have produced at least a generalized notion of West Africa’s precolonial history.

By the time *Othello* appeared in 1604, Yorubaland, which matched England in size, was an assemblage of established political kingdoms with distinct laws and recognized dynasties. The term “Yoruba” was originally a specific reference to the Oyo kingdom and did not become an umbrella term for the various kingdoms until the nineteenth century (Isichei 249). These independent kingdoms were hierarchical societies governed by an *oba* (“divine ruler”) and his chiefs. The kingdom usually had clear boundaries, a capital town, and even provinces, depending on its size. The principal occupations of the people were farming and crafts, although priests, soldiers, and slaves were all significant members of the kingdom’s infrastructure and both festivals and wars were common (Smith 109-119). Interaction with Europeans was limited to coastal trade but Robin Law’s historical study of the Oyo Empire notes that “during the seventeenth century, the Dutch, French, and English all established permanent trading stations in the Whydah area” (15). This rudimentary historical framework indicates a heterogeneous people who

have since been homogeneously categorized according to language and “a body of shared religious concepts and socio-cultural patterns” (Isichei 249). It is the notion of a common Yoruba pantheon, however, that is essential to this study of specific mythological deities and the mapping of those deities onto a Shakespearean text. This mapping will reinforce the notion of intertextuality and present potential paradigms for characterizations in *Othello*.

The demarcation between myth and history in Yorubaland is notably blurred but the origins of the Yoruba kingdoms are all consistently traced to the town of Ile Ife or Ife: “A common origin of the Yoruba kingdoms is the existence over the whole country of a cycle of myths and legend which purports to describe the creation of the world and its people and the foundation at Ile Ife, the world’s centre, of the first kingdoms” (Smith 11). Although the establishment of this ‘cradle of civilization’ by an *òrìṣà* (“god”) is generally accepted, the name of that *òrìṣà* varies according to different traditions. The most widely spread version involves Odùduwà (also called Odua), and his descent from heaven to create the earth and found Ife. Other versions of the myth attribute the founding of Ife to Obatala, an *òrìṣà* that is sometimes interchangeable with Odùduwà and sometimes cast as his brother or follower. Yet another variant of the myth indicates that sixteen elders or princes descended with Odùduwà and lived with him in Ife. These elders (who are synonymous with Odùduwà’s children/grandchildren in certain traditions) then became *òrìṣàs* in their own right and founded other Yoruba kingdoms, thus establishing a genealogical link between the independent monarchies and instituting Odùduwà as a common ancestor.

From and along with this creation myth (which has many variants) comes ‘the enormously rich world of Yoruba myth and ritual’ (Isichei 250), featuring hundreds of *òrìṣàs* and as many tales about them. There are, however, a limited number of greater deities who are ‘best known and most widely served where traditional religious life survives’ (Courlander 5). These *òrìṣàs* (some of whom were among the original sixteen elders) are patrons or personifications of specific natural phenomena and are sometimes hailed as early rulers of the Yoruba kingdoms. As a significant black pantheon that was already in place long before the seventeenth century, the *òrìṣàs* represent an important reference point for a powerful black figure like Othello.

There are a number of significant points in the *Othello* text where Yoruba beliefs are relevant. Although Shakespeare’s portrayal of magic and unseen forces within *Othello* is not founded in traditional African beliefs, strong ties remain evident between Othello’s acknowledgement of supernatural powers and the rituals of Yoruba religion. In order to clarify this argument, it is necessary to introduce the concepts of fetishism and juju. Both of these terms are linked to West African religions and Yoruba beliefs in particular, and imply the investing of an inanimate object with magical power.

E. Idowu notes in his study of Yoruba theology that, ‘according to the history of the word [fetish], it was first introduced by the Portuguese to describe the charms and sacred emblems of West Africa. The word signifies ‘that which is made’ (2). Idowu also addresses the historicity of the word ‘juju’ as a possible derivative of the French term ‘jo u-jou’ meaning ‘toy’ (2). Richard Dennett offers an alternative source for ‘juju’ in the Yoruba phrase, *Èṣù pù*, meaning ‘Little Devil’ (192).⁶ And both Gascoigne Lumley and Robert Nassau, a missionary to West Africa in the nineteenth century, note the

interchangeability of the two terms, fetish and juju. Lumley states, “The term ju -ju means the same as fetish [...]. It is not a native African word, but is derived from the French *jeu*, a play” (Hives and Lumley vi) and Nassau writes:

