

# Ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́

## *Ifá* Quest The Search for the Source of *Santería* and *Lucumí*

by

*Awo Fá'lokun Fatunmbi*

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In memory of Dr. Albertus Fenyes  
whose spirit guided me  
on the path from spiritual awakening  
to initiation.

*Iba se Ori Ègún.*

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## Preface

“Inú bíbí nìí Sobinrin Ogun Edo fùfú nìí Sobinrin ijà Inú bíbí ngo fisẹ̀ mi ran o Edo fùfú ngo be o lowd A'di fa fun ori Adẹ̀lu Abìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́ Tùu somo bíbí inú Ọ̀rúnmilà.”

Ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́ is a book that deals with Ifá-Ọ̀rúnmilà; a traditional religion in West Africa which compares favorably with other world religions. The effort of the author should be praised not only by Ifá adherents world-wide, but other religionists as well as historians who have the intent to seek more knowledge about the age long religion of millions of African people.

A religion that never deceives them. The morals taught by the religion transcend others. *Fatunmbi* has done a tremendous job of opening the sacred religion to the world at large. I have the pleasure of editing this book and a double joy of writing the Preface.

For the people who don't believe that Ifá is a peaceful religion, the above Ifá verse, where the title of this book was derived, gives testimony to this.

Ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́ is a Yoruba word for soft character or gentle behavior. *Ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́* happened to be one of the children of Ọ̀rúnmilà who lived a peaceful life on earth. Ifá otherwise known as a means of communication between Gods and their people. “For those who seek knowledge, the joy of the eating is in the pudding.”

I and Ifá adherents by birth and culture recommend this book to all scholars and learners of Yoruba culture.

Ire o  
Adebolu Fatunmise  
Providence, Rhode Island  
USA

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*Iba si gbogbo eegún tó fun mi ní ire*, I pay homage to all those ancestors whose wisdom has contributed to my good fortune. In particular I pay homage to the memory of grandfather Albertus Fenyés whose spirit has guided me on the long journey of self-discovery.

A special thank you to *Apetẹbi Ìyá l'Orisha Oshun Miwa*, Luisah Teish who introduced me to the mysteries of *Orisha*. Her support and the support of her *Oshun* have guided me through the struggle of coming to terms with the Mystery of the Erotic.

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This book would not have been possible if it were not for the kindness of all those men, women and children from *Òde Rẹmo* who made me feel like a member of their community. Among those who were especially helpful I say thank you to: *Oba Sunday Olufunso Adeolu*, Chief A. Osifade, Chief E. A. Olubodun, Chief B. Martins, Chief S. Ogundehin, Chief R. Gbadamosi, Chief E. Ajulo, Chief V. Oduwole, Chief I. Allison, *Oluwo Adesanya*, *Ifaonlae Adesanya*, *Ifatoye Adesanya*, *Titilayo Adesanya*, *Opeoluwa Adesanya*, *Ifalao Adesanya*, *Olaide Adesanya*, *Omosoeke Adesanya*, and *Ifamuyiwa Adesanya*.

To the members of the fraternity of *Ifá* priests who guided me through initiation I say: *Mo dúpẹ́ Ègbè Ifá Òde Rẹmo*, *Babalawo Adesanya Awoyade*, *Babalawo Babalao Akinsanya*, *Babalawo Saibu Lamiyo*, *Babalawo Odujosi Awoyade*, *Babalawo Olu Taylor*,

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My grateful appreciation for the warm welcome I received in *Ilẹ́ Ifẹ́* from the *Emese* and the *Awoni*. In particular I want to thank the members of *Awo Fatunmise; Jolofinpe Falaju Fatunmise, Babalawo Ganiyu Olaiifa Fatunmise, Babalawo Awoleke Awofisan lokore, Babalawo Ifaioye Fatunmise, Babalawo Ifanimowu Fatunmise, and Babalawo Ifasure Fatunmise* for opening the doors to the sacred sites of our tradition.

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To Alan Sagan, I say thank you for introducing me to the mysteries of computers, and to Alasyn Sagan I say thank you for her contributions to my understanding of spelling and punctuation.

My final thanks to all those who have contributed to that body of wisdom that gives us a deeper awareness of the Mysteries of Nature in all of her manifestations.

*A dupe O, Awo Fa'Lokun Fatunmbi*

## Introduction

In 1965, while I was a student at U.C. Santa Barbara, my personal search for transformation led me on many late night walks along the beach. My favorite spot was a peninsula that extends about fifty yards from the shore. It was made from a line of well worn rocks that took me out past the waves. Going there at night gave me the opportunity to imagine what it was I wanted to become.

The last time I ever took that walk was late in the evening. There was a strong wind, a clear sky, and white caps on the water. As I considered my future, I was overwhelmed by the feeling that the wind, the sky, and the ocean wanted to devour me. The feeling was so strong, I started running towards the beach in an effort to escape. Just before I reached the wooden steps that led to the street, I caught a glimpse of someone sitting in a rocking chair. It appeared to be a very old black man, positioned where the waves flattened against the sand. As I stopped to take a closer look, the image disappeared. At that moment, the fear vanished, and I was struck by a profound sense of connection with everything around me. Unable to move, it seemed to me that the only certainty in my life was the fact that some form of spiritual force had created the universe. Not a particularly original thought but at that moment it became a part of my inner self. An internal transformation had occurred that no longer required debate. My understanding of Spirit and nature had been changed by a shadow in the wind.

That brief encounter with a flickering image caused an almost obsessive interest in the science of Creation. I left school and tried to find some way to integrate the experience of inner certainty with my Western rational orientation. This effort to reconcile the scientific description of the origins of the Universe with my belief

in Spirit was a frustrating endeavor. It led me to the conclusion that Spirit and science had no knowable common ground.

Five years after leaving school, I returned to Santa Barbara on business and stayed with a couple who have been my neighbors. During that visit I was surprised to discover that the woman was a gifted psychic. One evening she asked me if she could read my palm. Feeling skeptical, I agreed and gave her my hand. She placed my palm on an ink pad and made a print on a piece of paper. Working from the impression, she wrote down the meaning of the various lines. My immediate reaction was that the reading involved enough vague information to be accurate, without being significant.

When she finished the interpretation, she lit a candle and raised her hands to her temples. As the flame flared up, I saw a transparent figure in the mirror on the wall. It was clearly a human shape and it was only visible in the mirror. I took a closer look, just as I had done on the beach, and once again the figure disappeared. Feeling silly, I asked her; "What is going on?" She said; "Your grandfather is here with us and he would like to speak to you. Pick up a pencil and write the first thing that comes to mind."

Thinking I had nothing to lose, I wrote; "Go to the bathroom." Indulging my friend, I stood up and walked to the bathroom.

On the way I told myself that when I returned to the living room, the nonsense would be over.

In the bathroom, I found that the lights were turned off, but there was a glow on the wall. Looking for the source of the light, I noticed that the window above the sink to my left was covered by a paper curtain that was pulled shut. There was a tear in the center of the shade that allowed moonlight to shine through the paper. The light cast a reflection on the wall in the shape of a triangle, directly at eye level. The pattern pulsated as the wind blew through the open window behind the curtain. In my mind, the triangle was a pyramid, and I watched it expand and contract

until I felt a charge of energy flow through my entire body that created a tingling sensation all over the surface of my skin.

As I left the bathroom, I noticed a bright red impression on the base of my palm. I showed the strange mark to the woman who had read my hand, and I watched her examine it with interest. She gave me a strange look, then picked up the paper with the palm print. The mark had not been there a few minutes earlier. It was in the shape of a figure eight that she said was the symbol for infinity and the sign of a magician.

Stunned by what had happened, I stretched out on the couch hoping that my life would return to normal. Instead, I had the notion that the ceiling was falling rapidly towards me. Startled, I realized that my field of vision was moving towards the roof of the house and that I was having an out-of-body experience. As soon as I consciously understood what was happening, my center of perception dropped back into my body with a thud. For the next several hours light patterns similar to the one that had appeared in the mirror floated through the room. Eventually the activity became too much for me and I said; "Thank you, whoever you are, now please leave me alone." The human shaped images immediately flattened into a horizontal line that thinned out and disappeared.

When I returned to my home in Marin County, I discovered that no one I knew was prepared to consider what I had gone through as anything more than a slightly neurotic illusion. The negative reaction caused me to stop discussing the incident, and eventually I began to wonder if it had really happened. I might have dismissed the entire episode for good if it were not for the fact that my house was plagued with problems that seemed related to what had happened in Santa Barbara. The lights in the bedroom would go off and on by themselves at night, and there were strange sounds coming from the walls and ceiling. There may well have been a non-occult explanation for the phenomena. Whatever the cause, it did kindle an interest in trying to determine if spirits could effect physical change.

This interest led to my involvement with the consciousness movement that was infamous in Marin County during the early seventies. The workshops and seminars I attended helped ease some of the pain caused by a recent divorce, but they did not explain the strange noises and lights. In group meetings I discussed my situation and hoped for some enlightenment. The only response, I could get from the seminar leaders was; “Thank you for sharing that.”

The first real breakthrough, in terms of understanding what was happening around me, came from learning a style of massage called *Shiat-su*. The technique is a Japanese system based on the use of finger pressure on acupuncture points located on the body. It was developed on the theory that tension in the body is caused by repressed experience that results from unexpressed emotion. By applying pressure on the areas of tension, the muscles are encouraged to relax. When muscle relaxation occurs, it is possible for the experience that caused the tension to move from the body into conscious perception. If, at that point, the emotion associated with the trauma can be released, the tension will dissolve.

While learning this technique I discovered that I would frequently receive images of the events that caused the tension before the person being treated was able to identify them. What this seemed to indicate was that the charge left by the trauma that was locked in the body generated psychic impulses that could be transmitted to another person. This suggested to me that the level of body tension can affect the dynamics of non-verbal communication between people in normal social situations. Further, it would be possible for this communication to occur without either person being fully aware of the source. It appeared to me that the physical effort needed to maintain a particular level of body tension could affect the selection of people who are comfortable being in our presence. Too much body tension can generate a subliminal psychic overload causing both avoidance and attraction. Virtually everyone around me was going through relationship problems while I was



trying to sort out my own separation. My circle of friends was being generated by my own inner circumstances.

The problem that I had using massage as a tool of personal transformation was that it seemed incomplete. When a negative experience was brought to the surface, the emotional discharge was often followed by a feeling of emptiness. The loss of tension would even start to feel like a loss of identity. Without some process of positive reinforcement for changed behavior, the person being treated would frequently recreate the old trauma in a new form. The experience that caused the tension would be replaced by something similar, only more current. Clients who had gone through body work were like giant magnets waiting to attract the same old problems.

I had noticed this trap in dealing with my own tension. As a child I had gone through several incidents of sexual abuse. The body work I had experienced allowed me to release the emotions associated with the abuse, but did nothing to improve my sexual self-image. On those occasions when progress was made, I would become involved in relationships that reinforced the negative self-image. In an effort to remedy this situation, I discovered that it is one of the functions of Shamanistic healing to introduce positive symbolic imprints during ritual healings. This seemed to be the missing ingredient.

Convinced of the need to explore the Shamanistic approach, I took part in a Native American ceremony that involved crystals and herbal medicine. The healing created a womb-like atmosphere and I started to feel energy swirling around my body like a whirlwind. As it gradually increased in intensity, it reached a point where I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I seemed to be in a valley surrounded by a long range of mountains. The vision was so real that I had to strain to see that I was still inside the room where the ceremony had started. This time the image did not disappear. Staring directly into my face was the head of a hawk. Without making a sound, the bird indicated that it would lead me to a cave

and that I was to go inside alone. As I imagined myself stepping into the cave, I had the sensation of falling into a bottomless pit. When I reached the end of the tunnel, I had glimpses of flashing lights. Out of fear of losing my identity, I resisted the vision and started to move around the house in an effort to return to normal consciousness. As I walked, the energy that was pulsating from my body kept throwing me off balance. It felt as if I was bumping into objects that were ten feet away. This sensation continued for several hours until I was instructed to lie down and rest.

In that position, I had a vision of floating down a river and I went into a panic. When I was pulled up from the floor by the woman leading the ceremony, I started to tremble and lost control of my arms and legs. The spasms in my limbs were periodically interrupted by a rush of energy up my spine that made my entire body stiff. The stiffness took the form of complete paralysis causing difficulty in breathing. The flip-flop between spasms and stiffness lasted for more than an hour.

As the involuntary movements diminished, I regressed into the consciousness of a five year old. Using the mannerisms and vocabulary of a young child, I acted silly, hurt, angry, and amused in a way that did not seem to be connected with what was going on around me.

Late in the evening, this behavior evolved into the actions of a full-grown woman. She wanted to be pampered and refused all suggestions to rest or sleep. At this point in the process I had been disassociated from my own consciousness for close to ten hours. Those present at the ceremony were becoming concerned about the length of time I had been in an altered state. In an attempt to bring me back, a Native American elder was contacted by phone. She said not to worry and that soon I would go to sleep. Following that conversation I felt as if I had been picked up by an enormous hand that wrapped its fingers around my body as I closed my eyes and started to dream.

The next morning I thought it was over. Still tired and dizzy, I decided to drive home. On the way I was overcome by an uncontrollable fit of crying. Once I was inside my house, a voice that was not mine spoke through me and identified itself as *Shango*. Because *Shango* is an African spirit known as an *Orisha*, a priest from the Yoruba based tradition known as *Lucumi* was brought to the house.

By the time he arrived, I was lying on my bed shaking more violently than I had on the previous evening. The movement was so intense that I injured my knee and had a constant nose bleed. As soon as the priest entered my room, he marked the bottom of my feet with a cross using soap. In the *Lucumi* tradition the cross is the sign of *Esu* who is the messenger of *Orisha*. The priest had me sit on a chair and I saw a golden cord connect the top of my head to the top of his head. After that I saw my inner self leave my physical body and lie down on a marble table that was surrounded by six hooded figures dressed in blue robes.

Based on the techniques of his tradition, the priest authenticated the possession by testing the *Orisha*. Satisfied that I was not faking, he sat down and listened to the words of *Shango*. The Spirit spoke about events and activities within the *Lucumi* community. This information included detailed descriptions of various disputes among several priests and criticism of the way that several rituals had been performed. They were all topics about which I had no direct knowledge. The Spirit that was speaking through me went on to make numerous predictions. Over the next ten months I was able to verify the accuracy of all but two of the statements that were related to future events.

When the message was over, *Shango* was replaced by a Spirit who was identified as *Ogun*. The harsh, often rude personality of *Shango* was replaced by a milder, more dignified presence. The second message was very similar to the first, but from a slightly different point of view. After the *Orisha* had announced that it had

nothing more to say, I experienced a sudden return to normal consciousness. The ordeal had lasted twenty-six hours.

During the six months that followed the possession, a series of events took place that were extremely confusing and profoundly disturbing. The most immediate of these was the fact that I was waking up in the morning in tears, with no idea of what was causing the anguish. Even more difficult for me was the fact that the priest who had witnessed the possession stated that he did not feel qualified to evaluate what had happened to me. I was told that in his religious community, possession only takes place through an initiated priest or priestess. In his mind, this invalidated what had happened and I was left totally bewildered and without guidance.

I had met what is known in Yoruba religion as *Eṣu ní ba ko*. The phrase means; “The Divine Messenger is a Trickster.” In my search for the meaning of Spirit, I had a real encounter with forces that appeared to come from outside my own consciousness. Having had the experience, I was at a loss to know what it meant. When *Esu* appears as a trickster, his function is to force the aspirant on a spiritual quest. This internal journey will lead to either growth and transformation, or fear and regression.

My journey took a number of surprising and unexpected turns. I felt abandoned by the psychic healers, the only tools I had to rely on came from the realm of psychology. I had read enough to know that most therapists equate possession with psychosis. It is usually considered to be a projection from the unconscious that is used to smother an emotional crisis. That explanation did not work for me. Even with a limited understanding of what had happened, it was impossible to imagine that the message from *Orisha* had originated in my psyche. I have no recent African ancestors, at the time I had never been to Africa, and my exposure to African ceremonies had been limited.

While trying to make sense of all this, I had the good fortune to meet Dr. Lee Sannella. He is a psychiatrist who has made clinical studies of what he calls the “Kundalini reflex.” He believes that

this phenomena is the basis for personal transformation that occurs during rituals of rebirth in traditional societies. His interest in the process was kindled when he started to run across spontaneous cases of possession that occurred outside of a ritual setting. The term Kundalini comes from the discipline of Yoga. According to Yoga theory, the process of spiritual transformation is caused by energy that is stored in the base of the spine. The Yogis believe that this energy will remain dormant unless it is activated through some form of meditation.

When this activation occurs, the energy is described as flowing up the spinal cord until it is released through the top of the head. This release is believed to cause altered states of consciousness that can include mystic vision. Dr. Sannella is of the opinion that mystic vision can have a positive effect on personal growth and should not be automatically dismissed as psychotic hallucination. The problem from the psychological point of view is to be able to make a distinction between inspiration and delusion. Dr. Sannella believes this distinction needs to be made so that the positive elements of the experience can be encouraged and the neurotic elements can be treated. The key to making this distinction comes from the physical symptoms of the person going through the transformation.

In discussing the clinical aspect of this research, Dr. Sannella admits that certain elements of the Kundalini reflex cannot be fully explained in physiological or psychological terms. Using studies conducted by Itzak Benton, Dr. Sannella has discovered a slight difference between spontaneous cases of transformation and classic Yoga descriptions of the awakening of Kundalini. The strongest difference is that Yogi literature describes the release of energy as flowing from the spine to the top of the head. Benton's research on spontaneous transformation suggests that the release of energy flowed from the top of the head and down the front of the body where it was released from the stomach. A possible explanation for

this variation is the effect of Yogi exercise on the way that the Kundalini energy is released through the body.

Other symptoms described by Benton include uncontrolled body movements and unnatural body postures. Some of these postures are similar to those found in Hatha Yoga and may be held for extended periods. At times the body may become locked in an abnormal position that becomes a form of temporary paralysis. Abnormal breathing patterns occur including rapid breathing, shallow breathing, deep breathing, and breath retention. Sensory stimulation can cover a wide spectrum of internal perceptions that may vary during the process. The skin may vibrate, itch and tingle. This can lead to sensations similar to those felt during orgasm. Body temperature can move between extremes of hot and cold with no external cause.

Included in the subjective phenomena reported were visions of light, exploding flashes, religious symbols, the perception of energy patterns, and the sight of colors coming from people and things. Frequently sounds were heard that ranged from high pitched hissing to human voices. There were also reports of sounds from nature, such as ocean waves and animal calls.

Those going through the Kundalini reflex cycle indicated periods of physical pain, especially in the head, eyes, and back. From a medical perspective, these pains had no apparent cause and stopped without treatment.

It was common for persons going through the experience to feel a wide spectrum of emotions. They reported feelings of extreme joy, and emotions associated with religious ecstasy. On the other end of the spectrum there was intense fear, anger, anxiety, and depression.

Seeing this material came as a tremendous relief to me because it not only meant I was not crazy, it told me I was not alone in my effort to understand what had happened. The problem for me was the limitation of the study. Dr. Sannella's research was designed to assist therapists in diagnosing the difference between symptoms

of psychosis and symptoms of positive personal transformation. It gives no explanation for why the phenomena occurs, and no methodology for integrating the process into a holistic world view. I had convinced myself that something good had happened, but did not know why or what to do with it. The physical phenomena I had experienced had not effectively transformed my experience of self and world.

If the Kundalini reflex was the basis of traditional rites of passage, that seemed to me to be a logical place to start searching for further answers. From a Shamanistic perspective the explanation was simple. I had been touched by Spirit. Being touched in this way gave me access to the Spirit realm. This access was a source of guidance in the quest for transformation.

According to Michael Harner in his book "The Way of the Shaman", the initial step in obtaining access to the Spirit realm is a journey to the underworld. This is a psychic journey that takes place when the novice Shaman either travels through a symbolic opening in the earth, or when Spirit power enters the body through the top of the head. Hopi Shamans build a mound of dirt with an opening on top, or place a hole in the floor of a Kiva. Eskimos visualize the journey as a path under the ice. In Africa the opening is a cut made on top of the initiate's head that is used to receive herbal medicine called *Aşg*.

There are a number of methods for inducing the altered state of consciousness that facilitates the journey. Fasting, prolonged dancing, herbal medicine, staring at the sun, and various ritual ordeals are among the most common techniques. They are used in a ceremonial setting where prayers, songs, and invocations guide the altered state in the desired direction.

The visions obtained in this way are very similar cross culturally. Joseph Campbell has made extensive comparisons of these visions and has shown that they frequently involve animals with anthropomorphic qualities: entities that are part human and part animal, communication with dead ancestors, and travel to mythical

landscapes. In virtually all Shamanistic traditions the basis for interpreting the mystic vision is the location and identification of a Spirit Guide. The guide aides the Shaman in understanding and processing the information received during the altered state. Two of the oldest written narratives describing this journey are the "Egyptian Book of the Dead" and the "Tibetan Book of the Dead." From a Shamanistic point of view, these chronicles tell of the interaction that takes place in the realm inhabited by the soul prior to birth and after death. From a psychological point of view, this narrative represents an exploration of what Carl Jung called the "collective unconscious."

Once this journey has been completed, the novice Shaman is prepared for the symbolic rite of death and rebirth. In some traditional societies this ceremony involves an ordeal that can only be passed with the aide of a Spirit Guide. The ordeal can include walking through fire, surviving burial underground, prolonged fasting, and flesh offerings. If the ordeal is successfully completed, it culminates in acceptance into a secret society and the oral transmission of traditional Shamanistic wisdom. This wisdom may include folklore, a secret language, magic rites, and various systems of healing.

Essentially, I went through this process spontaneously when I was possessed by *Shango* and *Ogun*. The difference was that I had no community of elders who could add the wisdom of their experience to my understanding of the journey. I also discovered that in the literature on the subject there was very little mention of spirit possession. This was a disappointment to me because I sensed that possession could be used as a tool for healing, but I was not sure how.

It took about six months for the symptoms of the Kundalini reflex to completely stop. When that happened, I was eager to share my newly discovered talents with others. At this point, the necessity for guidance by elders was not apparent to me. With the enthusiasm of a convert, I held channeling sessions in my living



room every Thursday for a year. I found that if I went into possession, I could guide those around me into a trance state. This included the ability to see images, hear voices and, in some cases, to experience full possession. Looking back, it is easy to see why channeling has become so popular in the New Age movement. Seeing images is relatively easy in a ritual setting. What I came to realize was that not all of these images were messages from spirit. In my opinion, channeling sessions can produce fantasy and illusion as well as spirit communication. That is, and will probably remain a very subjective judgement. It is, none-the-less, an important distinction. The value of receiving training from elders in a Shamanistic tradition is in the possibility of learning to distinguish between the various types of messages that can emerge at a ceremony.

While trying to discover how this problem was approached in traditional societies, I came to appreciate the importance of the use of divination in the process of validating and interpreting the messages received from spirit. This is an important function that divination can provide for someone who is attempting to develop Shamanistic skills. Not all forms of possession are desirable. Divination can be used to make the distinction. Within Shamanistic societies that deal with possession, steps are taken to protect the medium from "earth bound" entities. These are not "evil" spirits in the sense that they are intrinsically demonic. They are more accurately described as ancestral spirits that have not released their attraction to the physical realm. These spirits frequently have been the victims of a sudden or traumatic death. In some instances they have developed an obsessive attachment to someone, or some place on earth.

The problem with these spirits is that they can cause involuntary possession. This condition is known among psychotherapists as multiple personality disorder or MPD. Clinically it is described as a dissociative reaction. This means that it is considered an attempt by an individual to split off a portion of their personality.

This is done in an effort to suppress an unwanted or painful aspect of the psyche. Certain types of problems such as drug addiction, alcoholism, and sexual abuse can cause a tendency towards this condition. The medical profession does not deal with the issue of possession in these cases, but the symptoms are similar to instances of unwanted possession described in Shamanistic literature.

During the year that I regularly held channeling sessions, I noticed that several people who went into possession channeled spirits who did not respond quickly to the techniques that worked in most other circumstances. I realized that the use of divination in these situations would have warned me of possible difficulties. In Shamanistic cultures, this use of divination is obvious. To a Western urbanite who was struggling to comprehend the deep meaning of Spirit, the connection was not initially as apparent. I discovered that in Africa where the use of trance states is highly sophisticated, divination is used constantly to verify, clarify, and confirm the messages that come through trance. West Africa in particular has a number of systems of divination. They include a simple yes/no process using cola nuts, a highly sophisticated system called *Dafa* and numerous variations in between.

In an effort to get better results from the channeling sessions I was leading, I consulted an *Ifá* priest. In Yoruba culture, an *Ifá* priest is considered to be an expert at divination. The first message I received from the oracle was that I had been protected over the years by two *Orisha*, *Qbatala* and *Yemoja/Olokun*. That information struck a deep chord of recognition. *Qbatala* was usually symbolized as an elderly dark skinned man with white hair who was either seated or stooped. *Qbatala* was the image I had seen at the beach, fifteen years earlier, long before I had known anything about African spirituality. *Yemoja/Olokun* is symbolized as the ocean and the ocean has always been my place of refuge. To me, this message reinforced the idea that I needed to include divination in my work with Spirit.

This was confirmed by later divination which said that I was a child of *Òrúnmìlà*. In traditional Yoruba culture this would mean that I was destined to become an *Ifá* worshipper and that I had a responsibility to learn divination. The priest who cast the oracle was from Africa. He told me that as far as he knew there was no way to learn *Ifá* outside of Africa. It seemed that *Eṣu* was still playing the role of trickster.

It must have been a test of faith. In my effort to find some way to learn *Ifá*, I discovered that an American had recently been initiated as an *Ifá* priest in Africa. As it turned out, I had met with him five years earlier and he lived less than a mile away from me.

Our meeting put me on the path of *Ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ̀*.

# 1

## IFÁ

### *The Source of West African Spirituality*

Òde Rẹmo is approximately one hour's drive east of Lagos, in Ogun State, Nigeria. It is not prominent among the places that Westerners consider going to in search of spiritual transformation. Located just off the highway on the west end of the African rain forest, most maps do not list Òde Rẹmo by name. On the surface Òde Rẹmo is similar to many of the farming villages spread across the southwestern region of Nigeria. What made Òde Rẹmo of interest to me, is a very old and deeply rooted religious tradition called *Ifá*.

I had made the trip in hopes of being initiated into the *Ifá* Priesthood. I knew of four other Americans who had made a similar journey to Òde Rẹmo. One of them had given me a letter of introduction and vague directions. In the midst of the routine pandemonium at the airport, I began to think that I had made a mistake. The minute I got off the plane, I was greeted by lines of soldiers, police officers, customs officials, baggage handlers, and translators all struggling to survive in a failing economy. I realized there was a set of unwritten rules regarding who can do what, who can go where, and what is acceptable payment for getting it done. Miraculously, I made it through the maze, and headed for Lagos.

Once in the city, I soon discovered that the only reliable transportation from Lagos to the rural areas is by cab. I also

discovered that cab drivers from the city would take you almost anywhere in the country except *Òde Rẹmo*. Everyone I spoke to, either wanted to know why I was going there, or cautioned me to stay away. There is much confusion and fear regarding the nature and practice of *Ifá*. Because of the influence of colonialism in Africa, indigenous religions are frequently accused of witchcraft and sorcery. Even among those who respect the old ways, there is a reluctance to speak openly about traditional beliefs. In pre-colonial times *Ogun* state was the location for many of the shrines that were used to invoke protection for the Yoruba Nation. The elders of *Ifá* in *Òde Rẹmo* still have a reputation for being warrior priests.

At one time the Yoruba Nation was made up of sixteen states. Each state had a specialized religious function that contributed to the overall well-being of the culture. Even when the British ruled Nigeria, this structure survived. It still survives, despite a significant increase in Yoruba conversion to Christianity and Islam. As a result of these conversions, many of the traditional religious and political offices within the Yoruba Tribal system have gone unfilled.<sup>1</sup>

I finally managed to make arrangements for transportation out of the city. The driver assured me that he could find *Òde Rẹmo*, but made it clear that he would not stay long.

I had been advised that the door to *Ifá* would not open unless I first received permission from one of the descendants of the royal family of *Ogun* State. My instructions were to locate the postmaster of *Òde Rẹmo* and ask for directions to the chief's compound. If the chief granted my request for initiation I would be given an escort to meet the senior *Ifá* priest known as the *Olúwo*. Any other approach would be considered a violation of protocol, and there would be no second chance.

I left the hotel on an unbearably hot day and traveled along a two lane highway that was plagued by large potholes, scattered rocks, and cracked pavement. Vehicles swerved around the obstructions without bothering to slow down, and no one seemed con-

cerned about maintaining separate lanes. There did not appear to be a speed limit. Instead there was a series of road blocks flanked by heavily armed soldiers. Each time the cab slowed down to pass through a barricade, we were surrounded by vendors selling live snails, bundles of plantains, and Coca Cola.

About the time that I was sure that we were lost, the cab made a sharp right turn on to a dirt road and literally bounced off the highway. In front of the turnoff, resting against a rock was a small sign the size of a checkerboard that read "Òde Rẹ̀mo".

The post office turned out to be a badly eroded mud hut with a rusted roof. From a distance the hut appeared abandoned. With no door on the frame, and no furniture inside, the only sign of life was a bicycle resting on the porch.

After turning off the engine, the driver looked at the hut and shrugged. Several dirt roads were scattered in front of us, but there were no street signs. He had taken me where I wanted to go and he had no idea where the chief lived or how to find his house.

As I got out of the cab, an elderly gentlemen appeared from behind the post office and stood near the porch. He greeted me in Yoruba and then looked towards the road avoiding direct eye contact. I returned the greeting and asked for directions to the home of the chief, who is called *Ọba* in Yoruba.

There was no immediate response. I could not tell if I had asked the wrong question, or if he simply did not understand my Yoruba.

Looking directly at me, the postmaster spoke in English with a heavy British accent. "The *Ọba* has passed. None of his children have chosen to take his place."

I knew that many of the traditional tribal elders had converted to Christianity or Islam. I had not anticipated that this would be a problem in *Ogun* State. In a panic I asked the postmaster if he could guide me to the home of the chief *Ifá* Priest; the *Olúwo Ifá* of *Òde Rẹ̀mo*. His silence intensified my frustration. Over the years I had heard reports from people who had come to Africa,

looking for initiation, who had been unable to locate anyone who would admit that they knew anything about it. Other stories had been told about ceremonies performed for tourists that were far from authentic. A big knot started to form in my stomach as I waited for a response. Trying to appear patient, I wiped the sweat from my forehead and prayed that I would not go home disappointed.

The postmaster's head turned as my hand ran across the top of my head. His eyes were fixed on a green and yellow bracelet that was on my left wrist. With a look of recognition he pointed at the beads. "This is your sign," he said.

The beads had been given to me by the American *Ifá* Priest who had divined that *Ifá* initiation was on my path of destiny. The bracelet, known as an *edẹ*, marked the completion of the first stage of a two-part ceremony that resulted in full initiation into the priesthood.

The postmaster gave me the information I had requested. Our directions were complicated. We headed down a series of narrow roads that were barely wide enough for the cab to maneuver. Weaving our way through the goats and chickens that roamed freely in the streets, we came to a clearing.

Immediately we were surrounded by a crowd of curious children. As I walked through an open market the adults kept a respectful distance, but everyone bowed and offered a greeting. After trying my best to communicate in Yoruba, someone grabbed my arm and pulled me back towards the car.

"Baba is on his farm," said a young man as he opened the front door of the cab and motioned for me to follow.

We headed out of town and drove directly into the most densely covered jungle I had ever seen. The trees and shrubs were so full and thick that it was impossible to see the sky. The land looked as if it had been untouched by man or the cycles of time.

Being in the jungle aroused a primal connection with the earth that came up through my feet and flowed into my body. Something

deep in my soul had created an opening that allowed me to be physically touched by the land.

At the same time, my fears started to surface. What was I doing here? I was six thousand miles from home, and I had no guarantee that I would be accepted for initiation. *Òde Rẹmo* is seldom visited by outsiders, and I knew of no other Anglo-American who had been ordained for *Ifá* in Africa. I had to admit that I barely understood what I was getting myself into.

There are few books on the subject of *Ifá* written in English, and most of them raise more questions than they answer. My involvement with the Yoruba religion as it is practiced in America had been through a Cuban tradition known as *Lucumí*. In the United States, *Lucumí* has distanced itself from *Ifá* and tends to emphasize a form of spirituality that is heavily influenced by Catholic theology. Within the *Lucumí*, tradition *Ifá* Priests are generally excluded from rituals. It is also common for *Lucumí* elders to consider an African initiation invalid within their own congregations. I had made the trip to Africa with very little support or encouragement from the people in the *Lucumí* community.

Through divination I had been told that coming to Africa for *Ifá* initiation was a predestined element of my fate. As I approached the possibility that this prediction would become a reality, I felt terrified. I had no idea where I was, where I was heading, or if I would be welcome when I got there.

The cab stopped near a clearing in the forest. It was a circular open space covered with rows of low growing plants. A dozen men using handmade tools worked the land while women came over a low hill carrying buckets of water on their heads.

Slowly, I opened the car door, not knowing whether I should stay, or run back to town. As I forced myself to take a step, my attention was drawn to a man who was bent over a plant near the road. I recognized him as the *Olúwo Ifá* from a single photograph I had seen in the United States. It had taken me three years to



reach this spot and I was struck by the seriousness of what I was about to do.

With a choked voice I greeted the chief *Ifá* Priest of *Òde Rẹmo*. “*Aláfia Baba*”. It was a moment of truth. I had come directly to him because an introduction from the *Ọba* was not possible. He would either return my greeting or send me on my way.

Looking up from the soil, the *Olúwo* smiled. As my fears drained away, I touched the earth in a gesture of respect. He immediately started praying and shaking my hand. Clumsily I offered him the letter. He took it and placed it in his pocket as if he were expecting me and the letter did not matter.

Prior to that moment, my understanding of African spirituality had been molded by anthropologists. Most anthropologists study religion from a sociological point of view. They identify commonly held beliefs and analyze the demographics of those beliefs. For someone like myself, who was interested in African spirituality for the purpose of effecting personal transformation, the anthropological approach has distinct limitations. I was about to make the switch from a person with some book learning on the subject of *Ifá* to someone with a direct experience of African spirituality. Looking back, I now see that this created a profound change in the way I experience myself, and the way I view the world.

I was raised in an urban environment where the relationship between survival and nature was nearly severed by an all-pervasive industrial support system. The dependency on machines and complicated technology seems to have diminished our desire to grasp the inner secrets of nature as a component of spiritual growth. The outdoors have become a place to escape to, rather than a place to learn from.

In response, some environmentalists have started to formulate an overview of the earth that describes it as a living organism. Known as the “*Gaia Theory*”<sup>2</sup>, this paradigm suggests that the balance between earth, air, fire and water can be irreparably damaged by the careless exploitation of natural resources. At the

present time the Gaia theorists are searching for the keys to understanding the way in which nature responds to catastrophes created by human negligence. The conditions in the Brazilian rain forest, the fallout at Chernobal, and the various massive oil spills have generated a planetary response that scientists can observe, but not quite understand.

I came to Africa with the belief that the insights necessary for understanding the inner workings of nature can be found in the wisdom of those who still depend on the environment for survival. The collective folklore and myth of West Africa is all about explaining nature's reaction to human action. I believe that the complex network of Spirits found in *Ifá* are symbolic expressions of real forces in nature that effect human consciousness in very direct ways. These forces have what can be described as a consciousness of their own that expresses itself in understandable ways. In my opinion, Spirits can have a direct impact on the process of personal transformation and growth. This impact occurs whether or not it is recognized and acknowledged. I believe that the more conscious this relationship becomes, the more effective it is in terms of generating positive change.

This belief emerged as a result of my conversations with elders of *Ifá*. Their perspective on their tradition was radically different from most of the material that I had read. It became clear to me that they perceive all Spirits as emanations from a single source. *Ifá* Creation Myth is rooted in the belief that there is a single unknowable source of Creation called *Ọ̀lórún*. *Ọ̀lọ́* is the Yoruba prefix for "owner". My understanding is that in a spiritual sense "owner" means one who possesses a secret. The owner of a secret is one who has become, or is the originator of a particular Mystery. *Ọ̀rún* is frequently translated as "Heaven". This translation is a distinctly Western interpretation that falls short of the deeper meaning being expressed.

The word *Ọ̀rún* is better understood to mean the invisible realm out of which the physical universe emerged. In this sense,

Ọrun is closer to the Platonic concept of “Ideal Forms”. Plato believed that the material universe existed before Creation in the mind of the Creator and that evolution is the unfolding of divine inspiration into physical manifestation.<sup>3</sup>

In Western theological terms the name “Owner of Heaven” suggest that Ọlórún is the “Ground of Being”; the starting point of existence, the “Ultimate Source”; that which has no creator, and the “Primal Cause”; the initial inspiration of Creation. These philosophical concepts are used here to characterize an implicit understanding of the universe that is expressed by Ọlórún. This understanding is the awareness that all dimensions of nature are related because they emerge from a single source.

