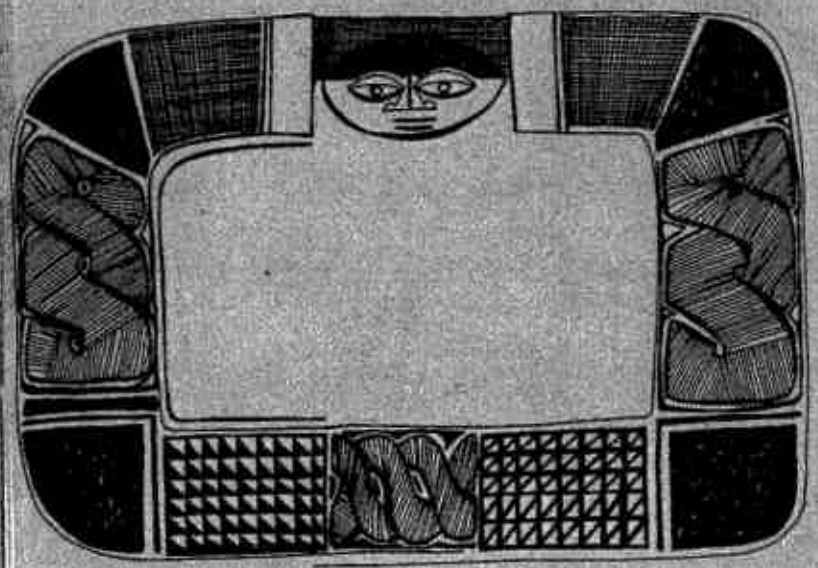
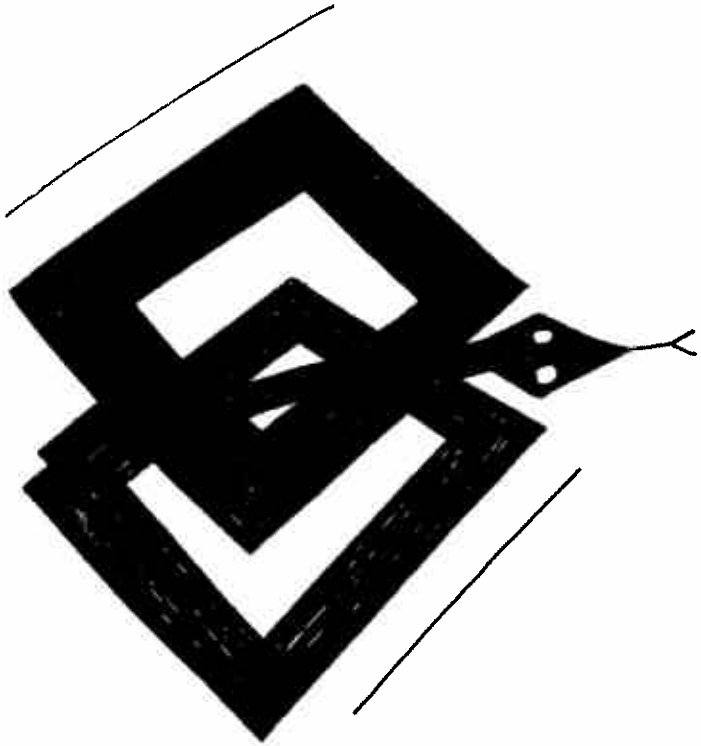
# Yoruba Myths

ULLI BEIER





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Compiled and Introduced by
ULLI BEIER
ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGINA BEIER

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# Acknowledgements

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## Notes on the Contributors

Ulli Beier spent twenty years in Nigeria and his last position there was Director of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ife. From 1974–78 he was Director of the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies. His books on Yoruba culture include *Yoruba Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), *Return of the Gods* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), *The Stolen Images* (Cambridge University Press, 1976) and *Yoruba Beaded Crowns* (Ethnographica, 1980).

Yemi Elebu-Ibon is a practising *babalawo* in Oshogbo. He is possibly the only *babalawo* who completed a primary-



school education before undergoing the rigid five-year training period as a Yoruba oracle priest. He has spoken on Ifa on the Nigerian broadcasting network and has published a recording of Ifa chants. He has on occasions performed with Duro Ladipo's theatre group.

Bakare Gbadamosi has published several Yoruba books including *Ọ̀ro Pẹ̀lu Idi Rẹ̀* (Mbari Mbayo, Oshogbo, 1965), and he was co-author with Ulli Beier of *Not Even God is Ripe Enough* (Heinemann AWS, 1968).

