

Trabajo Fin de Grado

African Mermaids, Gods, and Rings: A Journey
across the Yoruba Realm through the Lens of
YA Fiction Archetypes.

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Abstract

Natasha Bowen's *Skin of the Sea* is a perfect example of how the new wave of young adult narratives uses fantasy to expand knowledge of other cultures—in this case, Yoruba culture and its people—adapting African gods into young adult archetypes. For this novel, Bowen chose to focus on the myth of the Orishas rather than the historical context of the early 1400s. This allows exploration of the religion and culture's depth; using the Orishas as characters, we get to interact with them, fight with them, and understand them, reimagining them as dynamic figures who serve as both protectors and disruptors of the natural order. The author highlights the resilience and depth of Yoruba spirituality, illustrating how myth and belief systems continue to shape narratives of identity, power, and resistance. We observe how protagonist Simidele's journey with characters such as Yemoja and Esu explores the full spectrum of human emotions, including love, jealousy, anger, and sorrow, while each Orisha maintains its mythological essence—Oya as the fierce rebel of justice, Sango as the embodiment of divine retribution, and Olokun as the forgotten outcast—yet they also take on new symbolic significance within the context. This is because Bowen took the myth and adapted it to fit YA archetypes, making it easier for young people to connect with this culture. Her interactions with the Orishas explore the tension between moral responsibility and cosmic law, showing how Yoruba mythology is not static but a living, evolving tradition that adapts to the needs of each generation. Bowen not only educates readers about the richness of African mythology but also underscores the importance of storytelling in preserving and reinterpreting cultural history, giving voice to the Orishas in a world that has often overlooked non-Western mythologies.

Resumen

Skin of the Sea, de Natasha Bowen, es un ejemplo perfecto de cómo la nueva ola de narrativas para adultos jóvenes utiliza la fantasía para ampliar el conocimiento de otras culturas (en este caso, la cultura Yoruba y su gente) adaptando dioses africanos a arquetipos de adultos jóvenes. Para esta novela, Bowen decidió centrarse en el mito de los Orishas en lugar del contexto histórico de principios del siglo XV. Esto permite la exploración de la profundidad de la religión y la cultura; al utilizar a los Orishas como personajes, podemos interactuar con ellos, luchar con ellos y comprenderlos, reimaginándolos como figuras dinámicas que sirven como protectores y disruptores del orden natural. El autor destaca la resiliencia y profundidad de la espiritualidad Yoruba, ilustrando cómo los mitos y los sistemas de creencias continúan dando forma a las narrativas de identidad, poder y resistencia. Observamos cómo el viaje del protagonista Simidele con personajes como Yemoja y Esu explora todo el espectro de emociones humanas, incluyendo el amor, los celos, la ira y la tristeza, mientras cada Orisha mantiene su esencia mitológica: Oya como el feroz rebelde de la justicia, Sango como la encarnación de la retribución divina, y Olokun como el paria olvidado; sin embargo, también adquieren un nuevo significado simbólico dentro del contexto. Esto se debe a que Bowen tomó el mito y lo adaptó para que se ajustara a los arquetipos juveniles, facilitando que los jóvenes se conectaran con esta cultura. Sus interacciones con los Orishas exploran la tensión entre la responsabilidad moral y la ley cósmica, mostrando cómo la mitología Yoruba no es estática sino una tradición viva y en evolución que se adapta a las necesidades de cada generación. Bowen no sólo instruye a los lectores sobre la riqueza de la mitología africana, sino que también subraya la importancia de la narración para preservar y reinterpretar la historia cultural, dando voz a los Orishas en un mundo, que a menudo ha pasado por alto las mitologías no occidentales.

Introduction

“Here is a story, a story it is...” It begins with a young girl who is no longer a girl, a young boy who is more than just a boy, gods who resemble humanity more than they think or even like, and a group of unexpected friends who join them during the adventures that the protagonists are thrown into. In the novel called *Skin of the Sea*, we follow Simidele, or Simi, the female protagonist who was once a human but is now a Mami Wata, a mermaid in the Yoruba culture. Transformed by the water deity Yemoja, Simi, along with six other women, was given the purpose of following the Oyinbo’s ships to rescue the souls of those who were stolen from their homes and lost at sea, until she finds one soul that is not completely gone. She decides to rescue this life, challenging the direct orders of Yemoja herself. When the deity discovers this, she explains to Simi the real consequences of her actions and tells her that now every Mami Wata is in danger, as well as the deity’s future. Therefore, Simi and Kola, the boy she rescued, find themselves immersed in an adventure to find the two rings that will help them get in contact with the Almighty god, Olodumare, to ask for his forgiveness and mercy. However, to do that, they have to be careful and hide from another Orisha, Esu, who wants the power of the jewels for himself and will do anything to get them.