To further express this point, *Ifá* describes Ọlórún as being beyond the rainbow. A rainbow consists of the full spectrum of visible light. In symbolic terms, anything that is beyond the rainbow cannot be seen by the human eye. This means that Ọlórún is responsible for all those dimensions of the universe that effect objective reality from a non-material plane. Ọlórún understood as the “Owner of Heaven” is the mystery that surrounds the miracle that created the invisible forces that become visible through nature.

A fundamental element of *Ifá* belief is that Ọlórún will forever remain a Mystery. To know Ọlórún would be to become the “Owner of Heaven” and that is considered impossible. As a result the essence of Ọlórún remains unknown. There is no priesthood that preserves Ọlórún's secret. There are no initiations into the realm of Ọlórún. There are no images that represent Ọlórún. There are no shrines for Ọlórún. Even the word itself is considered a shadow of a deeper symbolic dimension.

The Spirit forms that emerge from Ọlórún are commonly called *Orisha*. They are the visible manifestation of a single Deity. It is through the Mysteries of the knowable aspects of Deity that we come to sense the deeper Mysteries of the Creator.

After saying a blessing over my head, the *Olúwo Ifá* joined me in the cab and instructed the driver to return to town. We parked at the same open market, only this time the crowd had grown into a human wall, lining the path to the *Olúwo's* house.

I removed my shoes outside the door as is the custom, and stepped inside a moderately sized four room cement brick home. Each room appeared to have been set up for sleeping several people. There was an open air patio in the rear with a fire pit for cooking. I was directed towards the front bedroom as the *Olúwo* disappeared behind a curtain on the back porch.

Most of the chairs were low stools and because I am tall it was difficult to get comfortable. While I was trying to find the best way to sit, I noticed that there was a name written under my feet on the concrete floor. It took me a moment to realize that the name was a marker on a tombstone. I was in an area where they still followed the traditional *Ifá* custom of burying the dead under the foundation of the home.

Someone handed me a warm beer while the kids leaned through an open window. They appeared excited to have a visitor, and went into fits of laughter every time I greeted them in Yoruba. I did a few simple magic tricks and the crowd of children started to swell until there were close to a hundred faces in the small court yard in front of the house.

When the *Olúwo* returned to the bedroom, he was wet from having taken a bath. His farming clothes had been replaced by a white toga that was wrapped loosely around one shoulder. Using a translator, I told the *Olúwo* that I had come to Africa in hopes of receiving initiation into *Ifá*. Nodding his head in approval, he picked up a bamboo mat and unrolled it across the floor. He sat on the mat and reached under the bed where he retrieved an old leather briefcase. Carefully he removed his tools of divination from the case.

There was a small tray called *ọ̀pọ̀n Ifá*, a bag of sacred palm nuts called *ikin*, a bag of yellow powder called *iyẹ̀rosun*, and a

tapper called *iroke Ifá*. These ceremonial tools are the foundation of all the rituals that occur in traditional Yoruba religion. The *gbṛn Ifá* represents the Womb of Creation, the *iro Ifá* is the virility of manifestation, the *ikin* are the fruit of the tree of wisdom, and the *iyṛosun* is the medicine of transformation. These receptacles of spiritual power are used in conjunction with herbs (*Osanyin*) and prayer (*Ọfọ Aṣṣ*) to invoke the spirit forces that are used for cleaning, healing, initiation, and divination.

By manipulating the palm nuts, the diviner is able to make eight vertical marks in two groups of four. Each mark is either a single line (I) or a double line (II). Within this system there are 256 combinations. Each combination refers to a specific verse of *Ifá* scripture. The individual verses are called *Odu* and the process of divination is called *Dafa*.

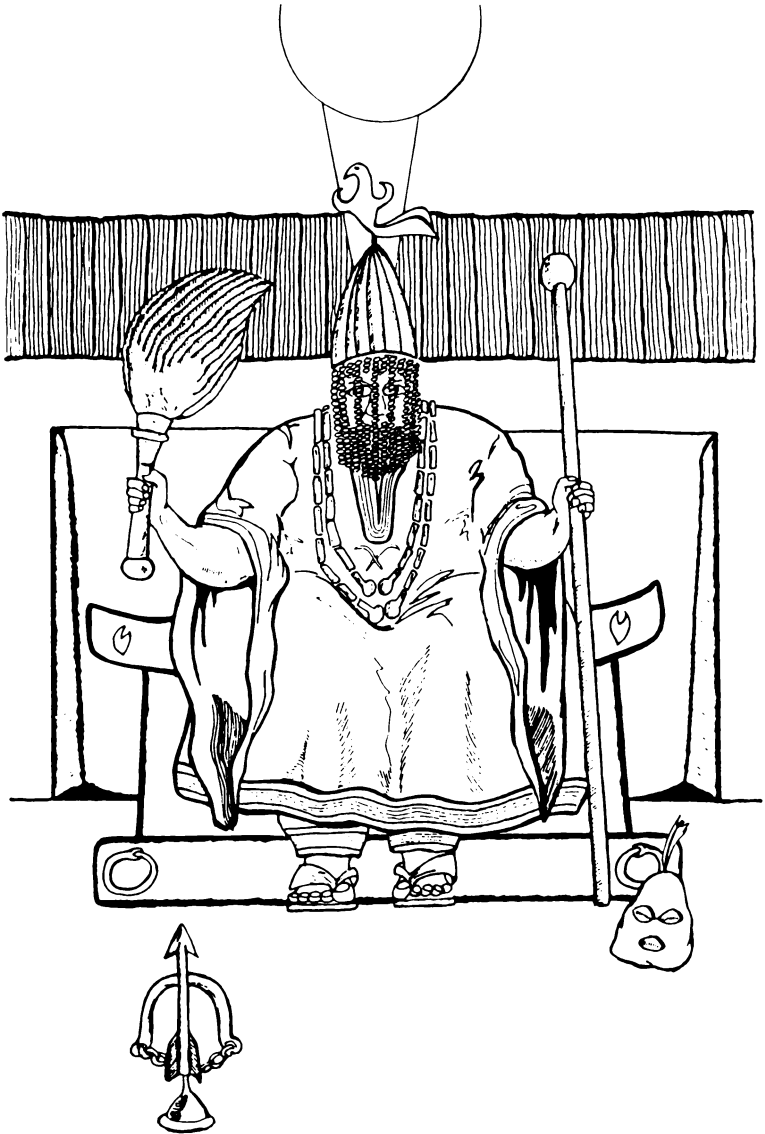
The *Odu* contain the folklore that discuss the energy patterns that incarnate the Spiritual forces reflected in the mark on the tray. Prior to initiation, *Dafa* is performed for the purpose of determining which spiritual force in nature is guiding the aspirant during their present reincarnation. There are different initiations for the different *Odu*, so if it turned out that *Ifá* was not on my path of destiny, I would be sent to another religious order within the tradition that was compatible with my spiritual needs.

The oracle was cast four times on my behalf. The initial verse indicated that I was ready to receive initiation. The last three verses were the same. I watched in silence as the *Odu* that indicates acceptance into the fraternity of *Ifá* was marked, once, twice, and a third time. The door to initiation was now open. I was at the crossroads. At this point I could have declined the offer to become an *Ifá* priest. The *Olúwo* asked me directly if I wanted to make the commitment, or return on a future date. Trusting the guidance of those spirits who spoke through the oracle, I accepted. Immediately after putting away his divination set, the *Olúwo* began making preparations for the ceremony.

I took a moment to reflect on what I was doing and why I was doing it. In my study of history, I learned that human life emerged from Eastern Africa.<sup>4</sup> Based on the fossil record, the earliest ancestors of modern Homo Sapiens lived in Africa from between three to four million years ago.<sup>5</sup> The history of human evolution is charted by scientists based on the record of changes in DNA. It is the DNA molecule that stores and passes along the genetic information that shapes the physical body. Research by Rebecca Cann at the University of California at Berkeley suggests that the DNA in modern humans originated in a single Sub-Saharan African woman who lived approximately two hundred thousand years ago.<sup>6</sup> The genetic record also indicates that the descendants of that African woman migrated to every continent except Antarctica. The spiritual implication of this research is that all humans alive today are members of a single family that originated over ten thousand generations ago.

The reasons for the massive migration from Africa to the rest of the world are not well established. It may have been the result of a shift in climate, or it simply may have been part of a search for new sources of food. Archaeologists tell us that this period of exploration resulted in a shift in the technology of survival. The earliest human tools were used to gather vegetation and to scrape carcasses that were slaughtered by wild animals. Over a long stretch of time, human families started to band together. The earliest collective efforts involved hunting, food storage and child care. These changes marked the earliest recorded examples of community and culture. Along with these changes came the development of ritual. Male Shamans guided their sons through puberty rites that taught the mysteries of the hunt. Female Shamans guided their daughters through puberty rites that taught them the mysteries of childbirth. The entire clan came together to ceremonially bury the dead.

Based on research by anthropologist Marija Gimbutas it appears that about ten thousand years ago women started to mark



Oba, the village chief, a descendant of one of the original families that settled Ilé Ife.

their menstrual cycles on bone.<sup>7</sup> Their cycles were correlated with the phases of the moon and this led to the development of a yearly calendar. The development of calendars coupled with the creation of irrigation systems allowed small clans to congregate in agricultural villages near sources of fresh water. The old need to travel for new food supplies was transformed into the desire to build communities. Those men and women who studied nature, shifted their focus from the observation of animal migration to the lessons needed to plant and harvest crops.

Eight thousand years ago, nomadic groups in search of a stable environment started to settle in the Nile River Valley. They came from both Central Africa and the fertile crescent that stretched from Mesopotamia to Palestine.<sup>8</sup> In an effort to use the natural resources that make a cyclical appearance along the banks of the Nile, these new settlers started to record their observations.

Because the shamans had traditionally preserved the wisdom of the tribe, the priests and priestesses of the newly emerging city-based culture had the responsibility of recording the cycles of time as they related to crop production. This was done in relationship to the movement of celestial bodies.<sup>9</sup> The information gathered was preserved in mythic terms. The agricultural clock was the foundation of astrology, and astrology was the basis for understanding the principles of divinity and cosmology.<sup>10</sup> Star movement was considered an expression of the will of the Creator.

Overflow from the Nile River that caused fertilization was seen as a reaction to the interrelatedness of all things. Nature as a form of consciousness was responding to the issues of human need and there was a profound desire to treat this relationship with reverence.

I believe that the key to understanding the complexity of Egyptian religion is to grasp that it was first and foremost an early form of science. As a science and as a religion it was both reductionist and holistic. The Egyptians were able to reduce relationships to mathematical formulas and they were able to postulate theories of galactic interaction through the use of symbolic imagery.



To insure that future generations would retain the wisdom of their intuitive understanding, the mythic relationships were coded directly into the temples. In an effort to facilitate the growing need to develop intuitive insight, the Egyptians established a system of initiation that would guarantee future access to the symbolic material that was beyond literal interpretation.

The secrets of the initiatory process were preserved in a text that is commonly known as the "Egyptian Book of the Dead". The deities described in this text were the personification of forces in nature that had a direct impact on survival. Scholars who are unaware of the function of initiation have long puzzled over the fact that the surviving copies of the text are scattered in sequence and content. Typically they have been found in the burial tombs of those who were likely to have been initiated. An explanation that seems evident to me is that the "Egyptian Book of the Dead" was the primary text used in some form of divination.

Those portions of the text that were relevant to a particular individual's destiny were revealed to that person in fragmentary form. For example chapter fifty-nine of the "Book of the Dead" speaks of sniffing the air and gaining power over the water located near the underworld.<sup>11</sup> In my opinion this is a reference to the centering technique that is used to explore the emotions that are unleashed during initiation. What follows is an invocation to *Nut* the Goddess of air and water. If the diviner determined that an initiate was having difficulty expressing his emotions this invocation would be said to call those Spirits that would break down the resistance. The text includes a picture of *Nut* standing near a sycamore tree pouring water on to the hands of the initiate. This image preserves the keys for conducting the ritual that accompanies the invocation. Anyone who drew this verse during initiation would be buried with a copy of that verse to indicate which lessons had been learned during that particular reincarnation. Only the diviners themselves would have full access to the entire oracle. The use of fragments was probably a built-in system of checks and



Eṣu, Divine Messenger, the guardian of the cross roads.

balances to ensure that the power that is inherent in the text was not abused.

From about 5000 B.C. to about 3000 B.C. the refinement of the Egyptian integration of science and religion led to a stable political structure along the entire length of the Nile Valley. It came to full fruition in what is known as the Dynastic Period of Egyptian history. The early Dynastic Period appears to have been productive and relatively peaceful. The Pharaohs were initiated into the mysteries of Ra, which is the solar principle of evolution from light. That means that creation was understood to be a manifestation of multiplicity from a single source. As religious rulers, the Pharaohs were expected to maintain clearly defined ethical standards and to receive training that would prepare them for the journey into the afterlife.

Approximately 1,500 years after the beginning of the Dynastic Period, the prominence of Ra as a spiritual principle was challenged by an aspect of the solar deity known as Aton. The reasons for this theological difference are difficult to fully understand, but there is some indication that Aton was believed to be the sun itself and not the spiritual essence symbolized by the sun.<sup>12</sup> What is clear is that the emergence of Aton led to what historians have identified as change in Egyptian belief from polytheism to monotheism. I disagree with this analysis because it ignores the fact that the religion of Ra was monotheistic as well. There is some indication that this shift in religious emphasis reflected a shift in political power that may have occurred along ethnic lines.<sup>13</sup>

The early Pharaohs were clearly of African descent, as evidenced by the statues of that period. At some point during the middle Dynastic Period there was a mass exodus out of Egypt. Tracing the lines of migration is difficult to document historically. What does emerge from the literature on the subject is a sense of extensive cross cultural interaction all across the continent of Africa. It appears that there has been some form of cultural interaction between the inhabitants of early Egypt and the original

founders of the Yoruba Nation. This exchange is most apparent to me in the striking similarities between Egyptian cosmology and the world view of *Ifá*. Some historians have suggested that the Yoruba tribe migrated directly from Egypt to West Africa. Because there is no solid anthropological proof of this claim, the issue remains open to debate.

According to the oral tradition of *Ifá*, the religion is based on the teachings of the prophet *Òrúnmìlà*. He is described in *Ifá* folklore as a Yoruba man who came to the city of *Ilẹ́ Ifẹ́* to teach a system of ethics, religious belief, and mystic vision. Towards the end of his life, *Òrúnmìlà* introduced a method of divination that is known as *Dafa*. It is the belief of *Ifá* priests that when *Dafa* is cast, it represents direct communication with the Spirit of *Òrúnmìlà*. The oral history also indicates that *Òrúnmìlà* traveled across Africa, sharing his wisdom with other cultures. There is clear evidence that the scriptures of *Ifá* have had an influence well beyond the Yoruba Nation. Elements of *Ifá* can be found in Dahomey, Togo, and Benin.<sup>14</sup>

It is difficult to place the exact time frame for the historical presence of *Òrúnmìlà* in West Africa. However, the pre-Christian emergence of *Ifá* is discussed in the Book *Òrúnmìlàism, the Basis of Jesuism*, by the Nigerian scholar Akin Fagbenro Beyioku. The material in Beyioku's book states that the prophet *Òrúnmìlà* traveled to Palestine where he was known as *Melchizedek*. According to some historians *Melchizedek* was the prophet of the sect of ascetics known as Essenes. There is evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls that Jesus may have studied with the Essene Rabbis who lived outside of Jerusalem. Beyioku's account would place *Òrúnmìlà*'s travels at a time between 2,100 to 2,500 years ago.

Further proof of cross cultural interaction between early Jewish culture and West African culture is suggested by the research of Stephen Skinner. In his book *The Oracle of Geomancy, Techniques of Earth Divination*, Skinner describes the similarity between the divination system of *Ifá* and the divination system used by the

Essenes. Both systems are based on the same 256 marks that are used to catalogue forces in nature.

It is possible that the link between these two systems of divination pre-dates both Yoruba and Jewish culture. The prophet *Ọrúnmilà* is also known by the praise name *Eleri-ipin* which means "Witness to Creation". This title suggests to me a possible association between *Ọrúnmilà* and the tradition of the Mystic Eye which was at the heart of the Egyptian divination process.<sup>15</sup> Such speculation remains tentative. However, it does appear that elements of *Ifá* predate Yoruba culture. The elders of *Ifá* believe that they are practicing the original religion of humans on earth. Because of the evidence that human life originated in Africa, there is a possibility that this belief is rooted in historical fact.

While researching the history of *Ifá*, I discovered an early Egyptian belief that was intriguing. The Egyptian priests believed that the key to understanding nature could be found in an understanding of the structure of sound and the study of the proportions found in the overtone series. Their study of this phenomena led to the development of solfege, which is the use of a set of syllables that represent musical relationships. *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*, by Manly P. Hall states that the Egyptians developed the use of "do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do" to represent intervals found in the overtone series. The book also states that the fourth step of the scale was believed by the Egyptians to hold the secret power of invocation. The fourth step is called "fa" which is a possible source of the word *Ifá*. I say this because the relationship between "do" and "fa" in Egyptian metaphysics makes a very distinct geometric pattern when translated into a two dimensional image. Those who have been blessed with initiation into *Ifá* will recognize this pattern as being evident when the power of the priesthood is passed to the initiate.

As soon as it became clear to me that the *Olúwo* understood the purpose of my visit, I realized that most of my historical study was beside the point. The reason for initiation is to experience

some form of internal transformation. In *Ifá*, initiation is believed to lead to a state of Being that is called *ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́*. The word is used to describe the behavior that is expected of an *Ifá* priest. The common translation of *ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́* would be “gentleness”. This translation is accurate, but it does not fully express the profound esoteric implications of the word as it is understood within the *Ifá* religious community.

*Ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́* is a contraction of the words *ìwa* and *Ọpẹ̀lẹ́*. *Ìwa* means “Character”. In Yoruba culture a person’s contribution to the community is measured in large part by the qualities of good character that they exhibit in their everyday life. *Ìwa* is used as prefix for a number of words that describe a wide range of positive and negative character traits. *Ọpẹ̀lẹ́* is both the wife of *Ọrúnmìlà* and the word used to identify one of the tools used in divination. To say that an *Ifá* priest is expressing the qualities of *ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́* is to imply that he has balanced the masculine and feminine elements of his own character. It also implies that this balance has taken place in accordance with those principles that are contained within the scriptures of *Ifá*. Those *Ifá* initiates who struggle to grasp the true meaning of *ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́* may eventually earn the right to be called *Babalawo*. The word *Babalawo* means “Father of the Secrets”. *Baba* is Yoruba for “Father” and *awo* is Yoruba for the secrets that are revealed through the study of divination.

## Lesson 1

### Self-study Guide

#### The Use of Signs as an Oracle

Oracles are considered to be forms of direct communication with nature and the spirits that express themselves through natural phenomena. The various forms of Yoruba religion that are practiced in the United States make extensive use of trance possession as a form of oracle. During trance work the consciousness of the medium is believed to be replaced by the consciousness of spiritual forces that could not otherwise speak in human language.

Another form of oracle is the use of meditation and prayer in specific geographical locations. The priests of *Ifá* believe that certain spiritual forces are stronger in specific natural settings than they are in other places. In Africa, the *Ifá* priests have done research to determine which spiritual forces are present throughout the natural landscape. If it is discovered that a particular area has a strong association with a particular Spirit, that area is consecrated as a shrine for the Spirit. This kind of exploration is similar to both the use of dragon lines by the Taoists in China, and the use of ley lines by the Druids in England.

Because *Ifá* is rooted in the study of nature, it becomes very important to know where the lessons of nature are the most self-evident. By going to these places to pray and meditate it is possible to enter into communion with the elements. When this is done, a form of meditative communication can take place that can be used as an effective oracle for solving problems.

In the practice of *Ifá*, this type of meditative work is conducted with the use of specific invocations (*ofò aṣṣe*), specific offerings (*adimu*), and by using a set sequence of ritualistic gestures.

Most of this material is taboo to the uninitiated. However, it is possible to make use of the format in a general way to gain effective insight into some of the profound lessons that nature has to teach.

The first step in this process is to clearly define the problem that is to be addressed. In my work as a diviner, I frequently discover that clients are plagued by certain re-occurring problems simply because they have failed to identify the real issue. To aid in the process of clarity, I suggest writing down the problem in a single sentence. The next step is to list all the attempts at solutions that have not worked. By making this type of examination, it is possible to get a fresh insight into the parameters of the problem itself.

I find that meditation and prayer are more effective when they are limited to a single issue. Once the problem has been clearly identified, a decision needs to be made regarding what place in nature will best enhance the kind of communion that is necessary for an effective oracle. Not everyone has access to a wide range of choices in this matter. Meditation and prayer can be effective any place that is quiet and undisturbed. However, there are a few general guidelines regarding what type of place is likely to produce the most effective results.

## MOUNTAINS — ÒKE GIGA

Mountains bring a person closer to the sky. They are a place to commune with the Spirits of the air. Spiritually as well as physically, air is created as a result of sunlight. Air is both literally and symbolically created by the sky. In *Ifá* the spirits of light and air associated with the sky are called *Qbatala* and *Qduduwa*.

Turning to the sky Deities is traditionally seen as a way to resolve issues of ethical behavior, spiritual growth and visions of the future.

Mountains may also be used to bring a person closer to the spirit of the wind. At times we may need a gentle wind. At other



times the strong wind of complete transformation is required. In both instances the wind is invoked to blow away bad habits, unwanted emotions, and to bring us closer to the wisdom of our ancestors. The wind is an aspect of the Spirit known in *Ifá* as *Oya*.

## WATER — *OMI*

Water is considered the source of physical, emotional and spiritual cleansing. Water can wash away issues of sadness, sorrow, and despair as well as clean away physical disease. During ceremonies water is used to spiritually clean away earlier conditions of immaturity, making room for renewed growth.

Fresh water (*omi tútù*) is associated with rivers which are considered the source of abundance and fertility. Yorubaland is rich with water spirits. Prominent among them is *Oshun*. The Goddess *Oshun* will heal problems related to sexuality as well as provide the good things in life.

Salt water (*omiro*) is the realm of the Spirits of the ocean. In West Africa the ocean Spirit is known as *Olokun*, in North and South America she is generally called *Yemoja*. Both manifestations of the Ocean Spirits express maternal nurturing, the mysteries of birth, and secrets of stability.

Still water (*Osa*) is the type of water found in a lagoon. Water that does not move is used to invoke spiritual death as a precondition of rebirth. The use of lagoon water is frequently a primary element in the initiation process.

## FIRE — *INÁ*

The most direct way to make use of fire is either with a candle or a wood fire. In most cases fire is used as the catalyst for spiritual transformation in the form of rebirth. It is the fire that is addressed when a person begins the process of tempering their consciousness as a condition of spiritual growth. In *Ifá* fire is associated with the Spirit of lightning called *Shango*. This Spirit is invoked in relation-

ship to issues of social justice as well as personal transcendence of the ego.

Lightning is described by *Ifá* as the child of the fire at the center of the earth. The earth fire is called *Agayu* and is accessible by meditation in desert areas. *Agayu* is called upon to burn away any deep emotional pain caused by prolonged suffering.

## EARTH — ONILÉ

Spirits of the earth give us the tools and resources for survival. In *Ifá* the earth is represented by the male and female aspect of *Ogun*. As a male spirit *Ogun* is the iron that is believed to be the seed of the earth's womb. Iron emerges from the molten lava at the center of the earth and gives shape to the earth's surface. *Ogun* is invoked to clear away obstacles to survival and spiritual growth. It is not always easy to find iron deposits in nature. I believe that the essence of *Ogun* can also be found in the thickly covered forest, because *Ogun's* knife is used to clear a path through the bush.

*Onilé* which means earth, is the female aspect of *Ogun*. In *Ifá* she is the final judge in all disputes. The reason for this role is because *Ifá* teaches that human law must be in accord with Nature's law, and no where is Nature's law more evident than in the ecological balance created by the Earth Herself.

## OFFERINGS — ADIMU

After selecting a place for meditation and prayer, it is important to bring an offering as a form of thanks. A fundamental law of Nature is that we do not get something for nothing. To continually ask Nature for Her blessings without giving a gift in return is to eventually become a thief. For the beginner I recommend an offering of fruit. Most fruit will be eaten by animals, then recycled into the environment. *Ifá* teaches that a prayer will be answered if the food left for the Spirits is eaten by wildlife.

## PRAYER — ADÚRÀ

All prayer should begin by stating your name to identify yourself to the Spirits. This is traditionally followed by praising the ancestors of your family lineage, including acknowledgement of those unknown ancestors who have come before us. The next step is to say thank you to the spirits for the blessings you have already received.

Following the thank you, the offering is presented along with a clear statement regarding the question that is to be asked, or the request that is to be made.

## MEDITATION — AŞÁRO

Meditation does not have to be complicated. Simply stay focused on the question at hand and only allow information to filter through your consciousness that relates to it. If the meditation occurs in a natural setting, events will occur around you that will reinforce the accuracy of the information that is presenting itself to you. Any sudden change in the environment such as a gust of wind, a rainstorm, or the emergence of the sun from behind the clouds, should be experienced as commentary on what is being seen in the mind.

Meditation can be very subjective process. Developing skill with this technique involves the use of a journal to record the content of each session. The journal should then be used over time to make an objective evaluation of the effectiveness of the information with regards to solving the question asked.

At the end of the meditation thank Nature once again and ask to be returned to normal consciousness. I find that the shift back to everyday life can be best accommodated by rubbing my bare feet on the earth.

# 2

## ÈGBÈ-IFÁ

### *The Concept of Ancestor Reverence and the Nature of Spirit Possession*

I was trembling when the *Olúwo* of *Òde Rẹmo* completed my *Dafa*. The shaking in my body was caused by both fear and relief. There was a very real fear of the unknown. The little I knew about the initiation process suggested that it included a physical ordeal that was a test of courage and strength. My relief was in knowing that the door to initiation was now open.

The *Olúwo* was visibly excited as he packed his ritual tools back in his briefcase. Standing, he shook my hand and started to recite *Oriki Eṣu Odara*, the prayer that asks the Divine Messenger to open the door to spiritual transformation.

Divination had clearly indicated that I was accepted into *Ègbè-Ifá*. *Ègbè*, like many Yoruba words has multiple meanings. Depending on usage, *ègbè* can mean either heart, emotion, or group. It is common for Yoruba idioms to assign several meanings to a single word within a specific phrase. Because of this complexity, *Ègbè-Ifá* can translate as either heart of wisdom, or society of wisdom. In both instances it refers to the total lineage of *Ifá* priests including those who have passed and those who are not yet born.

The inclusion of ancestors in the definition of the term *ègbè* is significant. Some Yoruba words can only be fully understood in relationship to the spiritual concepts that are commonly held

within the culture. In this case there is a suggestion that wisdom is contingent on the accomplishments of those who have lived before us. There is also an implied assumption that wisdom must be passed on to future generations if the descendants are to prosper. Coupled with its connotation as heart, *Ègbè-Ifá* is considered a living organism. It has an emotional center and by inference, a consciousness of its own.

My intellect had been able to translate the various meanings of the word *ègbè*, but for the first time I was experiencing the communal interaction that gives it substance. The idea of becoming a priest was moving beyond my preconceived notions into a concrete reality. As an outsider, I had anticipated some skepticism or possible hostility regarding my interest in *Ifá*. Those notions dissolved as the men, women and children who were to participate in the ceremony started to gather in the courtyard in front of the *Olúwo's* house.

Most of the men were farmers, some were carpenters and a few held professional jobs in the city. The word had spread that an initiation was about to take place and the *Ifá* community responded. The older men arrived first and they all vigorously clutched my hands while offering prayers and blessings. The younger men and most of the women arrived later in the afternoon following a full day's work. In all there were twenty-seven priests, about thirty priestesses and at least fifty children. The age of the initiated men and women ranged from five years old to past eighty.

Throughout the seven day ritual, I was impressed and humbled by the knowledge and level of participation of the young children. I was given the opportunity to see why the Yorubas place so much emphasis on ancestral heritage. The *Ifá* initiation is an extremely complex sequence of events. It includes extended segments of drama, singing, prayers and invocations. The details of the ceremony have been passed down for countless generations through oral teachings and direct participation. Everyone present had a

specific task to accomplish. Part of each task was to make sure that the young ones learned and remembered.

There was one five year old priest who seemed to take an active interest in my state of health. I was not used to the hot weather, the trip had been physically difficult and I was having trouble staying awake. My young friend danced past me several times during the opening portion of the ceremony. Each time he danced past me, he would cock his head towards the floor. It took me a while to realize that he had dropped food, wrapped in a leaf near my feet. Acting as a priest, he was making sure that I kept up my strength. When I tried to thank him by offering my hand, he reminded me that I was not allowed to touch anyone until after the seventh day of the ceremony.

There is an *Ifá* proverb that asks the question; “What are you willing to do to receive enlightenment?” The correct answer is; “I am willing to eat the head of the rat.” The question that follows is; “How do we eat the head of the rat?” The elders say; “Bit by bit we eat the head of the rat.” In other words, slowly we learn the wisdom of our ancestors until we are able to make our own contribution which we pass on to our children.

While I was in *Òde Rẹ̀mo* all of my meals were served on a mat on the floor. They were prepared in a communal pot that was placed in front of the eldest person in the room. That person would take the first portion and place it on the floor as an offering to the ancestors. It was both a gesture of remembrance and praise. Each meal was an affirmation of the belief that everything we accomplish takes place on the shoulders of those who have come before us.

To understand what spiritual transformation means as it is expressed in *Ifá* requires an explanation of the Yoruba words used to describe the human form. In *Ifá* metaphysics, the body has two components, the *ara* and the *ẹ̀mí*. *Ara* is the physical body, and *ẹ̀mí* is the soul or inner essence.<sup>1</sup> *Ẹ̀mí* is also the word for breath and is indicative of the relationship between breath and life.

According to *Ifá* scripture, the *ara* is molded by *Orisanla* who is the force in nature associated with white light. The hands (ṣwṣ) and feet (ṣṣṣ) are crafted by the Spirit called *Ogun* who represents the force of evolution.<sup>2</sup> This myth parallels the correct sequence for the development of an embryo in the womb. The brain and central nervous system are formed first, then comes the development of the limbs and digits.

In West Africa, *Ifá* is considered both science and religion. The religious symbols of *Ifá* express the structure and function of real forces that exist in nature. For example fresh water is an aspect of the Spirit *Oshun* who is the Goddess of Abundance. To call water *Oshun* is expressive of our dependance on water for the fertility of the soil, for physical health and for creative inspiration.

Once the *ara* or body is formed, it is given the breath of life (ḙmí) from *Ọlṣdumarṣ* who is the Source of Creation. *Ḙmí* is believed to be contained within the blood (ḙḙḙ) and is described as the vital essence that animates human life.<sup>3</sup> As *ḙḙḙ* passes through the physical heart called *ḙkàn* into the body, it generates an invisible inner heart known as the *ḙgbè*. The idea of an invisible inner heart refers to the complex network of emotions that forms human personality.

There is a similar polarity between the physical brain and human thought. *Orí* is the word used to describe the head, and *orí inú* refers to the inner self. When speaking of *orí inú*, the reference is to the center point which forms consciousness without becoming conscious. *Orí inú* is the "I AM" that Buddhist mystics believe can be experienced only in meditation.

The definition of *orí* as head is misleading. The word does not simply refer to the human head. In *Ifá* cosmology, all things in the universe including; elements, minerals, plants and animals have an *orí*. This suggests that the entire universe is endowed with a form of self awareness that guides the mechanics of evolution.

*Orí* in the universal context, refers to the belief that every force in Nature is a Spiritual entity with its own unique quality of



Oya guarding the gateway to the realm of the ancestors.



self-awareness. According to *Ifá* it is the *orí* of natural forces that shapes Creation and gives physical expression to the changes that occur in the process of evolution. In *Ifá* cosmology, all visible forces in nature are guided by invisible forms, just as human action is guided by the unseen sources of motivation and will. This idea is based on the belief that all things in the universe contain *aṣṣ*, the spark of Divine essence that emanates from *Orisanla*. The concept that *aṣṣ* exists in all things is an affirmation of the belief that the physical world is inherently sacred. *Ifá* embraces all of Nature as a manifestation of Spiritual creativity.

*Ifá* teaches that the purpose of all life is to live in perfect alignment with *ìporí*. The *ìporí* is described as the soul's double which exists in the invisible realm of *Òrun*. Here again we are not just speaking of human souls. *Ìporí* is the ideal essence of all that is. The concept of *ìporí* is based on the belief that the soul force in all things guides the universe towards balance and transformation.<sup>4</sup> In metaphysical terms balance occurs when the guidance of *ìporí* perfectly matches the manifestation of *orí*. At the moment that this alignment takes place, transformation occurs that allows for the expression of deeper levels of self-awareness. In nature, this transformation expresses itself as new environments and new species. In humans this transformation expresses itself as mystic vision and the evolution of consciousness.

The alignment between *orí* and *ìporí* in human terms requires harmony between the *ara* and the *ẹ̀mí*. When the body and the emotions are in accord, the body becomes healthy and vibrant.<sup>5</sup> To accomplish this unity, *Ifá* encourages both attention to good hygiene and the development of good character. The *Ifá* elders say; "Bit by bit we make the feet, the heart and the head travel in the same direction." Our thoughts, our feelings, and our actions must be of a single purpose if we are to successfully accomplish any task. When these three elements are functioning together, it is possible for a portion of the *ìporí* to be revealed to the *orí*. The result of this revelation is transformation in the form of wisdom.

The Yoruba word for wisdom is *orí ire* and it is the quest for *orí ire* that is celebrated during the initiation process.

Movement in opposition to balance is known as *ibi*. Idiomatically *ibi* is defined as bad luck or misfortune. From a spiritual perspective, *ibi* is the loss of mental and/or physical health that results from neglecting the discipline of developing good character. This neglect is also believed to be the cause of natural disasters and what is known in the West as accidents. *Orí ibi* develops in everyone as attempts are made to adjust to the changes in responsibility that come with age and maturity. This simply means that not all human action is guided by natural law. The purpose of divination is to make an assessment of the state of balance or imbalance between *orí* and *ìporí* and to offer remedies that will insure good health, good fortune and deeper understanding of self and world.

During the first segment of *Ifá* initiation, there is an invocation for *Iku*, the Spirit of Death. The invocation is spoken to remove any bad fortune that has accumulated around the *orí* of the initiate. The removal of *ibi*, by invoking *Iku*, returns the *orí* to the state of perfect alignment with *ìporí* that is believed to have occurred in *Òrun* prior to birth. While in *Òrun*, the *orí* makes an agreement with *ìporí* regarding the lessons that are to be learned during the next stage of reincarnation. This agreement, or genetic selection, becomes the template for personal destiny and creates the parameters of potential within the inner self (*orí inú*).

To insure the removal of *ibi* during initiation, a funeral is performed on behalf of the initiate. Taboo forbids description of this process, but I can say that it felt like a physical death which resulted in a loss of consciousness. In Native American rites of passage, this process is called the “Little Death”. Some Western occult traditions describe orgasm that leads to loss of consciousness as the “Little Death”. There appears to be a cross cultural awareness that loss of consciousness can open a threshold to deeper levels of understanding. It is the emergence from the “Little Death” that

brings the mystic vision of the inner self. Experiencing this vision can be a fearful moment, and the invocation of *Iku* does nothing to diminish this fear.

From a theological point of view, Yoruba funeral rites are based on the belief that the *ẓmí* or spiritual body separates from the *ara* or physical body at the time of death. When this occurs the *ẓmí* is guided towards a transcendent state known as *egun*.

The spirit of *ēgún* is believed to have the ability to interact with humans who still exist in the material world. *Ēgún* visitation from a revered ancestor is considered a blessing and is openly encouraged. *Ēgún* is invoked to provide guidance to children, to protect the family from harm, to share their insights into issues of personal and communal growth and to preserve the principles of good character. Ancestors are also called upon to act as intermediaries between humans and forces of nature called *Orisha*.

*Ifá* elders give various explanation for the physical location of the after-life. *Ēgún* is described as living either under the earth, in the invisible realm, or in the ancient village of *Ilé Ifé*. On the surface, these differences may seem contradictory. Based on my discussions with African priests, these differences can be explained by the fact that *ēgúns* can have different functions at different levels of spiritual development.

Those ancestral spirits who remain under the earth work with Nature Spirits (*Orisha*) to maintain a system of divine justice. While in the invisible realm, *ēgún* goes through the transformation required for reincarnation. To say that *ēgún* lives in *Ilé Ifé* means that the ancestral spirit has returned to Source. There is a physical city in Yorubaland named *Ilé Ifé* and it is the center of the *Ifá* religion. But there is also a spiritual city by the same name which is the mythic source of life on earth. *Ilé Ifé* roughly translates as "City of Origins". A literal translation is; "Spreading Earth." It can be thought of as a state of Being rather than a physical place. The relationship between the physical city and the spiritual city is similar to the relationship between *orí* and *ìporí*. This is

another expression of the idea that the spiritual guides the physical towards a deeper appreciation of its own inner essence. *Ègúns* who reside in *Ilẹ́ Ifé* have reunited with the mystic Source of Life. They have experienced the ascension of *ori inu* to a place of eternity within the realm of the primal *asẹ* of *Orisanla*. These *ègúns* become deified ancestors by merging with the forces in nature known as *Orisha*.