Pierre Verger has spent a life time studying Yoruba culture in Nigeria, Dahomey, Cuba and Brazil. With his massive work *Notes sur les Cultes des Orisa et des Voduns* (published by IFAN in Dakar, 1957) and its shorter popular version *Les Dieux d'Afrique* (Paul Hartman, Paris), he surprised the world with the richness of the culture he had documented. In innumerable articles and books and collections of poetry he has since continued to add to our knowledge and understanding of the Yoruba world.

# Introduction

In September 1972 I walked, more or less at random, into a performance by the National Black Theatre in Harlem. I had arrived the night before in New York on my first visit to the United States and this was my first experience of black American theatre. The play – superbly and powerfully performed – was about the drug and crime scene in Harlem, about the dehumanising effect the drug pushers were having on the community. The theme was not unexpected, and the early scenes of the play seemed a realistic presentation of everyday life in Harlem. But then, suddenly, there was a startling surprise: the play developed into a plea for the rejuvenation of black society and the saviour who appeared to rescue the beleaguered community was – the goddess Oshun! Here, in the midst of the most sophisticated and – in some sense – most westernised black community in the world, the new values that could make life in an urban slum meaningful again were sought in *Yoruba religion!*

To one coming to the United States from Nigeria, and being, by inclination at least, a citizen of Oshogbo, the very home of Oshun, the experience was both exciting and sad. Exciting, because Oshun was given such unexpected honour in the New World and sad, because in Nigeria itself the prestige of the goddess is waning and Yoruba religion is on the retreat. Despite the prestige



that other aspects of traditional African culture – the music, the art and the poetry – have acquired in recent years, Yoruba religion is still not 'respectable'. Christians and Muslims still see it as an inferior aberration and in many cases they are openly hostile to the *olorisha*, the practitioners of Yoruba religion.

Sometimes it is thought that belief in a single God is in itself 'nobler' or superior to a religion that postulates many gods. One Yoruba scholar has argued that Yoruba religion is a 'degeneration' of an earlier monotheistic religion and that the Yoruba *orisha* are merely a symptom of cultural or religious corruption.

The perfect answer to this argument was given by the great Muslim scholar Malam Hampate Ba. Hampate Ba is revered as a great authority on the Koran and some people in his native Mali regard him as a saint. When he visited me some twenty years ago in Ilobu, he asked to be taken to the Shango shrine. After talking to the Magba Shango for a long time and watching the kola nut being thrown for him,[1] he turned to me and said: 'People always say to me: "Polytheism, polytheism", as if they were referring to some monstrous evil. But I say to them: "Don't you know that Allah has ninety-nine names? And who tells you that each name is not another god?"'

With this interpretation Hampate Ba comes very close to the Yoruba concept itself. The Yoruba people see the multiplicity of gods merely as aspects or facets of *the same* divine force. The *orisha* are not the messengers of God, or his subordinate beings (as missionaries have sometimes assumed) they are part manifestations of the divine spirit, the *orisha* being variously accessible to different people. They are different routes leading to the same goal. This comment is beautifully expressed in 'Orishanla', myth no. 4 of this collection.

The intolerance of some Christian Churches in Nigeria

towards Yoruba religion is sad, because in both Cuba and Brazil African religions and Christianity have found a way of living harmoniously together. The people go to church on Sunday and perform their rituals for the *orisha* on weekdays. If the Church has periodically been worried about this, it has been unable to do much about it. The Yoruba descendants in Havanna, for example, *refuse to see* that there is a conflict between Christian and Yoruba beliefs. Pierre Verger saw them carry the madonna from the altar of the big cathedral to the beach, in order to worship Yemanja, the Yoruba goddess of the sea. We must hope that some day the religions can live equally peacefully together in Nigeria and that the world will come to recognise Yoruba religion as one of the great religions of the world.

It is still possible for a Nigerian school-child to learn more about the mythology of the ancient Hebrews and Greeks, than about the mythology of his own people. This book tries to make some of the beautiful tradition of Yoruba mythology available to Nigerian schools, and not only to those schools where the majority of the students are from Yorubaland. The myths here are not presented as an introduction to Yoruba religion, but as a piece of literature.

Yoruba religion is complex and difficult and, to gain a deep understanding of it, it is necessary above all to study the religious poetry: the *oriki* and the *odu* Ifa. As in other cultures, the myths do not always have a deep religious content. Sometimes gods merely appear as the *dramatis personae* in the literary invention of a story-teller. The Greek gods in the epics of Homer are a good example of this.