Published in 2021 and written by Natasha Bowen, of Nigerian and Welsh descent, this is the debut novel of a teacher who spent nearly a decade teaching in East London. This book is the result of her studies in English and creative writing, along with her deep love for mermaids, African history, and mythology. Setting the story in the 1400s, when the Portuguese began kidnapping people in Africa to use them as slaves, Natasha chose the Yoruba part of Nigeria to represent not only the faith crisis that the Nigerian people suffered at this time but also to portray a representation of the Orishas, which at some point will differ from the real myths to favor the fictional element of this Young Adult novel.

In this dissertation, I will deal with the mythical origins and elements of the novel *Skin of the Sea* and will analyze the representations of them to explain their role in the plot and the differences that exist between fiction and reality in the Yoruba religion, not only in Nigeria but also in other parts of the world where it has a strong cultural representation. To begin with, it is commonly known that most of the Yoruba people are now located in the modern country of Nigeria. However, before the European imperialists began ruling over Africa in the early twentieth century, the Yoruba people used to rule Yorubaland. What is not so well known is that they are also found in the Republics of Benin and Togo.

Yorubaland spanned the territory that is now split by two international boundaries, covering the total area of the three countries previously mentioned. Founded by the Proto-Yoruba and the Proto-Edikiri people, it had three different capitals depending on the purpose they served: Ìbàdàn was the political capital, Ilé-Ifè was the cultural and spiritual one (on which I will elaborate later), and Èkó was the economic capital. Today, the southwest territory of Nigeria is subdivided into six regions where the bulk of the Yoruba people are located: Ekiti, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Lagos. During this essay, I will discuss the regions appearing in the novel, together with the importance and relevance of some major rivers like the Ogun River and Yewa River, which are the two main rivers of Ogun State.

Concerning the location, the novel is set along the (Odo Ogun) Ogun River in the west of the country near the border with Benin. The protagonists begin their journey together in the sea, relatively close to the shore. However, they find themselves forced to return to the mainland and follow the course of the river. This river, in particular, used to run through the heart of the old Oyo Empire, dividing the six provinces from west to east. The river was so important that Ogun State was named after it in 1976. The male protagonist of the story, Kola, is from a town called Oko, which can be found following one of the tributaries on the

west side of the Ogun River. The city exists in real life and is named, just as explained in the novel, after the Orisha Oko, the Yoruba god of farming, harvesting, fertility, and agriculture.

Historical and Cultural Context of the Yoruba Culture

I will now expand on the origins and importance of the Oyo empire, the Orishas, and the relevance of those that appear in the novel as characters, engaging with the protagonists, Simi and Kola. Historical evidence suggests that the Yoruba people migrated to their current region from other parts of West Africa. Scholars speculate on a possible connection between the Yoruba and the Nile Valley civilizations, tracing their origins to ancient migrations and subsequent settlement in southwestern Nigeria. Archaeological findings in Ile-Ife reveal urban development as early as the 8th century CE, with the city flourishing as a cultural and economic center by the 12th century. Ile-Ife's sophisticated artistry, particularly in bronze and terracotta sculptures, reflects the Yoruba's profound cultural and religious sophistication, which laid the foundation for their cultural legacy (Mason 19). Over time, the Yoruba formed city-states, including powerful entities such as the Oyo Empire, which reached its peak in the 16th century. The Oyo Empire's military strength and political influence facilitated the spread of Yoruba culture across West Africa, while its trade networks enabled cultural exchange with other groups, further enriching Yoruba practices (Drewal and Drewal 52).

According to Yoruba mythology, the origins of humanity and Yoruba civilization lie in the city of Ile-Ife, often referred to as the 'navel of the world.' Yoruba creation stories tell of Olodumare, the supreme deity, who sent his emissary Obatala to create the Earth. However, Obatala fell asleep, and the task fell to Oduduwa, who descended to Earth, using a chain and a handful of sand to form land in Ile-Ife. This myth establishes the city as the foundation of Yoruba society and religious belief, positioning it as the birthplace of

humankind and divine kingship (Drewal and Drewal 34). The mythological heritage of Ile-Ife influences not only Yoruba cosmology but also their political structures. It legitimizes the authority of Yoruba kings, or Obas, who are considered to be descendants of divine figures like Oduduwa. This link between mythology and governance strengthens social cohesion, rooting the Yoruba political order in spiritual beliefs and ancestral lineage (Bascom 78). The emphasis on both divine ancestry and communal unity is a significant element in Yoruba social identity and provides continuity throughout centuries of change.

Central to the Yoruba religious tradition is the veneration of Orishas, divine intermediaries who govern various aspects of life and nature. Notable Orishas include Shango, the deity associated with thunder and justice; Oshun, the goddess of rivers and love; Yemoja, the goddess of the sea and motherhood; and Esu, the trickster and messenger deity. Each Orisha embodies intricate human characteristics and natural phenomena, offering Yoruba practitioners archetypal representations that mirror life's challenges and virtues (Gonzalez-Wippler 57). Unlike the more transcendent supreme being, Olodumare, the Orishas engage directly with humans, providing guidance in decision-making, relationships, and moral conduct. As Drewal and Drewal observe, the roles of the Orishas foment a spiritual system that emphasizes reciprocity, teaching Yoruba followers that actions, whether positive or negative, have corresponding consequences (41).