‘Fetich’ is an English word of Portuguese origin. It is derived from *feitico*, ‘made,’ ‘artificial’ (compare the old English *fetys*, used by Chaucer); and this term, used of the charms and amulets worn in the Roman Catholic religion of the period, was applied by the Portuguese sailors [...] to the deities they saw worshipped by the Negroes of the West Coast of Africa [...]. The native word on the Liberian coast is ‘gree -gree’; *in the Niger Delta*, ‘*ju-ju*’ [author’s emphasis]; in the Gabun country, ‘monda’; among the cannibal Fang, ‘bian’; and in other tribes the same respective dialectic by which we translate ‘medicine.’ (81)

In Yoruba religion, these reversible terms thus connote the endowed supernatural properties of a specific constructed object. Shakespeare’s text provides a critical example of a fetish or juju in the form of the famous handkerchief that Othello gives to Desdemona.⁷ The supernatural implications of the handkerchief go far beyond its ritualistic construction by a witch and its oral empowerment by a diviner, although these factors alone qualify it as fetish/juju and link it with traditional Yoruba religion.

The Egyptian (hence African) “charmer” who bestows the handkerchief on Othello’s mother can “almost read the thoughts of people” (3.4.57 -8) and articulates the power of her gift to seduce men or drive them away. This character forms an interesting double for the Yoruba diviner, an important member of Yoruba society who interprets myth and serves as a priest for the *òrìṣà*. The process of divination and geomancy in Yoruba

society involves the consultation of nuts, cowries, or shells and the recitation of verses. Systems of divination are numerous and highly complex; however, the role of the diviner is relatively consistent as the connection between the people and their deities:

The babalawo constitutes a focal point in the traditional Yoruba religion, channeling sacrifices and worshipers into different cults, recommending sacrifices to the dead or means of dealing with witches [...] and preparing protective and retaliatory ‘medicines.’ He helps his clients deal with the wide range of personalized and impersonal forces in which the Yoruba believe, and to achieve the individual destinies assigned to them at birth.

(Bascom 12)

Although Shakespeare does not elaborate on the circumstances of the meeting between the charmer and Othello’s mother, there is the suggestion that she has approached the charmer as a client or suppliant who wishes to preserve her husband’s fidelity. The charmer produces the handkerchief, which corresponds to the Yoruba diviner’s preparation of magic or *ôgùn* (“medicine”). Like the diviner’s medicine, which is synonymous with juju, the charmer’s handkerchief has been ritualistically constructed:

There’s magic in the web of it. / A sibyl that had numbered in the world /
The sun to course two hundred compasses, / In her prophetic fury sewed
the work; / The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk, / And it was
dyed in mummy which the skillful / Conserved of maidens’ hearts.

(3.4.69-75)

The use of specific bodily fluids in the preparation of the handkerchief and its construction in “prophetic fury” directly parallels Nassau’s description of fetish -making:

A fetich, then, is any material object consecrated by the [...] magic doctor, with a variety of ceremonies and processes, by virtue of which some spirit becomes localized in that object, and subject to the will of the possessor. Anything that can be conveniently carried on the person may thus be consecrated,—a stone, chip, rag, string, or bead [...] . There is a relation between these selected substances and the object to be obtained by the fetich which is to be prepared of them,—for example, to give the possessor bravery or strength, some part of a leopard or an elephant; to give cunning, some part of a gazelle; to give wisdom, some part of a human brain [...]. In preparing a fetich the [magic doctor] selects substances such as he deems appropriate to the end in view,—the ashes of certain medicinal plants, pieces of calcined bones, gums, spices, resins, and even filth, portions of organs of the bodies of animals, and especially human beings (preferably eyes, brain, heart, and gall-bladder) [...]. These are compounded in secret, with the accompaniment of drums, dancing, invocations, looking into mirrors or limpid water to see faces (human or spiritual, as may be desired). (82)

Othello's handkerchief qualifies as a consecrated "material object" and "can be conveniently carried on the person." The handkerchief is also prepared with specific substances that are "appropriate to the end in view." The sibyl's choice of the fluids drained from embalmed maidens' hearts is clearly linked to the handkerchief's ability to keep maidens desirable for their husbands. The sibyl's "prophetic fury" can likewise be linked to the "drums, dancing, [and] invocations" which Nassau describes above.