Look at this well-known story about the goddess Oshun, the divinity of the river of the same name:



Oshun and Oba were both wives of Shango. Oshun was the favourite wife because she cooked better soup than Oba. Shango was particularly fond of her mushroom soup. Oba always wanted to know the secret of Oshun's soup, and one day Oshun tied a scarf round her head and viciously told Oba that she had cut off her ear to put in the soup. Oba looked at the large mushroom floating in the soup and believed it was an ear. The day when it was her turn to cook, she cut off her ear and cooked it. Shango tasted the soup, spat and beat her mercilessly.

This is a typical Yoruba trickster tale, of the type we associate with the character of tortoise,[2] rather than a Yoruba *orisha*. For some reason or other the story-teller has chosen Oshun as the cruel trickster heroine; but the tale has nothing to do with the personality of the goddess that is revealed in religious poetry, in her *oriki*:

Brass and parrot feathers
on a velvet skin.
White cowrie shells
on black buttocks.
Her eyes sparkle in the forest,
like the sun on the river.
She is the wisdom of the forest
she is the wisdom of the river.
Where the doctor failed
she cures with fresh water.
Where medicine is impotent
she cures with cool water.
She cures the child
and does not charge the father.
She feeds the barren woman with honey
and her dry body swells up
like a juicy palm fruit.
Oh how sweet is the touch
of a child's hand.

Myths about Yoruba *orisha* can serve different functions and can therefore be divided into the following four categories:

(1) Myths of a basically religious nature, from which we actually learn much about the Yoruba world view. Myths like 'Orishanla' (no. 4) and the superbly poetic 'The Sun' (no. 1) fall into this group.

(2) Folk-tales in which the protagonists happen to bear the names of the gods. The story about Oshun and Oba quoted above is of this type.

(3) Myths about the *orisha* that have an historical, rather than a religious function. 'Oranmiyan and the foundation of Old Oyo' (no. 12) is a fine example of this type.

(4) Finally there are the numerous inventions of the Ifa oracle, whose major function is to provide a precedent, with the help of which the priest can advise his client on the right course of action to take. Sometimes existing religious myths can serve this purpose, but on many occasions the stories of the Ifa oracle are tales with divine protagonists, specially created for the purpose of assisting the process of divination. 'Obatala and Ojiya' (no. 10) is an example of this category.

Obviously the categories will overlap. All have in common considerable merit as literature. The religious myths are often told in sparse language and no attempt has been made to decorate them here. It is often the stark simplicity of the telling that gives them their sense of archaic authority. The less serious myths, the more folkloristic themes, are often more playful and elaborate in their language.

While this collection is intended to be enjoyed mainly as literature it is hoped that it will also rouse the reader's curiosity about the mysteries and wisdom of Yoruba religion.

Ulli Beier



# 1 The Sun

Agbeji Agbenahara Ogbodoso says:

'The bush fowl wakes up; he is disappointed to find that the beans have grown out of his reach.'

He pronounced the oracle for the owner of the forest.

He asked him to sacrifice, because of the iroko tree in his backyard, lest it fall on his house and kill him.

The owner of the forest refused. The iroko tree fell, but did not touch the ground.

The owner of the forest went to the wood carvers. When they started to cut the tree, Obatala appeared and turned the tree into *oje*, the sacred white metal.

Obatala called his slave, You-don't-hear-what-I-say, and told him to give the *oje* to the blacksmith of heaven. He said he wanted the metal to be fashioned into a decorated pot. The remainder he wanted to be forged into a boat.