The Yoruba religious practice allows individuals to personalize their worship by choosing an Orisha they feel connected to. Ifá divination is an integral part of this practice, as it facilitates communication with the Orishas through a Babalawo or priest. This divination system emphasizes the significance of destiny, known as 'Ayanmo' in Yoruba, and encourages individuals to align their lives with the guidance provided by the Orishas and Ifá wisdom (Bascom 102).

During the transatlantic slave trade, many Yoruba people were captured and transported to the Americas, especially to Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and Trinidad. This led to the spread of Yoruba religious practices across the Atlantic. In the Americas, Yoruba religion merged with Christianity and other local beliefs, resulting in the emergence of religions such as Santería in Cuba, Candomblé in Brazil, and Vodou in Haiti. Despite the forced migration, Yoruba religious practices have remained resilient and continue to be practiced in the Americas, Africa, and other parts of the world, due to the migration that places like Cuba are experiencing. These religions retain the core tenets of Òrìṣà worship, such as divination, ritual sacrifices, and ancestor veneration, highlighting the adaptability of Yoruba spirituality (Mildon 108). The worship of the Orishas, along with rituals, music, and dance that characterize Yoruba spirituality, has profoundly influenced the cultural and religious life of African diaspora communities. Practices such as drumming, dance, and festivals hold central importance in Yoruba worship and have been preserved and adapted within new cultural contexts.

Mythological Relevance and Traditional Role of Some Orishas

In this section of the dissertation, I will delve into the traditional roles and relevance of some of the main Orishas. To begin, we should discuss the Almighty God, Olodumare, also known as the Supreme Being. The closest comparison in other cultures would be the Christian God or Allah for the Muslim people. Although direct worship of Olodumare is uncommon, its presence is profoundly felt throughout Yoruba life as the ultimate source of energy, justice, and order. Olodumare delegates earthly affairs to the Orishas, creating a decentralized system of spiritual governance. Bolaji Idowu describes Olodumare as ‘the giver of life’ who provides *ase* (divine energy) to sustain all beings (Idowu 27). Despite this indirect interaction,

Olodumare's role as the arbiter of destiny ensures reverence through prayer and moral conduct.

The second in rank would be Esu, one of the most dynamic and controversial Orishas, often portrayed as a trickster, moral enforcer, and divine messenger. He is responsible for conveying offerings and prayers to other Orishas and ensuring cosmic justice by rewarding good and punishing wrongdoing. His trickster nature embodies the unpredictability of life, challenging humanity to reflect on its choices. It is culturally highlighted that Esu's dual role as a mediator and enforcer is essential to maintain balance within the Yoruba spiritual system. Misunderstood in Western interpretations as a malevolent figure, Esu actually safeguards justice, which makes him integral to Yoruba ethics and religious practice. For Olodumare, Esu is the emissary, the mediator between the heavens and the earth.

Esu's mythological role as a trickster and mediator places him in the same category as other cultural figures like Hermes, Loki, Legba, Mercury, Coyote, and Anansi. Each of these deities serves to bridge realms, challenge conventions, and reveal deeper truths, thus embodying the transformative power of chaos and unpredictability. However, Esu's unique role in Yoruba cosmology as a constructive force and a guardian of balance sets him apart, which shows the Yoruba worldview of harmony and interconnectedness.

Then comes Yemoja, often called 'the mother of all Orishas,' who is associated with rivers, motherhood, and nurturing. She is venerated as the protector of women and children, embodying the qualities of care, fertility, and emotional healing. Like the ocean, she is nurturing but can become destructive when angered. She is often depicted as a mermaid, which symbolizes her connection to the moon, ocean, and creation. This aspect of her is significant, considering that she is described as the 'creator of mermaids' in Bowen's work. Yemoja's mythological role as a water deity and universal mother finds parallels across many cultures, in figures such as Isis, Aphrodite, Tiamat, Saraswati, Ganga, and Yemayá.

These deities collectively reflect the universal human recognition of water as a source of life, sustenance, and transformation. Yemoja's significance in Yoruba cosmology and her enduring presence in the African diaspora highlight her role as a nurturing and protective force that ensures the continuity and balance of life.

She is also associated with Oshun, her sister, who is the goddess of love, sensuality, compassion, and freshwater. She is equated with goddesses such as Aphrodite and Venus in other cultures, as she symbolizes fertility, prosperity, and the nurturing of life. She governs sweet waters, essential for life, and embodies love and creativity. Oshun is 'the mother of all orphans' and a protector of the less fortunate. She is a healer and nurturer who seeks to bring love and care to those in need. Oshun's role as a mediator among the Orishas reflects her wisdom and ability to resolve conflicts, while her connections to deities like Aphrodite and Saraswati emphasize her universal significance as a creator and nurturer. Her enduring presence in the Yoruba diaspora highlights her ability to adapt and remain relevant as a symbol of love, resilience, and prosperity. Both Orishas highlight the themes of emotional depth, feminine strength, and the cyclical nature of creation and transformation in mythology.