In *Ifá* ceremonies it is possible to experience *Ilẹ́ Ifé* prior to death. This experience places the *ori* in a mystic state known as *lẹ́-lẹ́*.<sup>6</sup> *Lẹ́-lẹ́* is similar to the Buddhist concept of Nirvana. In Buddhism, Nirvana is beyond the cycle of change, beyond death and decay, and beyond thought. Buddhists who practice deep meditation report that they are able to reach Nirvana while preserving their physical existence. In *Ifá* it is believed that *lẹ́-lẹ́* can be reached through meditation and through the trance states that are induced by song, dance and the power of the word.

In their capacity as intermediaries, *ègúns* are called upon to assist in the elevation of *orí* to *Lẹ́-lẹ́*. This is commonly done in the rites of passage that are an integral part of Yoruba traditional religious life. Rites of passage are ceremonial celebrations of life changes that occur with the physical aging of the body. Physical changes are accompanied by a shift in social responsibilities that are presented to the initiate through the use of mythic drama. The most common rites of passage are birth, puberty, marriage, pregnancy, old age and death.

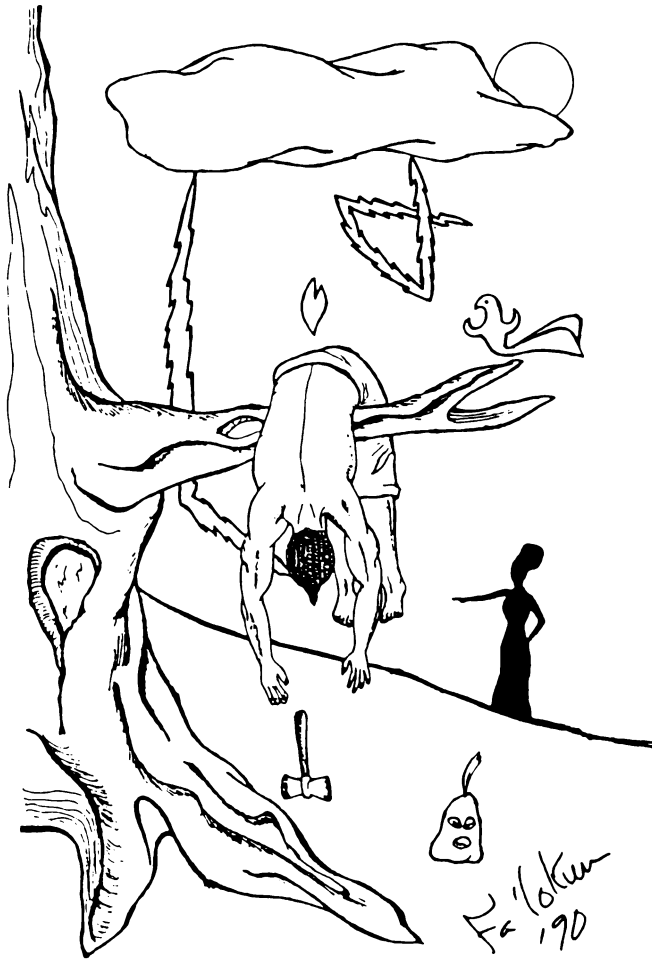
Along with rites of passage, there are Yoruba ceremonies that are performed to honor the memory of departed ancestors. Each region of Yorubaland has its own ancestral societies and each society has a different name. They are called *Egúngun* in Oyo, *Gelede* in *Igbado*, *Agemo* in *Ijebu* and *Epa* in *Ekiti*. The performers in these mythic dramas are costumed from head to foot in ceremonial cloths that usually includes a hood or a mask. Some ancestral dramas are presented for entertainment and have a festive atmosphere. The

majority of the dramas are considered solemn religious events that preserve important religious concepts.

Each performance generally follows a ritual sequence that takes twenty-four hours, from sundown to sundown. The dramas may continue for as long as thirty-one days as a series of different themes are presented. In each performance, the night segment is usually conducted in private among members of the order. During the evening hours, prayers, songs and invocations are done to induce ancestor possession. At sunrise, the *Ègbè Egúngun* (Society of mediums) leaves the shrine and opens the ceremony to the public. Because of the use of trance states, the costumes are consecrated and fitted with charms to attract the *ēgún*. The performers are initiated into the order in a ritual that enhances their ability to function as mediums. When possession occurs, the enactment is believed to be a return in time to the historical moment when the event first took place. To sustain this impression the identity of the mediums is kept secret, and anyone who could be easily identified is not chosen.

The content of the drama varies from region to region based on family history. Some of the most elaborate *ēgún* dramas come from the city of Oyo. They involve stories of families related to, or associated with the chief of Oyo known as the *Alafin*. Undoubtedly the most famous *Alafin* of Oyo was *Shango*. The story of the death of *Shango* is called *Ọba ko so*. As a legend it contains all the elements that are essential to an understanding of ancestor reverence. As far as I have been able to determine, *Ọba ko so* is not performed in ceremony as an *ēgún* drama, but it is a key source for many of the ideas expressed in *ēgún* performances.

According to Yoruba oral history, *Shango* was the fourth *Alafin* of Oyo. At a time when the Yoruba Nation was undergoing a period of internal conflict, *Shango* united portions of the federation. In so doing he earned a reputation as an effective warrior. When the need for battle came to an end, *Shango* is reported to have suffered from boredom. In an effort to rekindle the excitement of his youth,



Oba Ko So, *Shango* committs suicide, his spirit is elevated by *Oya*, Goddess of the Wind.

he ordered his brothers to fight a duel. Reluctantly they agreed and one of them was killed. Overcome by grief, *Shango* left the city of Oyo and hung himself. The first person to find his body was his wife *Oya* who said: “*Qba ko so*,” which translates as: “The king is not dead.”

This story exemplifies the most fundamental concepts of ancestor reverence and is infused with deep esoteric meaning. As a warrior *Shango* represents every man and woman who must face the fear of the unknown in the quest for spiritual transformation. In some versions of the story, *Shango* is born a slave who overcomes his captors to become the *Alafin*. Other variations of the legend indicate that he was an overlooked younger brother who was chosen chief because of his skills in military tactics and government administration. Both versions show him transcending social restrictions in his effort to fulfill his destiny. Because of this triumph, *Shango* has come to represent the passion and vigor that is needed to rise above the obstructions that can result from political stagnation.

The tool that *Shango* used in his quest for victory was a double headed ax called *Oṣé Shango*.<sup>7</sup> Twin blades on a single staff is a symbol of divine justice. A double headed ax can cut to the right or the left from a center point. The ability to cut both ways expresses the idea that no one is above judgement as it manifests through nature. On a personal level the *Oṣé Shango* symbolized the need to balance the forces of dark and light that exist within every human soul. Dark and light are not seen as forces of “good” and “evil”. Instead, they are seen as the essential polarity that generates life. It is the imbalance in either direction that causes the conflicts that are sometimes referred to as “evil”. In *Ifá* terminology it would be more accurate to describe conflict as the lack of attunement with personal destiny and natural evolution. On a social level the *Oṣé Shango* symbolizes the need to protect the rights of the community from the abuse of power.

The double headed ax is used, among initiates, as a dance wand during ceremonies for *Shango*. The wand is usually carved from wood with a handle in the shape of a woman. Each blade is an extension of her hair. The female form is symbolic of compassion. In *Ifá*, the concept of compassion is usually associated with female Spirits. In the *Oṣé Shango* we have the image of a weapon used by men in battle tempered by an aspect of the feminine principle.

After *Shango* unified the tribe and brought peace to the nation, he mistakenly believed that his spiritual quest had come to an end. At the same time he still desired the excitement and self-revelation that occurred during his quest to become an effective warrior. Here the myth offers a warning to both traditional rulers and those who are interested in the development of personal power. According to *Ifá*, all personal growth involves an increase in spiritual power called *aṣẹ*. Rituals of transformation involve an infusion of *aṣẹ* into the initiate which can be used to enhance the alignment between *orí* and *ìpòrí*. The purpose of these ceremonies is to use the *aṣẹ* for the elevation of the individual, the family and the community. In this instance, *Shango's aṣẹ* was used to bring peace to the nation. But at the moment that the political task was completed, his *aṣẹ* was directed towards personal amusement rather than the will of *Orisha*.

*Shango* attempts to reclaim his enthusiasm for life by demanding a duel between his brothers *Timi* and *Gbonka*. At first the two brothers attempt to appease *Shango* by pretending to engage in combat. The *Alafin* is not satisfied and demands a fight to the death. Out of respect for his status as chief, *Timi* and *Gbonka* agree. The brothers are placed in a situation where they must violate their own affection to appease *Shango's* arrogance. Here the myth is clearly expressing a warning against the inherent dangers of temporal power. The abuse of political authority is one of the re-occurring themes of Shakespeare and Greek theater. It is a theme that shows up time and again in the scriptures and oral traditions of the



religions of the world. There is also the suggestion that the search for spiritual transformation is never complete. *Aṣẹ* must be continuously directed towards a deeper understanding of spirit and self if it is to avoid the pitfalls of stagnation and egotism. For *Shango* the fatal flaw in character leads to the death of *Timi* at *Gbonga's* hand.

Seeing his dead brother, *Shango* is overwhelmed by the consequences of his arrogance. Ashamed of what he has done, he abandons his kingdom. After wandering in a daze, he comes to an *iroko* tree. The tree itself is an important ingredient for understanding the esoteric meaning of *Egúngún* ritual. The *iroko* tree is used to make offerings to the Spirit of *Oro*. At funerals it is *Oro* that elevates the *ẹmí* of the deceased and transforms it into *ẹgún* so that it may continue its journey into the realm of the ancestors.<sup>8</sup> *Oro* is a difficult concept to translate, but can be understood as the pure manifestation of the power of the word. *Oro* in its common usage means "word". But in its spiritual context it is closer to the Biblical reference in Genesis where the "Word becomes flesh." I think of *Oro* as the result of invocation for purification. It is the crystallization of prayer that is directed towards the elevation of spirit.

The power of the word itself comes from an elemental spirit known as *Àjẹ*. Anthropologists usually translate *Àjẹ* to mean "witch" and this inaccuracy has caused serious confusion regarding the theological foundation of *Ifá*. Both *Àjẹ* and *Oro* are found at the *iroko* tree. *Oro* is the manifestation of the power of the word. *Àjẹ* is the force that gives the power of the word the intensity needed to effect change. It is the polarity between *Àjẹ* and *Oro* that makes effective prayer possible. The ability to pray effectively is called *ọfọ aṣẹ*. *Ifá* scripture suggests that women have *ọfọ aṣẹ* as a consequence of menstruation. Men receive *ọfọ aṣẹ* as a consequence of initiation. Because the power of the word is a natural birthright of women, this power has been erroneously associated with "witchcraft" by those who have tried to give it a

negative connotation. The power of the word for both men and women is an ethically neutral phenomena that relies on character development to insure that it is used for elevated spiritual purposes.

When *Shango* hangs himself on the *iroko* tree, he goes to the seat of spiritual power in an effort to transcend his human weakness. After his death, he is discovered by one of his wives, *Oya*. In *Ifá* scripture, *Oya* incarnates the feminine principles of death and rebirth. She is closely associated with *Ajalaiye*, the winds of change. When *Oya* sees that *Shango* has committed suicide, she speaks the words that characterize the esoteric meaning of the myth; “*Ọba ko so*”, meaning “The king is not dead”. This is not a description of *Shango*’s physical state of being. The words spoken by *Oya* are an invocation. She is speaking as a priestess not as a distraught wife. *Oya*’s function in ancestral ceremonies is to invoke *Iku*, who initiates the transformation that occurs at death. *Oya* also opens the gates to the realm of the ancestors. *Iku*’s presence is required as part of the process of transforming *ẹ̀mí* into *ẹ̀gún*. The gateway to *Ọ̀run* must be opened so that *ẹ̀gún* does not wander aimlessly on earth. By saying that the king is not dead, *Oya* has passed judgement on her husband’s state of enlightenment. She is saying that he has learned the lesson of not abusing power and that he has taken the wisdom of that experience with him into the next life.

The effectiveness of *Oya*’s invocation is expressed in the legend by *Shango*’s union with his father *Ọbatala*. As “King of the White Cloth”, *Ọbatala* is the representative of ethical standards within the *Ifá* religion. The image of unification between *Shango* and *Ọbatala* is a reference to the link between *orí* and *iporí*. This unification is the ideal state in the *Ifá* concept of the after-life. *Shango* has learned from his mistake and it is the vision of his own weakness that insures his immortality. It is a vision that unites him with *Ọbatala* who in turn guides *Shango* into the realm of *Lẹ̀-lẹ̀*. According to the legend, *Shango* lives in *Ọ̀run* where he becomes the father of lightening. Contact with *lẹ̀-lẹ̀* gives

*Shango* the ability to transcend time which is how he comes to be identified with lightening. The reason for this identification is because lightening is the *Ifá* symbol for the enforcement of divine judgement.

By raising his consciousness at the moment of death, the ancestral Spirit of *Shango* the man, becomes elevated to the status of revered ancestor. As a consequence, invocations to *Shango* will reveal the wisdom of his life experience. This is a point that is often misunderstood in the literature on *Ifá* religion. *Shango* is a revered ancestor who is described as living with *Qbatala*. This means that *Shango* has reached a place where *iporí* transcends human form and exists as a force in nature known as *Orisha*. Because *Shango's orí* was guided by the principle of fire, his *orí* unites with the *orí* of fire as a result of the transformation that occurred at his death.

The transformation of *Shango* represents the effort of the conscious mind to illuminate the mysteries of unconscious motivation. As Joseph Campbell has pointed out in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, myths from every culture use the warrior motif to signify the conscious mind of both men and women as they struggle to unravel the mystery of self-awareness. From a psychological point of view, the warrior is doing battle with those unconscious sources of conflict that threaten spiritual growth through loss of sanity. The appearance of the Goddess in hero mythology represents the motivating influences that guide the psyche towards self-integration and wholeness. If integration does not occur, the Goddess is often blamed for creating the crisis. At times this "blame" can cause a cultural rejection of the divine necessity for the feminine principle. When this occurs, female spirits are often identified as the "Source of Evil". To some extent this misidentification has occurred in *Orisha* worship as a result of the Christian influence in areas where the *Ifá* religion has suffered from oppression.

I believe that serious attempts to understand the inner essence of the relationship between *Oya* and *Shango* can help overcome the

distortions that have unfortunately occurred. Myth serves the function of preserving cultural norms by insuring that they are passed on to future generations through scripture and folklore. But all myth must be constantly re-interpreted to reflect the contemporary spiritual needs of the community. By using the myth of *Shango* as a basis for meditation, the symbols can catapult the mind into a deeper appreciation of the polar tensions that sustain all levels of Creation. It is through the appreciation of this dynamic tension that the initiate emerges from death into the light of rebirth.

The various mythic dramas that are performed as part of the Yoruba ancestor reverence ceremonies are based on the concepts expressed in *Qba ko so*. During the all night ceremony that proceeds the liturgical performance, the invocation to induce the trance state for the mediums is often said by a priestess who takes the role of *Ato*. In the scriptures associated with *Oya*, *Ato* is *Oya*'s ninth daughter. Most pre-Christian cultures associate the number nine with the Goddess of Mystery. In exoteric systems of numerology, nine is the number of completion prior to transformation, with ten becoming the beginning of a new cycle.<sup>9</sup> *Ato* is described as the surviving daughter of triplets.<sup>10</sup> Her brother and sister who passed away at birth become the polar principle of expansion and contraction in the Spirit realm. In Buddhist theology this principle is known as *yin* and *yang*. In *Ifá*, this polarity is called *Ibèjì* which is the Yoruba word for twins.

In *Ilẹ̀ Ifẹ̀*, *ēgún* ceremonies called *Agigun* are lead by a person who was born a triplet. If it is a woman the position is known as *Ato* if it is a man the position is known as *Amusen*. The mythology says that *Ato*'s brothers and sisters were born mute. This does not mean that they could not speak. It suggests that they did not have the ability to be heard by those spirit forces that open the gates to trance possession.

The importance of *ēgún* ceremonies and the use of mediums is very evident during traditional funeral services. Seven days after the burial, the family of the deceased goes to the grove of the *ēgún*

and calls the name of their departed relative. A response comes from the forest after the name is called three times. From the grove emerges a medium in costume who has taken on the spirit of the person who was buried and who becomes the voice of the deceased ancestor. The relatives are given a last opportunity to say farewell before invocations are done to escort the ancestral spirit beyond the earth dimension.

Within *Ifá* the cycle of death and rebirth is a fundamental concept for understanding the relationship between human consciousness and human destiny. Every step along the path of spiritual growth involves the death of the old self as it makes room for deeper levels of enlightenment. For this reason initiation is never seen as an end in itself. The search for *ìwa-pélé* becomes a life long quest for the rebirth that occurs when we are willing to face the fear of our own human limitations. I have always been skeptical of priests and priestesses who claim to have all the answers, or who claim to be perfect examples of ethical conduct. Such assumed perfection is the last stage of illusion before suffering the death that leads to real spiritual awareness.

## Lesson 2

### Self-study Guide

#### The Construction of an Ancestor Shrine

The starting point for any spiritual quest within the tradition of *Ifá* is to honor the ancestors. This can be accomplished through the construction of a simple altar that can be used as the focal point for meditation and prayer.

I recommend that the shrine be constructed with minimal elements, and then be allowed to grow as a result of guidance from the ancestors themselves. A white cloth covering a small table or box, placed in a quiet corner can be used as a foundation. Place a glass of water, a candle and a photograph or drawing of respected relatives at the back of the table or on the wall.

The location of the shrine should be someplace where quiet meditation can occur, without distraction or interruption. After clearing the space, smudge the area with smoke from cedar, sage or any preferred aromatic leaf. Smudging is the use of smoke to consecrate an area for spiritual work. Place the leaves in a metal pan, a bowl or a shell. Say a prayer over the leaves that explains what is being done. In Yoruba the prayer could begin: “*Iba se ewé*” Which means; “I pay homage to the spirit of the leaf”. This would be followed by a request that the smoke from the fire clean way any negative emotions, or negative influences that may have accumulated in the room. The prayer would end with the phrase; “*Ewé mo dúpé, aṣẹ*”, which means; “Leaves, I thank you, let it be so”.

As soon as the prayer is complete, breathe on the leaves. This transfers the power of the prayer (*ofo aṣẹ*) directly from your mouth to the leaves.

Light the smudge with a match, then wait until the flame has diminished, leaving a cloud of smoke. Circle the area to be used for the shrine with the smoke while continuing to concentrate on the content of your prayer. If possible, continue this process throughout the entire house or apartment. Remember, whatever you are thinking becomes a part of the cleaning process, so do not undermine your effort with inappropriate thoughts. If the smudging is done with serious intent, intuition will guide your hands to linger in areas that require added attention.

In *Ifá*, once an area has been spiritually cleaned it is customary to seal it with water. Take a bowl of water and place a small amount of perfume or cologne that is personally used and add it to the water. In addition add a small amount of body fluid, either saliva, or urine to the water. This is known as putting your *ase* or spiritual essence into the seal.

Place the open palm of your left hand over the bowl and say a prayer that identifies why it is that you are creating a shrine for the ancestors. This prayer could begin with the Yoruba phrase; “*Iba se omi tútù*”, which means; “I pay homage to the spirit of cool water”. We say cool water because we want to create a calm environment that will quiet the mind for meditation. A quiet mind is called a cool mind or *orí tútù* in Yoruba. Finish the prayer with a thank you; “*Omi tutu mo dúpé, aṣẹ*”. Again, breathe the prayer into the bowl.

Now take the water and sprinkle drops around the room starting with the area to be used as a shrine. The focus of attention should be that only honored or revered ancestors will be welcome at the shrine. Most of us have a few relatives who would not be welcome due to a lack of character development. A prayer can be said for their spiritual transformation, but it should be made clear that they are not welcome at your shrine.

Some people do not know who their ancestors are. This should not be a hinderance to the process. Anyone in this circumstance can begin by honoring historical figures who have been inspirational

to them, or they may include personal acquaintances who have offered guidance and understanding. Even those who know their relatives may want to include persons on their shrine who are not part of their immediate lineage. In *Ifá* there is a belief that if we trace our ancestry back far enough, we are all related.

After the area is cleaned and sealed, place a white cloth, a glass of water, a candle and the pictures on or near the box or table. This should also be done with conscious attention on the purpose of the shrine. Ancestor reverence is practiced so that we might share in the wisdom of those who have come before us. Being open to that wisdom can diminish the grief, confusion and suffering that often occurs while searching for spiritual transformation. Respect for the ancestors is a part of every indigenous religion that I am aware of and can be practiced whether or not you embrace the religion of *Ifá*.

When the shrine is complete, stand in front of it and light the candle. The first address to the shrine should be a commitment to regular use of the shrine for meditation and prayer. It does not matter how often you agree to make use of the shrine, what is important is that you live up to the agreement. The white cloth, candle and water can be thought of as an electromagnet that draws ancestral Spirits to the altar. The current that drives the magnet is composed of the prayers that are directed towards it. If you only turn to the shrine in moments of crisis, the power of attraction will be weak. If you charge the batteries on a regular basis, the spiritual connection will be easily accessible.

The next step in making ceremonial use of the ancestor shrine is to make an ancestor staff. Take seven pieces of fruit to a wooded area and leave them at the foot of a tree. Say a prayer asking for permission to enter the area, and ask for permission to take a piece of wood that can be used as a staff. I recommend looking for a branch that has fallen to the ground, rather than cutting one from a tree. Almost everyone who I have instructed in this process reports that once the offering is made, they feel guided to the spot



where a staff lies waiting. When you find it you will know. Thank the ancestors for their guidance and thank the spirits of the forest.

Bring the staff home and smudge it and seal it with the same method used to smudge and seal the shrine. I prefer using a plain piece of wood, but it is traditional to decorate the staff with pieces of colored cloth, and bells. The cloth should be torn from pieces of old clothing, and if possible from clothing that belonged to a departed ancestor.

For anyone interested in joining any of the religious traditions based on *Ifá*, I recommend that divination be done by an initiated diviner to determine if additional elements need to be added to the shrine. This is not essential to starting the process, but it can help strengthen the level of connection with the ancestors.

When the staff is prepared, return to the shrine and light the candle and freshen the water. The staff is to be used as part of the process of invocation and should only be used for that purpose. Invocation means that you are inviting the ancestors to come to the shrine to offer their guidance in some direct form of communication. There are many ways to invoke the ancestors, and many languages that they respond to. Whenever possible, pray in the language spoken by your ancestors. I am including a traditional *Ifá* invocation, that can be used in conjunction with prayers that might be more familiar to your personal ancestors.

*Iba se Ila Ọrun.*

I pay homage to the Spirits of the East.

*Iba a se Iwo Oorun.*

I pay homage to the Spirits of the West.

*Iba a se Ariwa.*

I pay homage to the Spirits of the North.

*Iba a se Guusu.*

I pay homage to the Spirits of the South.

*Iba a se llé.*

I pay homage to the Spirits of the Earth. *Iba a se* (name of relative)

I pay homage to (name of relative).

- Name each relative to be honored starting with the closest relationship and move backwards. Say; *Iba se*, before each name.

*Iba a se gbo gbo ēgún, aṣẹ.*

I pay homage to all my ancestors, so be it.

As the prayer is being spoken, the staff should be tapped on the floor in a steady rhythm. When the invocation is completed it is traditional to make an offering to the ancestors. This can be something to eat or drink. The food should be placed on the altar and removed before it spoils. In Africa, food that is presented to the ancestors is prepared without salt, otherwise it is small portions of a regular meal.

In the work that I have done with members of my own congregation, I have found that a simple set of questions can initiate dialogue with ancestors. Start by asking; "Is there anyone who wishes to speak?" The answer does not have to be dramatic or audible, simply go with your intuition. If you sense that the answer is yes, ask that the spirit identify itself by name. In most cases a name will come to you. If a name is given, ask if the ancestor wants anything on the shrine to enhance their presence. If a yes answer is given, make an effort to accommodate the request as soon as possible.

Once contact has been made, ask for guidance around unresolved issues. In the beginning ask the questions in a way that they can be answered with a yes or no response. When the session is completed, make a record of the questions and answers and test them to see if they are of value in improving the quality of your life.

With practice the level of communication can become very clear and responsive. Occasionally ancestor spirits will appear who have little of value to contribute. It is all right to send them away or inform them that they are not welcome. It is a fundamental tenet of *Ifá* that spirits respond to the power of the word. You are the persons who is in control of the ceremony. Whatever is spoken by you with sufficient intention will manifest. The key to intention is to work through any fear that may arise during the process. If this becomes difficult use the shrine as a place to pray for guidance and discontinue the invocations.

In my experience the only danger in this process can come to someone who has attracted unevolved spirits to themselves without knowing it. This can also occur as the result of some extreme life crisis such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, and substance abuse. Anyone who has not fully recovered from these types of crisis should limit their ancestral work to prayers for full recovery.

This does not mean that ancestor reverence is to be abandoned as a spiritual practice by those who are in crisis. In my experience, some of the most moving and helpful advice from my departed relatives has come simply by remembering how they handled a particular problem, enabling me to make an effort to follow their example.

# 3

## DAFA

### *The Structure and Function of Divination*

There is a point during *Ifá* initiation when the priests consecrate the sacred *ikin* (palm nuts) that are used for divination. After they have been blessed, the *ikin* are presented to the initiate and they become his personal tools for consulting the oracle. As part of the consecration process the *Olúwo* uses the *ikin* for the first time to cast the oracle on behalf of the initiate. Consulting the *ikin* is called *Dafa* and it is considered to be direct communication with the prophet *Ṣrúnmílà*.

When *Dafa* was marked on my behalf, all the priests who had participated in the ceremony were seated in a circle. They were all tired from a full night's work and we were all covered in sweat. There was a feeling of quiet accomplishment as the *Olúwo* said the invocations that open *Dafa*. At home, I had only heard the prayers spoken by a single person. Here they were recited as a call and response. The invocations were a group effort that clearly revived everyone in the room.

While singing the praises of the *Ifá* scriptures, the *Olúwo* placed sixteen *ikin* in both hands and shifted them from left to right. While the *ikin* were in his left hand, he would grasp as many of them as he could with his right hand. If there were two *ikin* remaining in his left hand, he put a single vertical mark (I) on the

earth with his right index finger. If there was one *ikin* remaining in his hand, he would put two vertical marks (II) on the earth. When more than two *ikin* remained, or when there were none in his left hand, he would cast again without making a mark.

The single line represents the force of expansion in the universe, and the double line represents the force of contraction in the universe. In metaphysical terms, expansion manifests as light, and contraction manifests as darkness. Within the cosmology of *Ifá*, darkness and light create all that is. It is an expression of the idea that light contracts to become matter, and that matter dissolves into light. In Taoism this polarity is symbolized by a circle filled with a black and white tear drop called *yin* and *yang*. Neither Taoism, nor *Ifá* considers light to be “good” or dark to be “evil”. Dark and light, expansion and contraction are simply two manifestations of a single form of spiritual substance that emanates from Source.

*Dafa* is considered a graphic representation of the ways in which darkness and light interact to form the physical universe. The single and the double lines are arranged in two groups of four marks, forming an octogram. A single group of four marks forms a quadragram. Each quadragram is called half a leg of *Ifá* and is made up of all sixteen combinations of single and double lines as follows:

I	I I	I I	I
I	I I	I	I I
I	I I	I	I I
I	I I	I I	I
<b>Ogbe</b>	<b>Ọyẹku</b>	<b>Iwori</b>	<b>Odi</b>

I	I I	I	I I
I	I I	I I	I I
I I	I	I I	I I
I I	I	I I	I
<b>Irosun</b>	<b>Ọwọnrin</b>	<b>Ọbara</b>	<b>Ọkanran</b>

I	I I	I I	I I
I	I	I	I I
I	I	I I	I
I I	I	I I	I I
<b>Ogunda</b>	<b>Ọsa</b>	<b>Ika</b>	<b>Oturọpon</b>

I	I	I	I I
I I	I	I I	I
I	I I	I	I I
I	I	I I	I
<b>Otura</b>	<b>Ireṣe</b>	<b>Ọṣe</b>	<b>Ofun</b>

When these quadragrams are grouped together to form octograms, they create 256 (16 × 16) combinations. Each of the 256 patterns indicates one of the ways in which expansion and contraction interact to form the multiple layers of physical reality. The patterns are equivalent to what East Indian Mystics call a mandala.

In Buddhism and Hinduism, a mandala is used as pictorial symbol of the inner essence of the structure of Being. The mandalas are used as a focus for meditation and are believed to unlock the mysteries of the relationship between the inner self and the external world. *Ifá* priests use the marks of *Dafa* in a similar manner. By listening to a question, and then looking at the pattern that has been cast, the *Ifá* priest is able to see the forces that are in play. From the visual image, the avenues of resolution begin to take shape.

It is the belief of *Ifá* that time is altered during divination. This has been my experience. I had the feeling of being in suspension as I watched the *Olúwo* complete the process for casting *Dafa*. The purpose of this particular divination was determine my personal relationship to the *ikin*. Each of the 256 octograms is associated with a specific verse in *Ifá* scripture. The verses are known as *Odu* and they contain the myths and symbols that illuminate the inner secret of a particular pattern. It is believed that the casting of the oracle will reveal factors that have created a given situation. Once the inner essence of anything is grasped, it is possible to learn how to live in harmony with it. The *Dafa* that was cast during my initiation, listed the taboos and restrictions that would become a part of my personal discipline as a priest.

Taboo is a frequently misunderstood concept. In the context of *Ifá*, taboo is a list of those factors that would pull an individual away from their destiny. Taboos are not considered restrictions, instead they are viewed as guidelines for enhancing the harmony between *orí* (consciousness) and those invisible forces (*aṣṣ*) that generate wisdom and growth. For example someone born with an *Odu* that indicates their destiny is to set an example within the community for good character might be given a taboo against drinking so that they would not run the risk of becoming intoxicated. Public drunkenness would be in opposition to that person's spiritual obligation.

After calling the name of the *Odu* that had been cast, the *Olúwo* turned to one of the priests who was in his early twenties and asked him to recite the verse. Everyone listened closely to make sure that the words of the scripture were being spoken accurately. When the recitation was finished, the *Olúwo* asked for commentary on the meaning of the verse. He started with the younger men and progressed to the elders, saving the last remarks for himself.

Within the religions based on *Ifá* that have survived in the Americas, there is a common misconception that *Ifá* priests do not go into possession. This perception is not consistent with my experience in Africa. Possession generally occurs in the United States as an ecstatic experience associated with singing and dancing in honor of *Orisha*. When *Ifá* priests attend *Orisha* ceremonies they frequently do not dance so that they can monitor and enhance the trance states of the *Orisha* initiates. This function of *Ifá* at *Orisha* rituals may have led to the misunderstanding that exists in this country. The possession that I witnessed in *Ifá* ceremonies in Africa appears different than *Orisha* possession. It is a much more subtle transition that is called *orí tútù* or cool headed possession. The trance states for *Ifá* can be induced through direct invocation with minimal body movement. There is change that takes place in the physical mannerisms of the *Ifá* priests as they go into trance, but they are not as dramatic as those that occur in trance dancing. I would describe it as the difference between the fire of the drum and the gentle breeze of the voice. By this I do not mean to suggest that one is preferable over the other. Both forms of possession have functions that are essential to the overall structure of the religion.

Because I had never seen *Ifá* possession, I was deeply moved when I realized that each priest was interpreting the *Odu* from a mystical state that was beyond my own experience. Some of the priests placed themselves into trance by repeating the verse of the *Odu*. That was followed by personal accounts of how the *Odu* had manifested in their own lives, or in the lives of those who had



come to them for guidance. They also called the names of former *Ifá* priests whose initiation had been from the same scripture. The commentary was made in Yoruba, and was spoken with such passion that the meaning transcended language. One of my brothers sat behind me trying to keep pace with the translations, but often there were no English words to express the admonitions that were being directed towards me.

It is a fundamental tenet of *Ifá* that *Odu* incarnate the multiplicity of spiritual forces that are honored and worshiped within the religion. When the *Odu* is marked by an *Ifá* priest those spiritual forces are invoked and present, adding their guidance and wisdom to the understanding of the verse. Trying to describe the impact of this process is very subjective, but no less real. The best I can do is to say that the *Odu* that was cast for me spoke of the need for humility; it discussed the parameters of priestly responsibility; and commented on the fickle nature of community respect. Within the circle of priests there was an air that left no doubt about the seriousness of the path I had chosen. It was a strong feeling of belonging, coupled with a sense of obligation to generations of predecessors who had struggled to unravel the mysteries of Creation. On those occasions after my initiation, when I have cast the oracle and the same *Odu* that I received during my initiation was marked, all the feelings that I encountered on that day in *Òde Rẹmo* return with the same intensity. Those feelings have become a permanent part of who I am.

I have met a number of students of *Ifá* who are confused by the wide range of variations in printed excerpts of the same *Odu*. The reason for this variety is because each priest adds their personal experience to the basic text and those additions are passed down to their students who make their own additions. *Odu Ifá* is a constantly growing and evolving body of wisdom that no one is expected to master in a single lifetime.

In my experience, approaching *Ifá* scripture is more productive if it is studied in stages. This can be done by starting with the

most immediate and personal applications of the patterns and then working back in time through the stages of personal, communal and environmental transformation. In this way the contours of the patterns begin to emerge in a way that can be grasped, then used to anticipate the consequences of their appearance. I am presenting here an introductory summary of each of the first sixteen *Odu*. These sixteen verses are considered the parents of the remaining two hundred and forty *Odu*. Verses one through sixteen are formed by placing the same half leg of *Ifá* (quadragram) on both sides of the octogram. The word for double in Yoruba is *meji*. For example; the quadragram for *Ogbe* is made up of two quadragrams of four single lines, or eight single lines in two vertical columns. Each quadragram is read from right to left.

### OGBE MEJI

I I  
I I  
I I  
I I

In cosmological terms, *Ogbe Meji* is the primal impulse for expansion, evolution and ascension. It is also a way of knowing that does not lend itself easily to objective language. Instead it opens a dimension of awareness that resonates with inner assurance. *Ogbe Meji* incarnates the light that illuminates both the physical and the spiritual universe. It is from the light of *Ogbe Meji* that the *orí* begins to sense the importance of good character as an element in relating to others.

*Ogbe Meji* is a boundless source of wisdom that can elevate the human spirit beyond difficulty. Elevation is directed by the power of the word (*ofó aṣẹ*). That which we believe we can create. The verse says; “*Bi a bo oju. Bi a ba bo imu. Isaleae agbon ni a pari re*”. Translated it means; “When we wash our face and nose we

finish washing beneath the chin." This implies that we finish washing our face by washing our mouth. The mouth is the sacred portal of the voice and the voice is the key to unlocking the mysteries of Being.

### QYẸKU MEJI

I	I	I	I
I	I	I	I
I	I	I	I
I	I	I	I

The second verse of *Ifá* is frequently interpreted as the messenger of death. It has that aspect, but it also holds the keys for averting death. According to *Ifá* death is a moment of transition in the life of *ẹmí* or the soul. Part of each human destiny is a potential life span. Nothing can extend that period beyond its inherent duration. But inattention to spiritual influences and taboo can cause a shortening of that potential time. When this *Odu* is cast, steps can be taken to place the individual back in alignment with their true potential. It may also refer to the end of a cycle other than the loss of *ara* or physical body. The invocation of *Qyẹku Meji* is a primary step in the first stage of all initiation ceremonies. It is also the portal through which *ẹgún* or departed ancestors return to earth to share their wisdom with the living. Like all doors it opens both ways.

### IWORI MEJI

I	I	I	I
	I		I
	I		I
I	I	I	I

In this *Odu* all things stand on the threshold of completion.

It is known as the “Deep Seer”. As we move towards completion of any task, we reach a point where we begin to sense the consequences of our actions even before they occur. We are also aware of the struggles that have occurred along the way. One person’s victory can be another person’s defeat. For those who are willing to listen and learn, conflict can bring both illumination and compassion. *Iwori Meji* begs the immortals to look on our endeavors with good eyes. This is a request for a blessing, but it is also a request that we be able to see clearly with the eyes of spirit. Doing this will insure that there will be no vain defeats and no empty victories.

In terms of standing on the threshold of completion, *Iwori Meji* is the fire at the center of the earth before it cooled sufficiently to allow for the unfolding of life forms.

### ODI MEJI

```

      I       I
     I I   I I
     I I   I I
      I       I
  
```

The anticipation of *Iwori Meji* comes to rest and completion in *Odi Meji*. It is known as the “Seal” which is an essential concept in *Ifá* ritual. To seal something in a ceremony is to guarantee that it will manifest. A seal is anything which becomes an irreversible fact, such as birth, some form of revelation, or the emergence of a new species. Seals are also used in a symbolic way to block that which is unwanted. They are forms of protection against loss, disruption and disease.