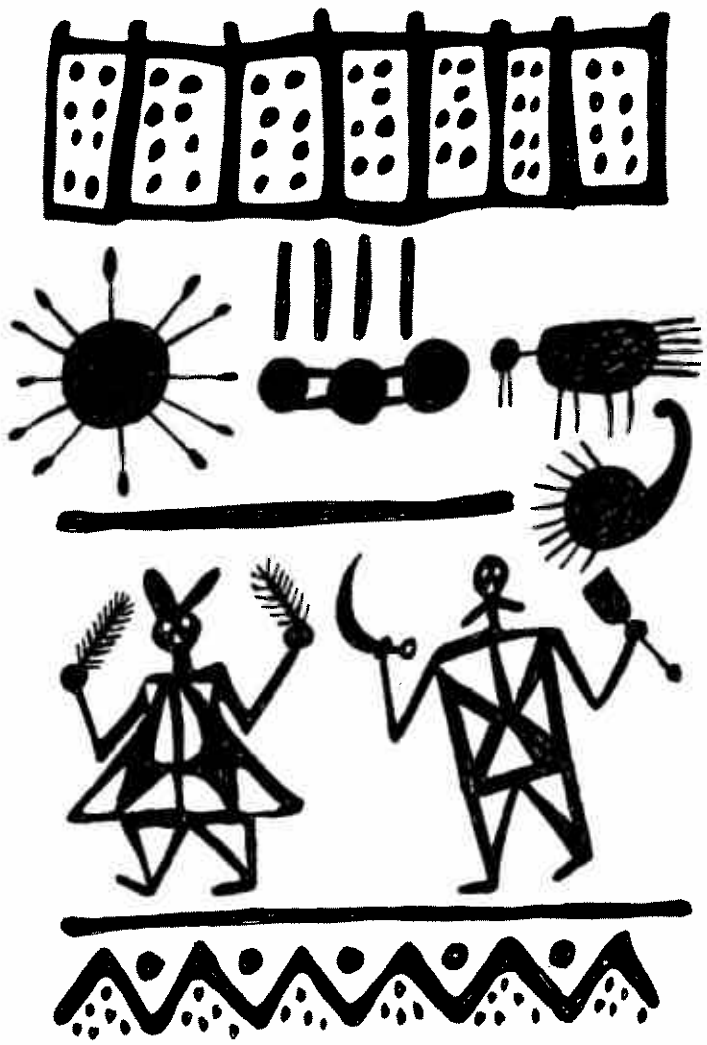
When You-don't-hear-what-I-say brought the objects back from heaven, Obatala placed something inside the pot. Then he covered the pot with a dress of brass. Then he asked his slave to place the pot in the ship.

Then he ordered him to travel from heaven to earth in one day, and to return from earth to heaven on the same day.

You-don't-hear-what-I-say became the driver of the Sun. He is the one who drives the Sun to the earth and back to heaven.

The home town of the Sun is Iwonran.

Obatala gave the Sun the order to beat down on people from heaven.





# 2 The Moon

The Moon is in heaven, and we on earth see the thin part of his body. He shows his fat side to the heavens above.

He is the one who gives us light.

Elaparo (Rainbow) pronounces the oracle for Moon, the son of Ajalorun (Spirit of Heaven).

Ajalorun is the one who begot the Moon. Elaparo told the Moon to sacrifice, so that he might have peace of mind, either in heaven or on earth. He refused to do the sacrifice.

Olodumare (God) sent a message to him. He said he wanted to send him somewhere.

Olodumare said to him: 'I am your maker. And after I created you, I delivered you to Ajalorun, to beget you.'

The Moon was in a hurry to hear what kind of errand Olodumare wanted to send him on. He asked: 'What is it that you want me to do?'

Then Olodumare replied: 'I want you to live fifteen days on the earth and fifteen days in heaven.'

Olodumare said that he would use fifteen days to create men and trees.

Then Olodumare prayed for the Moon. And he gave him this order: That from that day on, he should not have peace of mind.

Ifa laughed at the Moon: 'You did not sacrifice, therefore you will not rest.

Fifteen days in the world.

Fifteen days in heaven.'

# 3 Choosing a fate

Mokewure, the priest of goats, and Mojewara, the priest of sheep, cast the Ifa oracle for three children:

Orisanku the son of Ogun
Oritemere the son of Ija
and for Afuwape the son of Orunmila.

It happened that these three children wanted to come into the world, and they must chose their own fate. None of them knew how to go about this and what to choose and what to avoid. But Afuwape's father, Orunmila, consulted the oracle. The priest told him that his son would be successful in the world. But before his son left heaven, Orunmila must make sacrifice for him.

Orunmila followed the instruction for sacrifice and he gave his son a thousand cowries, as advised by the *babalawo*. He told him that he must spend this money in the house of Ajalamo, 'the one who moulds new children'.

When Orisanku and Oritemere had been waiting for Afuwape for some time and did not see him they left for Ajalamo's house. When they arrived, they could not see Ajalamo. They saw many beautiful 'heads' (*ori*), which they thought would be good for them, and they picked the ones they liked. Then they left for the world.

Later Afuwape arrived. He saw an old woman sitting on the floor, who seemed to be waiting for something. Afuwape asked her what was the matter? She replied that Ajalamo had bought some maize beer from her, but he had not paid her. Afuwape asked how much he owed her. She said 'One thousand cowries'. Then Afuwape gave her the money.

The old woman asked him what he had come to do. He said he had come to pick his own 'head' (*ori*). She told him that two other children had been there before him





and that they had chosen the heads they liked. Then she left, thanking him for the money.