Together with the sisters comes Olokun, the Orisha of the sea, who embodies the mysteries, wealth, and untamed power of the ocean. As the keeper of the ocean's depths, Olokun is associated with abundance, healing, and the subconscious. William Bascom describes Olokun as a symbol of prosperity and spiritual renewal, emphasizing the importance of the ocean as both a material and symbolic resource (Bascom 65). It is important to highlight that Yemoja is also related to the ocean, not only to rivers. Yemoja is usually associated with estuaries and the sea surface, whereas Olokun is found in the depths of the oceans. This is why in the novel we see Yemoja and the Mami Watas mainly on the surface while Olokun is bound at the bottom of the sea. In the African diaspora,

particularly in Afro-Caribbean religions such as Santería and Candomblé, Yemoja, Oshun, and Olokun maintain their interconnections through their shared association with water, their complementary roles in nurturing and healing, and their collective representation of feminine power and mystery. While Yemoja embodies motherhood and sustenance, Oshun symbolizes love and fertility, and Olokun represents the depths and wealth of the ocean. Together, they reflect the Yoruba understanding of balance and interrelationship in nature and the divine (Olupona 243). They are often celebrated together in rituals that acknowledge their shared watery domains and collective influence on life, wealth, and spirituality. For instance, Oshun's rivers flow into Yemoja's and eventually into Olokun's ocean, which symbolizes the continuum of life and energy. His parallels with Poseidon, Varuna, Njord, Tiamat, Yemayá, and Manannán mac Lir highlight the universal human reverence for the sea as a symbol of mystery, abundance, and transformation. Olokun's mythological significance transcends cultural boundaries, emphasizing the timeless recognition of water as a force that sustains, challenges, and connects humanity to the divine. Another point to acknowledge is Olokun's identity, often described as androgynous or fluid. This Orisha embodies both masculine and feminine energies, thus reflecting the Yoruba understanding of balance and duality in nature and the divine. The deity's dual nature allows for a comprehensive representation of power, nurturance, and creativity.

The other female Orisha that appears as a character in the novel is Oya, Orisha of wind and storms and guardian of the dead. She is venerated as a powerful force of nature who controls not only the weather but also the transition between life and death, guarding the entrance to the afterlife. "Oya. She who tore" (85), an Orisa who can command winds and storms and one of the fiercest warriors ever known. Oya's connection to the dead complements Yemoja's role in guiding souls, as Oya oversees the gateway to the spiritual world. She is also known for her transformative power, representing the sweeping changes

that life and death bring. Her ability to command storms is symbolic of the turbulent forces of life and fate that the characters experience. Oya's role as a guardian of the cemetery underscores her liminal nature, bridging the living and the dead. Her parallels with figures like Kali, Sekhmet, and Hecate demonstrate her universal role as a fierce protector and agent of transformation. Oya reminds humanity of the necessity of change and the balance between creation and destruction in the cycle of life.

Her male counterpart and partner is Shango, the Orisha of thunder, lightning, and fire. "Sango hovers next to his wife, a sphere of lightning gathered in his large hand" (86). He is a deity associated with raw power, leadership, and the ability to enact justice through force. A warrior god, he is often called upon in times of conflict to bring swift judgment and protect against evil. As a former king of Oyo, Shango's human flaws and divine qualities make him a relatable and revered figure in Yoruba mythology. Jacob Olupona notes that Shango's mythologies illustrate the Yoruba belief in the interplay of power and responsibility, as well as the consequences of its misuse (Olupona 233). His symbolic axe and thunderbolts emphasize his role as a protector of truth and enforcer of divine justice. "He's still on edge, fingers flexing around the handle of his axe" (88). His charisma, courage, and leadership make him a revered figure, and his comparisons to Thor, Zeus, and Indra highlight his universal role as a warrior king and enforcer of divine justice. Shango's enduring legacy in Yoruba culture and the diaspora reflects the timeless appeal of strength tempered by fairness and responsibility, making him a model for leadership and resilience.

Then comes the Ibeji, or sacred twins, who hold a unique and venerated position in Yoruba mythology, representing duality, balance, and divine blessings. The Ibeji are symbols of fertility, prosperity, and interconnectedness. Twins are considered extraordinary in Yoruba culture, and their presence is interpreted as a direct manifestation of the divine, with significant spiritual, mythological, and cultural implications. The Ibeji are believed to be

children of Shango, the Orisha of thunder and power, and either Oshun, the goddess of rivers and love, or Oya, the goddess of storms, depending on the mythological variation, as there are myths that mention a possible love triangle between these three Orishas. Twins are seen as spiritual beings sent by Olodumare to bring fortune and blessings to their families. ““They are Ibeji. Orisa?” I ask, the word rising with my surprise. I think of what I know of the twin gods, one soul in both bodies, Orisas of glee and mischief as well as abundance. Their presence brings happiness and health to people and life to the lands they live in” (118). Bolaji Idowu (121) explains that the Ibeji symbolize the Yoruba understanding of complementary opposites, where two entities work together to create wholeness. This duality reflects the Yoruba belief in the interconnectedness of all forces and the need to maintain harmony in life. The Ibeji are believed to have a direct connection to the spiritual realm. Twins are seen as mediators between the living and the dead, embodying the cyclical nature of life. Their duality allows them to serve as spiritual guides, protecting their families and ensuring continuity between the earthly and divine worlds.