The benevolent properties of the handkerchief are conditional upon its retention within Othello's family. Desdemona's consequent loss of the article (and its repossession by Iago) initiate the malevolence of which the charmer warns Othello's mother: 'If she lost it / Or made a gift of it, my father's eye / Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt / After new fancies" (3.4.60-63). Thus Othello, in fulfillment of the curse, begins to loath his wife and pursue the fancy of murdering her. James McPherson identifies the handkerchief as "of *great* symbolic significance to the play" (59) and posits it as a form of witchcraft, which Othello expressly denies using to woe Desdemona: '[Othello] refutes the charges against him, of witchcraft and betrayal of loyalty, by placing his story within a literary convention, or form, familiar to the Duke and his senators [...]. But the 'rational' nature of his speech [...] causes Othello to omit any reference to the handkerchief he had given Desdemona" (58-9).

The mapping of Yoruba belief onto the handkerchief transforms it into a manifestation of witchcraft (juju), which comes in contact with several people and negatively affects them as a result of its mystical properties and origins. It is important to note that, in concurrence with the concept of juju, the handkerchief is not animate or dangerous in and of itself, but rather it operates through the actions of those who handle it: 'The owner 'does not worship his fetich, but regards it as a little bit of property which cannot but be of service to him through its supernatural powers"' (Farrow 122).

The concepts of fetishism/juju and the role of the Yoruba diviner are all grounded in Yoruba mythology, which revolves around the *òrìṣà*. Thus, it becomes necessary to return to the *òrìṣà* as the source of religion and ritual and attempt a mapping of specific

òrìṣà onto characters from *Othello* to prove further the intertextuality of these traditions and locate the axial points where the traditions meet.

A preliminary example of mimesis between an *òrìṣà* and an *Othello* character is evident in a reading of Ògún and the protagonist, Othello. Because Ògún is the *òrìṣà* of iron, his role includes patronization of war and warriors: “The Yoruba term for war, *ogun*, is related to the term for the deity, Ògún, in spite of tone differences [...]. The root *ogun* is found in *ounogun*, weapons; *ológun*, brave warrior; *olóriogun*, general of the army; *àwon omogun*, army; and *òpá gun*, war staff. Oral traditions also stress Ògún’s military exploits” (Barnes 31).⁸ The literal interpretation of Ògún as “general of the army” directly parallels Othello’s position as a general in the Venetian army. Similarly, the emphasis on “Ògún’s military exploits” forms a clear link with Othello, who is elevated for his military endeavors: “And little of this great world can I speak / More than pertains to feats of broils and battle” (1.3.86-7).

Notably, both of these figures are assigned shifting roles as heroes/destroyers. Barnes writes of Ògún, “He is a fierce, angry, vengeful god, negatively linked with destruction, but because of his bravery and opportunism, positively credited with innovation and discovery. Paradoxically, he is perceived both as a benefactor and a pariah, a leader and a recluse” (7). Othello, who is originally esteemed by the Venetian elders for his skill in leadership and warfare, adopts an equally paradoxical role as the violent murderer of his wife, prompting the character, Lodovico, to lament, “O thou Othello that was once so good, / Fall’n in the practice of a cursèd slave, / What shall be said to thee?” (5.2.287 -89).

Another, more extensive “point of axis” that correlates the *òrìṣà* to characters from *Othello* is the personification of the devil, a trope that manifests itself in the Yoruba

divinity, Èṣù, and Othello's nemesis, Iago. Èṣù is one of the primary *òrìṣàs* in Yoruba myth and personifies a number of abstract concepts, including chance, accident, and unpredictability (Courlander 10). Harold Courlander describes him as "the force of randomness and whim that defies certainty and turns fate aside. When Èṣù appears there is a flaw in the sequence of events, a disruption of heavenly intention that causes men to turn into unforeseen trials and tribulations" (6). This portrayal of Èṣù also describes Shakespeare's Iago, a character who vindictively alters the lives of others and prompts Othello to ask, "Who can control his fate?" (5.2.262).

As a malicious, trickster-like figure, Èṣù is often paralleled with Satan and dreaded by those who worship him. Despite the existence of a malevolent force in many theological beliefs, this particular deity exemplifies a number of traits that link him significantly with Shakespeare's Iago. Introduced simply as "a villain" in the cast of characters, Iago represents the diabolical element of the play. Like Èṣù, Iago is the hierarchical subordinate of another prominent character and serves as the intermediary between his superior and other characters. Iago is Othello's "ancient," a position of secondary military status; although, through the course of the play, he also becomes Othello's informer, confidante, and eventually lieutenant, while consistently playing the underlying role of nemesis: "In following him, I follow but myself. / Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming so, for my peculiar end [...]. I am not what I am" (1.1.55-62).