Then Ajalamo came down from the rafters where he had been hiding. He thanked Afuwape for what he had done. Then he led him to the garden, where he kept all the heads. He showed him the beautiful heads that everyone liked to pick, but which might not let a man survive. He told him that some who pick beautiful heads do not succeed in the world and others will be surrounded by enemies. He warned him not to touch all those beautiful heads.

Then Ajalamo showed him the right head to pick, and he told him that human beings bring trouble upon themselves, because they do not know what a good head is. Then he prayed for Afuwape and sent him to the world with his blessing.

Then Afuwape left for the world to become a successful and wealthy man. Orisanku the son of Ogun and Oritemere the son of Ija were surprised. They said, 'Was it not the same place in which we picked our own heads?' That is why they sing:

I don't know where my friend
picked his head
I would go and pick my own.
It was the same place where we picked our own head
but fate is different
If I knew where Afuwape chose his head
I would go and choose my own again.

# 4 Orishanla

In the beginning there was Orisha. Orisha lived alone in a little hut which was at the foot of a huge rock. He had a faithful slave, who cooked his food and looked after him in every way.

Orisha loved this slave, but the slave secretly hated Orisha and decided to destroy him.

One day the slave waylaid Orisha. He waited for him at the top of the rock, and when he saw Orisha return home from his farm, he rolled a huge boulder onto the hut. Orisha was crushed into hundreds of pieces and they were scattered throughout the world.

Then Orunmila arrived and he wondered whether he



could not save Orisha. He wandered all over the world and gathered the pieces together. He found many – but hard as he tried, he could not gather all.

Orunmila put all the pieces he had collected into a large calabash which he called Orisha Nla, or Orishanla, and deposited them in a shrine in Ife.

But hundreds of fragments are still scattered throughout the world today. And this is why Orishanla (i.e. the big *orisha*) is the most important and senior of them all.

# 5 The creation of land

The one who comes from far away pronounces the oracle for Oduduwa. When all the *orisha* came into the world, Oduduwa went to Orunmila, to know what Ifa would predict in heaven.

Orunmila told him to find a hen with five toes.

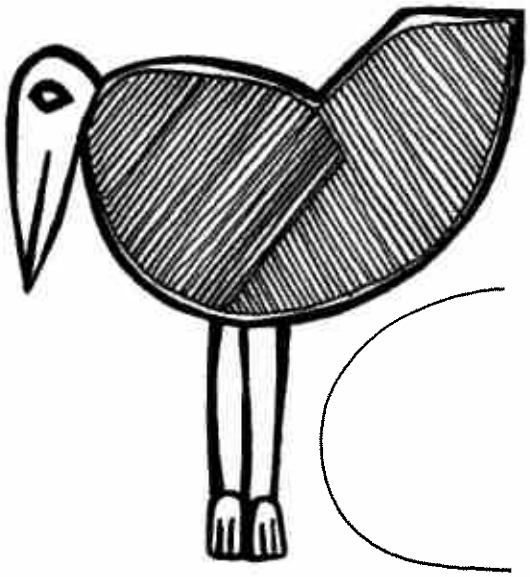
He told him to get five chameleons and five hundred chains.

Oduduwa prepared them all, and Orunmila made sacrifice for Oduduwa. He sprinkled the wood powder on the sacrifice. He told him to go with it to the world.

Oduduwa left Orunmila and went to Olodumare. Olodumare gave Oduduwa some sand, wrapped in cloth.

When the *orisha* got to the world, they met only water. There was no place to step. All the other *orisha* returned to heaven, except only Oduduwa.

Oduduwa tied the chains of Orunmila in heaven. He climbed down the chains. Then he put the sand on the water. The sand spread and stayed. Then he placed the chameleons on the sand, to see whether it would hold. The chameleons walked carefully, testing the ground.



And the ground was solid. That is why chameleons still walk carefully even today.

Then Oduduwa placed the hen on the sand. Oduduwa was surprised. Oduduwa tested the ground with one foot. When he saw that it was firm, he left the chains and came down. Then he untied the chains in heaven; and he put it down at Idio at Ile Ife. That place is still known as the house of Oduduwa today.

Next Aje, wealth, descended from heaven and told Oduduwa that she wanted to live with him on the earth. And she gave Oduduwa plenty of money.

Then Ogun came and worshipped Oduduwa.

Then Obatala came and worshipped Oduduwa.