*Odi Meji* seals the point of completion, but completion in *Ifá* cosmology always marks the beginning of a new phase, a new cycle of birth, life, death, and re-birth. For example, the completion of childhood is ceremonially sealed by the puberty rite. It is a ritual

that brings to an end the child's dependency on the parents and introduces the young adult to conflicts associated with finding their place in the world.

When the fire at the center of the earth reached a certain state of cooling, it allowed for the emergence of oceans on the earth's surface. In *Odi Meji*, the birth of ocean water seals the term of the earth's development as a lifeless planet and generates the conditions that allow for the further unfolding of evolution.

### IROSUN MEJI

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*Irosun Meji* is known as the sounding *Osun*. In *Ifá* cosmology, *Osun* is the Spirit that protects the head (*orí*). The head is the place where memories are stored, so by protecting the head, in a sense *Osun* is protecting the past. *Irosun Meji* is the stable inflexible reality of that which has come before us. This *Odu* speaks of the need to respect and honor the ancestors as a way of preserving our memory of their achievements which then become a vital part of our own consciousness. Through this process we are guided towards finding our own place of respect and accomplishment in the world. If this happens, we will become the revered ancestors of the future.

A part of this *Odu* warns against laziness. That is to say, we have a responsibility to both remember and expand upon what we have learned. This requires being alert to our own shortcomings. The first step in solving any problem is to be able to clearly and objectively identify the problem. This step can be extremely difficult when the problem involves a personal weakness. We would not want a doctor to give us medicine for the wrong illness. In the same way we do not want a spiritual remedy for the wrong problem.

## QWỌNRIN MEJI

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The solidification of the past lays the foundation for that which is to come. *Qwọnrin Meji* is known as the “Reversed Head”. It is the potential that exists in every present moment to alter future events as an act of will. *Ifá* theology is not fatalistic. Humans are born with a spectrum of potential which cannot be changed. Within that spectrum we can make choices that effect the way in which our potential becomes manifest. Every investment in learning a particular skill requires the sacrifice of some other form of progress. Included within the panorama of potential futures is the possibility of changing bad luck into good fortune. It also includes the ability to break away from those past influences that lead *orí* (consciousness) away from attunement with Nature.

*Qwọnrin Meji* is the force that incarnates great prophets, those who have the courage to deviate from the past in search of deeper levels of understanding. This *Odu* uses the image of seeing your destiny and moving straight towards it without faltering. By creating the past in *Iwori Meji*, the future becomes possible in *Qwọnrin Meji*.

## QBARA MEJI

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Enlightenment is transient. After every breakthrough there is

period of resting and hovering in anticipation of the changes that are destined to manifest. It is the resting that comes after a long struggle, and it is the hovering that occurs while contemplating the next move. Transcending the ego and facing the deep lessons that arise while searching for the inner self carries with it the promise of abundance. *Ifá* teaches that the earth is essentially abundant in the same way that the ocean provides for all those who live in Her waters. The key to unlocking that abundance is to live in harmony with nature as opposed to trying to impose personal will on the distribution of nature's wealth.

At times enlightenment can bring a deceptive sense of accomplishment. There should be acknowledgement of achievement and rest from struggle. However, this *Odu* warns of the danger of becoming complacent. The danger is the risk of mistaking personal ambition for spiritual imperative.

In some ways *Qbara Meji* represents the sense of security that occurs whenever a species finds its ecological niche.

### QKANRAN MEJI

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In *Qkanran Meji*, there is an expression of the idea of Divine Justice. *Shango* becomes incarnated as an *Orisha* by the punitive power of the Creator. This does not mean that the Creator is an unforgiving Deity. By incarnating *Shango* as *Orisha*, the universe allows for transformation through tragedy and crisis. False pride and egotism can create an illusion of accomplishment and honor. But the laws of Nature are such that the illusion cannot be sustained by itself indefinitely. When the illusion crumbles it can be a shattering experience, but it can also bring transformative insights.

## OGUNDA MEJI

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*Ogunda Meji* means *Ogun* creates. *Ogun* is the Spirit of Iron, which is sometimes a confusing and misleading attribute. Iron was one of the first metals to be molded into tools. As such, it represents an advance in human technology. This *Odu* speaks of the driving force that pushes evolution towards greater levels of complexity. It is symbolized by the image of clearing the road of all obstacles. The clearing of the road can be a struggle, but it is a struggle that results in easier passage for those who follow.

In *Ifá* scripture, *Ogun* is clearly the dynamic force behind evolution. Part of this process is linked to the aggression necessary for maintaining the food chain. The idea of taking one life so that another may live is an undeniable law of Nature that applies to both plants and animals. Large trees overshadow smaller shrubs, blocking the sunlight and absorbing the nutrients from the soil. This type of struggle for ecological control is a part of the force in nature known as *Ogun*. In the context of divination *Ogunda Meji* is often a reference to the need for some form of protection.

This *Odu* also speaks of *Ogun's* relentless search for truth. By truth I do not mean some idealistic vision of the way things should be. *Ogun* searches for the truth about how things are. In Yoruba culture iron is used for swearing oaths. The use of oaths is a traditional aspect of initiation into the priesthood and it is *Ogun* who enforces these promises.



**QSA MEJI**

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*Qsa Meji* speaks of the winds of change. It is known as the spirit of “Run-away”. The Spirit of “Run-away” is any attempt to avoid disaster that leads to further disaster. I associate *Qsa Meji* with the tower card in the Tarot Deck. There is an element of random chaos within the systems that regulate the earth’s environment. The chaos of natural forces that can cause earthquakes, flood, and volcanic eruptions insures a certain level of human humility in relationship to the inherent power that often lies dormant within the earth. Cataclysmic change may seem harsh and unfair, but it could be the misunderstood rumblings of the movement towards a deeper and more profound sense of order. Certain types of environment turbulence are reactions against abuse. The earth goes through periods of tremendous upheaval during which Nature seems to be wiping the slate clean so that She can begin anew. This parallels the way the body produces fever to fight infection.

**IKA MEJI**

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*Ika Meji* is known as the “Controller”. That which is being controlled are those vicious, violent and cowardly acts that do damage to personal integrity and disrupt natural harmony. Within this *Odu* there is an admonition to avoid cowardly behavior.

Especially the cowardly behavior that would motivate someone to use hexes as a form of denigration. Hexing does not necessarily mean the use of a ritualized curse. There are forms of hexing that include gossip, lying, maliciousness, and lack of consideration. Diminishing one's own worth can be understood as a form of self-hexing. The *Odu* warns of the consequences of this type of behavior, because ultimately it blocks the individual's perception and appreciation of their own inner self.

### OTUROPOŃ MEJI

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The type of behavior described in *Ika Meji* is often the result of a lack of courage. In *Oturopon Meji* there is an admonition to face problems head on. This *Odu* is characterized by the phrase; "Don't run away, you can do it." *Ifá* is a religion that sanctions the quest for spiritual power. This quest always involves facing a particular fear. There is only one antidote for fear and that is courage. Any avoidance of the call to courage simply adds fuel to the fear itself. When courage is required, there is absolutely no substitution that will bring enlightenment.

### OTURA MEJI

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Facing fear with courage will ultimately lead to peace. We find peace in *Otura Meji*. It is the peace that comes from an inner

knowing, an inner certainty that our life is on the path of it's own highest good. This is the kind of peace that brings personal calm, strengthens family ties, and unifies the community around issues of social justice. Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. are two historical figures we can use as examples to understand the mystery of *Otura Meji*.

### IREṬẸ MEJI

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At various times in the history of individuals and in the history of nations, the oppressive forces of injustice are seemingly in control. With *Ifá* theology there are no forces that are regarded as inherently “evil”. But there are spirits known as *elenini* that set up barriers to the full expression of freedom, enlightenment, and environment balance. The forces of *elenini* are closely associated with sorcery, which is defined as the attempt to alter nature without regard to ethical principles. In the category of sorcery, I would include the development of nuclear weapons, the “Star Wars” defense system, and the destruction of the Brazilian rain forest.

*Ireṭẹ Meji* both incarnates this negativity and provides the keys for dissipating its influence.

### QṢẸ MEJI

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The victory over negativity is celebrated in *Qṣẹ Meji*. The

removal of sorcery and oppression is one of the keys to abundance. *Ọ̀ṣẹ́ Meji* is the positive use of the power of the word for protection and transcendence. According to *Ifá* the way to overcome oppression is to do the right thing, at the right time, in the right way. Ultimately this will result in a recycling of negativity with positive results.

### OFUN MEJI

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*Ofun Meji* is known as the “Giver”. This *Odu* represents the blessings of Deity that come from the quest for enlightenment. Every attempt at spiritual growth can bring a positive result even if it does nothing more than clarify our understanding of what not to do. It is the power of the word in the Alchemical sense, having the ability to transform lead into gold. Lead used as an allegorical symbol is the dense consciousness of the life that is lived in opposition to Natural law. Gold is the symbolic fruit of our labor, that comes when we respect Natural law.

### Ọ̀ṢẸ́ 'TURA

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*Ọ̀ṣẹ́ 'Tura* is not one of the first sixteen verses of *Odu Ifá*, but it is very important within the overall structure of *Ifá* scripture. This *Odu* gives birth to *Eṣu*, who is the Divine Messenger. It is through *Eṣu* that human language becomes translated into Spirit

language, and it is through *Eṣu* that Spirit language becomes translated into human language. *Eṣu* is also known as the Trickster because he is the force in Nature that introduces chaos and disorder into the process of evolution.

*Ifá* identifies *Eṣu* as both the source of chaos and the source of virility. It is *Eṣu* who causes the first sixteen verses to reproduce, forming the remaining two hundred and forty patterns that comprise the entire corpus of *Odu*. The invocation of *Qṣṣ* 'Tura during the *Ifá* initiation is a key element in giving the initiate the *ṣṣ* *aṣṣ* (power of the word) that is needed to invoke all the spiritual forces that appear in the *Odu* of *Dafa*.

The entire fabric of *Ifá* religion has to do with the preservation and exploration of the spiritual forces incarnated through *Odu*. Every initiation, every sect, every rite of passage, and every installation of a chief in traditional Yoruba ritual is rooted in a specific *Odu*. As a result, the religion becomes a living manifestation of the hidden principles that guide and sustain Creation.

In addition to their ritual function, the *Odu* are used as a wholistic system of codification for organizing the study of various disciplines such as art, medicine, herbs, farming, self-defense, astrology, and sacred architecture.

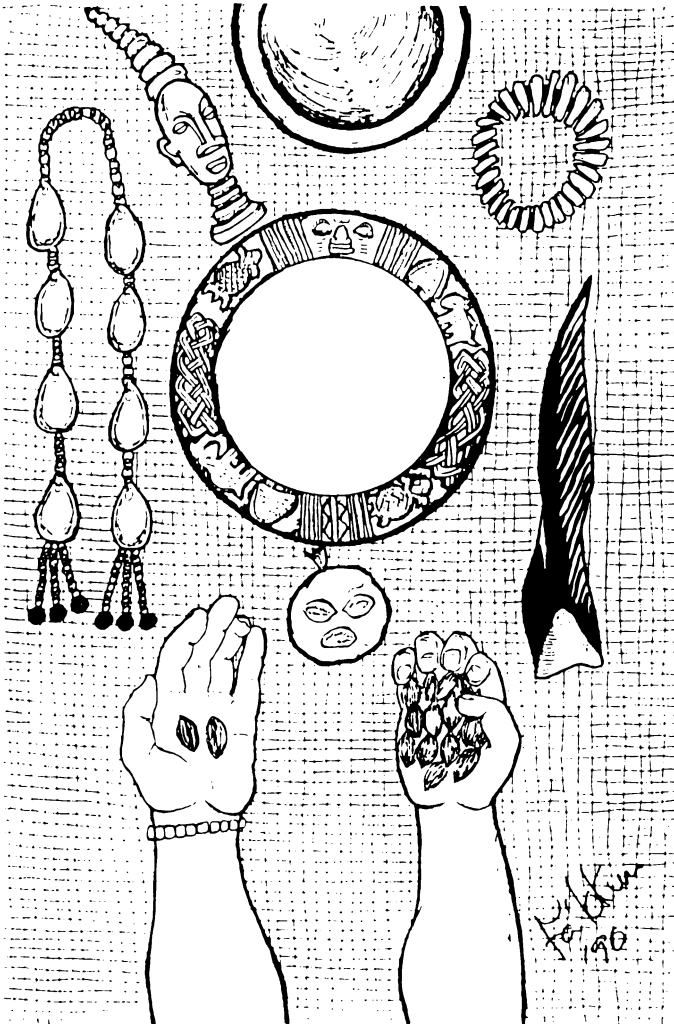
The clearest example of this process is traditional Yoruba medicine called *Oníṣèḡun*, which translates as "owner of the power of medicine". The practitioners of *Oníṣèḡun* search for a complete cure rather than the removal of symptoms. A complete cure is known as *iwosan* and is based on the idea that health requires the integration of the physical (*ara*), the emotional (*ègbè*), and the spiritual (*èmí*), aspects of life.<sup>1</sup> To effect a complete cure, the *Oníṣèḡun* uses *Odu Ifá* to discover the nature or inner essence of the disease, in addition to observational analysis of the biological and symptomatic attributes of the illness. Knowing the *Odu* that incarnates a disease gives the *Oníṣèḡun* the ability to dissipate its effects through the use of herbs that have an opposite quality. The use of herbs as a cure is practiced in conjunction with invocations

for health. *Ọfọ aṣẹ* is the the Yoruba word for the invocations used in ceremony. The invocations used by traditional healers are called *afoṣṣe*. The content and style of delivery in *afoṣṣe* is a command by the healer that the illness release its hold on the patient, and that the medicine release its power to heal.

*Odu* are also used to catalog and type the vast quantity of herbs, plants, and trees that are used as medicine, food supplements and cosmetics. The Nigerian rain forest is thick with exotic looking vegetation. In the rural markets you can see stalls that carry a wide variety of herbs, leaves and tree bark. Everything that is sold has a specific name, function, and some form of ritual preparation that is based on *Ifá* scripture.

Once an *Ifá* priest has learned the poetic verses of the *Odu*, he can choose to add to his knowledge of the scripture through the study of any number of disciplines. This was the original function of the Chinese system of divination called the *I Ching*. Both *Dafa* and the *I Ching* use binary geometric patterns to identify forces in Nature. Binary language is the same system that is used to program computers which are also used to store information. Just as a computer operator can scan a list of topic headings to access specific types of information, the *Ifá* priest can visually run through the patterns of *Odu* to access the mental memory bank that has stored years of learning.

In my experience, once the basic principles of *Odu* have been internalized, it is possible to see them manifest constantly on a daily basis. By organizing data through this system, life becomes an open window into the mysteries of Being, and a source of inspiration during the search for *Ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́*.



Tools used for *Dafa*.

## Lesson 3

### Self-study Guide

#### The Use of Divination in Personal Spiritual Study

The type of spiritual communication described in lesson 2 of this book can be a very subjective experience, especially for the beginner. Without guidance from an experienced medium, it is often very difficult to distinguish between messages from Spirit and projections of personal will and fantasy. The reason for this potential confusion is that in the beginning, spirit communication can take a form very similar to daydreaming. There are books available that teach the use of imagination as a gateway into trance, but the crossover point from projected image to direct contact can be illusive. Even among highly adept mediums, the possibility of confusion in this area is never fully eliminated.

In an effort to add clarity to the spirit communication process, *Ifá* uses both trance and divination as a cross check on the content and validity of information received. Within the traditions based on *Ifá*, there are multiple levels of trance states and corresponding levels of both divination and initiation. One of the functions of initiation is to temper the head of the initiate in a way that will accommodate the infusion of spiritual power (*aṣṣé*) that occurs in trance. Among the uninitiated, there is a system of divination and a realm of trance related to the ancestors that is considered safe and accessible to anyone who approaches the discipline with respect and serious intent.

In Africa, the system of divination used to communicate with ancestral spirits commonly involves the use of *obi cola* nut. A similar system is sometimes used with four cowrie shells. Because *obi cola* is difficult to obtain outside of Africa, I recommend the use



of cowrie shells which are available in craft stores and botanicas across the United States.

The first step is to obtain a quantity of shells and examine them closely. Separate four that feel comfortable in your hands. Cowrie shells have a slight hump on the top that is usually marked by an oval shaped line that is darker than rest of the shell. In order to use the shells for divination, this hump must be removed. Place the shell on a cutting board with the hump against the wood and the open side face up. Next take a pointed knife or ice pick and pop a hole in one corner of the hump. This can be easily done by holding the knife in one hand in the desired spot, while pounding the handle with the other hand. A small hole should open in the top of the shell. Turn the shell over and place the knife blade in the hole from the top side. Pushing the blade into the hole will cause the hump to pop off along the oval mark. Sometimes they break, so do not get discouraged. Eventually you will have four shells that are open on the top and the bottom.

When the hump is removed, you will be able to see a spiral shaped pillar inside the shell. This is known as the female side of the shell and it represents the force of contraction discussed in the previous chapter. The opposite side of the shell curves in and is known as the male side. Together the male and female sides represent the forces of expansion and contraction as discussed in the previous chapter.

To begin using the shells, place them in a bowl of water and take them to your ancestor shrine (Self-Study Guide, Lesson 2). Light a candle on the shrine and have a fresh glass of water near the candle in addition to a bowl of water containing the shells. Say the invocation to the ancestors that is listed in Self-Study Guide, Lesson 2, while holding the left hand over the bowl with the cowrie shells. Add to that invocation a prayer asking that the cowrie shells be given the *aṣṣ* (spiritual power) to communicate with the ancestors. When this process has been completed, place the finger tips of the right hand in the glass of water that does not

contain the shells. Use your wet fingers to clean the back of your neck. According to *Ifá* the back of the neck is the seat of confusion, by washing the neck you are invoking for clarity. Now remove the shells from the bowl and place them in either a white cloth or a small pouch when they are not in use.

When consulting the oracle always make sure that there is fresh water on the altar and there is a candle lit near the water. The water and the candle, coupled with the air in the room and the ground under the altar means that you are divining in the presence of the four basic elements that make up the universe. Earth, air, fire and water carry with them the seeds of diversity and harmony which are the qualities that the oracle uses as a basis for communication.

Before using the shells to speak with the ancestors, you must invoke the ancestors so that their participation will guide the answers that are given. It is traditional to use cowries on a flat circular mat, and it is traditional to be seated on the mat when the oracle is consulted. There is a common prayer that is used to praise the ancestors that is subject to a wide range of variation. I am presenting the basic structure and I encourage students to expand on it. The purpose of the prayer is to put the diviner in communication with the ancestors. There may be individual additions to the prayer that will enhance the level of communication. Some ancestors respond best to the prayers and language they were used to hearing while they were living. Those prayers can be included even if they do not come from an African culture.

## DIVINATION PRAYER

(Sprinkle water on the floor three times)

*Omi tútù,*  
Fresh water,  
*ona tútù,*  
freshen the road,  
*Ile tútù,*  
freshen my house,  
*tútù ēgún.*  
freshen the ancestors.

(Using the right hand move the shells around the mat  
in a counter-clock wise circle)

*Ko si ku.*  
May death be no more.  
*Ko si ofo*  
May loss be no more.  
*Ko si idina.*  
May obstacles be no more.  
*Ko si eyo.*  
May tragedy be no more.  
*Ko si arun.*  
May disease be no more.  
*Ko si fitibo.*  
May nothing be overwhelming.  
*Ko si arifin.*  
May there be no disrespect.

(Move the shells in a clockwise motion on the mat.)

*Ki nkan maṣe;*

I offer respect; list the names of those living spiritual elders who have given you guidance and inspiration, preface each name with the phrase *Ki nkan mase*.

*Iba a se;*

I pay homage; list the names of those ancestors who passed that you wish to remember, preface each name with the phrase *Iba a se*.

*Fu mi ní 're.*

Give me good fortune.

*Fu mi ní owo.*

Give me abundance.

*Fu mi ní aláfia.*

Give me health.

*Fu mi ní ogbon.*

Give me wisdom.

*Fu mi ní agbara.*

Give me the power of speech.

*Fu mi ní ogbon Ifá.*

Give me the wisdom of Destiny.

(Touch the shells to the four directions of an imaginary circle on the floor or mat, starting from top to bottom, then right to left, touch the center of the mat three times as you say *ire, ire, ire*, then drop the shells to the mat. From this point on you can ask questions without repeating the prayer.)

At the end of the session empty the water, extinguish the candle with your fingers and say; *Mo dúpé ēgún.*

The first level of access to the cowrie shells is a yes/no form of communication where you ask the ancestors simple questions that are phrased in such a way that they can be answered with a straightforward yes or no. When phrasing the question make sure that the best answers will come out with a yes response. For example, if you are trying to break out of a cycle of poverty, do not ask; "Will I always be poor?" Instead ask the question; "Will I manifest abundance?" In the first example a positive answer will come from a no and in the second example a positive answer will come as a yes, even though the response is the same in terms of outcome.

When using the yes/no format, there are five potential combinations that can occur as follows;

1. *Aláfia*; four male sides up.
2. *Etawa*; three male sides up, one female side up.
3. *Ejifé*; two male sides up, two female sides up.
4. *Qkanran* \*(*Okana*); one male side up, three female sides up.
5. *Oyeku*; four female sides up.

\* In the United States this formation is commonly known as *Okana*, in Africa it is more widely known as *Qkanran*.

*Aláfia* and *Ejifé* are both a definite yes to the question. When *Aláfia* falls it is a yes with a blessing of peace, meaning there will be no opposition and no struggle. *Ejifé* is a yes with a blessing of wisdom, meaning the affirmative answer carries a spiritual understanding of the issue. This is true even if some conflict is involved.

*Ọyẹku* is an absolute no. Once *Ọyẹku* has hit the mat, wash the shells in water and do not continue with the same line of questioning in hopes of getting a more favorable answer on the issue. If *Ọyẹku* falls twice in a row within the context of one topic the issue needs to be taken to an elder. If an elder is not available, I recommend caution when *Ọyẹku* appears.

*Etawa* and *Ọkanran (Okana)* are both unstable answers in that they suggest a possible outcome that requires further exploration. When either *Etawa* or *Ọkanran (Okana)* falls, a second throw is needed for clarity. *Etawa* suggests that the answer is yes with a struggle, the next question should repeat the former question with the addition of a single suggestion on how to proceed. This process is continued until there is a clear indication of how to solve the problem that is being addressed. *Ọkanran (Okana)* suggests a doubtful outcome. This is sometimes due to a misunderstanding of the problem. Rephrase the question with a different emphasis on procedure until there is clarity.

The possible double combinations of *Etawa* and *Okanran (Okana)* should be interpreted as follows:

1. *Etawa-Etawa*; yes.
2. *Etawa-Alāfia*; yes.
3. *Etawa-Ejifé*; yes.
4. *Etawa-Ọkanran*; no.
5. *Etawa-Ọyẹku*; no. (When this combination falls, change the line of questioning.)
6. *Ọkanran-Ọkanran*; no.
7. *Ọkanran-Ọyẹku*; no. (When this combination falls, change the line of questioning.)
8. *Ọkanran-Alāfia*; yes. (Emphasis on the second question.)
9. *Ọkanran-Ejifé*; yes. (Emphasis on the second question.)
10. *Ọkanran-Etawa*; Very doubtful.

When using the cowrie shell system of divination it is possible to read *Odu Ifá*. This system should only be used by those who have received initiation because the *Odus* perscribe solutions to problems that require knowledge of the inner secrets of the tradition.

If you are using a circular mat or tray, place it directly in front of where you are sitting. The mat can be visually divided into four quadrants. Once this has been done, the pattern of the way in which the shells fall can be translated into the half a leg of *Ifá* that is discussed in chapter 3. The male side up is the same as a single mark (I) in *Dafa* and the female side up is the same as a double mark (II) in *Dafa*. These marks are read from the top of the tray down. At times the shells will fall so that they appear to be almost horizontal, but in most cases one will appear to be slightly higher than the other in relationship to the vertical axis of the mat. By transfering the marks into a singly column you are able to produce all sixteen of the quadragrams used in *Dafa*.

When this method is used a single throw generally refers to one of the first sixteen *Odu* of *Ifá* scripture. In this instance you are doubling the same quadragram to form an octagram. A double throw can be used to read all 256 *Odu* by regarding each throw as a quadragram and by placing the first throw on the right side of the octagram.

# 4

## IFÁYELELE

### *The Experience of Oneness and the Myth of Creation*

After the *Ifá* initiate has gone through the rite of Iku (death), he takes a ceremonial journey into the underworld. The underworld is not a place of “evil”, it is a place of regeneration. Underground, in darkness, is the place where seeds lay dormant through winter waiting to sprout in spring. It is the place where *ẹ̀mí*, the human soul, becomes *ẹ̀gún*, the ancestral spirit. The underworld is the womb of re-birth.

When the *Ifá* initiate is first brought into the sacred grove, it is to experience the journey through the underworld. The initiate is covered from head to foot in a cloth bag that serves as an oversized blindfold. As I walked through the grove, things happened around me that were meant to test my courage. I thought that I was handling the ordeal relatively well, until I started to hyperventilate from a lack of oxygen inside the bag. I assumed that my reaction was a part of the process and I struggled for air until I passed out. Fortunately, I was surrounded by a circle of priests who caught me before I hit the ground.

Later I discovered that fainting was not a part of the process and the descriptions of how I keeled over became the source of some good natured teasing. Even though I was not supposed to faint, the experience was a significant aspect of the initiation. After



returning to the United States, my memory of the symbolic journey through the underworld, kindled memories of a near death experience that I had as a child. Consciously, I had forgotten the details of the experience, but as the real life images started to re-emerge, I came to understand how that one event had influenced my emotional reaction to seemingly unrelated circumstances. Frequently I had gone through an irrational feeling of claustrophobia. The near death experience from my childhood involved suffocation under a pillow.

Because initiation had triggered those suppressed memories, I was able to confront my fear of confinement. It was through the confrontation of my fear, that the real power of the initiation process began to become apparent to me. I suspect that different elements in the initiation can have a similar effect on other initiates depending on their individual problems.

I have known some initiates in this tradition and others, who have encountered their fears while traveling through the mythic underworld, who have blamed the elders for causing their fear. In my opinion this is a way of avoiding dealing with the issues that are raised. When this occurs, the initiate fails to access the fundamental source of transformation. This failure can lead to a feeling of bitterness about the initiation process that cannot be healed until the personal issues are faced.

In the old Kung Fu television series the hero is shown lifting a red hot pot with his forearms. That was the last stage of the journey through the underworld for the Taoist monks who studied the martial arts in China. Lifting the pot unlocked a door that marked the end of the ordeal.

In both *Ifá* and Taoism, the journey through the underworld is a test of courage. The ultimate test of courage is the ability to face the fear of death. The only antidote to fear is courage and it is courage that is being invoked during the second stage of initiation. Fear is a relatively easy experience to conjure. I was able to access my own

fear simply by having someone place a bag over my head. The ability to access courage on the other hand, requires effort.

*Ifá* and the Taoists martial arts teach that the path to courage requires stillness. It is the stillness that accompanies the calm introspection that leads to a feeling of oneness with self and world. Being one with the world necessitates an acknowledgement that the thing that is feared is a part of the self. The Taoists call the experience of oneness Tao. In *Ifá* it is referred to as *Ifáyeleḽeḽe*.

The term *Ifáyeleḽeḽe* describes both an inner calm, and the ritual process used to resolve disputes between *Ifá* priests. To know *Ifáyeleḽeḽe* in the face of fear, is to return to the moment of unity at the beginning of time. True courage can be found in no other place.

Religion traditionally takes one of two approaches in its attempt to describe the unity of Being. The dogmatic approach is to describe Deity based on established religious doctrine. Accessing courage using this approach is based on accepting or believing specific articles of faith. The mystic approach is to experience Deity through ascetic discipline.

*Ifá* uses the mystical path to access courage. In *Ifá*, the ascetic discipline involves honoring personal taboos, the study of geomancy (the patterns of *Dafa*), meditation, incantation, and initiation. Using these techniques, understanding Being becomes a process of expanding consciousness by overcoming fear through *Ifáyeleḽeḽe*. There is religious dogma in *Ifá* regarding the beginning of time, but this doctrine is understood to be a limited reflection of the mystical experience.

The content of mystical experience is known in the West as revelation. In *Ifá*, revelation is described as communication with *Ọ̀rúnmilá*. The revelations of successive generations of *Ifá* priests is added to the scriptures (*Odu*) used in divination. As a result, mystic vision is used along with dogma as a guide for accessing courage.

The philosophical implication of *Ifá* mystical discipline is that Being, or *Ọ̀lórún* is grounded in a creative process that is

based on universal principles that can be grasped by human consciousness. These principles are viewed as levels of mystery into the nature of *Ọlórún* that can be progressively revealed to anyone interested in making the effort. But because consciousness is restricted by the limitations of time and space, *Ọlórún* remains beyond the scope of verbal description. For this reason, *Ọlórún* has no gender, there are no symbols of *Ọlórún*, no one becomes possessed by *Ọlórún*, and there are no invocations for *Ọlórún*.

Prayers may be offered to *Ọlórún*, but this is usually done when all other efforts to produce spiritual transformation have failed. These prayers traditionally take the form of a request for the solution to a problem and include an acknowledgement that *Ọlórún's* will is always in effect. This means that events that may appear as tragedy and misfortune, are believed to have a deeper meaning that may not be clear to human understanding. This element of faith is based on the *Ifá* belief that every human head (*orí*) has made an agreement with *Ọlórún* at the beginning of time to receive a specific destiny or purpose in the overall unfolding of evolution. For this reason, the process of spiritual transformation is understood to be the conscious act of remembering elements of the original agreement between *orí* and *Ọlórún*.

In *Ifá* the agreement between *orí* and *Ọlórún* includes the element of reincarnation. *Ifá* understands reincarnation to be the rebirth of consciousness in different physical bodies. The rebirth of the *ẹ̀mí* (soul) is believed to occur within recent family lineage. It is this aspect of *Ifá* belief that is the basis for ancestor reverence and respect for children. Those who come before us and those who follow us are part of a continuous search for *Ifáyẹlẹ́*.

The *Ifá* rituals performed for cleaning away negative influences (*etutu*), rites of passage (*Egbodu*), and offerings of appeasement (*Ebo*), are all intended to create attunement with what can be known about an individual's specific destiny. They are not intended to fulfill arbitrary desires, or to create meaningless power and abundance. It is the task of *Ifá* to guide individuals along the

path that leads to those portals that reveal the primal agreement with *Ọ̀lórún*. Once a threshold has been approached, the elders step aside. Transformation will only take place if the person being guided walks through the gateway on their own. If the step is not taken, fear becomes reinforced with more fear. If the step is taken, fear is replaced with courage at the moment of *Ifáyẹ̀kẹ̀kẹ̀*.

The life long process of discovering oneness with Source builds what is known in Yoruba culture as *ìwa*, (character). Those who develop good character (*iwa-pẹ̀lẹ́*) become the elders of the community, sharing their insights with the younger members of the extended family who look to them for guidance. What this means in practice is that the deepest meaning of *Ifá* folklore, myth and symbolism cannot be fully understood by the intellect alone. Religious meaning must be both understood and experienced to be fully grasped. In the West the integration of knowledge and experience is called wisdom. In Yoruba language, wisdom is known as *orí ire*. The term has various translations, but in this context it would mean; “head of goodness”, or “transformed head”. *Orí ire* is the basis for the respect given to the elders of the Yoruba community who have direct experience of remembering aspects of their original agreement with *Ọ̀lórún*. This idea of having an agreement with Creation is not common to Western forms of spirituality. It is rooted in the belief that all things have consciousness, and consciousness gives birth to change through the power of the word.

In *Ifá* the sound of Creation is called *Oro* which means word. It is not the word of normal speech or conversation. *Oro* is the word of power, the word of manifestation and the effect of invocation. Creation is the *Oro* of *Ọ̀lórún*, it is the manifestation of existence and the invocation of evolution spoken at the beginning of time.

This understanding of word as power is the foundation of the *Ifá* process of spiritual transformation. The *Ifá* belief is that the power of the primal *Oro* has been preserved in the physical universe at all levels of existence. Because of this retention, the power of

Oro can be invoked through the use of the human voice. In human form Oro is known as *ofo*.

According to *Ifá* the moment of Creation (*Oro*) generated a single force known as *aṣẹ*. This force is manifest in polar form as expansion and contraction. The force of expansion creates light, and force of contraction creates matter. It is the harmonious interaction between light and matter that is responsible for good fortune, known in Yoruba as *ire*.

The *Ifá* Creation myth teaches that all form (*ire*) was placed in the universe at the beginning of time. The primal Spirit that sustains form as an element of Creation is *Ọlọdumarẹ*. This is a difficult word to translate directly into English. Some Yoruba dictionaries define *Ọlọdumarẹ* as the self-existent God. In metaphysical terms this means that *Ọlọdumarẹ* is that aspect of *Ọlórún* that has physical existence. In this context *Ọlọdumarẹ* is sometimes called *Ọba Ọrún*, meaning "Ruler of Heaven". This would suggest that *Ọlọdumarẹ* is similar to the Western theological concept known as pantheism; the belief that everything in the physical universe is an expression of Deity. As a universal symbol of substance, *Ọlọdumarẹ* can be understood as the archetype or repository of all forms that give shape to matter. In metaphysical terms, *Ọlọdumarẹ* would be the primal source of *ire*.

I have not seen this interpretation of *Ọlọdumarẹ* expressed in the written literature on *Ifá*. In my opinion it appears to be expressed symbolically in *Ifá* myth. In the story of Creation, *Ọlọdumarẹ* gives *Obatala* the task of molding the physical universe, but retains the power of giving breath to humans. The Yoruba word for breath is *ẹmí* which is the same as the Yoruba word for soul. This suggests that *Ọlọdumarẹ* is both the source of physical animation, and the source of consciousness. Breath is a new born baby's first experience of *ire* or transformation, and it is a result of the *aṣẹ* (power) that is raised during childbirth. In psychological terms, the moment of birth becomes every individual's initial contact with the polarity between light and dark as it



Oṣùmàrè, Goddess of the Rainbow.

exists in the world. During the *Ifá* initiation, the journey into the underworld can be understood as a re-creation of the journey down the birth canal. The fear that is overcome as the baby emerges into the world is re-lived as the initiate prepares for ritual rebirth.

There is still another definition of *Ọlọdumarẹ* that gives credibility to the idea that *Ọlọdumarẹ* is the source of *ire* in the universe. E. Bolaji Idowu in his book *Ọlọdumarẹ, God in Yoruba Belief*, suggests that *Ọlọdumarẹ* means snake excretion. There exists in Nigeria a real snake known as the Rainbow Python, and this snake is used as one of the symbolic images that represents *Ọlọdumarẹ*. When the live Rainbow Python gets old, it loses its eyesight. At the same time that the snake goes blind, it discharges a small florescent stone that radiates with the colors of the rainbow. The sightless snake is able to sense the radiations from the stone and will strike anything that blocks its perception of them. This gives the Rainbow Python the ability to survive after it can no longer see.<sup>1</sup> Hunters who locate the stone use it as a charm for invoking abundance.

The use of the python as a symbol of *Ọlọdumarẹ* expresses the *Ifá* idea that every object carries within itself the seeds of change. Confirmation for this interpretation of the esoteric meaning of *Ọlọdumarẹ* may be found in the fact that Rainbow Python's stone is used as a power source in some rituals of transformation.<sup>2</sup> Used as a talisman, it is a symbol of courage. The reason for this is very simple; anyone who has the stone must face their fear of the snake in order to take possession of its magic.

Still another layer of meaning concerning the nature of *Ọlọdumarẹ* comes from the *Ifá* description of the messenger of *Ọlọdumarẹ* known as *Oşùmàrẹ*. The word *Oşùmàrẹ* means rainbow and the rainbow is described in *Ifá* myth as a serpent in the Sky. Here again we have the association with the Rainbow Python. It is *Oşùmàrẹ*'s task to deliver a covenant between *Ọlọdumarẹ* and the people of the earth. A covenant is a promise or a pledge. In a spiritual context it is the expression of a sacred

truth. The rainbow represents the visible spectrum of light in the universe. If the message from *Ọ̀lọ̀dumare* is the full spectrum of light, and if light is a reflection of the invisible forces of *Ọ̀run*, the covenant from *Ọ̀lọ̀dumare* is that everything we see is an expression of Divine principles as they were meant to be understood. Put simply, everything in the universe contains the essence of *Ọ̀lọ̀dumare*. That essence is the ability of all forms within Creation to become transformed and to experience rebirth. It is interesting to me to notice that the rainbow is the same image that is used in the Bible to symbolize God's covenant with Noah. I suspect that the original intent of both images was the same.

It appears that the word *Ọ̀lọ̀dumare* might be a contraction of *Ọ̀lọ̀du* meaning; "Owner of *Odu*". and *Oṣùmare*, meaning; "Rainbow". *Odu* is the word used to describe *Ifá* scripture, but it also represents the Womb of Creation. The image from this interpretation would be; "The light of the Rainbow comes from the Primal Womb". I can find no written confirmation for this translation. However, it appears consistent with the idea that double lines in *Dafa* represent the portal of re-birth, and it is re-birth that generates ire or good fortune.