Furthermore, although the Mami Wata (Mother of Water) figure is not a traditional Yoruba Orisha, her presence highlights the adaptable nature of African spirituality. Mami Wata, a water spirit venerated throughout Africa and its diaspora, has been associated particularly with Olokun and Yemoja in some cultures, thus resulting in a syncretic figure that embodies power, allure, and mystery. According to Henry Drewal (134), Mami Wata’s imagery blends African and Western elements, reflecting the complex nature of African spiritual identities shaped by colonialism and the slave trade. Her seductive beauty symbolizes abundance and fertility, while her serpentine motifs emphasize transformation and spiritual power. Mami Wata is also venerated as a powerful healer and spiritual guide. Her connection to water reflects its purifying and restorative properties. In the Yoruba tradition, water spirits like Olokun and Mami Wata are often invoked in rituals for emotional

and physical healing, spiritual renewal, and the resolution of personal or communal crises. Her followers often undergo transformative experiences, such as spiritual awakenings or rites of passage, symbolizing the deep connection between humanity and the divine.

When it comes to gender dynamics, the Mami Wata challenges and redefines traditional gender dynamics in Yoruba culture. She is portrayed as a powerful, autonomous female spirit who commands respect and devotion. Her beauty, sensuality, and independence highlight the Yoruba belief in the multifaceted nature of feminine power, as seen in other female Orishas like Oshun and Yemoja. In the African diaspora, particularly in Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian traditions, Mami Wata has been integrated into spiritual practices that blend Yoruba, European, and Indigenous influences. Olupona notes that Mami Wata's popularity in the diaspora highlights the enduring significance of water spirits in Yoruba-inspired religions, where they continue to symbolize resilience, renewal, and survival in the face of adversity (Olupona 221). Her significance reflects the Yoruba understanding of water as a vital, sacred force that bridges the material and spiritual worlds, ensuring balance and harmony in life.

Relevance and Archetypes of the Orishas and Other Mythical Beings As Characters in the Novel

I will now continue with the analysis of the novel and the representation of the characters following the Young Adult literary archetypes, highlighting the differences between the mythological descriptions of the previously mentioned Orishas and character, and their literary roles in the fictional narrative. In *Skin of the Sea*, the Orishas are portrayed as powerful, complex, and deeply intertwined with both the natural and supernatural worlds. They represent various aspects of life, death, nature, and the cosmos, and their influence is felt throughout the story, particularly through their relationships with Simidele and humanity.

To maintain cultural and historical accuracy, the author largely preserved the mythological portrayals of the Orishas. The novel's setting at the dawn of the slave trade consciously connects the Orisha characters and the themes Bowen explores all through the work, such as slavery, freedom, fate, identity, love, sacrifice, loyalty or the soul of the African mythology and culture.

On the one hand, we have the Orishas that take part in the hero's journey, such as Yemoja. Portrayed as a nurturing yet authoritative figure, she is the Orisha of the sea and the mother of the Mami Wata, with the power to transform mortals like Simidele into divine beings. "I know she is mother of all Orisas" (27). Yemoja represents the balance between creation and destruction: she guides souls to rest but is strict in maintaining the rules that govern her realm. "But gathering the souls of those who pass in the sea is a way to honor them and bless their journey back to our Creator, Olodumare" (137). Her power is immense, and Simidele constantly fears Yemoja's potential punishment for defying her by saving a human. Her physical appearance radiates grace and power, reflecting her status as one of the most revered Orishas.

The tip of a golden crown. Thick shoulders and onyx skin glow in the sun as she takes a step onto dry land. Her voice is both rough and smooth, like satin and sand and smoke. Twin combs hold back the mass of her hair, while a veil of milky pearls obscures the middle of her face. The Orisa smiles, teeth that are sharp points emerging from her generous mouth [...] the gleam of her black-and-silver gaze. (13-14)

In the novel, her role gives her a place fitting the archetype of The Mentor. Yemoja embodies wisdom, protection, and the nurturing qualities often seen in young adult literature. Similar to a typical mentor figure, she provides moral guidance and sets the protagonist on their path, but leaves the ultimate decisions and growth to them. Her actions represent the archetype of self-sacrifice, as her defiance of Olodumare comes at great personal cost. In