This complex link between Iago and Othello is mirrored in the relationship between Èṣù and Òrúnmìlà. E. Bolaji Idowu points out that "Èṣù was created to be the right-hand divinity to Òrúnmìlà. It is his duty to run errands for Òrúnmìlà; he must be always in attendance upon him and act under his orders" (80). Any dissatisfaction on Èṣù's part,

however, results in vengeance: "In return for the service which Èṣù gives to Òrúnmìlà Òrúnmìlà feeds him. But whenever he is not satisfied with the feeding, he takes it upon himself to spoil the works of Òrúnmìlà" (80). Just as the discontent Èṣù "takes it upon himself to spoil the works of Òrúnmìlà," Iago, who has been passed over for a promotion, appoints himself as an instrument of vengeance and plots to ruin Othello's life: "The Moor is of a free and open nature, / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, / And will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are. / I have't. It is engendered. Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light" (1.3.390 -95).

Iago's extensive plot, which culminates in several deaths, seems out of proportion with his reason for extracting revenge, indicating an intuitive malevolence that is part of his role as "villain." Iago's wife, Emily, unconsciously describes her husband's innate wickedness when she is attempting to explain Othello's jealous behavior: "I will be hanged if some eternal villain, / Some busy and insinuating rogue, / Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office, / Have not devised this slander" (4.2.129-32). The image of the "eternal villain" is again mirrored in Èṣù and his association with evil: "There are those who say that the primary function of Èṣù in this world is to spoil things [...]. When a person commits any deed which results in unpleasantness or harm to himself or his neighbor, the Yoruba immediately say, *Èṣù l' o ti i*—'It is Èṣù who stirred him'" (Idowu 83). This saying indicates the supernatural power of the *òrìṣà* to take possession of a human being and control his/her actions. Iago, however, exhibits a similar preternatural power in his ability to utterly control Othello, which suggests an inhuman dimension to his character: "The discovery of Iago as 'devil' confirms Othello's religious Otherness as he comes to understand that the devil has 'ensnar'd his soul and body'"

(Burton 58). Othello can only explain his own actions and Iago's malice through Iago's demonization: "I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable / If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee" (5.2.282-83).

As a representation of the supernatural devil, Iago's mortality is called into question ("I cannot kill thee") and then tested when Othello stabs him. His survival ("I bleed, sir, but not killed") becomes further evidence of his incarnation as the devil. Iago acknowledges his own supernatural abilities when his deceitful words send Othello into a stupor. Othello, confronted with the graphic image of his wife having intercourse with another man, punctuates his horrified muttering with, "O devil!," before entering a trance (4.1.41). Iago, ironically addressed as "devil" through Othello's rambling, responds with, "Work on, My medicine, work!," a statement that recalls my earlier discussion of juju and casts Iago as a diviner. Iago's use of "medicine" and his role as diviner directly parallel Èpù's function as magician and patron of divination: "Much of what Èpù does is done through magical transformations, which he accomplishes by clapping his hands, throwing dust and clapping his hands, blinking his eyes, and pointing his staff or *medicine* [author's emphasis]" (Bascom 106). As the *òrìṣà* of chance, Èpù is also significant in some traditions of divination as "the one who taught Ifa how to divine" (Bascom 107), thus reflecting Iago's role as a diviner who creates magic/medicine.⁹ The last notable parallel between Iago and Èpù, which emphasizes the symmetry of these characters (and thus the overlapping devil motif and its specific representation), is their linguistic abilities. Iago's supernatural power as devil and diviner stems from his use of language: "Lacking a sphere of influence within the civil and military hierarchy, Iago locates his power in the manipulation of discourse" (Fulz 198). Èpù, the patron of

languages, exhibits the same discursive ability and carries messages to the supreme *òrìṣà* Olorun (Courlander 10). His tendency to confuse meaning and compose false reports (like Iago), however, enhances his power and inspires fear and respect in his worshippers.