*Ifá* teaches that the need for ritual re-birth is a result of the need to gain insight into our original agreement with *Ọ̀lọ̀run*. Human life includes the possibility of living in harmony with that agreement or living in opposition to that agreement. The consequence of living in opposition to our destiny is the experience of disruption, illness, grief, mental suffering and fear of the unknown. In *Ifá* scripture it is *Eṣu* who guides the *orí* (consciousness) towards one of these two possibilities.

*Eṣu* is known as the "Rascal", and virtually all traditional forms of Nature Worship recognize some form of the Trickster Spirit. In European systems of Earth Reverence, the Trickster is often represented as the "Divine Fool", or the "Court Jester". What is unique in *Ifá* is that it has identified the force that controls *Eṣu*. This force is called *Ela*. The word has no literal translation,



but is sometimes described as; “The One Who Makes Man”.<sup>3</sup> Man is used here in the symbolic sense as the force of expansion. To me, the *Ifá* description of the interaction between *Ela* and *Eṣu* is an expression of the effect of Divine Will on the parameters of chaos. In some regions of Yorubaland, *Ela* is known as *Elẹda*. The word *Elẹda* is used to describe the energy center in the human head that is located above the bridge of the nose. In Western occult theory, this center is known as the “Third Eye”. For both *Ifá* and Western occultism, this spot is the seat of intuition. Opening *Elẹda* or the Third Eye in both traditions is viewed as the antidote for the confusion and disruption caused by the Trickster. In *Ifá* the chaos caused by *Eṣu* is believed to originate in the energy center located at the base of the neck called *Eṣu ni ba ko*. In Western occultism the Trickster is sometimes known as the Jabberwocky who lives in the back of the neck.

The back of the neck is the place where the head connects to the body. Symbolically it is the spot that connects the mind with the emotions. When emotions that are inappropriate for a given circumstance are triggered they can effect our perception of reality. This is the psychological source of the Tricksters power to cause disruption. It is my belief that emotions become misdirected as a result of some unconscious fear. The same fears that are confronted during initiation in the journey through the underworld.

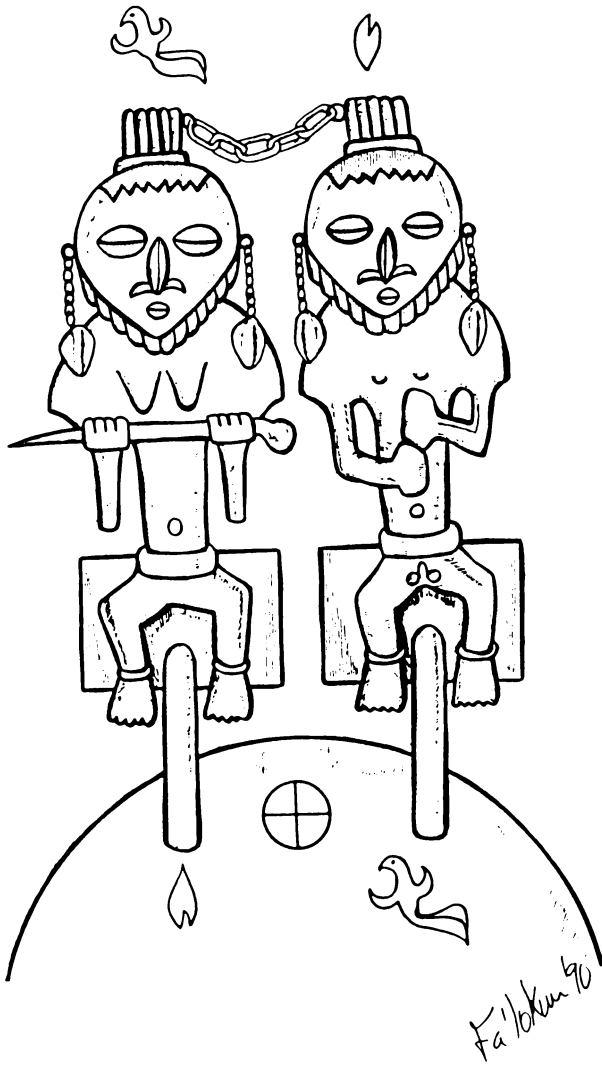
It is the function of *Ela* to place limits on the disruption caused by *Eṣu*. To fully understand this relationship requires an explanation of the way in which an *Ifá* priest approaches divination. People come to *Dafa* for many reasons, but from the point of view of the *Ifá* priest there is ultimately only one question that can be asked. That question is; “Am I in alignment with my destiny?” If the answer is no, it is believed that *Eṣu* causes a condition known as *orí ibi*. The Yoruba dictionary defines *ibi* as “evil”. Unfortunately the most readily available Yoruba dictionary was prepared by the Church Missionary Society Bookshop and it does not reflect an informed understanding of *Ifá* concepts. I would interpret *orí ibi*

to mean confused head. The purpose of *Dafa* is to give guidance so that a confused head, (*orí ibi*) can be transformed into a wise head (*orí ire*). When someone approaches divination with issues of misfortune, poor health, and confusion, *Ifá* believes that all of these issues are rooted in *orí ibi*. In this circumstance *Eṣu* can be seen as the Divine Enforcer. *Eṣu* creates these conditions as a reminder that life includes the possibility of transformation and enlightenment.

When a person is in consistent resistance to transformation it can lead to a condition that *Ifá* calls *orí buruku*. The condition is considered so reprehensible that the word *buruku* is never spoken without covering the head with the hands. The word itself is a form of hexing and is never spoken in a sacred place. The Yoruba dictionary defines *buruku* as “Hell”, but here again the definition is misleading. It would be more accurate to understand the term as referring to someone who is inherently confused. The main remedy for this condition is to invoke *Ela* in hopes of forcing a breakthrough that will lead to healing.

*Ela* is considered the first incarnation of the prophet *Ọ̀rúnmilà*. It is an incarnation in Spirit form that precedes the emergence of human life. *Ela* is the power that gives expression to the forms that exist in the womb of *Ọ̀ḷọ̀dumare*. The *aṣẹ* (power) of *Ela* is constantly giving support to the forms that emanate from *Ọ̀ḷọ̀dumare*. In metaphysical terms, *Ela* creates the world in every present moment.

*Ọ̀rúnmilà* is known as the first *Babalawo* which means “Father of Secrets”. But it is the spiritual presence of *Ela* that is being expressed through *Ọ̀rúnmilà*'s revelation. In objective terms the existence of *Ela* means that chaos in the universe can only move a certain distance from the parameters of evolution before it runs up against the primal genetic imprint of Nature. As a force in Nature, *Ela* is both the coded blueprint for the unfolding of evolution and the primal principle that defines the nature of expansion in the universe. *Ifá* myth indicates that the *aṣẹ* that



Idan, sacred symbol of Ogboni.

is used to communicate between the *orí* of humans and the *orí* of *Orisha* (natural forces) comes from *Ọ̀lọ́dumare* through *Ela* to *Eṣu*. Because it is the most immediate and the most accessible link to *aṣẹ*, *Eṣu* has the additional function of being the Divine Messenger. When that message is misunderstood our entire understanding of self and world is disrupted. This means that the first step in understanding our original agreement with *Ọ̀lọ́run* involves clear communication with *Eṣu*. When divination indicates that this communication is clouded, it is the Spirit of *Ela* that brings clarity.

In Yoruba terms, coming to *Dafa* is *orí's* appeal to *Eṣu* to illuminate the relationship between *Ọ̀lọ́run*, *Ọ̀lọ́dumare*, and *Ela*. As symbols of real forces that existed at the beginning of time, they are the *Ifá* Trinity of Divine Manifestation. Astrology describes these principles as cardinal, fixed and mutable. The concept of Cardinal Deity would correlate to *Ọ̀lọ́run* as the Source of all that is in its primal context. The concept of Fixed Deity would correlate to *Ọ̀lọ́dumare* as the originator of form in its primal manifestation. The concept of Mutable Deity would correlate to *Ela* as the originator of dynamics which is the primal force for change.

Based on *Ifá* Creation myth, these three fundamental principles existed in undifferentiated unity within *Ọ̀lọ́run* prior to Creation. At the moment that time and space came into Being, these principles generated the force in nature known as *aṣẹ*. From *aṣẹ* emerged the polarity between light and dark, expansion and contraction, dynamics and form. It is the manifestation of this polarity that is contained within the images of *Odu* that are consulted during divination. We return to these images in an effort to return to Source so that we might find the Courage to live without fear.

Those elders who have experienced Courage at this depth are said to manifest a level of power and contentment that is expressed by the term *ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́*.

## Lesson 4

### Self-study Guide

#### The Use of Geomancy as a Basis for Meditation

As a part of the ascetic discipline of *Ifá*, time is spent meditating on the meaning of the geometric patterns that represent each *Odu*. In my experience, this process has a way of triggering deeper insights into the meaning of the *Odu* that is not possible through other means of study.

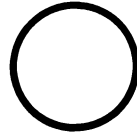
Because these patterns function like magnets attracting the forces that they represent, I recommend some caution. Concentrate on one *Odu* at a time as they are listed in Chapter three. Read the description of the qualities they represent, then sit quietly and look at the pattern. No specific meditation technique is required, but I find that deep breathing encourages relaxation which will enhance the value of the exercise.

The patterns of *Odu* are believed to reappear at every level of Creation. What this means is that the marks of each *Odu* represent polarities that exist from the smallest atom to the largest galaxy and every dimension in between. *Odu* can be studied to gain insight into metaphysics, physics, cosmology, psychology, and physiology. The examples I am using in this study guide will be based on physics which is the foundation for relating *Odu* to forces in Nature from a Western perspective.

The first step in a meditative study of *Odu* is to remember that the single mark represents expansion or light. The *Odu* for pure light would be *Ogbe Meji*:

I	I
I	I
I	I
I	I

OGBE MEJI



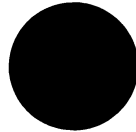
OGBE MEJI

In physical terms you could think of this *Odu* as the sun. Remember that every *Odu* is a two dimensional representation of three dimensional reality. The key to understanding the marks is the ability to translate them into forces that appear in nature.

The double mark represents darkness or matter. The *Odu* that represents matter in its densest form would be *Qyẹku Meji*:

I	I	I	I
I	I	I	I
I	I	I	I
I	I	I	I

QYẸKU MEJI



QYẸKU MEJI

In modern physics the most dense form of matter that appears in nature is called a black hole. It was given that name because it is so dense and the gravitational pull is so strong that even light can not escape it's boundaries. Black holes can be thought of by imagining our sun squeezed down to the size of a pin head.

Once you are able to visualize these two *Odu* as manifestations of natural phenomena, consider that each *Odu* emerges from its opposite pattern. This is an expression of the idea that matter can be transformed into light and light can be transformed into matter. Darkness becomes light, expansion becomes contraction, joy becomes sorrow, and so on. In *Dafa* each single mark arises from an invisible double mark, and each double mark arises from an invisible single mark. When an *Ifá* priest interprets an *Odu* not only does

the *Odu* indicate the current circumstance, but by implication indicates the situation that preceded the current circumstance.

Now return to the example of *Ogbe Meji* (pure light or all single lines) and *Oyẹku Meji* (pure matter or all double lines). These two *Odu* arise out of one another because each single line in *Ogbe Meji* becomes a double line in *Oyẹku Meji*, and each double line in *Oyẹku Meji* becomes a single line in *Ogbe Meji*. If *Odu* reflect the dynamics and form found in nature, then our analogy of the sun and a black hole should have some type of interdependent relationship.

To find this relationship let us look at the life of a star. As a star gives off light it burns up its fuel. When the star gets old, it starts to run out of fuel and slow down. When this happens, the large gravitational force of the star literally crushes the star into its self. The following chain of events are set in motion:

1. The star is collapsing because of the large gravitational pull.
2. As the star collapses it becomes more dense.
3. As the star becomes more dense it's gravitational pull increases.
4. As the gravitational pull gets stronger the star collapses.
5. At the point when the star collapses completely it becomes a black hole.
6. The black hole continues to collapse until it explodes.
7. The explosion of a black hole generates light and matter that forms new stars.

As you can see this chain of events sets up a never ending spiral. As the star gets more and more dense we finally end up with a black hole. But can the star collapse forever? Physicists who study this phenomena are not in agreement. It has been postulated that once a certain level of density is reached the black hole explodes and becomes a supernova creating a cauldron of light. The stars

created by this light are destined to become black holes which transform themselves back into light. Those physicists who say that this is an unending process are suggesting that the life of the universe is infinite. Those physicist who say that this process has limits are suggesting that the life of the universe is finite. My understanding of the *Ifá* perspective on this issue is that one day black holes will stop evolving into stars and the entire universe will collapse in on itself. When this occurs the entire universe will be transformed and reborn with a new set of *Odu* that regulate the laws of Nature. This means that the *Imole*, *Irumole*, and *Orisha* are themselves capable of experiencing the mystery of rebirth.

Take any one of the patterns of the *Odu* found in chapter three and visualize it's opposite by changing all the single lines into double lines and all the double lines into single lines. Now count the number of single lines in both *Odu* and count the number of double lines in both *Odu*. As part of the meditative study actually go through the process of selecting several *Odu*, find it's opposite *Odu* and count the number of single and double lines in both patterns. No matter what choice you have made, there will always be eight single lines and eight double lines from the total of marks in both *Odu*. This is a symbolic representation of one of the fundamental laws of Nature. It is an expression of the belief that the universe is created by the interaction between equal forces of expansion and contraction, light and dark, the feminine and the masculine. There is no day without night, there is no up without down, there is no time without space and there is no growth without decay.

The patterns from the first four *Odu* represent the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth. Take the patterns from these images and visualize them until you can see both their physical form and their relationship to one another. *Odi Meji* represents birth, *Ogbe Meji* represents life, *Oyẹku Meji* represents death, and *Iwori Meji* represents conception or rebirth.



# 5

## TEFA

### *Initiation and the Role of Ifá in Traditional Yoruba Culture*

Once I had been taken into the sacred *Ifá* grove, it was clear to me that I had no choice other than to surrender to the process. The emotional preparation needed to place your trust in an elder who has complete control over your spiritual well being is difficult to access. Within my own cultural conditioning there was no precedent for this level of trust. Discussing the content of what occurred inside the sacred grove is taboo. What I can discuss is my emotional reaction to what occurred.

While being fitted with the charms that are worn as protection during the initiation I got the mistaken notion that my leg had been cut. The charms themselves gave me the sensation that blood was dripping down my leg. My reaction to this was terror. It took me a long while to realize what had happened. In retrospect I can see that my lack of trust created an illusion that resulted in overwhelming fear. When I saw the level of concern and care that

was reflected in the faces of the men in the room, I realized the foolishness of my feelings. It is difficult for me to admit this mistake, but I mention it for a very specific reason. I have had the experience in the United States of placing my trust in elders who were not qualified for the level of responsibility that my trust required. The result of this misplaced trust was a feeling of being abused that created more problems than it solved. I recommend that anyone who is giving serious consideration to any form of spiritual initiation, first address issues of trust. Surrendering to the process is required if the process is to be effective, but not everyone has the maturity needed to properly guide the initiate through the portals of re-birth. I know of no easy solution to this problem other than to trust your instincts. In my own experience the issue came up during the initiation itself and was resolved in such a way that I gained both trust and respect for those who were in a position of authority.

The first two days of *Ifá* initiation include the ritual elements that lead from spiritual death to spiritual re-birth. The actual re-birthing process has all the elements of a physical birth. It includes the use of medicine that has a physical effect on the body. For this reason there is a five day period of rest and recuperation while the initiate adjusts to the physical, emotional and spiritual changes that have occurred inside the sacred grove.

Once the re-birth has occurred, the initiate is taken from the sacred grove to the home of the *Olúwo*. Dressed in a white toga, I started the mile long walk from the grove to the house feeling very self-conscious. All the hair had been shaved from my face and head. There was a circle of tan paint in the middle of my forehead, and there was a red parrot feather attached to thin headband just above my eyebrows.

The younger initiates were given the task of leading the procession through *Òde Rẹmo*, while the elders remained at the grove. I was having difficulty walking because I felt tired beyond anything that I had previously experienced. It was as if my internal

organs were exhausted from physical exercise, even though the ceremony required little physical exertion.

As we headed down the narrow alley that led to the main street, I had no idea what kind of reception I would get when I encountered members of the community. Men and women, young and old, poured out of their homes to offer congratulations. Some offered me money and asked for a blessing. Others offered the traditional Yourba greeting to a *Ifá* priest; “*A boru, a bo ye*”.

Just before reaching the *Olúwo*'s house, we stopped to make an offering to the elemental spirits. It is the elemental spirits that can be used to carry a hex. *Ifá* teaches that every increase in personal power requires an increase in personal protection. The ability to effectively pray for positive change, inevitably attracts negative attention from those who are threatened by spiritual transformation. This belief is often misunderstood, and has led to the misconception that *Ifá* is all about hexing enemies. In truth, *Ifá* initiates have a strong taboo against using their *aṣẹ* out of anger, vengeance, or jealousy. All prayers that are spoken are motivated by the sanctions from *Odu* and are used to either restore spiritual balance or to effect spiritual transformation. By making an offering to the elementals at the end of the procession from the sacred grove, *Ifá* is protecting the initiate from any jealousy, that may consciously or unconsciously manifest once the initiate has been presented to the public.

The media is fond of portraying African religion as a random set of superstitious beliefs. Anything remotely African tends to be lumped under the generic term “Voodoo” with the implied assumption that “Voodoo” is something used to harm an enemy. This line of thinking is evident in such films as “The Believers” and “Angel Heart”. Similar themes re-occur on television. The image of an African Priestess sticking pins in a doll is ingrained in the consciousness of the masses and has no basis in reality. Rarely is African spirituality included in books on comparative religion. Trying to locate any text that includes a serious discussion of theological

principles found in African myth can be a frustrating search. The kindest thing that can be said about this situation is that it reflects a widespread lack of understanding.

In contrast to these negative stereotypes, the religion of *Ifá* is a highly structured, well disciplined, and mystically inspired tradition that values good character and ethical behavior. As it is practiced in the rural regions of Nigeria, *Ifá* continues to maintain its organizational structure in spite of economic, political and religious oppression.

When the British colonized the Yoruba Nation, they made a deliberate effort to ridicule and abolish indigenous forms of religion. The effects of that campaign are still apparent in modern day Nigeria. Missionary groups provide much of the available education outside of the large cities. Indoctrination against *Ifá* is a part of the curriculum in many of the Christian schools. During the 1950's, missionary groups from the Congo entered Nigeria and accused large numbers of traditional women of practicing "witchcraft". As a result of these accusations, many of the shrines used by female secret societies were burned and destroyed. Present day Nigerian newspapers frequently run stories about women who have "confessed" to crimes involving magic and the use of spells. Typically these accounts are about teenagers who have been "saved" by some Christian evangelist. Both Moslems and Christians still cut down sacred trees that are used as communal alters by *Ifá* and *Orisha* worshipers.

Islamic politicians control key elements of Nigeria's economy. In most large cities, conversion to Islam is a condition for employment with major firms and for government service. At the *Oshun* shrine in *Osogbo*, guards are posted to protect the grove from loggers who want to sell the wood. In spite of the continuous, and sometimes violent opposition, the old ways still survive.

The organization of *Ifá* religion is rooted in the traditional political structure of the Yoruba Nation. Even though the Yorubas are subjects of the Nigerian government, many of their traditional

political offices still continue to function. The traditional chief of the Yoruba Nation is called *Ọni Ilẹ́ Ifé*. Since colonial times, the political power of the *Ọni* has diminished, but he maintains important ceremonial and diplomatic functions that sustain the underlying structure of the religion. The *Ọni* is a linear descendant of one of the original families who founded the Yoruba Kingdom. Before assuming office, each *Ọni* must go through a lengthy and difficult initiation into the mysteries of *Odu*. Following his initiation, the *Ọni* has a central role in the seasonal celebrations that are a part of the yearly religious calendar. These annual events are designed to reinforce communal harmony and to sustain access to the forces of fertility and spiritual renewal. There is a group of sixteen *Babalawos* called *Ẹmẹsẹ* who live at the *Ọni's* palace. They are responsible for the daily prayers that are said on behalf of the *Ọni* and the Yoruba Nation. These prayers are said every day of the year, except one day which is set aside to honor the *Ọni* directly. To assist the *Ẹmẹsẹ* in performing their ceremonies, there is another council of sixteen *Babalawos* called *Awọni*.<sup>1</sup> The word *Awọni* is a contraction of the words *awo* meaning secrets and *Ọni* meaning chief. Those who serve as *Awọni* function as diviners for the *Ọni*. The position of *Awọni* requires its own initiation beyond the ceremony for *Babalawo*. Before becoming eligible for *Awọni* the elders must also receive initiation into *Ogboni*. It is the function of *Ogboni* to serve as jurists, settling disputes among priests and to monitor the behavior of the *Ọni*. If there are no qualified candidates for openings that arise in *Awọni*, the seat remains vacant. In *Ifá* religion it is considered preferable to leave a post unfilled, rather than appoint someone who is not fully qualified.<sup>2</sup>

Each of the *Awọni* have a specific title and function related to one of the sixteen primary *Odu*. The senior position is called *Araba*, and the first assistant to the *Araba* is called *Agbongbon*. The remaining fourteen *Awọni* are ranked according to their seniority, based on the length of time they have held their title. They hold the positions known as; *Ageşinyowa*, *Aşeda*, *Akoda*,



Oshun, Goddess of Abundance, Fertility and the Erotic.

Amosun, Afẹdigba, Adifalu, Qbakin, Olori, Iharefa, Lodagba, Jọlọfinpe, Męgbon, Tędimọlę, Erinmi, and Elesi.<sup>3</sup>

While on my second trip to Nigeria in 1990, I was made a member of the *Ifá Ègbè in Ilẹ Ifé* that is led by the current *Awoṅi Jọlọfinpe, Falaju Fatunmise*. As a result of this affiliation, I was taken to the *Oni's* palace and introduced to the other members of *Awoṅi* and the members of *Ẽmęsę*. It was my experience, based on conversations with the senior elders of *Ifá* that they are sincerely interested in the integrity of *Ifá* and *Orisha* worship as it is conducted in the United States. The members of the *Awoṅi* with whom I was able to spend time, answered all my questions, and took a sincere interest in my efforts to gain a better understanding of *Ifá*.

Within the *Oni's* court there is a council of women who are initiated into a priesthood that is called *Odu*. It was clear to me that the priestesses of *Odu* hold considerable power within the court. However, their ceremonial function remains secret to the uninitiated.

The seasonal ceremonies that are performed in *Ilẹ Ifé* are linked to the Yoruba calendar that is based on a five day week. The fifth day is reserved for specific invocations that are done on an ongoing basis. The yearly rituals are linked with the *Ifá* system of astrology called *Gędę*. Calculations used in *Gędę* are based on the transit of the sun, the moon and the planets across the landscape. This is significantly different than the method used in Western astrology. *Gędę* is closer in form to the Chinese system of astrology that is used to track lines of power across the surface of the earth. In China these power centers are called *Lai* lines.<sup>4</sup> *Ifá* priests used *Gędę* to determine which *Odu* is strongest in a particular geographical location. This information was used to place shrines in areas that would make optimum use of the *aşę* (power) that is generated by the earth itself.

In an effort to deepen their understanding of Nature, the elders of *Ifá* have formed an organization called the Ancient

Religious Society of African Descendants, Association.<sup>5</sup> Through this organization, *Ifá* priests have joined with elders of Taoism in China, and elders of Vedanta in India. They meet on a yearly basis, rotating the location between each country. At these meetings the elders share their understanding of medicine, philosophy, metaphysics, and cosmology. Under the guidance of the *Ọ̀ni*, efforts are underway to hold similar conferences with priests who practice earth-centered religions in the Western Hemisphere. This exchange is based on a common understanding that all culture originated in Africa. It is also based on the knowledge that the ancient traditions of Africa, India, and China share a similar world view. The differences that exist between these ancient religions are matters of form, not content. Each of them have found their own cultural ways of expressing a wholistic understanding of Nature including methods for living in harmony with Her laws.

Taoism, Vedanta, and *Ifá* all begin training children who have been selected for the priesthood at an early age. Yoruba families who adhere to *Ifá* beliefs generally perform a naming ceremony for newborn children. On this occasion, *Dafa* is done on behalf of the child to determine their name and to gain insight into their destiny. If the *Odu* is marked that indicates *Ifá* initiation, the child will often begin training at about the age of seven. In many areas the apprentices live with their teachers where they help with farming and household chores. In addition they learn to identify and gather the herbs and plants that are used for medicine and spiritual cleaning. The apprentices are expected to attend *Ifá* festivals and rituals where training is an ongoing part of the ceremonial process. Students also meet regularly with their teacher to recite verses of *Odu*. The verses must be submitted to memory. Testing of the student can occur at any time during a ritual, or when the oracle is being cast.

*Ifá* initiation can be either a one, two or three stage process depending on both the needs of the initiate and local custom. The first stage is generally known as *Ọ̀mọ̀lawo*, meaning; “Child of the



Secrets". The ritual to become *Qmglawo* involves making an offering to *Eṣu*, swearing an oath, and receiving the *aṣẹ*, or medicine of *Ifá*. At this point the apprentice is given an *opẹlẹ*. The *opẹlẹ* is a chain with eight pieces of nut attached. By holding the chain in the middle and dropping it to the mat, it makes the same series of marks that are created by casting the *ikin*. *Qmglawo* uses the *opẹlẹ* as a tool for study and to practice the procedure for divination. The fully initiated *Babalawo* often uses an *opẹlẹ* for commentary on the *Odu* marked by the *ikin*. In most instances the *opẹlẹ* is considered less definitive than the *ikin*.

The position of *Qmglawo* is usually filled by men, but there are instances of women receiving this stage of initiation into *Ifá*. Women who become *Qmglawo* may use the *opẹlẹ* for divination and may receive *Qmglawo* in conjunction with other initiations.

To become *Babalawo* requires a seven day ceremony that involves the use of a sacred ritual pot called *Odu*. This ceremony is called *Tefa* and it takes place in an *Ifá* grove called *Egbodu*. The *Odu* pot is placed on the head of the initiate at the end of the re-birthing process. *Odu* contains the *aṣẹ* of the first four *Odu* of *Dafa*. It is believed that all the remaining *Odu* evolve from these four. By placing the pot on the head of the initiate, he becomes *Babalawo* as a consequence of receiving the *aṣẹ* of *Odu*. This *aṣẹ* gives the *Babalawo* the power of the word needed to invoke all the spiritual forces that are recognized by *Ifá*.

As far as I know, the initiation for *Babalawo* in Africa is for males only. I know of two instances in this country where women have been initiated as *Babalawo*. This fact has caused some confusion and bitterness regarding the issue. It is a subject that has caused heated debate within the *Ifá* community on several continents.

Having been through the initiation, I have a very definite opinion on the subject. *Babalawo* means; "Father of the Secrets". It is a male rite, designed to bring men into harmony with those aspects of their inner-self that could be described as feminine. By linking the male and the female of his inner-self, the initiate

becomes attuned to the full scope of *ìporí* (higher self). There are initiations that bring women into attunement with the masculine aspects of *ìporí*. The ceremony for *Babalawo* would not serve this purpose. The appropriate initiation for women within *Ifá* is called *Odu*. Those women who receive *Odu* have elder status among the men and women who worship *Ifá*. I would consider *Odu* to be the female equivalent of *Babalawo* both in terms of the effect of the rite on the initiate and in terms of their influence within the religion. If the tradition of *Ifá* is going to be fully available to devotees in the United States, I believe that some effort should be made to reclaim the office of *Odu* in this country. This makes more sense to me than having a women receive initiation into a fraternal order that deals with the issue of transforming the male psyche.

In addition to *Odu* there are specific offices held by women in *Ifá* ceremonies. Prominent among them is *Apetẹ̀bi*. The word *Apetẹ̀bi* is usually translated to mean; “Wife of *Ọ̀rúnmílà*”. Many, but not all who are initiated into *Apetẹ̀bi* are wives of *Ifá* priests. The term *Apetẹ̀bi* refers to a marriage with the Spirit of *Ọ̀rúnmílà* and it is a highly regarded position in traditional Yoruba culture. An *Apetẹ̀bi* who has also received initiation into the mysteries of *Oshun*, the Goddess of fertility and abundance, has a major role in the initiation of *Babalawo*.

On the seventh day of the *Ifá* initiation, the clothes that have been worn by the initiate in *Egbodu* are removed and placed over the cloths of *Apetẹ̀bi Oshun*. In the West this might be wrongfully interpreted as a man giving his discarded clothes to a woman. This is not what is taking place. *Ifá* believes that the negativity that is cleaned away from the initiate during *Tefa* remains in the white toga worn during the ceremony. By giving the cloths to *Apetẹ̀bi Oshun*, *Ifá* is acknowledging the great power of the feminine principle in its ability to transform a negative into a positive. For me, this part of the ceremony was a very humbling reminder of the *Ifá* teaching that all power comes through the interaction between the masculine and feminine forces in Nature.

The role of *Apetębi Oshun* in *ifá* initiation is a literal enactment of this principle.

There are some places in Nigeria where the *Ifá* initiate goes through an intermediate step between *Ọmọlawo* and *Babalawo*. This step is called *Ọlòdu* and it involves showing the *Ọmọlawo* the inner sanctum of the *Ifá* temple.

In *Òde Rẹmo* I met close to thirty *Babalawo*. They were part of what is known as *Ègbè Ifá iti Ijebu Rẹmo*. The area known as *Ijebu Rẹmo* is similar to a county. The city of *Òde Rẹmo* is located in the region of *Ijebu Rẹmo*. The members of *Ègbè Ifá Òde Rẹmo* are also members of the county fraternity of *Ifá* priests. *Ifá* in Nigeria is organized by geographical region. Each town that has an *Ifá* shrine has an *Ègbè Ifá* made up of the local priests. The *Ègbè* is led by an elder priest known as *Olúwo Ifá*. This position is usually inherited by a descendant of the family who founded the original *Ifá* shrine. Some towns or cities might have more than one shrine, and usually more than one *Olúwo*. The *Olúwo* in a particular area form a council of elders led by a senior priest known as the *Araba*. In *Òde Rẹmo* the *Olúwo* who led my initiation was also the *Araba*. His son, who was seven years old at the time of my first trip, has already been designated to become the next *Olúwo Ifá* of *Òde Rẹmo*. The decision to transfer title to a specific child is confirmed through divination. The transfer of power will not occur until after the current *Olúwo* passes. I suspect that there may be some variation across the country in selecting candidates to fill the position of *Olúwo* and *Araba*. Both offices require further initiation into the mysteries of *Odu*. As a result it is assumed that the *Olúwo* and the *Araba* have a deeper understanding of *Odu* than the other *Babalawo* in their community. For this reason, the other initiates never stop turning to their elders for guidance and instruction.

While I was in *Òde Rẹmo*, I was told that the *Ègbè Ifá* had approximately seventy members. Some of the *Babalawo* had moved out of the area, while others had been initiated for health reasons

and did not function as practicing priests. Most of them returned home every year in August after the first rains. Throughout Yorubaland, this is the time of the annual *Ifá* festival. It marks the time for bringing fertility to the soil and is linked to a specific cycle in the movement of the constellation Pliades. During this festival, the *Ifá* priests seclude themselves in the *Ifá* grove and make preparations for one of their members to become possessed by *Ela*.

I have already mentioned that I was surprised to see the *Ifá* priests go into possession during my initiation. The form of possession that I witnessed is called; "Remembering the time when *Ọ̀rúnmilà* walked the earth". The possession that occurs during *Ifá* festivals is considered the voice of *Ọ̀rúnmilà* speaking from the Spirit of *Ela*. Based on reports from those who have witnessed this event, the medium who is mounted by *Ela* is given meticulous care and attention in preparation for the ceremony. It is considered a difficult and dangerous transformation and is always approached with caution and serious intent. Information received during this ceremony will contribute to the ability of the *Ifá* priests to function as diviners, healers and ceremonialists during the up-coming year.

One of the communal functions of a *Babalawo* is to participate in the council of elders known as *Ogboni*. This council is a form of judiciary based on the use of ritual and divination. *Ogboni* is open to all *Babalawo*, but not all members of *Ogboni* are *Ifá* priests. The task of *Ogboni* is to settle disputes among priests and priestesses, to enforce taboos and to maintain moral and ethical standards. They are also called upon to act as advisors to the village chief who is called *Ọ̀ba*.

Within *Ogboni*, the *Babalawo* lead the rituals and cast the oracle. The ritual aspect of *Ogboni* involves the worship of *Ọ̀batala* and *Ogun*. *Ọ̀batala* is considered the source of moral standards, while *Ogun* has the function of enforcing those values. *Ogun* also plays a role in determining the truth of a matter that comes before the council. It is not generally known in this country that *Ogun* has seven roads or aspects including a female aspect called *Onilẹ́*.

The word *Onilẹ* means; "Owner of the Earth". All issues of justice are believed to be rooted in the principles of Nature that are reflected through attunement with *Onilẹ*. Consultation with *Ogun* as *Onilẹ* involves a system of divination that is only used in *Ogboni* ritual. The system makes use of an iron set of statues with a male and a female figure linked together at the top of the head by a chain. The male figure is *Edan* and the female figure is *Onilẹ*. Together they represent the masculine and feminine aspect of *Ogun*. Linked by a chain, they become the *Ifá* guardians of truth.

Enforcement of *Ogboni* judgements belongs to a sub-group within the council of elders called *Oro*. Men and women hold offices in *Ogboni*, but *Oro* is all male. The *Oro* society also has an important function during the rites of passage that are performed during a funeral. Once a year the *Oro* society holds an outdoor ceremony for men only. They announce their arrival in a particular area by spinning a bullroar which makes a distinctive whirling sound. The bullroar is one of the oldest musical instruments ever made and is used to invoke spirits in many traditional cultures around the world.

As ceremonialists, the *Ifá* priests preside over most rites of passage that occur in the life of men and women in the community. During a child's naming ceremony, the *Ifá* priest will cast the oracle to give the parents a sense of the child's destiny. The priest will also perform a rite of passage called *Esentaiye*. This rite involves introducing the baby to essential elements that are required for good health, growth and prosperity. The priest blesses small portions of water, palm oil, honey, pepper, cola nut and salt. A taste of each element is placed on the baby's tongue while invocations are spoken for a healthy life.

When twins are born an additional ceremony takes place. Nigeria has the highest rate of fraternal twins in the world.<sup>6</sup> In Yoruba twins are called *Ibẹ̀jì*. The Spirit of *Ibẹ̀jì* is a force in Nature similar to the Taoist concept of Yin and Yang. They represent the eternal polarity that exists in all things. As a way of

praising this polarity, the birth of twins is considered a sacred event. After consultation with the oracle, the priest will frequently recommend that the parents commission the preparation of *Ibèjì* statues. The statues are consecrated in a special ceremony and they are made by wood carvers who have been initiated into their own craft guild. When the statues are finished, the mother will dance through town. As she dances, she will be offered money from those who wish to share in her good fortune. Giving money to the mother of twins is considered an offering to the Spirit of *Ibèjì* and it is believed to bring abundance and good fortune.

*Ifá* is responsible for the rites of passage that occur at puberty. In the rural areas these rites include making tribal marks on the face. These marks both identify family lineage and serve as a test of courage to designate the transition from being a child to becoming an adult.

*Igbeyawo* is the Yoruba word for marriage. Again *Ifá* priests both conduct the ceremony and consult the oracle to determine what offerings need to be made to insure a harmonious relationship.

Funerals are the responsibility of *Ogboni*, and it is the *Ifá* priests within *Ogboni* who lead certain aspects of the ritual. The *Ifá* priests clean and mark the body, then prepare offerings that are placed in the grave.

Along with his community functions, the *Ifá* priest is obligated to worship *Ifá* by conducting his own personal ceremonies every five days. In Yoruba culture, the yearly calendar is based on a five day week. The weekly ceremonies involve the care and feeding of the ritual paraphernalia used for ritual and divination. Every *Ifá* priest will have a bowl of *ikin* and an *Eṣu* in his personal shrine. Any number of other pots may also be present in the shrine depending on the needs and level of initiation of the priest. On the fifth day of each week, invocations are said to the Spirits in the shrine to insure that their presence is strong. These invocations also strengthen the relationship between the priest and the forces that he works with.

In *Òde Rẹmo* the ritual objects used for divination were very simple. The *Olúwo* had his *ikin* wrapped in a cloth. He used a small circular tray for marking the *Odu*. The *iyerosun* that is placed on the tray was kept in a piece of cloth that was tied shut when not in use. In other areas of Nigeria, it is more common to find a wider assortment of altar pieces. These would include; *Apere Ifá*, a small carved cup used to hold the *ikin*; *iroke Ifá*, a carved stick used to tap on the tray during invocations; and the tray itself called *oppon Ifá*. Most *Ifá* shrines will also have an iron bell with a handle shaped like a knife called *Ajá*. Often there will be an assortment of *opẹlẹ*, and a horsetail wish. Outside the shrine there is a staff made from iron with one or more iron birds fitted on a cup at the top of the staff. This staff is called *Osun* and in Africa it is used to indicate the presence of a diviner either in the house or at the *Ifá* grove.