Chapter 7, Yemoja cautions Simidele about the consequences of her actions, particularly saving a human, which violates divine decrees. “‘Creating seven Mami Wata was risky. Olodumare saw it as a fracture of the decree. It did not go unnoticed, and once again I was reminded of the decision for mankind to have free will,’ Yemoja sighs, her hands going to the whiteness of her veil. ‘Olodumare saw your creation as a blurring of the line. A disrespect of the rules that were set out’ (51). Throughout the novel, we see how Simidele respects Yemoja’s guidance and fears the consequences the Orisha may face for her own choices: “I left the rivers and streams of our lands and made the sea my home, following the people whose lives were fractured, taken and forced on a different type of journey” (15). Yemoja’s transformation into a sea goddess to assist those lost in the transatlantic slave trade highlights her archetypal role as a self-sacrificing mentor. To better understand her position in that role we can see other characters that fit in the archetype of the Mentor as they are Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* or Dumbledore in *Harry Potter*.

The next main Orisha-character with a pivotal role in the novel is Esu, who embodies duality, fitting the archetype of The Trickster who challenges the protagonist’s perceptions and forces them to think critically. In YA literature, such characters often drive conflict and moral ambiguity, revealing the consequences of choices.

The stew is finished, and all eyes are fastened on the babalawo as he sweeps his gaze over us. ‘Remember who Esu is.’ ‘The trickster,’ says Kola. ‘The guardian of the crossroads of life,’ adds Yinka. ‘Master of language and messenger to Olodumare,’ finishes Bem. ‘Hmm, yes.’ The babalawo leans back, his eyes crinkled with worry. ‘Do not forget any of this.’ His hands rest on his knees. ‘Do not underestimate him. Not at any cost.’ (183-84)

He introduces complexity into the narrative, embodying chaos and moral grayness. This is why it is important to remember that Esu is neither fully good nor evil, existing in a

space of duality where his actions can benefit or harm, depending on perspective. “Esu is not inherently evil. He showed them mercy when they showed him respect” (224). He is a powerful and dangerous figure, known for manipulating events in unexpected ways. His presence creates tension in the story because his motives are often unclear, and he seems to enjoy testing humans as much as the Orishas and challenging their willpower. As a trickster, Esu drives the story forward by complicating the protagonist’s journey and creating moral dilemmas. The best example of this is when, in chapter 24, Simidele and Kolasade realize that Ifedayo, one of the group’s member that was with them from the very beginning –“A new guard, bàbá? One who has come from Oyo-Ile to assist with the Tapa threat” (161) –was in fact Esu himself, disguised as a human:

we turn and gape at Ifedayo. Even his face is different, no longer gaunt, his cheeks rounder, lips fuller. ‘Come now, Mami Wata, speak.’ Ifedayo nods smugly. ‘I thought you had something to say.’ ‘Ifedayo?’ Kola asks, his face creased in confusion. Anger stretches my spine ramrod-straight as realization hits me. ‘Esu,’ I manage, my voice tight. I should have worked it out. I should have known. ‘But not one of you guessed!’ Esu crows, throwing himself back against the throne in triumph. (267)

Esu’s role as the chosen archetype can be seen in other characters like Loki in Marvel’s representation of the mischievous Norse god; like Esu, Loki thrives on chaos and uses cleverness to challenge authority.

Apart from Yemoja and Esu, other Orishas play significant, yet occasionally secondary, roles in shaping the narrative and world surrounding Simidele and Adekola. Each helps the protagonists develop an important aspect of their journey. Olokun, with the archetype of the outcast or fallen power, resembles the role in the novel not only as a figure who was once mighty but has been exiled or punished, but also in the myth of being the Orisha of the deep, bound to the ocean’s depths as punishment for his wrath against

humankind. His bitterness and desire for redemption align with the novel's themes of isolation and the struggle to reclaim a sense of identity. He also serves as a warning figure, embodying what happens when rage overtakes reason. "People tell stories about me now, but I am more than a myth! I am more than a tale to be told by storytellers!" (206).

When Simidele seeks Olokun's help in Chapter 18, his anger at being forgotten and his desperate need for validation are evident. He grudgingly provides information but highlights his own suffering as justification for his resentment. "'Esu!' Olokun spits the name and circles me, his skin gleaming in the anglerfish's pale light. 'He ignores my pleas to take messages to Olodumare to petition my cause. Why would you pursue him?' He tips his colossal head to one side, watching me" (205). Olokun embodies the archetype of the Byronic Hero, reflecting the isolation experienced by many young adult literature characters because of their past. Ultimately, Olokun assists Simi in confronting Esu; however, as has been repeatedly demonstrated, this help comes at a cost. Simi surrenders her freedom, bound by her promise to remain with Olokun in the ocean's depths as his companion. "I agreed to help Olokun fight the loneliness he faces, to shoulder the burdens he bears. I lock eyes with Kola, lifting my chin. I promised to make the Land of the Dead my home" (302).