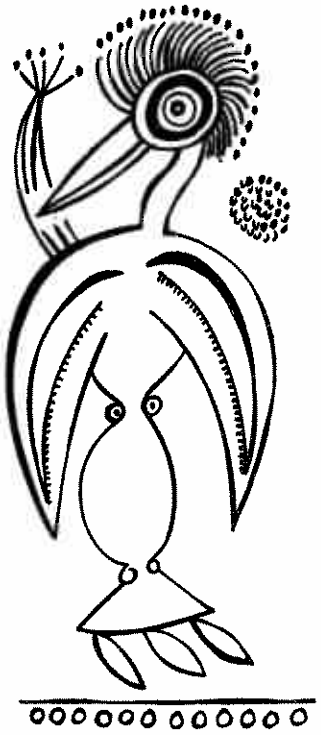
Then one by one, all the *orisha* appeared on earth.

It is said that Orishanla is the eldest brother of Oduduwa. But because of Oduduwa's bravery, he became the leader.



# 6 Obatala and Oduduwa

Obatala and Oduduwa were sent by Olodumare to the world, in order to create the land. Together they carried the bag of the world. On their way they rested and they drank some palm wine. Obatala liked the wine so much that he became drunk, and fell asleep. Oduduwa picked up the bag of the world and continued on his own. When he had completed his descent, he found that all was water.



He opened his bag, and he found some black earth inside it. He piled a little mound of earth on to the water. He took the cock with five toes which Olodumare had given him and placed it on the earth. The cock began to scratch and the earth spread far and wide.

When Oduduwa had created the earth, the sixteen major *orisha* descended from heaven and they lived with him in Ile Ife.

# 7 Oranmiyan

In the beginning there was no earth. There was sky above and water below. No being lived in the sky or the water.

Olodumare created at first seven crowned princes. To feed them he then created seven calabashes full of maize gruel. And he made seven bags which contained cowries, beads and cloth; and he made a chicken and twenty bars of iron. He also created a substance that was wrapped up in a black piece of cloth, and whose real nature one could not see. Finally he created a very long chain. He attached the princes, the food and the treasures to the chain. Then he let it down towards the surface of the water.

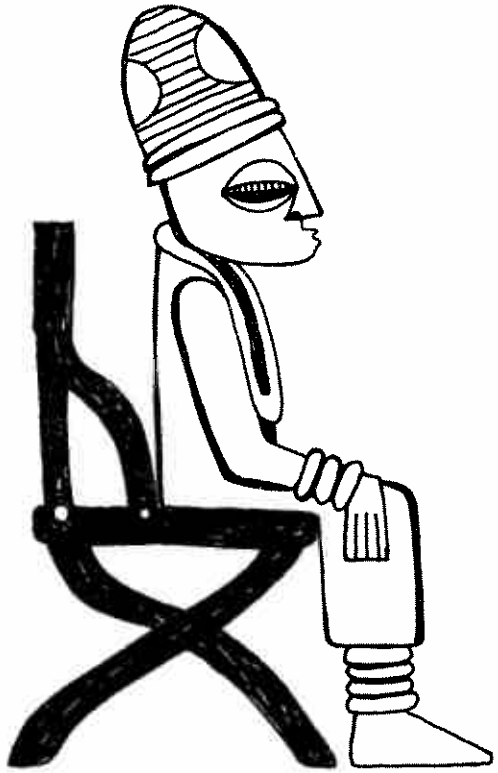
From the sky, Olodumare threw down a palm nut. Immediately a giant palm tree rose from the water spreading out huge branches. The princes took refuge on the tree and settled down with their treasures.

The names of these princes were: Olowu, Onisabe, Orangun, Oni, Ajero, Alaketu, who became the Kings of Egba, Sabe, Ila, Ife, Ijero, and Ketu; and the youngest was Oranmiyan who became King of Oyo and of all the Yoruba.



As they were all crowned princes, they all wanted to command and so they decided to separate. Before each was to follow his own road, they were to divide the treasures amongst themselves.

The six older princes took the cowries, the beads, the cloths, the food, and anything they thought precious. They left to their youngest brother nothing but the strange parcel of black cloth and the twenty pieces of iron. The six princes then disappeared in the branches of the palm tree.



When he was left alone, Oranmiyan was curious to see what was in the black parcel. When he opened it, he found a substance he had never seen before. He shook out the cloth and the black stuff fell onto the water. It did not sink, but formed a mound on top of the water. The chicken flew down to perch on it. It began to scratch and the black matter was spread over the water far and wide. And this is how the earth was formed.

Oranmiyan was happy. He wrapped the twenty pieces of iron in the bag and took possession of his new kingdom. When the six older princes saw this, they descended from the palm tree and they wanted to rob him of the land, as they had already robbed him of the cowries, the beads and the clothes. But Oranmiyan had weapons: the twenty pieces of iron had transformed themselves into spears and arrows and matchets. With his right hand he seized a long sword that was sharper than the finest Ilorin razor and he attacked the princes.