The relationship between *Ifá* and *Eṣu* is fundamental to the ritual process. *Eṣu* is the Divine Messenger who takes the prayers of the *Ifá* priests to the Spirits. It is also *Eṣu*'s function to bring the answers of those prayers back to earth. There are twenty-one different aspects of *Eṣu* which are sometimes called roads of *Eṣu*. These different aspects reflect the varying relationships between the Divine Messenger and *Orisha*. Each road of *Eṣu* is treated differently to enhance the communication between *Eṣu* and specific Spirits. For example the turtle is the *Eṣu* used to communicate with *Oya* (Spirit of the Wind) and *Shango* (Spirit of Lightning). *Ọrúnmilá* works most directly with *Eṣu Odara*, the Divine Messenger of Spiritual Transformation. This aspect of *Eṣu* is believed to be the guiding force in bringing an individual into a deeper appreciation of their own personal destiny. In *Ifá* all rituals begin and end with an offering of respect to *Eṣu Odara*.

Once the *Ifá* priest has become fully initiated, some of them will learn the traditional system of healing. Not all *Ifá* priests are healers, and not all healers are *Ifá* priests. Those healers who are not *Ifá* priests usually work closely with someone who knows the

art of *Dafa*. The association is based on the belief that the causes and cures of illness are linked to the spiritual process of living in harmony with Nature. In the large cities it is common for *Ifá* priests to work in association with medical doctors trained in Western forms of medicine. Where this occurs the relationship is one of mutual respect.

In Yoruba, illness is called *arun*. Within *Ifá* medical theory, most illness is categorized by its cause. There are external causes and internal causes for most disease. The external conditions include various forms of hexing, physical contact with bad medicine or spoiled food, and interaction with a Spirit called *Ṣọpọ̀nno*. The internal conditions are sub-divided in two major groupings called *kokoro* and *aran*. *Kokoro* means germ and includes illnesses caused by organisms too small to see. *Aran* means worm and refers to illnesses that are caused by any kind of insect.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to document, but it appears that *Ifá* may have discovered the theory of illness caused by germs prior to the time that Louis Pasteur introduced the idea in Europe.

Medicines used to cure illnesses are categorized according to the method of preparation. *Agunmu* is made from either herbs or tree bark that is pounded into a powder with a mortar and pestle. *Etu* is medicine that is cooked in a pot. *Agbo* is a soup made with water that usually includes both food and medicine. *Aṣṣe* is any food that has medicinal herbs added to it. External forms of medication are generally mixed with a black soap called *oṣṣe*. Within each of these forms of preparation there are sub-groups based on the flavor of the medicine. *O dun* is sweet, *o koro* is bitter, *o kon* —is sour, and *o ta* is peppery.<sup>8</sup>

The effectiveness of traditional medicine is based on a sophisticated understanding of local fauna. Living in harmony with nature requires an understanding of trees, plants, shrubs, and herbs, both as cures and as a source of nourishment. Within the context of *Ifá*, plant life is also a valuable tool for effecting spiritual transformation.



For the *Ifá* priest, the study of vegetation comes through the guidance of the Spirit of *Osanyin*.

In Nigeria there are priests and priestesses who are initiated directly into the mysteries of *Osanyin* (the Spirit of Herbs and Medicine). If an *Ifá* priest is inclined to work extensively with herbs, he will either become initiated into the society of *Osanyin*, or he will work closely with an *Osanyin* elder.

Any traditional Yoruba who goes to the forest to pick plants will say a prayer and make an offering to *Osanyin* before starting the venture. Most plants and trees are associated with a specific Spirit, so a variety of prayers and offerings will be made depending on which plants are to be gathered. Every time a plant is picked, permission to take the life of the plant will be addressed to the spirit of the plant. Before the removal occurs an invocation is spoken that is believed to awaken the inner essence of the plant. This process is part of a very conscious effort to remain in accord with those elements that help sustain life.

The image used to represent *Osanyin* is of a man with a single arm, a single leg, and a single eye. This image is based on the folklore associated with the historical healer named *Osanyin*. According to *Ifá* myth, there was a diviner who could find no work because everyone in his community who became ill was going to *Osanyin* for treatment. The diviner asked *Osanyin* to share some of his clients but was ignored. After being rejected by *Osanyin*, the diviner went to *Eṣu* and complained that he was unable to earn a living at his art. *Eṣu* caused *Osanyin*'s house to collapse, leaving him maimed. At this point *Osanyin* needed the diviner's assistance so they worked together forever after.<sup>9</sup>

This story is both a warning about the need for humility and an admonition to make use of medical knowledge in accordance with the principles of *Ifá*. Part of the traditional understanding of plant life includes extensive knowledge of plants that can be used as poison for hunting. For this reason, *Ifá* stresses the need for



Osanyin, guardian of the mysteries of medicine.

those who are initiated into the mysteries of *Osanyin* to maintain high ethical standards.

The *Osun* staff that is placed at the entrance to an *Ifá* shrine is consecrated to the Spirit of *Osanyin*. The staff is an iron representation of the *agogo* tree. The leaf from this tree is used as protection from negativity. On top of the staff is an iron vulture. The beak of the vulture is known as *agogo igin* which is also a form of protection. Vultures are associated with the Spirit of fertility and abundance called *Oshun*. In *Ifá* the vulture has many of the attributes associated with the eagle in Native American traditions. It is the vulture who has the power to take messages directly to *Olódumare*. When an offering is left on an altar outdoors, the prayers made over the offerings are not considered accepted until the food is eaten by a vulture. This process symbolizes *Oshun's* power of transformation as it manifests through the spirit of the vulture.

At the core of the relationship between *Ifá* and *Osanyin* is the belief that most forms of illness are the result of a lack of attunement with Nature. Herbs, and medicine can heal the symptoms, but they cannot eliminate the cause. According to *Ifá* the source of an illness can only be transformed by making a direct appeal to the spiritual condition that generated the symptoms. It is one of the functions of *Dafa* to identify circumstances that can lead to sickness. The remedy is through prayer, invocation, and offerings made to the Spirits that can establish balance and harmony between the person and the world.

There are two primary forms of offering; *adimu* and *ebo*. *Adimu* is an offering of vegetables, fruit, or cloth. *Ebo* is an offering that includes animal blood (*èjẹ*). The use of blood offerings is frequently misunderstood and is the basis for some of the negative criticism of African forms of spirituality.

In my experience in *Òde Rẹmo* all the animals that were used for *ebo* were eaten by the members of the extended family. Every animal that is slaughtered for food is blessed first, and every part

of the animal is used in some way. It seems to me that blessing an animal and making use of the entire carcass including the blood and bones is reflective of a reverence for life and is not an expression of cruelty. Blood is believed to contain spiritual power (*aṣẹ*) that can be used to enhance the effectiveness of prayer. Before an animal is slaughtered a prayer is spoken that asks the spirit of the animal to take a message directly to *Ọrun*. The spirit of the animal is then elevated in a ceremonial way that is respectful of both the animal and its spirit. There was no evidence of any type of sadistic pleasure associated with *ebo*. Slaughtering animals is a part of the process of survival, and it was treated with same reverence that was used while gathering plants.

In my opinion, those *Ifá* priests who slaughtered the animals had a deep appreciation for the mystery of life and death. *Ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́* is about knowing the earth, and the earth contains the remains of all forms of life that have gone through the cycle of life and death that leads to the mystery of rebirth.

## Lesson 5

### Self-study Guide

#### Making *Ibora* for Home Protection

Within the *Ifá* faith it is believed that every initiation results in an increase in power. Every increase in power requires an increase in spiritual protection. The student who begins serious work with ancestral spirits will want to take some time to shield their home from both unwanted and disruptive spiritual influences. Every family has ancestors who can be turned to for guidance and inspiration. Every family also has ancestors whose influence would be non-productive. This is especially true for ancestors who may have died a violent death. Often spirits who die in tragic circumstances are not fully aware that they have passed. In their confusion they are unable to serve as sources of wisdom. There are also instances of ancestors who led unethical and destructive lives. Their guidance is simply unwanted.

In *Ifá* protection from the home comes from spirits known as *Ibora*. The *Ibora* include *Eṣu*, *Ogun*, and *Ochosi*. The ritual process for making *Ibora* is very complicated and at times dangerous. This lesson will discuss a way to make a symbolic representation of *Eṣu* that can be used in a limited way as protection from unwanted ancestor spirits. When more advanced study takes place under the guidance of an initiated elder, the symbolic *Eṣu* can be replaced by a fully consecrated *Ibora* shrine.

Start the process of making a shrine for a Messenger Spirit by purchasing a coconut. Every coconut has three small circles on one side. These circles often resemble two eyes and a mouth. They form the face of the coconut. Choose a coconut with a face that is both

clear and appealing. Some stores, pour wax over the surface of the coconut, so you might have to remove the wax with a knife.

Sit in front of your ancestor shrine with a lit candle and a glass of water. In addition you will need a bowl of water and some red palm oil or some protection oil. Start by saying the prayer given in Lesson 2 of this book. When the prayer is completed, ask your ancestors for guidance to create a coconut image that represents the Messenger Spirit. Next clean the entire surface to remove whatever psychic impressions may have collected around it. Hold the coconut in both hands and say a prayer to the coconut, telling it the kinds of protection you need. At this point, you may list specific ancestors who you know that you do not want to visit your shrine.

The coconut is a symbolic representation of the Divine Messenger. In *Ifá* this Spirit is known as *Eṣu*. Within the traditions of *Santeria* and *Lucumi*, the Divine Messenger is generally known as *Elegba*. Because the coconut is being used in relationship to ancestor spirits, there may be a Divine Messenger who is more closely aligned to your family lineage. Native American traditions use the coyote, the mouse, the jack rabbit and possum as Messenger Spirits. In European traditions the “Fool” or the “Court Jester” is a common representation of the Messenger. Remember, the Messenger Spirit also functions as a trickster, causing periodic disruption so that we can re-evaluate and re-examine our relationship with Spirit. Take the time to ask the coconut to reveal the form that is best suited to the work that you need to do. When you get a clear image of the type of Messenger that is to be represented by the coconut, use divination (lesson 3) to confirm your impression.

Continue sitting with the coconut until you see the colors that are to be used and the types of images that should go on the face. Check each impression with divination until you have a clear image of how to proceed. *Eṣu* and *Elegba* use the colors of either red and black or white and black. The Native American tricksters frequently use four colors representing the four directions. This

color scheme will vary, but it usually includes colors associated with earth, air, fire and water. European color schemes for the trickster are usually bright and include geometric patterns.

In African traditions it is customary to place the Messenger near the front door. This is done either inside or outside the house. I suggest that once the coconut has been painted, take it to the ancestor shrine and ask where to place it. Again, use divination for confirmation. When the location is determined, rub either palm oil or protection oil from a botanica over the entire coconut. While you are rubbing the oil repeat the prayer for protection.

I recommend that the coconut be placed in a basket filled with dirt. The dirt should be from either a sacred site or your favorite place in nature. In *Ifá* a prayer asking *Eṣu* for protection would be repeated every five days. Some set routine of reinforcing the prayer should be established. Whenever the prayer is made, it is appropriate to make an offering. The coconut spirit can be fed with a few drops of rum, popcorn or candy. Messenger Spirits from specific cultures may have traditional foods. If you are uncertain of what type of offering to make, use your intuition and confirm through divination.

In my own work, I always address *Eṣu* before speaking with the ancestors. This is not a universal practice within *Ifá*. Some priests have good results going directly to the ancestors and only use *Eṣu* to communicate with Nature Spirits. It will take some time to develop your own effective relationship with *Ibora*. Make notes of the impression you receive while working with the coconut, confirm with divination, then objectively evaluate your results. You want to get to the point where the Spirit represented by the coconut will both protect your home and give you warnings to prevent any danger or disruption. The communication could come either through dreams, an inner voice, a psychic image or just a gut feeling. By paying attention to these different types or reactions, communication with Spirit will be enhanced.

# 6

## ÌFAIYÀ

### *The Experience of Enchantment and the Realm of Orisha*

While in Africa, I was able to witness two *Orisha* initiations. The first ceremony involved an African American woman named Uzuri Amini. She had been escorted from the United States to Africa by Luisah Teish who is *Ìyá l'Orisha Oshun Miwa*. The phrase *Ìyá l'Orisha* means; “Mother of the Selected Head”. It is the Yoruba term for priestess. Luisah Teish was initiated as a priestess for the Goddess *Oshun* in the Afro-Cuban Tradition of *Lucumí*.

The original shrine for *Oshun* is located in the city of *Osogbo*, near the *Oshun* River in Nigeria. By taking Uzuri Amini to *Osogbo*, Luisah Teish was hoping to reunite her family of *Oshun* worshippers with their ancestral heritage in Africa. Before coming to Africa, Luisah Teish had performed all the rituals that prepared Uzuri Amini for initiation.

I accompanied both women when they met with the *Qba* of *Osogbo* to ask permission for Uzuri Amini to be accepted into the priesthood. Unlike *Òde Rẹmo*, the *Qba* still functions in *Osogbo* and it was up to him to introduce us to the elders of *Ègbè' Oshun*. Luisah Teish's intention was to set a time and date for the initiation that would give us a day or two of rest in the city. Instead the *Qba* advised us that the ceremony would begin immediately.



The head priestess known as the *Iya'gba Oshun* entered the palace and said that we should follow her to the *Oshun* shrine that was located next to the *Qba's* compound.

We entered a very old mud brick building. The walls had been painted with the traditional markings for *Oshun*. The *Iya'gba* sat on a mat near a small altar at one end of the building. There was a door to her right. Beyond the door were the sacred relics that had been used to invoke *Oshun* from the earliest days of *Oshun's* worship. A battery of drummers playing the talking drums praised *Oshun*. The priests and priestesses isolated themselves in the shrine room and started making the sacred pot that would contain *Oshun's* *asẹ*, and serve as the focal point for the initiate's *Oshun* shrine. When the pot was fully consecrated, the *Iya'geba* directed us outside where we climbed into a van and drove to *Oshun's* sacred grove on the banks of the *Oshun* River. The buildings at the shrine have been reconstructed under the guidance of Susanne Wanger, an Austrian woman who has been initiated into *Orisha* and now lives in Nigeria. The grove is filled with ancient trees that are sacred to the Goddess. Scattered among the massive roots of the trees are statues depicting various aspects of *Oshun* including her interaction with other *Orisha*. The initiation temple at *Oshun's* grove is a rectangular building with an open air court. At the center of the court there is an altar that is surrounded by two rows of low benches. The priestesses of *Oshun* sat in front of the altar and started to sing. It was the initial step in transferring the power of *Oshun* directly to the *orí* of the initiate.

After that portion of the ritual was finished, we were led to the place near the river where *Oshun* is believed to have first come to earth. The spot is marked by a statue of *Oshun* that is surrounded by roots that move up out of the ground like oversized fingers. Luisah Teish was so moved by the sight, that she started singing to *Oshun*. As she sang, she became touched by the Spirit of *Oshun*. As her body moved to receive the *asẹ* of *Orisha*, the fish in the river started to jump into the air. In *Osogbo* when the fish jump it

is considered a sign that the Spirit of *Oshun* is present in the medium.

I had many moving experiences in Africa, but nothing so overwhelmed me as that moment. For me it was confirmation that *Orisha* has survived the disruptive and painful journey to the Western Hemisphere. *Oshun's* secrets had been preserved under the most oppressive circumstances to survive and flourish. As Luisah Teish became transformed by possession the elders of Ègbè *Oshun* acknowledged the presence of their Goddess.

*Ma ferefun Oshun* which means; "I gave praise to the Spirit of Love, Sexuality, Fertility and Abundance".

In *Ifá* cosmology *Orisha* evolve from *Odu* through *Imole* and *Irunmole*. *Odu* are the primal principles that give structure to the Universe. *Imole* are those invisible forces that sustain Creation. *Irunmole* are the dynamics and form within the Earth that give expression to the forces of evolution. It is the appearance of *Irunmole* that creates the environment that allows for the emergence of human consciousness. *Irunmole* create *ẹmí* (human soul) and *ẹmí* becomes *ẹgún*. In *Ifá*, *ẹgún* are ancestral spirits who carry the survival of human consciousness (*orí*). This sequence represents the descendance of *aṣẹ* from *Ọrun* (Source) into *Ilẹ* (Earth). Those humans who attain perfect alignment between *orí* and *ìporí* (Divine Destiny) become *Orisha*. This is the turning point in the cycle of spiritual transformation. It is known as the ascension of *aṣẹ* from *orí* back to *Ọrun*.

I have found that the relationship between *Odu*, *Imole*, *Irunmole*, *ẹmí*, *ẹgún*, and *Orisha*, is frequently difficult for Westerners to grasp. We are used to thinking in terms of a linear progression from past to present and from present to future. The *Ifá* concept of time is circular. Those *ẹgún* who become *Orisha* ascend to the realm of *Ọrun* in the dimension of *Lọọ-lọọ*. This means that consciousness experiences eternity. The idea of eternity does not mean living forever in the future, it means touching Source. At Source, there is no space, and there is no time.

The initial stages of *Orisha* possession can link the human *orí* with the *orí* of forces within the earth. These forces are known as *Irunmole* and they give the medium an experience of time as it is being projected forward through evolution. The deeper levels of trance push the medium into the dimension of *Lḡḡ-lḡḡ* where *Odu*, *Imole*, *Irumole*, *Èḡún* and *Orisha* become One.

There is no easy way to explain the circular link between these Spiritual Forces. Grasping the mystery of their inner unity comes through Mystic Vision and every attempt at explanation falls short of the experience.

In Africa every *Orisha* is invoked by marking a specific *Odu* from *Ifá* scripture. Most *Orisha* have multiple aspects and each aspect is generated by a different *Odu*. Every *Orisha* shrine in Yorubaland is a guardian of the mystery of one or more *Odu*. It is the relationship between *Odu* and *Orisha* that links the worship of *Ifá* and *Orisha*.

The ritual basis for this link has been lost in the United States. In most areas where *Orisha* worship survived in the Western Hemisphere, there was no access to *Ifá*. Instead of marking *Odu* to create a shrine, make a pot, or perform an initiation, *Orisha* worshipers used the ritual tools of older *Orisha* initiates to pass on *aṣḡ*. As a result there is a common notion in the United States that *Ifá* worship and *Orisha* worship are separate and have a limited relationship to one another. This notion seems to be based on the erroneous idea that *Ifá* priests have not been initiated into the secrets of *Orisha* and should be excluded from the inner sanctum of *Orisha* ritual.

In my experience receiving *Orisha* was an integral part of the *Ifá* initiation. The way in which *Orisha* is presented to an *Ifá* priest reveals the nature and essence of *Orisha* as they relate to *Irumole*, *Imole*, and *Odu*. The process itself is taboo to discuss. Because of the misinformation that I had received before coming to Africa, I was very surprised to discover that receiving the *aṣḡ* of *Orisha* is an aspect of *Ifá*. During *Ifá* initiation it is the

invocation of the link between these forces that gives the initiate the power to make ritual use of *Odu*. It would not be consistent with *Ifá* theology to give someone the power to invoke a Spiritual Force, that their own *orí* has not been tempered to receive.

In *Ifá* Creation Myth, *Ọ̀ḷodumarẹ́* has the responsibility of animating life by giving it breath or *ẹ̀mí*. The task of molding the universe was given to *Ọ̀batala*. The word *Ọ̀batala* means; “Chief of the White Cloth”. In esoteric terms, the white cloth represents the spectrum of visible waves that generate white light. *Ọ̀batala* is that force in Nature that creates the visible Universe.

Light is one of the fundamental expressions of energy in the Universe. *Ifá* describes the essential nature of light by saying that everything in the physical world, including consciousness, contains a spark of *Ọ̀batala*’s *aşę*. Different *Orisha* carry different *Odu* expressing different frequencies along the spectrum of light. *Ifá* considers all color as a form of Spirit. Because all color is contained within white light, all *Orisha* are believed to be linked with *Ọ̀batala*.

After *Ọ̀batala* was given the task of molding the physical universe, the *Ifá* Creation Myth says that he stopped to rest on a palm tree. While resting *Ọ̀batala* got drunk on palm wine. The task of finishing Creation was given to the female aspect of *Ọ̀batala*, known in some areas as *Oduduwa*. The word *Oduduwa* is difficult to translate. The prefix *O* means; “owner”, *dudu* means; “depth” and *wa* means; “cut”. A possible translation would be; “The Owner of the Mystery of Division”. *Ifá* makes no attempt to justify or excuse *Ọ̀batala*’s drinking. The myth simply expresses the idea that evolution includes the possibility of imperfect form. Imperfection exists throughout Creation and is explained by saying that *Ọ̀batala* sat in a tree drinking palm wine.

The palm tree is one of the symbols of *Ìyá Moopo*. She is the *Ifá* symbol for the cosmic tree of life. Palm branches are an essential ingredient in *Ifá* initiation. The palm tree is a symbolic representation of the idea that invisible forms give structure to visible reality.

*Ìyá Moopo*, *Ọbatala*, and *Oduduwa* are all symbolized by the snail shell. The pattern of the snail shell was known among the early Egyptians and Greeks as the “Golden Mean”. The Golden Mean is a mathematical formula for creating the most common pattern of growth found in nature. Every snail shell, tree trunk, and many force fields form a gradually expanding spiral that increases in size with the same relative proportions. This formula is recognized by *Ifá* as a key to understanding the nature of power in the Universe.

A living snail is the *Ifá* symbol for androgynous reproduction. Snails have both male and female sexual organs and their mating results in mutual pregnancies. It is the archetype for the relationship between *Ọbatala* and *Oduduwa*. *Ọbatala* represents the expansive quality of light, while *Oduduwa* represents the contractive quality of darkness. Together the principles of expansion and contraction, or light and dark, generate the polarities of dynamics and form in the visible world. The snail used as a symbol is an expression of primal procreation.

When I first started to read *Ifá* Creation myths, I was struck by the fact that the symbolism seemed to parallel what I knew about the scientific model of Creation. In some *Ifá* myths the fruit of the union between *Ọbatala* and *Oduduwa* is known as the “Heavenly Waters”. *Ifá* refers to *Olokun* as the owner of the Heavenly Waters. These waters were shaped into stars by *Oduduwa* who is described as causing them to burst from *Olokun*'s belly. One of these stars was named *Olofi* which is commonly called the Sun. *Olofi* sent his seed hurling into space forming the molten core at the center of the earth. This core is called *Agayu* in *Ifá*. *Ọbatala* is the light at the beginning of time, *Olofi* is the light of the sun, and *Agayu* is the light at the center of the earth. All three *Orisha* are manifestations of the same *aṣẹ* or power of expansion. The only difference is one of cooling. *Ifá* calls this cooling process *orí tútù* which is a form of tempering. Just as the blacksmith tempers iron with fire, then lets it cool for strength, *Ọbatala* tempers *aṣẹ* and lets it cool to manifest diversity through evolution. Tempering allows for the

blacksmith to strengthen alloys which are a mixture of elements. As the *asẹ* of *Ọbatala* descends to earth, tempering literally creates the elements that produce all forms of matter.

With the birth of *Ilẹ́* (Earth), the Heavenly Waters (hydrogen atoms) are pulled around *Agayu* (Earth's molten core). This union is described by *Ifá* as the marriage between *Olokun* and *Agayu*. In some versions of the myth, the marriage is between *Yemoja* and *Agayu*, but the elements and the interactions are the same. Molten lava poured from the center of the earth through fissures at the bottom of the sea. Minerals formed by the cooling lava solidified in the depths of the ocean and started to develop rust. Some scientists believe that life emerged from bacteria that grew out of these rust deposits. *Ifá* says that *Yemoja* and *Agayu* gave birth to *Ogun*, the Spirit of Iron. At this point in evolution both science and *Ifá* say that Earth and Water gave birth to life.

The surface of the Earth, the mass between *Yemoja* and *Agayu* is called *aiye* in Yoruba. *Aiye* is aspect of the Spirit of the Earth known as *Onilẹ́*. In *Onilẹ́*, *Ifá* finds the germination of all those ecological relationships that allow for greater levels of complexity within Creation. The single celled creatures of the sea started to develop a protein called DNA. Within DNA is stored the genetic information that allows generations of species to pass on biological instructions that guide the growth and maturity of their offspring.

With the development of DNA, the consciousness that lies hidden in Nature finds expression. At this point in the *Ifá* Creation Myth the *Orishas* are described as making the journey from Heaven to Earth on a metal chain. When DNA is viewed under an electron microscope it appears as a double helix which forms a molecular chain.

The first *Orisha* to make the journey from *Ọrun* to *Ilẹ́* is *Ogun*. As an *Irunmole*, *Ogun* is described as the Spirit of Iron. As an *Orisha*, *Ogun* is described as a warrior, and a hunter, the Spirit of human survival. Here we begin to see the manifestation of the *Ifá* concept of circular time. When the first life forms emerged from

the rust at the bottom of the ocean, those cells that struggled to stay alive were drawn towards the surface of the water. They were drawn towards the *aṣṣ* of *Qbatala* that struck *Yemoja* from the rays of *Olofi*. It was the aggressive spirit of *Ogun* within those single cells of life that propelled evolution on to land. But *Ogun* is also understood in human terms as the Spirit of the Hunter, the Guardian of the blacksmith, and the Protector of the home and village.

We see the passion for pro-creation symbolized on the altars of *Ogun*. *Onilẹ* is the female aspect of *Ogun*. She is the womb of the Earth and *Yemoja* is her vaginal fluid. *Onilẹ* is represented on *Ogun*'s altar by an iron pot. The pot is trimmed by a metal chain and a red strip of cloth. It is a symbol of the primal womb bleeding at birth as it passes the grain of genetic memory. The pot is sprinkled with *irosun*. The *irosun* is a red power that comes from the camwood tree. In Yoruba *irosun* means; "menstrual blood". Inside the pot there are spikes, symbols of *Ogun*'s virility and sperm. Just as the snail is the *Ifá* symbol for androgynous procreation, *Ogun*'s pot is the *Ifá* symbol for heterogeneous procreation. *Ogun*'s instinct for survival pushed ocean creatures towards the surface of the water, led them on to land and eventually sent them flying through the air. The pot for *Ogun* which is placed near the door of a shrine for protection is an image of the instinct for survival and the urge for reproduction. It is an image of life giving birth to itself in spite of incalculable odds against success.

When *Onilẹ* came to full term, the salt waters of *Yemoja* flowed on to the dry land where wind and air transformed it into the fresh waters of *Oshun*. Wind is the Spirit known as *Oya*. *Ifá* cosmology describes *Oshun* and *Oya* as sisters. There is no fresh water without rain and there is no rain without wind. Together wind and rain make the earth fertile.

It is the symbolic marriage between *Oshun* and *Ogun* that allowed for the evolution of life forms on the surface of the earth, because *Oshun* motivated *Ogun* to embrace the erotic. *Ifá* scripture



Ọbatalá, Chief of the White Cloth, the Spirit of Creation.



says that *Ogun* came to earth unprepared for the hardships of his long journey. As a result, the task of shaping life on earth was given to *Ọ̀rúnmilà*.

The word *Ọ̀rúnmilà* is often translated to mean; "Heaven is my Salvation". By giving the task of guiding life on earth to *Ọ̀rúnmilà* the Immortals charged the inhabitants of earth with the sacred task of elevating themselves beyond the instinct for survival. The reality of survival of the fittest was replaced by efforts to form families, build communities, and develop culture. At this point *Oshun* becomes *Ọ̀rúnmilà*'s wife.

*Ọ̀rúnmilà*'s appearance in the *Ifá* Creation Myth represents that stage in human history when the descent of *Ọ̀batala*'s *aṣẹ* into matter creates an awareness of the ethical principles inherent in Creation. Again we have an example of the *Ifá* concept of circular time. Historically the influence of *Ọ̀rúnmilà* as a spiritual force predates the appearance of *Ọ̀rúnmilà* the prophet. The spiritual force directs *orí* to turn its attention back to source. In so doing the Spirit of *Ọ̀rúnmilà* opens the road for the birth of the ancestral *Ọ̀rúnmilà*. This change in attention from survival to salvation is described in *Ifá* theology as the ascent of *Ọ̀batala*'s *aṣẹ* from *Ilé* back to *Ọ̀run*. It is the *aṣẹ* (power) of *Ọ̀rúnmilà* and *Oshun* that makes this shift possible.

This in no way diminishes the importance of *Ogun*. It is the spirit of *Ogun* that is invoked whenever an *ebo* is made for *Orisha*. *Ogun* as an aspect of survival can never be eliminated from the human condition. The food chain is not simply an issue of the stronger species eating the weaker species. Every ecological environment sustains itself through the balance of natural forces. In areas where certain predators have been eliminated by human intervention, the prey overpopulate and run the risk of extinction due to disease and lack of food. The Spirit of *Ogun* reminds us that one day we too return to the Earth. If we do not respect the issue of harmony and balance in the natural environment, there will be no Earth to sustain future generations.

At that moment when humans become aware of the need for harmony and balance, they also become capable of exploitation and abuse. It is Ọ̀rúnmilà who studies the forces of expansion and contraction so that we may know the ways that harmony and balance are both manifest and threatened. One of the praise names of Ọ̀rúnmilà is *Eleri-Ipin* meaning; “Witness to Creation”. The Spirit that Witnesses Creation is known to all Earth Centered Religions. In Egypt it was called the Mystic Eye. In East India it is called the Buddha. According to Buddhism, all history past and future is recorded in a spiritual dimension known as the Akashic Record. In philosophical terms, the Akashic Record is the knowledge of those forces that shape Destiny. The Akashic Record is known in *Ifá* as *Dafa*.

Traditionally there have been two dominant views regarding the nature of destiny in the history of philosophy and religion. One is that destiny is totally pre-ordained and unalterable. The other is that it is undetermined and completely affected by chance and freewill. *Ifá* takes the middle view. Destiny in *Ifá* is based on the agreement between *orí* and *Ọ̀lórún*. In human terms this agreement is the relationship between consciousness and inherited potential. The agreement with *Ọ̀lórún* is guided by the *aṣẹ* or spiritual power from *Ọ̀ḷdumarẹ* and *Ela*. The record of *orí*'s original agreement with *Ọ̀lórún* is accessible by invoking the Spirit of Ọ̀rúnmilà. In his role as keeper of these records, Ọ̀rúnmilà has the task of speaking through the oracle so individuals may find their highest potential. The *Ifá* concept of destiny is not a fixed unalterable reality. The process of remembering the agreement between *orí* and *Ọ̀lórún* is ultimately the responsibility of each individual. According to *Ifá*, the unfolding of personal destiny creates fate lines within the boundaries of the individual's inherited potential. These fate lines are understood to be possible destinies that may be fulfilled or ignored based on the considerations of free will and free choice. Divination illuminates the possibilities, it does not create the future. Once a particular fate has been chosen,

the guiding principles of *Odu* give a clear description of the consequences of a given decision. In a sense, divination is a window that allows us to see strands of personal and collective destiny. It is *Ọ́rúnmìlà* who understands the ways in which we put ourselves in accord with those strands.

The body of wisdom and understanding that has been revealed by *Ọ́rúnmìlà* is recorded as commentaries on *Odu*. The real power to alter Destiny comes through *Oshun*. In *Ifá* folklore *Oshun* is described as the wife of *Ọ́rúnmìlà*. Earlier she was described as the wife of *Ogun* and throughout *Ifá* scripture she is shown having relationships with many of the male *Orisha*. These tales have led some writers to describe *Oshun* as being either promiscuous or of questionable character. I believe such references are uninformed because they ignore the allegorical nature of these myths. Eroticism is one of the primal forces in Nature. Those who refer to *Oshun* as promiscuous are making a negative value judgement that is not consistent with the *Ifá* perception of the erotic.

*Oshun* as represented by the vulture is the only *Orisha* who can take prayers directly to *Ọ́lórún*. This means that any prayers asking *Ọ́lórún* to alter Destiny must be carried to *Ọ́run* (Heaven) with the power of *Oshun's* *asẹ*. As the Goddess of Sexuality, Creativity, Fertility and Abundance, it is *Oshun* who can motivate individuals, communities and nations to strive for the impossible, to rise above the limitations of genetics, environment, and potential to work miracles. The relationship between *Oshun* as a manifestation of contraction and the male *Orishas* as a manifestation of expansions represents the ability of nature to transcend its limitations.

When human will and Divine Will are in accord the *orí* is believed to experience a state of Being called *Ìfaiyà*. The word *Ìfaiyà* translates as enchantment. In simple terms, *Ìfaiyà* is an inner sense of joy and fulfillment that leads to a sense of wonder. *Ìfaiyà* occurs when all the diverse elements that create consciousness, define human motivation, and inspire the transformation

become fully integrated. Those forces come together at the crown of the *orí*, the very top of the head known as either *atari* or *awuje*. This is one of the places where herbal medicine is applied for various types of ritual cleanings prescribed by *Dafa*.

According to *Ifá*, *Ìfaiyà* occurs when *orí* is placed in perfect alignment with *ègbè* (emotions), *ẹ̀mí* (soul) and *íwa* (character). The scriptures of *Ifá* teach that there is a direct relationship between *orí* and *ègbè*, or mind and emotion. This interaction is known in psychological terms as the feeling tone response. Psychologists believe that every thought has a corresponding emotion. Because the religion of *Ifá* recognizes the link between thoughts and feelings, all spiritual cleanings for *orí* are believed to effect the *ègbè*. In psychology the conflict between mind and emotion is the cause of mental illness. In *Ifá* the conflict between mind and emotion is the cause of a condition called *orí ibi*.

There is no correlation between *orí ibi* and the Western concept of “evil”. In the *Ifá* world view *orí ibi* can lead to enlightenment if its causes are examined, removed and then replaced with a deeper awareness of self and world. *Ifá* teaches that *orí ibi* is a natural consequence of the limitations of finite consciousness. Life is a constant struggle to transform *orí ibi* into *orí ire*. The word *orí ire* means; “good fortune”, which implies being in perfect harmony with personal destiny. *Ifá* teaches that good fortune comes by alignment of the head and heart. This process of alignment is symbolized by the image of the serpent devouring its own tail. The snake represents the universal power of expansion, the circle represents the universal power of contraction. It is a cross cultural symbol of rebirth and regeneration. Carl Jung believed that the image of the snake swallowing its own tail was an archetype that represents the psychic mechanism that structures consciousness itself.<sup>1</sup> All consciousness is rooted in the ability to expand its limitations, and each expansion of consciousness is a rebirth of the soul. After the snake has consumed itself it is born again with greater power.

From a western point of view, *Orisha* emerge from the earth by manifesting themselves in the DNA that generates all life. DNA can be considered the imprint of *Irunmole* that arise from *Odu*. The theological implication of this progression is that all the dynamics and forms that shape evolution are reborn in the human *orí*. Put simply, consciousness is structured by *Odu*.

Based on the belief in reincarnation, *Ifá* teaches that individuals are born with a specific task to accomplish, specific lessons to learn, and a clear affinity with specific forces in nature called *Orisha*. The wisdom of *Qbatala*, the nurturing of *Olokun*, the eroticism of *Oshun*, the courage of *Shango*, the strength of *Ogun*, the capacity for change of *Oya*, the passion of *Agayu* are all manifestation of personality that form an eternal link with the Source of Creation.

Every *orí* is believed to be guided by a specific *Orisha* that is a key element in the path towards *orí ire*. Living in harmony with the *Orisha* that protects and guides a specific *orí* becomes the path of least resistance in the quest for deeper union with the Mysteries of Being.

The idea of *Orisha* guiding *orí* can be easily misunderstood. It is important to remember that every *orí* contains *aṣṣ Qbatala* and that *Qbatala* is the full spectrum of light that includes the *aṣṣ* of all *Orisha*. In *Ifá* theology, light creates matter and matter creates light. Based on this belief every *orí* is a reflection of Nature, and all of Nature is reflected in *orí*. This reflection takes the form of the diffusion of light throughout the entire body. Every *Orisha* is an expression of a particular frequency of light, and it is the absorption of light by the body from the sun that sustains life.

The idea that light is diffused through the body at different frequencies is the basis for the Hindu, Taoist, and Buddhist concept of chakras. In the view of these traditions, light is absorbed into the body by invisible receptors called chakras that exist near the spine. According to Eastern mystical discipline, light is balanced in the body through meditation, yoga, proper diet, devotion and

ethical behavior. The result of the proper balance of light is mental and physical health that can lead to spiritual awakening.

In the Eastern view the receptors or chakras have a direct influence on consciousness and are the sources of motivation, stimulation and creativity that influence behavior. Until these receptors are brought into balance, one or two chakras may be more influential than the others. The chakra that is the most receptive would have the most prominent influence on personality and would represent the path of least resistance for absorbing light.

*Ifá* has an understanding of internal balance that is similar to the Eastern concept of chakras. The *Ifá* system uses the following centers that are described as receiving the *aṣẹ* of *Orisha*;

1. Top of the head	<i>Awuje</i>
2. Third eye, between the eyebrows	<i>Eleda</i>
3. Throat	<i>Ofun</i>
4. Right shoulder	<i>Ejika Otun</i>
5. Left shoulder	<i>Ejika Osi</i>
6. Heart	<i>Okan</i>
7. Stomach	<i>Ikun</i>
8. Knees	<i>Orokun</i>
9. Ankles	<i>Koko ẹ̀ṣẹ̀</i>
10. Hands	<i>Qwó</i>

Part of the esoteric knowledge of *Ifá* is to know what forms of medicine are to be placed in each of these areas for specific initiations into the mysteries of the various *Orisha*.