Next in line, we have the archetype of the Rebel Leader, incarnated by the Orisha Oya. In the novel, Oya appears as a fierce warrior and protector. She and her husband, Sango, destroy slaving ships, intervening directly in the human world. As an archetype, she embodies rebellion and resistance. Her defiance of Olodumare's divine decrees reflects young adult protagonists who challenge authority to fight for justice. Her dynamic with Sango also highlights partnership in shared goals. To understand her role in the archetype, we must analyze her together with Sango, who fits the archetype of the warrior, showcasing strength and ferocity in battle. In young adult narratives, such figures are often powerful allies who

offer protection and inspire courage, though they may struggle with balancing anger and justice.

‘We will not sit back and watch. We will not leave the pleas of our people unanswered,’ adds Sango, his rumbling voice as deep as the ocean beneath us. [...] ‘Even if it means we have to face Olodumare,’ the orisa adds, courage in the angle of her raised chin. ‘Besides, Esu is not relaying all that he should to the Supreme God, only that which serves his favor or gives him more power. It is in his interest to have us on his side.’ The Orisa tips her head. ‘I know Esu and his tricks. We will take our chances.’ (89)

Oya is unafraid to challenge the status quo and divine decrees, believing that justice must come before obedience. Her role as a fighter for the enslaved mirrors YA characters who prioritize moral action over rule-following. Despite her defiance, her actions are rooted in empathy and a desire to protect the vulnerable. Her literary equivalent would be Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*; like Oya, Katniss defies authority to fight for the oppressed.

In the case of Sango, he uses his immense strength to protect those who cannot defend themselves. His powers highlight the consequences of divine intervention, representing justice through destruction. Sango’s presence is awe-inspiring and terrifying, embodying the archetypal warrior’s focus on protecting and fighting for the greater good. His loyalty to Oya and their shared cause reflects his unwavering dedication to justice. Oya and Sango work in tandem, balancing the strategy and strength necessary for transformation. Oya and Sango’s actions highlight *Skin of the Sea’s* central themes of justice, resistance, and sacrifice. Their defiance of divine authority mirrors Simidele’s journey, as she critically examines the morality of divine laws and actively champions her convictions. Sango’s equivalent in young adult narrative would be Cassian in *A Court of Thorns and Roses*; like Sango, Cassian is a

fierce warrior with an intense sense of loyalty and honor who is capable of great destruction but uses his powers to protect the vulnerable.

Olodumare, the Supreme Creator, is frequently mentioned as the one who establishes the rules governing both the mortal and divine realms. His role is to maintain cosmic balance and ensure the Orishas follow divine law. For instance, Yemoja and the other Orishas operate under his decrees, even while coping with the moral implications of those laws. He represents the archetype of the Supreme Authority/Creator, a distant, all-powerful figure who establishes the laws of existence and oversees the universe, but rarely intervenes directly in individual lives. In young adult literature, such figures often symbolize the ultimate force of order, morality, or creation. Olodumare's infrequent direct intervention highlights this archetype's tendency toward detachment, allowing others to navigate challenges within the established order. This mirrors similar figures in YA literature, such as Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, who represents ultimate wisdom and justice while offering indirect guidance.

Apart from the Orishas themselves we have another three central characters that lean between the supernatural and the mortal realms. First we have the Ibeji, the twins that are the Orisha incarnated in Taiwo and Kehinde, Kola's siblings: "'They are Orisa incarnate,' I say quietly, unwinding myself from Kola's arms to hold the priest's gaze. 'Yes. The Ibeji have indeed manifested in them. Two with one soul. Rainmakers, bringers of prosperity and health'" (173). The Ibeji are the divine twins, Orishas representing duality, balance, and harmony. In *Skin of the Sea*, they guide Simidele and Kola on their journey, serving as protectors and symbols of equilibrium. This is why they represent the archetype of the Guardian of Balance, their lightheartedness contrasts with their deep insight, making them approachable yet profound. The Ibeji offer safety and direction, ensuring that the protagonists stay on the right path while teaching them critical lessons.

Second is the Babalawo, who acts as an intermediary between the human and divine worlds, providing essential guidance to the protagonists while withholding full clarity. His archetype as The Oracle gives him the place to connect with the Orishas directly and understand their will. Like Rafiki in *The Lion King*, he will lead the protagonists onto their superior journey. He speaks in riddles, forcing characters to interpret his wisdom. His insights propel the story forward by revealing key truths: “‘The babalawo has been our high priest and the one we consult for as long as I can remember,’ says Kola as he trudges across the sand” (169).