Through these axial points of intertextual affiliation between Shakespearean text and Yoruba myth, I have attempted to demonstrate not only the symmetry of two very distinct traditions but also the possibility of an extant discourse between these traditions. While it is unlikely that Shakespeare was aware of the specific overlap between tropes in *Othello* and tropes in Yoruba oral culture, this does not negate the intertextuality of these respective traditions. Given the exigencies that have structured early modern historical and critical scholarship where representations of Africa (and specifically Africans) are at stake, the possibility remains that, on some level, one tradition informed the other as a marginalized aspect of early modern intercultural relations. This essay addresses the likelihood that *Othello* was constructed through knowledge of “the dark continent” and perhaps even informed by literature that documented the traditions and beliefs of African people.

Such cultural interplay would constitute a form of intertextual discourse and prove that, like the epigraphs cited at the beginning of this paper, discourse can be an unconscious and seemingly arbitrary process, but still result in dialogue and cultural exchange. The first epigraph, a citation from *Othello*, was written presumably in 1604 by an English playwright, while the second, a proverb, evolved as part of the oral tradition of a West African people; remarkably, these contrasting discourses respond comprehensibly and logically to each other. Even as Othello blames the position of the moon for his actions, a Yoruba voice replies cynically from across space and time that if the moon is

too close for his comfort, perhaps he should climb up to move it. And it is precisely by locating those points where texts and traditions literally speak to each other, that we begin to realize the interconnected nature of diverse works and cultures and to reconsider notions of originality, authenticity, and influence. By acknowledging the possibility that *Othello* was constructed through an awareness of Africa, we can shift notions of Shakespeare as an “authentic” source, and instead view his works (and other early modern texts) as products of intertextual influences and even adaptations of global traditions.

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It is the very error of the moon.
She comes more nearer earth than she was wont
And makes men mad.
(*Othello* V.ii.108-10)

Eni ti kò báféibi tí òpàwà, kò gòkèlò gbêkúrò níbè
He who is dissatisfied with the position of the moon, should climb up to move it.
(*Nigerian Proverb*)

Notes

¹ Robin Law asserts in a historical study of Yoruba kingdoms that ‘archaeological evidence demonstrates the antiquity of human settlement in Yorubaland, while linguistic evidence suggests that the Yoruba (in the sense of speakers of the Yoruba language) have long occupied their present homeland. The Yoruba have probably lived in Yorubaland for some thousands of years’ (26).

² Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet*, Duro Ladipo’s *Oba Waja* and Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are Not to Blame* are twentieth-century play texts for future study. Sears’s African-Canadian drama is a contemporary adaptation of *Othello* while Ladipo and Rotimi’s plays represent different schools of twentieth-century Yoruba theatre.

³ The New Cambridge Edition of *Othello* explains the reasoning behind the date 1604: ‘The earliest evidence of the date of *Othello* is the record of a performance at court found in the Accounts of the Master of the Revels of the time, Edmund Tilney, for the year 1604’ (I).

⁴ Biodun Adediran describes the land occupied by the ‘Kwa’-speaking people (Yoruba being classified under this language sub-group) as the ‘large area of West Africa between the Niger Delta in the east and the Volta in the west,’ and specifies the location connoted as Western Yorubaland: ‘It extends from the Oyan (a tributary of the Ogun River) westwards to the basin of the river Mono which [...] can be taken as the western boundary of Yorubaland. From the Atlantic Ocean in the south, the region extends to latitude 9° north where it merges with Borgu. From a coastal belt just north of the

intricate system of lagoons which surround the town of Porto Novo, western Yorubaland extends northwards towards a depression which runs from west to east” (2-3).

⁵ The Yoruba language remained unwritten until the 1840s although there was possibly a minor level of literacy in Arabic among select individuals of the northern Oyo people (Law 12).

⁶ Èṣù, the dreaded *òṣìṣà* of life and death, is often paralleled with the biblical Satan or Devil.

⁷ Lemuel Johnson presents the handkerchief as *juju* in his study of *Othello*: “Othello soon discovers that not even this *juju* of a handkerchief will do the trick where he now finds himself” (171).

⁸ Barnes’s claim that Ògún (*òṣìṣà*) and *ogun* (war) have the same etymology is disputable, but I have retained the quote for its methodology and its value in establishing the strong connection between the *òṣìṣà* and war, and thus between the *òṣìṣà* and *Othello*.

⁹ Ifa, the *òṣìṣà* of divination, is often interchangeable with Òrúnmìlà.