The use of dance in *Orisha* ceremony can be described as an African form of yoga. In the East, yoga is a system of exercise that opens the chakras and makes them more receptive to light. In Africa the dance steps for each *Orisha* enhances the way *Orisha*, or light, enters the body during ceremonies. It is the opening of these centers, enhanced by drumming and singing, that induces possession. During possession, attunement with *Orisha* reaches a

point where the *orí* becomes a living manifestation of *Orisha*. The words spoken in possession are the words of *Orisha* and are treated as a direct revelation from Nature.

There is a point in trance dance for the *Orisha* when the medium is elevated beyond the ability to speak. This elevation is described as an explosive union with the entire spectrum of light that catapults the dancer into the realm of *lq̃-lq̃*. It is in the realm of *lq̃-lq̃* that the dancer experiences the mystical union that transcends language, that transcends thought, and that can only be expressed in terms that are a shadow of the actual event. The result of being in *lq̃-lq̃* is a returning to the earth dimension with a feeling of awe and enchantment over the wonders of Nature. *Lq̃-lq̃* is the source of *Ìfaiyà*. It is attunement with Source beyond the boundaries of time and space. From *Ìfaiyà* the medium gets a glimpse of the transformation that occurs after death. *Ifáyebelé* is the stillness that is required to face fear, *Ìfaiyà* is the wonderment that occurs when fear is overcome through a sense of unity with all that is.

While in Africa I was asked to participate in an *Olokun* ceremony in Benin. I arrived at the *Olokun* shrine at sundown and was introduced to the initiates of *Olokun* and *Shango* who maintain the temple. While I was being shown the inner sanctuary. I could feel the crowd gathering outside. There was anticipation and excitement everywhere I looked. The altar inside the temple was filled with statues carved from chalk. The chalk is called *efun* and it is made from the fossil remains of creatures from the ocean. Offerings and prayers were made to the altar in preparation for the ceremony that was about to begin.

As an *Ifá* priest attending an *Orisha* ceremony I was expected to stay grounded, to stay in my body and not become affected by the presence of *Orisha*. For me it was a difficult task. The *as̃* of *Olokun* seemed to flow through the temple in giant waves. Every time anyone coughed or sneezed, one of the elder priestesses would

clean them with *efun* powder, sprinkling their face and head as well as the floor and walls.

I was escorted out of the shrine by a dozen *Olokun* initiates who directed me to a seat across from the drums. There were four *bata* drummers seated next to a chorus of shekeres. The *bata* drum which is consecrated to *Shango* is traditionally played by male drummers. The shekeres were being played by a group of thirty women who formed a semi-circle to the left of the drummers. A crowd of at least three hundred worshippers stood in a complete circle around the dance area.

The priestesses of *Olokun* emerged from the temple and formed a tight circle in front of the drummers. As they moved from the temple the drums made a thunderous sound that was accented by the shekeres. A shekere is a gourd covered with beads, and they were played in unison as each woman pointed her instrument at the head priestess of *Shango*. The priestess was in the center of the circle and was the only person who was dancing. All the singing and drumming was directed towards her in an effort to induce possession. I had to shake my feet and slap my hands to keep from being overwhelmed by the *aṣẹ* that was being raised.

Everyone in the crowd sang as the priestess of *Shango* raised her hands above her head. Her movements started slow and tentative and gradually increased in speed and intensity. When she was fully mounted by *Shango* she spoke to various people in the crowd giving them advice on health, spiritual care and the development of good character. When *Shango* spoke to me the message was a repeat of the admonitions that had been spoken during my initiation. These admonitions were specific regarding my personal destiny and could not have been known by the medium. To me, it was confirmation of the belief that the path to *íwa-pẹ̀lẹ́* is constantly guided by Natural law. *Orisha* is the expression of the personal manifestation of that law.





Ibeji, the spirit of twins, symbol of polarity in creation.

## Lesson 6

### Self-study Guide

#### Building an *Orisha* Altar

In the religion of *Ifá* there are complex methods for building and consecrating *Orisha* altars and shrines. For the student of *Ifá* who does not have access to the priesthood, it is possible to build an altar that can be used as a focal point for meditation and prayer.

Start the process of building an *Orisha* shrine by reviewing the material in lesson 1. Each *Orisha* represents a specific force in Nature. I recommend that anyone approaching *Orisha* for the first time should begin by selecting one *Orisha* from one of the elements of earth, air, fire or water for study and prayer. These elements are fundamental to all life and it is relatively easy to establish an affinity with one of these elements in circumstances where divination and oracular guidance are not available.

To establish an affinity with an *Orisha*, start by identifying your area of immediate spiritual concern and interest. *Orisha* associated with air are generally involved with issues of ethics and good character. At the core of this interest is an aptitude for considering metaphysical issues and a curiosity about the nature of Creation. *Orisha* associated with earth emphasize survival issues such as ecology, building a healthy and safe home, and they guide artistic endeavors such as sculpting and metal work. *Orisha* associated with water are nurturing. This includes a concern for both mental and physical health. The element of water is also essential to issues of fertility and abundance. In Yoruba culture, fertility and abundance give life richness and joy. *Orisha* associated with fire are at the core of any process of transformation. Fire is the element that tempers the head during initiation. Passion is considered an aspect of fire.

The idea of passion includes personal relationships and interest in social justice.

## AIR

Air is the substance that we breathe. The breath of life was given to the world by *Ọlọdumarẹ*. In *Ifá* cosmology the path to *Ọlọdumarẹ* is through *Orisanla*. I use the term *Orisanla* to represent the combined forces of *Ọbatala* and *Oduduwa*. Just as *Odu* are supported by their opposite pattern, all the *Orisha* exist in polarity. *Ọbatala* is the *aṣẹ* from which all things are made. *Oduduwa* gives form to *aṣẹ* by sustaining matter. As symbols of good character, *Ọbatala* strives to be a model of ethical standards, while *Oduduwa* shapes those ideas that form morality.

Building an altar for *Orisanla* would be recommended for anyone who is struggling with issues of substance abuse, or self-destructive behavior. In this circumstance, *Orisanla* becomes the guiding principle for changing those bad habits that block spiritual growth.

*Orisanla* would also be an ideal focal point for anyone who uses meditation as a basis for a deeper awareness of self and world.

An altar for *Orisanla* should be primarily done in white. A small amount of light blue to represent the sky that holds the air we breathe would also be appropriate. Start with a white cloth on a small table holding a white candle on a white saucer. Take a large white plate and begin to collect natural elements that are white in color. Organic chalk, white shells, especially shells that are enclosed and form a spiral pattern. The earth element associated with *Orisanla* is pewter, and traditionally the altar would have a pewter bell. White rocks, eggs, white fabric, and jewelry with white stones would all be effective symbols.

Remember color carries *aṣẹ* or spiritual power, so the emphasis is on white as the source of all color and the source of all matter. Pictures, or drawings of the sun as a manifestation of light can be

placed on or above the altar along with mandalas that represent the unity of Nature.

## WATER

In the United States and the Caribbean Islands, water elements are most frequently represented by dark blue and white. In Africa salt water is generally represented by red and white. Fresh water which is associated with abundance uses yellow or gold mixed with green. The *Orisha* for salt water in Africa is known as *Olokun*, meaning; "Owner of the Ocean." It is more common in this country to associate the ocean with *Yemoja* which means; "The Mother of Fishes." *Olokun* is considered an androgynous force with male and female aspects.

An altar for either *Olokun* or *Yemoja* would be recommended for anyone who is going through an emotional crisis, or for persons involved in the health care profession. For those who live close to the ocean, salt water, and rocks from the beach are easily to collect. If you live a distance from the ocean, it is possible to simulate sea water by adding sea salt to fresh water. Salt has the ability to clean away negative influences and unwanted emotions. Water has the same inherent qualities. By adding salt to the water you are enhancing the healing qualities of the water on the shrine.

Fresh water is traditionally associated with fertility, sensuality, creativity and abundance. Prominent among the spirits of fresh water in Africa is *Oshun*. The colors associated with *Oshun* are yellow and green. *Oshun's* energy is believed to be contained in brass. It is traditional to use a brass bell to invoke *Oshun's* presence. Meditation of your own image in a mirror can be a powerful exercise in self-understanding. Nearly everyone lives close to some form of fresh water. Rocks from either a river or a lake would be effective altar pieces for a shrine to *Oshun*.

## FIRE

Fire spirits are the key to spiritual transformation and growth. They represent the power of death and rebirth which is a recurring phenomena in the quest for a mystical understanding of Nature. The most well known *Orisha* associated with fire is *Shango*. The easiest way to place the *aṣẹ* of *Shango* on a shrine is through the use of a red candle surrounded by volcanic rocks. His symbol is a double headed axe which can be made from wood and decorated with either red and white cloth or beads. Red is the heat of passion and white is the coolness of temperance. It is the balance of these two forces that is at the core of the mystical journey.

A shrine for fire would be appropriate for anyone who is feeling stagnant or unfulfilled in their life. Fire is also the element in Nature associated with social change and issues of community justice.

## EARTH

The primary spirit of the earth is *Onilẹ*. The traditional shrine for *Onilẹ* is shrouded in taboo. For this reason I would recommend that anyone who feels an affinity to spirits of the earth should build a shrine for *Oshosi*. In *Ifá* *Oshosi* is the spirit of the tracker who lives in the forest. The male aspect of *Oshosi* is *Okunrin* and the female aspect of *Oshosi* is *Obinrin*. On the spiritual level *Oshosi* is called upon to clearly identify those obstacles along the spiritual path that are blocking progress. All growth occurs step by step. The mystical understanding of Nature is no exception.

To build a shrine for *Oshosi* use rocks and dirt from your favorite place in Nature. Add to this some of the traditional tools of a tracker such as a knife, and a bow and arrow.

## THE FUNCTION OF AN *ORISHA* SHRINE

In Africa *Orisha* shrines serve as a gathering point for specific forces in Nature. The *Orisha* is drawn to the shrine as a result of the constant repetition of prayers, songs and invocations. Tradi-

tionally the prayers and invocations are spoken every five days and again on seasonal holidays. By maintaining the discipline of prayer the presence of the *Orisha* will be available when needed for guidance or to resolve a crisis. If the prayers are only said in times of need, it is believed that the force of the *Orisha* will be weak within the shrine.

Start by saying simple prayers in your own language. They should start by saying who you are. This is followed by a request that a specific *Orisha* hear the prayer. Next thank the *Orisha* for blessings that have already been received. After the appreciation has been spoken, requests of the *Orisha* can be made. In Africa whenever the *Orisha* are asked to answer a prayer, an offering is made. The subject of traditional offerings is highly complex. Start by offering flowers, liquid refreshments or food associated with the natural elements. Spirits of the air take food that is white in color such as eggs, potatoes and rice. Spirits of water take moist vegetables and fruits. Melons and squash are common offerings. Spirits of fire take hot and spicy foods like peppers, and food cooked in red hot sauce. Spirits of the earth can be given foods that grow underground such as carrots, and yams.

Remember it is the sincerity of the gesture that is important. By making an offering we are using ritual to say that we do not want something for nothing. The real offering is the commitment, to live life in harmony with Nature and to appreciate her many blessings.

# 7

## AWON IFÁ

### *The Influence of Ifá on Santería and Lucumí*

I was raised a Methodist in an upper middle class suburban neighborhood. Church was a place I went to on Sunday mornings and ignored during the rest of the week. Religious instruction was something that came through Sunday school and sermons. My recollection of this instruction was that it focused on the issue of being well behaved. I cannot remember ever hearing religious myth used as a basis for social change, and I had no idea that there was such a thing as a Spiritual transformation.

During my late teens I turned to the clergy in an effort to resolve some emotional difficulties related to a broken relationship. The pastoral guidance I received was the suggestion to see a doctor who could prescribe tranquilizers. A short time later I tried to discuss a religious vision with my minister. He smiled and said some none responsive words which was the extent of his feedback. For the next fifteen years my only source of guidance came from books, and for a while I was content to leave it at that.

As a result of having a series of para-normal experiences I made an effort to seek out anyone who could assist me in evaluating those experiences. In 1980 I started attending *Lucumí* ceremonies and attended some workshops on Native American Spirituality. At that point in my life I considered myself relatively well read and

well educated. It was painful to realize how little I knew about Native American and African history, let alone the spirituality of those cultures. In an effort to fill in those gaps I started researching the history of African religions. What I discovered was inconsistent and limited. Some of the material was clearly written by unsympathetic researchers who seemed more interested in condemning the subject than presenting information.

Early Yoruba history, like the early record of all cultures has been preserved in mythic terms. The Yoruba ancestral myth describes a migration from the East by a family that was led by the warrior *Odudua*. In this legend, *Odudua* is a historical male leader and not the female aspect of *Orisanla*. The family traveled to the west coast of Africa and founded the city of *Ilẹ́ Ifé* which is considered the “Garden of Eden” in Yoruba Creation Myth. It may seem like a contradiction to say that culture migrated to the original home of humans. The contradiction only exists if the myth is taken literally. Joseph Campbell has shown in his survey of myths that most cultures have stories related to Creation and the journey into the original land. The point of these tales is to mark the temporal beginning of life on earth. Most myth includes elements of real history. There are some archeological indications that the Yoruba Nation was formed by a series of migrations that took place between the first and twelfth century A.D.

From both oral tradition and historical record, it is known that *Ilẹ́ Ifé* grew into a large city that developed highly structured systems of political and religious belief. The chief of the city of *Ilẹ́ Ifé* is known as the *Ọni*. He was and continues to be chosen on a rotating basis from among the families who are believed to have originally founded the city. After going through an extensive initiation, the *Ọni* takes up residence inside the palace compound. In the early years of the Yoruba Nation, the *Ọni* stayed in the palace for his entire life. Contact with the *Ọni* came through his attendants who acted as intermediaries between the Chief and non-members of his court. At some point, a prophet known as



Òrúmilà introduced a system of divination called *Dafa*. The system of *Dafa* was taught to the elders of *Ilẹ́ Ifé* by Òrúmilà's first two students *Akọda* and *Aşda*. Over the years *Dafa* became a receptacle for a variety of systems of information. To help use and preserve this body of wisdom, the early *Qni* of *Ilẹ́ Ifé* set up a council of diviners called *Awoni*, a council of ritualists called *Ẹmeşş*, a council of judicial elders called *Ogboni* and a council of priestesses called *Odu*. These institutions served as the foundation for the political and Spiritual development of the Yoruba Nation.

A series of migrations expanded the kingdom of *Ilẹ́ Ifé* which became the capitol of a loose confederation of city states. Some accounts of Yoruba history indicate that the Nation was divided into sixteen regions. Each region came under the administration of a chief with the title of *Qba*. Most of the *Qba* set up their council of elders based on the model used in *Ilẹ́ Ifé*. Just like the *Qni*, each *Qba* is chosen from among the families who are believed to be the original settlers of *Ilẹ́ Ifé*.

This system remained relatively stable until the fifteenth Century. At that time several eastern cities joined together and formed a federation centered at *Oyo*. The federation was formed for defensive reasons and came under the leadership of the *Alafin* of *Oyo*.

I have not seen any academic accounts of Yoruba history that attempt to explain the reasons why the Eastern section of the Yoruba Nation would have to form a protective alliance. It is known that by the late fourteenth century North Africans were transporting gold from west Africa into Spain. By the mid fifteenth century Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand had forced the Moors out of Spain. At the same time Portuguese sailors ventured along the west coast of Africa in search of resources. The Portuguese were primarily interested in the gold that was no longer being imported by Moorish traders. In 1448, with the blessings of the

Catholic Church, the Portuguese brought the first African slaves to Europe.

Because of the hostility between Spain and North Africa, Queen Isabella sent Christopher Columbus on an expedition to discover new trade routes to India. Instead Columbus arrived in the Caribbean and started the exploitation of precious metals in the Western Hemisphere.

In 1520 Hernando Cortes conquered the Aztec Nation and forced the Aztecs to mine their homeland. The war of conquest coupled with the introduction of foreign forms of illness destroyed large segments of Native populations.<sup>1</sup>

The army of Cortes was followed by an expeditions led by Francisco Pizarro, Hernando de Soto and Francisco Vasques de Coronado. The amount of gold and silver sent to Spain literally flooded the European market. Within a fifty year period, between 1492 and 1520, the west coast of Africa stopped being a source of precious metals for international trade.

During this period the Spanish created a monopoly on the mines in Central America, South America and the Caribbean. Six thousand slaves were purchased from the former gold traders of west Africa and sent to the Potosi silver mines in what is now Bolivia. The mine was nearly three miles above sea level and none of the Africans survived the harsh change in environment.<sup>2</sup>

It was at about this time that the historical *Shango*, the fourth *Alafin* of Oyo successfully unified the eastern region of the Yoruba Nation. To me this suggests that the *Alafin* was attempting to protect the Yoruba frontier against the early invasion of slave traders.

By the middle of the sixteenth century, both the British and the Dutch were supplying forced labor to the Spanish. The silver coins minted by the Spanish provided a medium of exchange for the slave trade and eventually gold and silver became the foundation of a global system of finance. At this point England and Spain became engaged in open warfare that led to the disruption of the

Spanish economy. England and France started their own colonialization of the Western Hemisphere that originally started as a search for new sources of precious metals.

The failure to find gold and silver in North America led to the development of large plantations that were controlled by European banks. In 1672 the King of England set up the Royal African Company and gave it the exclusive rights for importing slaves into the new colonies. Tobacco, sugar and cotton became the basis for England's domination of world trade and financed the colonization of other continents. England's position as a mercantile empire remained unchallenged until the American Revolution. Following American independence, slavery continued to be the foundation for supplying trade goods on the world market.

In my opinion the history of slavery as it is taught in the schools in the United States is more of an effort to pretend that it did not happen than a real effort to illuminate the cause and effect of institutional racism. Slavery seems to have been eliminated more as a result of the industrial revolution than as the result of any moral outrage. Factories in the north were able to hire child labor at rates that were cheaper than feeding and housing families of slaves. This created economic competition between the North and the South that was cloaked within the debate over states' rights. The North and the South became engaged in an economic war that led to a civil war. Emancipation appears to have been a military tactic used as a last ditch effort to assist a poorly guided Union Army.

During the three hundred years prior to emancipation there appears to have been a significant difference in the way that England and the United States treated slaves and the way that Spain treated slaves. That difference was that Spain used Catholic Jesuit priests to convert the African slaves as well as the indigenous population. The British and the United States were predominately Protestant and seemed less concerned with the conversion of slaves to their faith. This difference appears to have been a significant

factor in the style of preservation of African forms of spirituality. By making this comparison, I do not mean to imply that slavery was any less harsh in either circumstance.

In the United States and the British Islands of the Caribbean, African religion, culture and ethics seems to have been secularized. This secularization was no doubt a condition of survival. During slavery there were laws in the United States that made it a capitol offense to play drums, speak African languages, and to practice African religion. It was also a crime for slaves to learn how to read or to congregate in crowds. The majority of slave owners in the South had small farms and relied on children of slaves to provide new sources of labor. This reduced contact with newly arrived Africans who had direct access to the old ways.<sup>3</sup>

Those slaves who were sent to Spanish colonies were baptized as Catholics. In Cuba and Brazil the plantations tended to be very large and the Africans were isolated from the European populations. This allowed for a greater level of interaction among the different African ethnic groups.<sup>4</sup> The Catholics also encouraged the slaves to participate in Catholic ceremonies. The festivals for the saints were similar in structure and form to the ancestral ceremonies of Africa. Fraternities of slaves were allowed to congregate for the purpose of preparing for the holidays that venerated the saints. These fraternities tended to be organized along ethnic lines and were undoubtedly used to preserve indigenous forms of spirituality.

Unfortunately the research concerning which ethnics groups went where, and the study of how they preserved their culture remains fragmented. With regard to *Ifá* there is some written and oral history available that suggests how the tradition was able to survive.

The first Spanish Colony was established in Cuba by Diego Velazquez in 1511.<sup>5</sup> The native population of the island was primarily Ciboney, Guanahatabey and Taino. By 1515 the Spanish had forced all three ethnic groups onto controlled estates called *encomienda*. Disease destroyed most of the indigenous people who



Ogun, spirit of iron, guardian of sacred places.

were quickly replaced by slaves from Africa. For the next two hundred years Cuba was primarily a port for Spanish ships on route between Spain and South America.

When the supply of precious metals started to diminish, the Spanish shifted their attention to agriculture as a source of trade. Cuba was well suited for the cultivation of sugar and tobacco. In 1740 Spain chartered the Havana Company to organize large plantations and to regulate the slave trade.<sup>6</sup> During the next hundred years the population of Cuba expanded from 150,000 to over 1,300,000 with Africans being the major source of the increase. Spain and England agreed to stop importing slaves in 1820. Despite this agreement, over 600,000 additional Africans were forced to come to Cuba after 1820. Slavery ended in Cuba after the war of independence in 1898.

The illegal slave trade in Cuba meant that African Cubans were in constant touch with newly arrived Africans who still remembered the old ways. Part of what was remembered was the worship of *Orisha* and the religion of *Ifá*. There are rural areas in Cuba that have retained elements of Yoruba language, Yoruba music, and Yoruba ritual. In the city of Matanza there are traces of *Ifá* that date back to the time of slavery. The secrets of divination and initiation were preserved and continue to be a vital religion in the area to this day. As far as I have been able to determine, Cuba is the only region in the West where *Awon Ifá* maintained its traditional structure.

Cuban independence took place during the American occupation of the island. The Platt Amendment passed by Congress in 1901 forced Cubans to accept intervention by the United States in matters of both international trade and internal administration. This legislation appears to have been designed to restrict the role of recently freed Afro-Cuban slaves in Cuban politics. This same policy set a climate that allowed for the suppression of African based religion in Cuba. As a consequence, the retention of Yoruba

religion remained underground in the rural areas until the mid 1940's.

Originally Cuban *Orisha* worship was known as *Lucumí* from the Yoruba phrase *Oluku mi* meaning; "my friend". During the forties *Orisha* worship started to appear in Havana where it became popular with both intellectuals and the newly emerging middle class. As best as I can determine from speaking with Cuban elders, the *Orisha* worship that developed in Havana was much less African and much more Catholic than *lucumí*. It also appears that the *Orisha* worship of Havana had much less access to *Ifá* than in the rural areas. The *Orisha* worship of Havana has come to be known as *Santería*.

What is amazing to me is not what was lost during the middle crossing, but how much was preserved. Many of the *Lucumí* congregations which are still active in Cuba trace their beginnings to specific Africans who are still remembered by name. The names of the verses of the scriptures used in *Dafa* remain intact. There is some variation in the content of the scripture, but that is true in Africa as well.

The songs and dances used to praise the *Orisha* have been well preserved in Cuba and are the basis for many of the popular dance styles and rhythms that are used in Cuban secular music. In present day Cuba, dances for the *Orisha* are considered a part of the national folk heritage and are performed on stage by professional dancers and musicians.

In both *Lucumí* and *Santería*, the congregations are made up of members who tend to worship all the *Orishas*. This is different from Africa where most congregations are dedicated to the worship of a single *Orisha*.

Initiation for the priesthood, in Cuba, has retained all the essential elements that are found in similar ceremonies in Africa. The sequence of the initiation has been well preserved in *Lucumí* and *Santería*. In my experience, it appears that the Cuban initiations have lost some of the prayers and invocations that are used

in Africa. But the ritual sequences, the use of herbs, and the dramatic elements have been retained.

In some Cuban congregations *Ifá* is used to do the divination prior to initiation. However, it appears to be more common to have the divination related to initiation performed by a senior *Orisha* priest who is given the title of *Ori Ate*.

There is a significant difference in the number of *Orishas* that are given in *Santería* initiations and the number of *Orishas* that are given in African ceremonies. Some *Lucumí* congregations and most *Santería* congregations give each initiate five *Orisha* pots that are consecrated for five different *Orishas*. The African tendency is to give one or two *Orishas* which is in keeping with the African system of having separate congregations for each *Orisha*.

The funerals for *Orisha* priests are very different on each continent. Some of these differences are due to strict funeral laws in the West. The consequence of these differences is that it is very common for Yoruba families to inherit an ancestors *Orisha* shrine, while in Cuba such a practice is rare. Both the Cuban and the Yoruba burials are considered secret.

In the area of ancestor reverence, most of the traditional *ẹ̀gún* ceremonies that are performed in Yorubaland did not survive the middle passage. It is not difficult to understand why this loss occurred. Yoruba ancestor ceremonies tend to be conducted by members of a single family, or extended family. Because slavery deliberately destroyed the African family unit, there was no context for the continuation of the traditional *ẹ̀gún* rituals. Instead, ancestor reverence in Cuba was heavily influenced by Spiritualism. The Spiritualist movement was popular in the United States and Europe at the turn of the century. The most prevalent style of ceremony for the ancestors within the Spiritualists movement is known as a seance. During a seance a medium will become possessed by the spirit of a deceased ancestor or spiritual guide who offers advice on practical problems. In some instances the mediums will do healings or offer suggestions for curing a physical ailment.



The Spiritualist movement in the United States faded after heavy criticism from the scientific community and the popular press. A similar form of ancestor reverence has emerged in the New Age movement in the form of trance channeling.

The ancestor ceremonies that I have participated in within the *Lucumí* and *Santería* traditions still maintain the influence of the early Spiritualist's movement. They generally make use of prayers from the Bible, or from Spiritualist prayer books, and conduct ceremonies that are similar in style to a seance.

During the late fifties a large number of Cuban exiles brought *Santería* and *Lucumí* to the United States where it has experienced rapid growth in those cities with a large Latin population. Both religions emerged from the retention of *Ifá* that occurred in Cuba during slavery and have evolved into autonomous traditions with their own inherent style and content. As with all religious institutions, the congregations of *Santería* and *Lucumí* reflect a wide range of theological, ethical, and philosophical perspectives. The range and scope of these differences is difficult to access because *Santería* and *Lucumí* remain shielded and underground.

*Santería* and *Lucumí* are both traditions that developed in spite of religious and social oppression. Historically and politically it is easy to understand why they remain secretive and unresponsive to examination of their beliefs and practices. In a country that prides itself for having established "religious freedom", the issue of the prohibitions against African forms of spirituality is not a subject that the public appears ready or able to address. This inability is constantly reinforced by the offensive, inaccurate and racist portrayals of African religion, in the press, in the media, and in the rhetoric of those members of the clergy who feel the need to condemn anyone who does not share their belief.

When I was first exposed to *Santería* and *Lucumí*, I made the decision to examine the effects of social conditioning on my own perception of African and Latin culture. It has been a difficult and painful process. What has become clear to me during this effort is

that cultural and social differences cannot be fully understood or appreciated without some grasp of the religious and spiritual conditions from which they came.

*Ifá* is not a tradition that believes in proselytizing. It is a way of looking at the self and world that has had a significant influence on large segments of the world's population. To ignore that influence, and to misrepresent its essence is to perpetuate false barriers between cultures and nations that have a common biological link with African soil.

*Ifá* is a celebration of life in all of its diversity. It is based on the belief that the full scope of diversity is experienced through the recurring cycles of reincarnation. The rebirth of an old spirit in a newborn child is considered to be a joyous and blessed event. There is no curse, blame, or guilt associated with the return to earth as a human soul. Earth is the place where the *orí* experiences the divine link between human consciousness and the consciousness that resides in all of Nature. It is the recognition of this link that motivates the exploration of the mysteries of Nature.

During the process of exploring this Mystery it is possible to become elevated beyond the limitations of human consciousness. When this occurs new potential is created that becomes an inspiration to future generations. *Ifá* describes this process as the transformation of *ẹ̀gún* into *Orisha*. The human personality that becomes *Orisha* is believed to be an organic extension of that *Orisha* as it will exist in the future and as it existed from the beginning of time. This is not a linear concept of time. It is a circular concept that is at the core of the *Ifá* understanding of the eternal within the temporal.

In Yoruba theological terms, *orí* becomes *Orisha* when it is perfectly aligned with *ìpòrí*. Each *orí* chooses an *ìpòrí* at the beginning of time. This choice is a covenant between *orí* and *Ọ̀lorun*. Spiritual growth is the process of gaining deeper insight into the nature of this covenant.

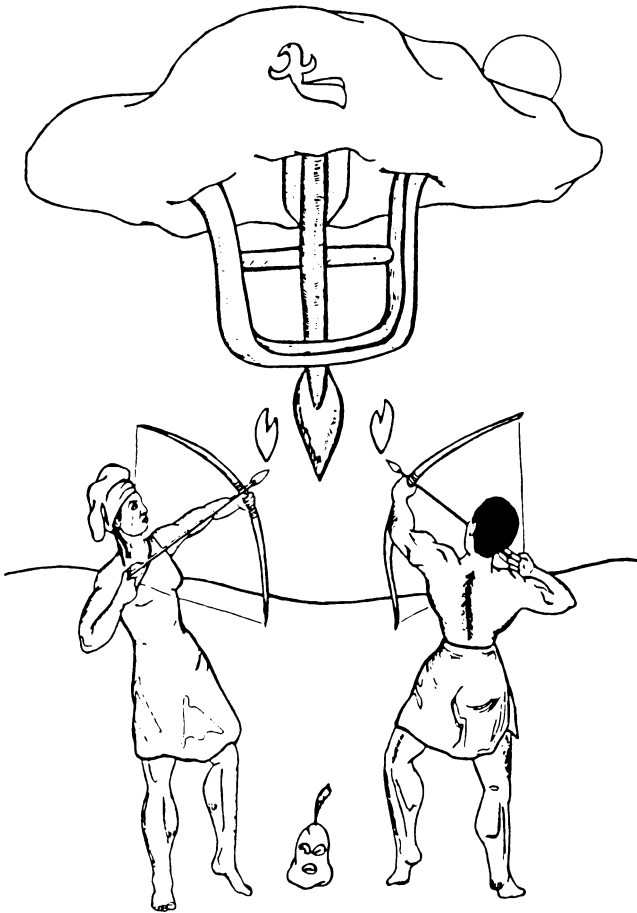
In Jungian psychological terms, consciousness seeks the illumination of those forms that structure consciousness itself. It was Jung's view that every individual can access those archetypes that make consciousness possible. He called the effort to grasp archetypes the process of individuation.

For the psychologist the process of individuation involves an effort to understand the symbolic content of dreams. For the *Ifá* priest the process of individuation involves an effort to understand the symbolic content of *Odu*. The psychologist guides individuation through the use of therapy. The *Ifá* priest guides individuation through the use of initiation. Both disciplines are based on the belief that human consciousness can grasp the universal principles that generated consciousness.

The goal of therapy is to gain access to all those forces that motivate behavior so that action becomes a function of conscious choice and not unconscious reaction. The goal of initiation is to gain access to those natural forces that guide *orí* towards *orí ire*. I make this comparison to suggest that the content and purpose of both disciplines are the same. The Jungian theory of individuation does not suffer from the kinds of negative stereotypes that plague African religion, because the Jungian process occurs within a socially conditioned context that has become acceptable to Western ideas of propriety. I also make this comparison to suggest that cultural difference should not be the basis for judging content.

The constant association of African religious beliefs with Satanism, Devil worship, and possession by diabolical forces is not a valid representation of content. It is an expression of the fear of cultural diversity based on a misunderstanding of what is taking place.

Prior to arriving in Nigeria I spent two days in Senegal. From my hotel window I could see Gori Island. During slavery Gori Island was one of the major ports used to transfer slaves to the West. I had mixed feelings about taking the ferryboat that connected the island with the mainland. There is a sense of despair about the



Ochosi, Spirit of the Tracker, guardian of new directions.

place that only increased when I stepped onto the dock. The beach near the ferry terminal is lined with small restaurants that cater to the tourist traffic. Behind them is a square that is surrounded by three large buildings. The buildings are abandoned hospital wards, built in the style of a prison. They were used to house those who suffered from leprosy after slavery was abolished. The hospital is no longer in use and stands in disrepair.

All the homes on the island are built in a French style and appear to be at least a hundred years old. It is impossible for me to imagine what it must be like to live in them. I have never been any place that carried such a strong aura of gloom, despair and tragedy. It was as if I had fallen into a horror chamber that psychically removed the possibility of experiencing any positive emotion.

There is a dirt path that leads from the square to the slave port. It is a structure that is surrounded by four stone walls ten feet high. The front gate opens into a courtyard that leads to a staircase. Above the staircase there are two large rooms with high ceilings that were used by the slave traders to transact their business. Along the walls to the right and left of the staircase there are rows of cells. The cells to the right were for the women, the cells to the left were for the men. A separate room behind the staircase was for the children. Directly under the staircase was a detention cell for Africans who would not cooperate with their captors. The ceiling in the cell was less than four feet high and too short to lie down in. Some of the cells had traces of dried blood. I found it impossible to speak.

Directly under the upstairs rooms, there is a passageway that leads to a door. The door opens out to the ocean. At one time there was a wooden dock that led from the door to waiting ships. Through this door passed the majority of Africans who were forced from their homeland.

I walked through the door with Luisah Teish unable to speak. As we looked out over the ocean she started reciting the Yoruba

prayer that honors the ancestors. Over six million Africans died from the abuses of the slave trade during the time that Gori Island was used as a slave port. Despite inhuman opposition the concept of *íwa-pẹ̀lẹ́* survived that journey.

## LESSON 7

### Self-study Guide

#### ***Adura* and the Process of Accessing Power**

*Adura* is the Yoruba word for prayer. It is the use of prayer that generates the power needed to effect personal transformation. In my experience it is often difficult for Westerners to translate natural forces into sources of personal motivation. In an effort to assist the reader with this process I am including a list of *Orisha* with a brief description of the role that they play in issues of personal growth. It is important to remember that *Orisha* are multi-dimensional realities. Not only is it impossible to formulate a complete description of *Orisha*, our grasp of their essential nature is constantly being enriched by revelation and contemplation. As human consciousness evolves our understanding grows. As more and more *Ègún* evolve, *Orisha* themselves change. The most powerful understanding of *Orisha* comes through direct experience. This means that it is possible to have an insight into the nature of *Orisha* that will be impossible to confirm through written sources. Be willing to explore new insights and be willing to test the consequences of that insight as it effects the issue of personal growth.

I find that the understanding of *Orisha* in the West is heavily influenced by Western modes of thinking and Western forms of acculturation. Some of these influences are a necessary consequence of our conditioning and do not distort the power of the relationship. Other influences seem to contradict the essential nature of *Orisha* and diminish their power. Be willing to test the consequences of your understanding as it effects the issue of personal growth.

*Ẹsu*: The Divine Messenger is the first Spirit that is called upon during prayer and during ritual. *Ẹsu* transforms human language into Nature language and Nature language into human language. *Ẹsu* is the power that opens the human channels of intuition. In his role as trickster, *Ẹsu* is constantly forcing us to examine the spiritual consequences of our actions in the world. There is also an element of innocence in *Ẹsu's* *aṣẹ*. He is similar to the Fool card in the Tarot Deck in that he is the force that will push the spiritual seeker to explore the unknown.

In dealing with issues that require courage, we can ask *Ẹsu* for the clarity needed to understand our own actions and motivations, even when we make mistakes.

Many anthropological texts describe *Ẹsu* as the “Devil”. This description is inaccurate. The misunderstanding of the trickster element in *Ẹsu's* nature may have caused this misidentification. It is the ability to effectively encounter the unexpected that is the true test of wisdom.

*Ogun*: The Spirit of Iron has many ritual functions in the religion of *Ifá*. It is common to invoke *Ogun* as a source of protection and he serves this role. With regard to the issue of personal growth *Ogun* has the *aṣẹ* to remove obstacles along the path of transformation. When most of us face a recurring problem there is a tendency to blame others for our condition. In some instances this may be accurate. In most instances blame is placed on external sources in an effort to avoid resolving some internal conflict. When prayer is addressed to *Ogun* to clear the path for growth, be clear that *Ogun* will clear the path regardless of its source. In *Ifá*, *Ogun* is one of the guardians of truth. So if we believe that someone else is responsible for a problem that is actually our fault, *Ogun* will go to the source and not to the projection.

*Onile*; The female aspect of *Ogun* is known as *Onilẹ*. Prayers to *Onilẹ* should involve the issue of living in harmony with the earth.



It is through the earth that the concept of justice becomes aligned with the concept of evolution. Those actions that destroy the earth's balance and block the flow of evolution would be unjust from the *Ifá* perspective.

*Oshosi*: The Spirit of the Tracker works in close association with the Spirit of *Ogun*. Often it is difficult to see what it is inside of us that is causing resistance to growth. Prayers to *Oshosi* should ask the Spirit of the Tracker to identify and illuminate the source of obstruction. *Oshosi* finds the shortest route to a given destination, while *Ogun* clears away the obstacles.