The third would be the Mami Watas. It should be noted that the order is not a signal of their relevance as characters in the novel. The Mami Watas in *Skin of the Sea* collectively fit into the archetype of the Collective Guardians or the Watchers in mythology and literature. Their role as divine beings tasked with guiding souls and maintaining cosmic balance aligns them with archetypes that focus on duty, sacrifice, and moral ambiguity. Created by Yemoja to bless and guide the souls of those who die at sea, they are deeply tied to their duty and divine purpose, often at the expense of their individuality or personal desires. They represent order, stability, and the weight of divine responsibility. The Mami Watas must put aside personal desires to serve their higher purpose. Like Simidele, they once had mortal lives but sacrificed their humanity to fulfill Yemoja’s will. As Watchers, the Mami Watas are not allowed to interfere with human affairs beyond their sacred task, even when faced with suffering. This creates tension between their compassion and their obligations, causing the novel’s main conflict as Simidele defies this rule to save Kolasade from death. While each Mami Wata retains some individuality, like Simidele and Folasade, they primarily act as a unified force, representing a larger divine system rather than personal motivations. Folasade reinforces the archetype by encouraging Simidele to fully embrace her role and leave her human attachments behind.

‘But you are not a girl anymore.’ Folasade grips my shoulder, forcing my gaze to hers. ‘You are more than that. We are more than that. Gathering souls to bless is what we were created to do. It is easier to leave who you were behind. Rejoice in that, sister. Let the sea swallow your memories, and embrace what you are now.’ (7)

To understand their roles, we can see that, in *The Mortal Instruments*, the Angels/Nephilim fit the same archetype. Like the Mami Watas, the angels are tasked with maintaining order and following divine will, often at the expense of personal desires.

However, this novel takes place precisely because one Mami Wata, Simidele, did not follow the ‘no intervention’ rule. This is why Simidele falls into a different archetype. Simidele stands out as the Chosen One because she dares to defy this archetype. While the Mami Watas accept their roles as guardians without questioning their limitations, Simidele challenges the divine order, introducing themes of individuality, free will, and moral responsibility. By saving Kola, she defies her sacred purpose, marking her as special and central to the story’s conflict. Her journey explores themes of sacrifice, self-discovery, and the weight of responsibility from the very beginning of the novel. “I’ve taken the boy from the sea. Saved him” (25). But at the same time Simi is destined to challenge the divine order, making her unique among the Mami Wata. “I know that I couldn’t watch him die” (25). Her actions lead the reader to think about free will and the divine role of ourselves. If everything is under Olodumare’s control, how do we know that her actions were not his will? As this leads finally to Esu’s punishment for disobedience and rebellion. This is reflected in characters like that of Harry Potter, who risked his own life to protect others, thus defying the status quo, and battling against enemies whose power was immense in comparison to his capacities.

Conclusion

Simidele's journey, although mythical, is a well-constructed image of what being human is. Her fears, strengths, and desires are human; she is divided to the vein between her will and her duty, just like any other human being. Throughout the novel, we can draw parallels between the way Bowen describes the Orishas and how the Greeks or Romans represented their gods, personifying their flaws and interests to bring them down to earth, making them more relatable to humanity and facilitating our understanding of them. The fact that the Orishas, Kola, and other mythical creatures like the Yumboes participate in Simidele's path makes it clear how strong the human heart can be, capable of both helping and hurting others.

With the use of archetypes, we get to know the Orishas' roles in the divine path of our lives. Although some may be exaggerated for fictional purposes, it is clear that Yemoja wants to protect our souls, that Oya and Sango are capable of fighting our enemies to save us, and that Olokun would risk the forgiveness it longs for just to help Simi and, by extension, the rest of the human realm.

As is seen in the novel, the Yoruba people have suffered numerous losses throughout history, from the wars that created the Oyo Empire to the enslavement that began in the 1400s. However, considering how Yoruba culture has spread and diversified through the Caribbean diaspora, the resilience of their hearts and faith is clearly proved. Nowadays, they can write novels like this to tell the world that they are still here, and to show how far from reality is the image that Western culture has projected of them.

Furthermore, there is a factor that may pass unnoticed, and this is the importance that the author gives to oral stories, more particularly in pre-modern cultures. For Simidele, her mother's stories serve as guidance when she feels lost or in danger, but Bowen also makes use of this technique to explore the past through other characters like Adekola or the Orishas themselves, as when Yemoja tells Simi about the punishment that Olodumare imposed on her

for her disobedience, or how Esu explains his motifs for his deeds. *Skin of the Sea* is a novel that delves into plenty of themes such as love, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, pain, loss, slavery, freedom, fate, identity and loyalty, and all of these themes are embodied in each and every character in it. We walk across Nigeria and dive into its waters learning about its people, their customs and their vision of the world. In my opinion, this is the main merit of the novel, to help readers to get to know a completely different culture.

Natasha Bowen was genuinely sagacious when shaping the characters through the lens of the YA archetypes. In this way, young people can connect emotionally, not only with their roles, but also with their souls and significance. In short, *Skin of the Sea* is a story about a girl that is no longer a girl and a boy that is more than just a boy, but when they come together they become much stronger and, which is more, encapsulate and dignify a culture that has been misunderstood and mistreated for far too long. Bowen's work is highly recommended if you want to begin a journey of discovery and reconnection with the values and traditions that are spread all over the Caribbeans waters, far from the land in which they were born. After all, when you peel the skin of the sea, you never know what you will find inside.

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