He said, 'This earth belongs to me alone. Up there, when you robbed me, you left me nothing but this earth and this iron. Now this earth has grown and this iron has grown too. I will kill you all.'

The six princes begged for mercy. They prostrated themselves before Oranmiyan. Oranmiyan pardoned them and gave them each a piece of land. He made only one condition: that the princes and their descendants should always be under him and under his descendants; and every year they would have to come to his capital and pay homage and pay tribute to him.

And this is how Oranmiyan became the King of all the Yorubas and in fact of all the world.



# 8 How Obatala lost the Calabash of good character

Give me! I will not give you. The tether does not enter the ground easily. He pronounces the oracle for Obatala, on the day he and Oduduwa entered the world. On that day they went to Olodumare, to obtain the calabash of good character. Olodumare gave it to them.

On their way to the world, Obatala was thirsty. They met a woman carrying palm wine. He drank until he could not control his senses.

Oduduwa, as a man of good sense, took the calabash of good character back to Olodumare. When he got there, Olodumare told him: I give you this calabash to use.

When Obatala's eyes opened, he returned to Olodumare in annoyance. He said to Olodumare, 'Why has the calabash of Olodumare disappeared?'

Olodumare said, 'Is that all?'

Olodumare then taught him how to create human beings and animals; which is greater than anything else.

Then Obatala said, that in his lifetime he would never drink more palm wine. Since then everybody greets Obatala:

One who creates the son and the mother
One who creates the nose and the eyes.

# 9 Obatala the creator

Obatala is the creator of man. Obatala made man out of clay. He moulded men and women and he asked Olodumare to put the breath of life into them.

One day Obatala got drunk on palm wine. On that day he made albinos, hunchbacks, blind people and lame people. Since that day, all deformed people are sacred to Obatala and albinos and hunchbacks live in his shrine.

But Obatala has abstained from palm wine ever since and his devotees are also forbidden to drink palm wine.

# 10 Obatala and Ojiya

Obatala, Alabalase, the holder of supreme power. The artist who has power to give a person money, who has power to open a blind man's eyes.

Small-river and Little-mud were the names of the *babalawos* who cast the oracle for Ojiya ego, the blind fisherman.

I know who stole my fish
lenle lenle nlere o lenlelenle
he wears a white gown
lenle lenle nlere o lenlelenle
he wears white metal on his hand
lenle lenle nlere o lenlelenle
I know who stole my fish.

It happened that Ojiya ego, the fisherman, came to consult the Ifa. He told him that he would see the thief who stole his fish. Every day Ojiya found that some of his fish were missing, but he could not catch the thief, because he was blind. He told him what to sacrifice. When he had sacrificed, the *babalawo* taught him the song he should sing whenever he went to pick up his fish at the river.

So next time Ojiya went to the river, he sang:

I know who stole my fish
lenle lenle nlere o lenlelenle
he wears a white gown
lenle lenle nlere o lenlelenle
he wears white metal on his hand
lenle lenle nlere o lenlelenle
I know who stole my fish.

Obatala had used the fish to make the charm that would give him supreme power; the power that made his words come to pass.

When Obatala heard the song, he was surprised that the blind man could give such an exact descripton of him; that he knew the colour of his gown and the colour of the bracelet on his wrist. He begged Ojiya ego not to tell anybody in the town that he was the thief.

Ojiya then begged Obatala to open his eyes for him. Obatala did so, and since then all Obatala devotees are forbidden to eat fish.

# 11 Obatala and the witches

Obatala was an artist who moulded men and women out of clay. Because of his work, he needed water every day to mix the clay. And every morning, before anybody else got up, he would go down to the river to draw water.

But there came a big drought and all the rivers, large and small, dried up. Everybody looked for water every-

where, but there was none. Then the witches dug their own well in the forest where all the members of their society could go and fetch water.

Obatala discovered the witches' well. He drew as much water as he liked. But he had not made sacrifice as 'Little-water' and 'Ancient-water' the *babalawos* had advised him to do. And the next day the witches began to notice that someone had tampered with their well. They decided to catch the thief. They lay in wait for him and on the fifth day they caught Obatala. He begged them, but they refused to spare him.

Obatala ran away and sought refuge in Egungun's house and asked Egungun to protect him from the witches. Egungun assured him that he would beg the witches to spare him.

The witches were already outside Egungun's house. They asked him to drag out the stranger. Egungun begged them with all his power, but the witches refused. They said that if he would not bring out Obatala they would destroy all his power. Then Egungun released Obatala to them.