*Shango/Oya*: As natural forces *Shango* and *Oya* represent thunder and lightening. *Oya* opens the gates to the realm of death while *Shango* gives us the courage to walk through that door. This is true literally at the end of life, and symbolically each time we invoke initiation as a process of transformation. *Oya* is the force that ends a particular cycle. In this role, *Oya* is similar to the tower card in the Tarot Deck. *Shango* is the source of the courage that is needed to admit the need for change.

Prayers to *Oya* ask that we be brought to the point of change, while prayers to *Shango* ask that we make the change.

*Ibèjì*: The Spirit of Twins are *Shango's* children. They represent the change that occurs when the cycle of death leads to rebirth. Every form of rebirth comes into the world as a perfect balance between forces of expansion and contraction. These forces are symbolized as a male and a female child.

Traditionally *Ibèjì* is associated with abundance. This is not simply the abundance of material possession, it is also the abundance that accompanies a deeper grasp of the mystery of Being.

Prayers to *Ibèjì* ask that the process of personal growth result in the good fortune that becomes the foundation of a joyous life. The good fortune is physical as well as emotional.

*Yemoja/Agayu*: *Yemoja* is the mother of fish, while *Agayu* is the fire at the center of the earth. As the Mother of Fish, *Yemoja* represents the Spirit of Nurturance. She is the primal source for providing the emotional healing that is needed during any attempt at personal growth. Prayers to *Yemoja* are a request to remove pain, sorrow, anger and despair. The Yorubas say that there is no problem so big that it cannot be transformed by the power of the sea.

*Agayu* is the primal spirit of strength. In *Ifá* myth, *Agayu* is the boatman who carries the traveller across turbulent waters. It is *Agayu* who gives us the strength to handle pain, sorrow, anger and despair until it can be washed away by *Yemoja*.

*Olokun*: In Africa *Olokun* is the androgynous Spirit of the Ocean. *Olokun* is often characterized as the mystery at the bottom of the ocean. It is at the bottom of the ocean that life begins the transformation into *Orisha*. It is the place where earth, air, fire, and water unite to form the link between the mineral realm and the animal realm. It is the place that links human consciousness with the consciousness of the earth. We pray to *Olokun* in an effort to grasp the *Odu*, or archetypes that form consciousness and that ultimately motivate the desire for growth.

*Ọ̀rúmilà/Oshun*: *Ọ̀rúmilà* is the Spirit of Destiny. He is the ability to envision the lines of fate that create personal potential. Prayers to *Ọ̀rúmilà* can ask that our perception of our highest good and our manifestation of our highest good become one.

*Oshun* is the power that motivates us to seek our highest destiny. It is from *Oshun* that we get the sense of fulfillment that allures us to desire change. It is also the erotic power of *Oshun* that assures that our prayers will be heard. Passion is the force that motivates change and it is *Oshun* we turn to when our prayer is for passion.

*Ọlọdumarẹ/Elá*: The polarity between *Ọlọdumarẹ* and *Elá* is the primal manifestation of dynamics and form. We turn to *Ọlọdumarẹ* and *Elá* when we are in search of a mystic vision. It is from our mystic vision of unity and prosperity that we form alliances with others that results in community and culture. When we pray to *Ọlọdumarẹ* we ask how should things be. When we pray to *Elá* we ask how should we make it so.

*Ọlórún*: In simple terms *Ọlórún* is God. All the Spirits that are revealed in *Ifá* worship are knowable aspects of the unknowable Source of Creation. We turn to *Ọlórún* when all other appeals have failed. The prayer to *Ọlórún* is an affirmation of belief that the will of *Ọlórún* is life affirming, life transforming and benevolent.

# 8

## IFANIMORA

### *The Mystic Mind and a Vision of the Future*

On the last day of initiation, *Dafa* is cast for the initiate that establishes their destiny as a priest. This particular oracle is known as the *eta*. The content of the *eta* outlines the lifelong responsibilities of the priest. It also determines the taboos that will guide the development of *ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ̀*. For all *Babalawo* there are taboos against swearing and cursing. The *aṣẹ* of an *Ifá* priest comes through his ability to direct the power of the word. Using foul language is considered an abuse of that gift. There is also a general taboo against poor hygiene. *Babalawo* are expected to bathe every day and to present themselves in public in dignified clothing. Any person who comes to *Ifá* for divination has an expectation of confidentiality, because there is a strict taboo against discussing the content of anyone's *Dafa*. It is also taboo to use the tools of *Ifá* for reasons of greed, revenge and deceit.

None of these admonitions can insure that *ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ̀* will manifest within the character of the priest. Their function is to provide guidelines that will encourage behavior that is consistent with the principles of *Ifá*.

Following my *eta*, I sat with the members of *Ègbè Ifá* as a full member of the *Awon*. I was no longer wearing the white toga that marked me as an initiate. We finished the meal with sodas

and beer. As each priest left the house, I had a feeling of emptiness. A bond had developed during the ritual, and now there was a sense of loss as everyone returned to the concerns of their own lives. The initiation had come to an end.

Before arriving in *Òde Rẹmo*, I had prepared myself emotionally for the possibility that I might not be accepted for initiation. In my mind I had covered each of the reasons why I might be rejected and I was fully prepared for any disappointment. As far as I was concerned, the trip was going to be a learning experience. It was simply up to me to discover the value of the lessons that the journey would provide.

What I had not done was fully appreciate the consequences of actually being admitted into the priesthood. From the time that I first shook hands with the *Olúwo* on his farm, I knew that the issue of acceptance would be determined by divination. It is a fundamental tenet of *Ifá* religion that *Dafa* is the voice of the Prophet *Òrúnmilà*. When a *Babalawo* sits in front of *gbọn Ifá*, invokes *Ela* then casts an *Odu*, the religion becomes whatever is spoken at that moment. The tremendous responsibility of this simple process did not hit me until I started to contemplate the ramifications of my own *eta*.

It struck me as I was saying goodbye to the men and women who had come to share in the meal that followed the *eta*. They had all devoted seven days to the task of guiding my re-birth. Now it was time for me to take that gift and make use of it. After everyone was gone, I stood on the front porch of the *Olúwo*' house. It was sundown, all the children who normally played in the compound were in their homes eating. This was my first moment of solitude in over a week, and it was my first moment alone as a *Babalawo*. I remember thinking that the shadows from the houses seemed darker than usual. I also remember a sinking feeling in my stomach that said; "What are you going to do now?" Stepping off the porch, I sat in one of the shadows to ponder the question.

The first point of clarity that came to me was that I had gone through a physical transformation. During the ceremony I had absorbed large quantities of *aṣṣ*. The *aṣṣ* had been directed towards me through the use of prayer, song, dance, drama, contact with sacred relics, and by the absorption of medicine. I could feel the internal physical effects of that *aṣṣ*. It was as if some invisible force had been working its way up my spine and through my internal organs making sure that every cell was clean and revitalized. During the recuperation phase of the ritual, I repeatedly tried to get up and walk around. The slightest physical exertion required an immediate return to the mat and an extended period of rest.

I had been told clearly at my *eta* that receiving *Ifá* had healed some physical illness that was lying dormant. My responsibility to develop *ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́* included the task of continuing to protect my health.

The trip to Africa had been made in hopes of experiencing spiritual growth. I knew that something internal and physical had taken place. I do not believe that this change made me better than anyone else. It did not make me instantly holy, it did not miraculously improve my character, it did not wash away all of my bad habits and it did not automatically give me all the answers to my religious questions. With the experience of initiation came the understanding that there are no miracles. By this I mean there is no supernatural intervention that contradicts the Laws of Nature. Initiation carries with it the possibility of gaining a deeper grasp of the Mystery of Nature. At times that awareness can be used in ways that may appear miraculous to those who have not experienced the Mystery. What appears as miracle is actually the effect of wisdom, and the development of wisdom is a slow painstaking process. There is no quick fix, and there is no free ride. You simply cannot do as you please and expect *Ifá* to constantly wash away the consequences of poor judgement, bad character and ignorance. The blessing of initiation is that it gives you tools and insights that can be used to improve the quality of life. It is not some magical

removal of pain, suffering, injustice and malevolence. All the daily problems that I faced before becoming a *Babalawo* were still there. The difference was that I had a new perspective on how to handle those problems. The elders say that the last day of *Egbodu* is the first day of a life long search for *iwa-pèlẹ́*.

The fundamental Mystery revealed during initiation is that life contains within itself the seeds of transformation and re-birth. This lesson only has value when the decision is made to re-affirm that lesson every minute of every day. It is through this constant renewal, through this daily re-initiation, that a *Babalawo* may begin to access the *aṣẹ* that sustains the real miracle. It is the miracle of living in harmony with Nature in all of its diversity. *Ìwa-pèlẹ́* is a process, a way of living and a way of looking at the world. *Ìwa-pèlẹ́* is not something that someone does to you in an effort to eliminate the need for taking responsibility for life choices.

During my stay in Africa, I made several short trips with a number of my *Ifá* brothers. I never saw any of them wearing the beads of their priesthood in public. I never saw any of them identify themselves as *Babalawo*. They bowed to the uninitiated elders of the community out of respect for their age, and preferred to remain anonymous as a way of acknowledging to themselves that they still had much to learn.

Sitting alone in the shadows it was clear to me that initiation was not the final step in the process of spiritual transformation. To me, it was the first step in a life long commitment to elevation of the human spirit. I had been given new options that could be used to aid me in this process, but the obligation to use them in an ethical way remained an issue of personal choice. The elders of *Ifá* say that all they can do during *Egbodu* is to guide the initiate up the seven steps of initiation, pound on the door of transformation then step aside. Walking through that door is something that the initiate must do alone. There is no guarantee that it will happen. The ceremony was over, I was sitting alone, the choice was up to me.

The next point of clarity for me can only be described as a personal belief. It is my feeling that the experience of *Egbotu* can place the initiate in perfect alignment with the purpose of Creation. For me this alignment occurred in a fleeting instant and was over before I grasped its significance. The *ọpọ̀n Ifá* is a symbolic image. It is a circle with an equal armed cross inside. This image represents the balance between expansion and contraction that exists as an ideal within the self and world. This symbol is the oldest and most common image used to represent the Mystery of Creation. It is found in the esoteric teachings of every religion in every culture I have ever studied. I knew before coming to Africa that if you look briefly at the sun, then turn your eyes to a clear spot in the sky, you will see a circle surrounding a cross.

At the end of the procession from the *Ifá* grove to the *Olúwo*'s house, I had looked up at the sun. When I turned away, I saw a different image. Five days later I saw the exact same image marked on the *Ifá* tray during my *eta*.

While I was looking at the image in the sky, it did not occur to me that it was an *Odu*. What registered instead was a feeling that I was truly a part of Creation and that Creation in its essence was benevolent. It was a feeling that I had once before twenty years earlier. On the prior occasion I was standing on the beach in Santa Barbara. For a brief instant I thought I saw an African man sitting in a rocking chair at a spot where the waves meet the shore. As I took a closer look the image disappeared. At that same moment I felt as if I was being pressed by the air around me. This paranoia built in intensity until it was replaced by a feeling of profound joy. During my *eta* I was given the name *Awo Fa'lokun* which means; "The Mystery of Nature that comes from the Ocean". I had been greeted at the end of my initiation by the same image that had kindled my interest in Spirit.

For me, the consequence of these two events was a sense of responsibility and a sense of obligation to assist those who have searched for a similar feeling. The experience was a personal



affirmation of one of the attributes of *iwa-pèlẹ́*. Specifically, I speak of the taboo in *Ifá* against refusing to assist anyone who comes to *Ifá* with a problem. Within the code of ethics followed by *Babalawo* who function as diviners, there is an obligation to divine for those who ask for spiritual guidance. This obligation holds even if the person seeking assistance cannot afford to pay for the services of a priest. The belief is that those who can afford to pay are making an offering on behalf of those who cannot. For the first time in my life, the reason for obligation was clear to me. I cannot explain fully why it was clear, I just know that it was.

My time alone was soon interrupted as the children started coming out of their homes to play in the night air. Now that the taboo against touching me had been lifted, my young friends were climbing all over me. Their parents offered a hand in congratulations and expressed regrets that I would be leaving soon. There was no doubt in my mind that anytime I returned to *Òde Rẹmo* I would be welcome.

I was scheduled to leave the next day to meet the rest of my traveling companions in Benin. It was to be my last night in *Òde Rẹmo* before returning to the United States. I wanted to spend some time alone with the *Olúwo* before I left.

Late that night the *Olúwo* came to my room with one of my *Ifá* brothers who served as an interpreter. The *Olúwo* was tired, but he seemed eager to answer my questions. The following translation of his words is as close to the original Yoruba as is possible given the large number of idioms used within the language.

My first request was for a clear definition of *iwa-pèlẹ́*.

“The first thing that anybody who follows *Ifá* must do, he must not see his elder as a subordinate. The real father that gives birth to the child, the child must not be arrogant with the parent. So the child after initiation must not be arrogant with the new father. The same thing applies to the mother. So the chief, the initiator stands as

a father. So anything that a priest thinks that he should do for his father, he should do for his *Olúwo*. He should always try to do good for his *Olúwo*. It is then that things will go smoothly. Anybody that wants to follow *Ifá* should not be dubious. They must be a stable person, firm in their faith. So he must not see red and say it is black and he must not see black and say it is red. He must say exactly as things are. It is after doing this that *Ifá* will support this particular person. Stability is the important thing.

That is if he does not tell lies, and does not tell lies to his *Olúwo*, his life will improve. So with that, anywhere one goes, *Ifá* is bound to give support and listen, *Ifá* will hear that person's prayers.

Anybody who follows *Ifá* should return to the home of their *Olúwo* each year and make an offering to *Ifá*. It is when that person is doing these things that the person will be able to solve their personal problems. So the reason for doing good to the *Olúwo* is because we want our *Ifá* to be kind with us in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening, as we have been kind to our parents."

I asked the *Olúwo* about his vision of the role of *Ifá* in the United States.

"Those who have come here to be initiated have taken *Ifá* to America in order for *Ifá* to have a seat there. And *Ifá* is always patient. Now that *Ifá* is seated in America, many people will be saying different things to give *Ifá* a bad name, but sooner or later they will come to worship *Ifá*. Moreover, *Ifá* will soon be widely spread. Those who are saying that they do not believe in *Ifá* will still come and worship *Ifá*. Because those who are saying bad things about *Ifá* will come to *Ifá* because of their problems. It is then that they will realize what they have said. Because

those who stand beside *Ifá* now should try to hold it firmly with honesty. So they should always realize that where there is *Ifá* there is God and there is man. As time goes on, *Ifá* will just be answering them as *Ifá* solves their problems. So that it will be automatic, and people will be surprised by it.

Now that *Ifá* has entered America things will be moving on for people over there and you will be multiplying more and more. So because of this, *Ifá* is gradually spreading and it is just started.”

I wanted to know if the *Olúwo* had any words for *Ifá* worshippers in the United States.

“My own advice is as I have been saying. Anybody who stands with *Ifá* should have no doubt, and they should always stand with the word of *Ifá*. If one can be patient with *Ifá*, and as the spirit of cooperation with *Ifá* increases, *Ifá* will do good for that person. If it is money that is a person's problem, *Ifá* will help solve it. Although at the initial stage people will be opposing that person, in the long run they will praise him. If it is a wife that is one's problem, *Ifá* will help find one. If it is a child that is a problem, the more one is patient and loyal, *Ifá* will answer their prayer and give them children. Because *Ifá* is the God who always fulfills his promise, he will always answer your prayer in time. Take a typical example, in Nigeria and throughout the federation, whenever they want to elect a new *Qba*, they first consult *Ifá*. Anything that *Ifá* says, the whole town will support. If the person selected is well suited, *Ifá* will support it. If *Ifá* says no, they will select someone else until the right person is chosen. It is the person that *Ifá* chooses that people will support. This is where we see the importance and signifi-

cance of *Ifá*. That is why we call him *Eleri-ipin*, the Witness to Creation. In *Ifá* we say *amoran moye* which means; I know what your problem is and I have the solution. *Ifá* is the Spirit that takes bad things and makes them good.”

Finally, I asked the *Olúwo* about the relationship between *Ifá* worship and *Orisha* worship.

“*Ifá* is the strongest of all. *Ifá* is stronger than any *Orisha* because of all of the Spirits that God gave power to, *Òrúnmilà* has the most knowledge of *ebo*. So when they went to earth, *Orisha* dressed up and started moving about. This explains why we see some of the *Orisha* priests moving about looking for money. Whereas, *Òrúnmilà* sat down in his own house and anybody who wants to see *Òrúnmilà* comes to his house. People come to see him where he sat down. He made offerings for people that made things well for them. So when *Orisha* is moving about, when anybody comes to meet *Orisha*, they might not find *Orisha* at home. In short, *Òrúnmilà* is the elder of them all. Before we can praise any *Orisha* priest the priesthood must be supported by *Ifá*. *Orisha* is not complete without the support of *Ifá*.”

Every time that I have been able to speak with one of the elders I start to sense the amount of wisdom that remains for me to learn. There are layers and layers of understanding behind the veil of each *Odu*. The elders of *Ifá* say that when the *Orisha* first walked the earth, there was a much shorter distance between Heaven and Earth. I interpret this to mean that the ancient ones had more direct access to those regions of consciousness that allowed them to penetrate the veil. As a result of that ability they were able to project primal images onto the environment that gave



*Babalawo using opẹ́ḽẹ́ to cast Dafa.*

birth to culture, religion, metaphysics and science. Those of us who grew up benefiting from that endeavor have put distance between Heaven and Earth. Because we no longer need to understand the dynamics of Nature to survive on a daily basis, our understanding of *Orisha*, *Irunmole*, *Imole*, and *Odu* has diminished. As we make our way through the darkness in an effort to once again shorten the distance between Heaven and Earth, we unlock regions of consciousness that have been previously unused or forgotten. I suspect that we might also find that Spirit will present itself with new faces.

During my short time in Africa I was introduced to a way of looking at Spirit that was very different from the many forms of *Orisha* worship I had encountered in the United States. Some of these differences are due to cultural conditioning, some are the result of turning to *Orisha* to solve different kinds of social and personal problems, and some are because elements of the old wisdom have been lost. It is my belief that there is value in trying to understand these differences. The value comes not from making one point of view right and the other wrong. The value comes in seeing the full depth and breadth of Spirit's response to the human condition. Those who have the most to teach in this regard have always admitted the limitations of their own understanding. Those who have had the least to say generally claim to know it all.

None of the ideas that I have introduced in this book should be considered final or definitive. My prayer is that by sharing my experiences in Africa, others might be encouraged to take a closer look at both *Ifá* and all the other earth centered religions that attempt to shorten the distance between Heaven and Earth. The dramatic elements that were enacted during my initiation in *Òde Remo* are virtually identical in content to the stages of initiation discussed by Black Elk in his books on Sioux medicine ways. In Africa there are ceremonies for *Ogun* that would be recognizable to anyone who has been admitted to a Masonic lodge. The principles that I have been taught in *Tai Chi* all have correlations with

ideas expressed in *Dafa*. The Yorubas believe that the Prophet *Ōrúnmilà* was the same historical figure who gave that oracle to the Essenes who in turn inspired the Kabalah. My paternal ancestors were involved in the preservation of the Grail mysteries. It was the spirit of my deceased grandfather who guided me to Africa based on the suggestion that *Ifá* contained clues to elements of Grail initiation that have been lost in the West. I never mentioned my grandfather to the elders in Africa until my *eta* was cast. At that time the oracle said that I needed to make a pilgrimage to my grandfather's house. *Ifá* said that I needed to make an offering thanking him for guiding me to *Egbotu*.

In Africa it is not uncommon to see *Ifá* priests pray in churches and attend mosques. I have seen pictures of Hindu saints on their altars and I have seen them greet priests from other cultures as their equals. I have tried to follow this example in my effort to make *Dafa* available to the members of my own congregation in the United States. Most of the *Odu* that I have learned make extensive use of herbs and many of them suggest wholistic cures for physical illness. The ingredients in both instances are generally unavailable in this country. In an effort to solve this problem, I have found it helpful to work with Native American elders who know the spiritual properties of local flora. This information can be used as a basis for making informed substitutions for the herbs used in *Dafa*. I also work with an acupuncturist who can legally practice wholistic forms of medicine. In both instances I am working with men and women who share a similar world view. There is strong precedent for this interaction within the African based religions that survived slavery. *Santeria*, *Lucumi*, *Candomble*, *Macumba*, and *Voudoun* all show traces of cross-cultural influences that appear to have occurred prior to emancipation. I believe that the great unwritten chapter in Western history is about the interaction between Native Americans and African Americans that occurred from Brazil to Canada prior to the Civil War. There are

even indications of African exploration of South America prior to European colonialization.

Earlier in this book I mentioned that the elders of *Ifá* meet on an annual basis with elders of Taoism and Vedanta. It is my personal hope that someday these conferences will include representatives from earth centered religions that are active in the West. The need for such a collective exchange is both global and personal.

The negative impact of living in disharmony with Nature should be clear to anyone who has turned to Nature for Spiritual inspiration. The open spaces are dwindling, the animals are disappearing, the water is polluted, the air is thick with chemicals, and countless species of plants and trees have vanished forever. Even the simple techniques for replenishing the soil are being ignored by farming conglomerates who have refused to consider the bigger picture.

By simply examining the patterns of *Dafa*, anyone interested in restoring balance to the planet can begin to see the various ways in which balance occurs. It is my belief that locked under the veil of these patterns is the key to discovering new and less toxic forms of energy. They also include guidelines for healing the damage that has already occurred. The revelation of these mysteries are available to anyone who takes the time to look. They need not be limited to those who accept *Ifá* as their religion. I say this because *Ifá* as a way of looking at the world transcends the restraints of cultural conditioning. History is filled with the memory of ancestors who expressed this point of view and their insights should be included in our efforts to grasp the inner secrets of Nature.

Dr. Walter Russell, one of the early critics of nuclear power argued that the danger of nuclear reactors was not so much from radioactive waste as it was from the process of removing radioactive material from deep within the earth. His argument was that radiation as it exists in mineral deposits is part of the natural cycle that the earth uses to make topsoil. To me this argument is an expression of the *Ifá* concept of balance in Nature.



The social consciousness of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is a direct expression of the principles found in the *Odu Otura Meji*. Dr. King may or may not have been aware of *Ifá*, but we can look to him for inspiration while trying to grasp the *Ifá* concept of justice.

The music of Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane is a direct extension of the musical principles that are used in *Ifá* to invoke mystic vision. *Orisha* music has had a profound influence on the cultures of North and South America. In my own experience I have learned far more about altered states of consciousness from listening to certain types of music than I have from reading any scientific journal. *Ifá* is a celebration of the altered states that music can create.

*Ifá* means Wisdom of Nature. That wisdom exists in African forms of Spirituality and in many other sources. Any lesson that we can learn from Nature, regardless of its cultural origin is *Ifá*. This should not be confused to mean that *Ifá* is an attempt to understand everything there is to know about Creation. *Ifá* would say that such an effort is both impossible and vain. What *Ifá* would say is that we can constantly learn ways to deepen our harmonious relationship with Nature. If you stand on the edge of a cliff and get some sense of the purpose of wind in the environment, *Ifá* is speaking directly to you. We can understand the nature and function of wind without having to explain all the physical factors that cause huge columns of air to move. The test of whether or not our perception is accurate is to evaluate the consequences of a given action. We may think that using certain pesticides improves the quality of life by increasing food production, but if those chemicals kill the birds that eat the insects, if those insects breed resistance to the chemicals, and if human illness is caused by the food that is harvested, we are ignoring the wisdom of those who have attempted to preserve the Mystery of Creation.

On a personal level the issue of balance can be illusive. I have said that the *Ifá* initiation is designed to balance the male psyche

with its female counterpart. Unfortunately, this is an oversimplification that is hampered by the limitations of Western language. When *Ifá* uses initiation as a tool to balance the *orí* of both men and women, it does so in accord with primal laws of Nature and not as a justification of the social expression of male and female roles in society. The balancing of personal consciousness is better understood as the harmony between internal forces of expansion and contraction. This polarity expresses itself through a wide range of instincts, motivations, and desires. The tension between introversion and extroversion, between joy and sorrow, between pleasure and pain, between personal survival and communal relatedness, and between personal will and predetermination are but a few of the elements that shape self-awareness.

In *Ifá* those who demonstrate the ability to balance these internal forces are said to be *orí tútù*. In Yoruba *orí tútù* literally translates to mean; “cool head”. Extreme expressions of passion, temper and aggression are considered hot emotions, while extreme expressions of sorrow, loneliness and despair are described as cold emotions. There are times when hot and cold are needed, but the value of maintaining balance always directs *ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ́* towards *orí tútù*.

*Ifá* teaches that everything arises out of its opposite. As the social roles of men and women change in our culture, the hidden forces of influence shift. For this reason it is ineffective and ultimately dangerous to rely on rigid gender definitions of man and woman to define forces of consciousness that shape motivation and will. Instead we need to begin the search for new symbolic expressions of our current dilemma. In *Ifá* this is done by adding new verses to earlier commentaries on *Odu*.

For those of us who worship *Ifá* and *Orisha* outside of Africa, there is a need to learn the skills that will enable us to make informed additions to the oracle that will speak directly to our needs. This is not an easy task. My vision of this process includes the need for *Ifá* to set up its own schools of higher learning. Part

of this effort would include the preservation of that which we already have. There are indications that some of the forms of wisdom that are a part of *Ifá* have been lost both here and in Africa. *Baba l'Orisha* John Mason has done an excellent job of recording and documenting the elements of *Orisha* worship as it is practiced in Cuba and portions of the United States. He has done so not as an anthropologist but as a active priest in the tradition. Luisah Teish has researched the elements of African spirituality as they survived in the American South. She also takes the perspective of an initiate who views her material as a source of personal inspiration. Material is available from the *Oyotunji* village in South Carolina that reclaims some of the lost elements of *Ifá* and *Orisha* worship as it occurs in Africa. Scholars such as *Babalawo Fabemi Fasini* and *Babalawo Adebolu Fatunmise* have lectured extensively on the use of *Ifá* as a source of inspiration in the modern world. To these pioneers of Spirit I say *Iba se orí ire*, meaning; "Praise to the wise ones for the blessing of their wisdom".

Òrúnìlà a boru, Òrúnmilà, a bo ye, Òrúnmilà a bo si se

*Awo Shopew, Fá'lokun Fátunmbi;*  
*Omo Awo Fatunmise, Ilẹ̀ Ifẹ̀;*  
*Babalawo Ègbè Ifá Òde Rẹ̀mo;*  
*Olúwo Ilẹ̀ Òrúnmilà Oshun, Oakland, CA*



Yemoja/Olokun, Goddess of the Ocean.

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## GLOSSARY

*adimu* — an offering of food made to Spirit.

*Adura* — prayer.

*afogṣe* — invocation said with force.

*Agaju* — Spirit of the fire at the center of the earth.

*Agbongon* — one of the 16 *Babalawo* who divine for the *Oni of Ilé Ife*.

*Agemo* — Spirit from the region of *Ijebu* with the powers of the chameleon.

*Agṣinyowa* — one of the 16 *Babalawo* who divine for the *Oni of Ilé Ife*

*agogo* — bell used to invoke *Orisha*.

*Agunmu* — a medicine that is prepared by pounding it with a mortar.

*aiye* — the place on earth where *Orun* (Heaven) and *Ilé* (earth) are joined.

*Ajalaiye* — Spirit of the wind, an aspect of *Oya*.

*Àjṣ* — elemental spirit associated with astral travel among women.

*Akoda* — one of the Prophet *Orúnmilà's* original students, and the title of one of the 16 *Babalawo* who divine for the *Oni of Ilé Ife*.

*Aláfia* — peace and good health, a common Yoruba greeting.

*Alafin* — the traditional chief of *Oyo*.

*amorán moyṣ* — a traditional greeting among *Ifá* priests that identifies the speaker as a diviner.

*Apetebi Oshun* — priestess who has been initiated into the mysteries of both *Ifá* and *Oshun* (the River Goddess).

*Apetebi* — priestess of *Ifá*.

*ara* — physical body.

*Araba* — senior *Ifá* priest for a specific geographical area.

*arun* — disease.

*aṣṣ* — spiritual power, or spiritual essence, the word is also used at the end of prayers to mean; "So be it."

*Aṣṣda* — one of the Prophet *Orúnmilà's* first two students, one of the titles of the 16 *Babalawo* who advise the *Oni of Ilé Ife*.

*atari* — top of the head.

*Ato* — female priestess in Ègún society.

*awo* — diviner.

*Awon Ifá* — group of *Ifá* priests, it may refer to all the *Ifá* priests who have ever lived, or it may refer to a family of priests in a particular region.

*Awóni* — the group of 16 *Babalawo* who diviner for the *Ọ̀ni of Ilẹ́ Ifẹ́*.

*Baba* — father.

*Babal'orisha* — male priest who worships *Orisha* (forces in Nature).

*Babalawo* — male priest of *Ifá*, Father of Secrets.

*bata* — foot, the word is also used to describe a drum that is sacred to *Shango*.

*buruku* — place of extreme confusion, describes a condition of consciousness in which there is little hope for spiritual transformation.

*Dafa* — the process of divination used by priests of *Ifá*.

*dudu* — great depth, and the color black.

*ebo* — an offering to Spirit that includes the blood of an animal.

*ede* — a bracelet worn as a sign of initiation.

*efun* — white chalk from the ocean used as medicine for spiritual transformation.

*Egbadon* — the largest city in Nigeria.

*ẹ̀gbẹ̀* — heart, emotion, group of individuals with a strong bond.

*Egbodu* — place of initiation.

*ẹ̀gún* — ancestor spirit.

*Egúngun* — medium who is possessed by an ancestor spirit.

*ẹ̀jẹ̀* — blood.

*Ejife* — *Odu* used in divination with *Obi cola*.

*Ekiti* — city in Nigeria.

*Ela* — Spirit associated with *Ifá*, the original incarnation of the Prophet *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*.

*Elẹ́da* — energy center located between the eyebrows.

*Elegba*, Divine Messenger, in Africa *Elegba* is a road or aspect of *Esu*.

*elenini* — spirit that blocks spiritual development.

*Eleri-ìpín* — praise name of *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*, meaning; "Witness to Creation."

*Èmẹ̀sẹ́* — group of 16 *Babalawo* who say daily prayers on behalf of the *Ọ̀ni of Ilẹ́ Ifẹ́* and on behalf of the Yoruba Nation.

*ẹ̀mí* — breath, or soul depending on usage.

*Epa* — disease of the intestines.

*Erinmi* — hippopotamus.

*Esentaiye* — naming ceremony for young child.

*Eṣu* — Spirit of the Divine Messenger.

*Eṣu ni ba ko* — power center located on the back of the neck, the phrase means; "The Divine Messenger is not against me."

*eta* — Divination done during an initiation that established the life long responsibilities of the newly initiated.

*Etawa* — *Odu* used in *Obi* collar divination.

*etutu* — offering to the ancestors

*Geḍḍ* — system of topographical astrology used in *Ifá* to locate places of power.

*Geleḍḍ* — form of ancestor reverence that honors women.

*Iba a se* — phrase used in prayer and invocation that means; "I pay homage to."

*Ibèjì* — Spirit of twins, and the word for twin children, occasionally used to mean double or twice.

*ibi* — condition associated with a person not being on their path of destiny.

*Ifá* — West Africa system of Spirituality that includes divination, medicine, initiation, Nature Worship, ancestor reverence, a system of ethics, and a philosophy of life that includes cosmology, metaphysics, ontology, and practical science.

*Ìfáiyà* — enchantment, wonderment about the mysteries of Nature.

*Ifáyelele* — a quiet mind, state of being in harmony with Nature and destiny.

*Ika Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

*ikin* — sacred palm nuts used in *Ifá* for divination, the fruit of the *Ifá* tree of life.

*Iku* — Spirit of Death.

*Ilé Ifé* — sacred city in *Orun* (Heaven), original city within the Yoruba Nation, the seat of the elders of *Ifá*.

*Ilé* — earth, soil, and house depending on context.

*Imole* — Spirit in its primal form.

*ìporí* — the spirit double of each person that contains the inprint of individual destiny.

*ire* — good fortune, the state of living in harmony with personal destiny.

*Ireṭe Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

*iroke Ifa* — carved piece of wood used to tap against the divination tray during divination.

*iroko* — tree that is sacred to ancestors and elemental spirits.

*Irosun Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

*Irosun* — powder from a camwood tree that is used as medicine for spiritual transformation.

*Irunmole* — Spirits that create and sustain the dynamics and form found within the Earth.

*iwa* — character.

*iwa-pẹ̀lẹ̀* — gentle character, the aspiration of those who seek both internal balance and harmony between self and world.

*Iwori Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

*Ìyá l'Orisha* — female initiate of *Orisha* (Nature worship).

*Ìyá Moopo* — Goddess of primal form in the Universe.

*Ìyá'gba* — grandmother.

*iyerosun* — sacred medicine used for spiritual transformation, sacred to *Ifá*.

*kokoro* — worm.

*lẹ̀g-lẹ̀g* — spiritual realm that is beyond time and space.

*Lucumí* — *Orisha* worship in rural areas of Cuba.

*meji* — twice or double.

*O dun* — sweat.

*o kon* — sour.

*o ta* — pepper flavor.

*Ọba* — chief, a descendant of one of the original families who founded the Yoruba nation.

*Ọba Ọrun* — praise name for the Creator, meaning; “Chief of Heaven.”

*Ọbara Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

*Ọbatala* — spirit of Creation, literally; “The Chief of White Cloth.”

*obi* — cola nut used in divination and as an offering to Spirit.

*Obinrin* — woman.

*Ochosi* — Spirit of the Tracker.

*Òde Rẹ̀mo* — city in *Ogun* State, Nigeria.

*Odi Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

- Odu* — Spirit that generates form in the Universe, the word used to delineate the verses of *Ifá* scripture.
- Oduduwa* — in some regions of Nigeria, the original male ancestor of the Yoruba Nation, in other regions of Nigeria, the female aspect of *Ọbatala*.
- ofọ aṣẹ* — the power of the word, power words used in invocation of Spirit.
- ofo* — word.
- Ofun Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.
- Ogbe Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.
- Ogboni* — of the earth, spirits of the earth, the society that worships *Onilẹ* the Goddess who is the Earth.
- Ogun* — the Spirit of iron, the protector of blacksmiths and hunters, the Spirit who opens the road to spiritual transformation, and the guardian of Truth.
- Ogunda Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.
- okan* — one.
- Okana* — *Odu* of *obi* divination.
- Ọkanran Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.
- Okunrin* — man.
- Ọlọ* — prefix meaning owner, or one who possesses.
- Ọlọdu* — owner of *Odu*.
- Ọlọdumare* — Spirit that maintains all forms that evolve throughout Creation.
- Ọlọfi* — Spirit of the Sun.
- Olokun* — Spirit of the Ocean.
- Ọlórún* — Creator, “The Owner of Heaven.”
- Oluku mi* — my friend.
- Olúwo* — senior *Ifá* priest in a family of *Ifá* initiates.
- Omi títù* — cool water.
- Ọmọlawo* — child of secrets, the first level of initiation into *Ifá*.
- Ọni* — owner of a thing.
- Onilẹ* — owner of the Earth, the Goddess of the Earth.
- Onísẹgun* — medicine.
- Ọpẹlẹ* — wife of *Ọrúnmilà*, chain used in divination.
- ọpọn Ifá* — tray used in divination.
- orí ibi* — consciousness that is in opposition of personal destiny.

*orí* — head, consciousness, the guiding force in all things.

*orí ire* — good fortune, consciousness that is in alignment with destiny.

*orí bunuku* — consciousness that is in serious opposition to personal destiny.

*orí tútù* — cool head, peaceful person.

*Orí Ate* — Orisha priest in *Lucumí* and *Santería* who leads Orisha initiations.

*Orisanla* — Spirit of Creation.

*Orisha* — Spirit of Specific force in Nature, meaning; “Select Head.”

*Oro* — Spirit of transformation.

*Òrun* — realm of ancestors.

*Òrúnmìlà* — Spirit of Destiny, “Heaven is my salvation.”

*Ọsa Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

*Ọsa* — lagoon.

*Osanyin* — Spirit of plants and herbs.

*Ọṣṣ Shango* — double headed ax used as a dance wand by *Shango* initiates.

*Ọṣṣ 'Tura* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

*Ọṣṣ Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

*Oshun* — Goddess of Abundance and the Erotic, Spirit of *Oshun* River in *Osogbo*.

*Osogbo* — City in Nigeria along the *Oshun* River.

*Ọsumare* — Spirit of the Rainbow.

*Osun* — spirit that protects the head.

*Otura Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

*Oturopon Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

*owó* — money.

*Ọwọnrin Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

*Oya* — Spirit of the Wind, Spirit of Transformation, guardian of the gateway to the realm of the ancestors.

*Oyẹku Meji* — verse of *Ifá* scripture.

*Oyo* — city in Nigeria.

*Shango* — Spirit of Lightning, the fourth *Alafin* of *Oyo*.

*Ṣọpọnnọ* — Spirit of Smallpox.

*Tefa* — initiation into *Ifá*.

*Yemoja* — Goddess of the Ocean in *Lucumí* and *Santería*, Goddess of the *Yemoja* River in Africa, Spirit of Healing.