But Obatala ran away again to the house of Shango. He asked Shango to protect him from the witches. Shango told him to go into his house and promised to appease the witches.

When the witches arrived at Shango's house they asked him to drag out the stranger. He begged them with all his power, but they refused. They said that if he did not give up Obatala then they would destroy his staff (*ose*) and his thunderbolt (*edun ara*). Then Shango released Obatala to them, but Obatala ran as fast as he could to Orunmila's house.

Awoyeroye, the priest in the house of Orunmila cast the oracle for Orunmila. The *babalawo* told Orunmila that a stranger was coming and that Orunmila should



prepare a sacrifice for him. He should offer *ekuru* (bean cakes) glue and four hundred cowries. After the sacrifice the *babalawo* told Orunmila to prepare a tray with *ekuru* and to put glue all round the edges.

As soon as Orunmila had finished all these preparations, Obatala came running into his house. He begged him to protect him from the witches. Orunmila asked him to sit down.

Immediately after that the witches arrived and they asked Orunmila to drag out the stranger from his house. Orunmila said that however the case might be, they should eat. They said they hadn't come for food, they had come for the stranger. Meanwhile Orunmila started to chant the *odu* that Awoyeroye had taught him. Then the witches agreed to eat. They all sat around the tray and ate *ekuru*. As they were eating, the glue which Orunmila had put on the rim of the tray held them down by their feathers. When they finished eating, they discovered that they were unable to move. They tried all they could. In the end they begged Orunmila to release them. Orunmila asked them whether they would forgive Obatala. They said that if Orunmila could release them, they would not touch Obatala or his children.

Obatala did not know how to thank Orunmila. He gave Orunmila his iron bell (*ajila*) and told him that whenever he went out at night he should ring the bell. That is why even today all Ifa priests ring the iron bell when they go out at night. The *ajila* clears all evil from the road. And Orunmila sang:

It belonged to *Orisha*
It belonged to *Orisha*
the iron you see in my hand
it belonged to *Orisha*.

# 12 Oranmiyan and the foundation of Old Oyo

When Oduduwa died, Oranmiyan became the King of Ife. One day the people of Ife were going to sacrifice a slave woman to Obatala, the creator god. But when it was discovered that the woman was pregnant, she was spared and her child was dedicated to Obatala. The young boy became a priest of Obatala and Oranmiyan was very fond of him. As the boy grew older, the King gave him more and more responsibilities and finally he put him in charge of all the shrines in Ife.

Now Oranmiyan wanted to make war against the Nupe people and he gathered all his chiefs and his entire army and marched towards the Niger. He left the priest behind to look after the town and to serve the shrines.

When Oranmiyan reached the river Niger, the Nupe army was waiting on the other side. They shot their arrows across the river, and however hard he tried, Oranmiyan could not bring his army across. When he finally had to admit failure, Oranmiyan felt ashamed to return home. He consulted with his chiefs, who advised him to look for land and to find a new town. Oranmiyan went to his friend the King of Ibariba (Borgu) and asked him where he should build his new town. The King of Ibariba tied some medicine round the neck of a boa constrictor and told Oranmiyan to follow the snake. Wherever it entered the ground, there he should build his palace.

This is how Oranmiyan founded Oyo. But when he wanted to be installed as Alafin of Oyo, he had to send back to Ife and ask the priest to let him use certain ritual objects that were required for the installation.

The son of the sacrificial victim (Owuoni) whom Oranmiyan had left behind, became the ruler of Ife,



and his title was shortened to Oni. Until this very day no Alafin can be installed, unless the Oni of Ife sends the ritual objects to Oyo.

# 13 Oranmiyan establishes dynasties in Benin and Oyo

Oduduwa the King of Ife was an albino. But his son Ogun was very, very black. One day the King sent Ogun to fight the war of Ogotun. Ogun routed the enemy and took many prisoners. He delivered all the prisoners to Oduduwa but he kept behind one very beautiful girl whose name was Lakange. Ogun married Lakange, but when Oduduwa heard of this, he sent his servants to seize her, and even though he knew that she had already had intercourse with Ogun, he married her himself.

When the child was born, its right side was white, but its left side was black. When Ogun saw the child, he cried: *Oranmiyan* which means 'my word has triumphed'. But others said: *Oroloniyan* which means 'it is a spirit'.

When Oranmiyan grew up, he left Ife to become the King of Benin. When Oduduwa died in Ife, his eldest son Obalufon seized the throne, and as he inherited all Oduduwa's wives, he also married Oranmiyan's mother. When Oranmiyan heard this, he became furious. He left his son Eweka behind to become the King of Benin and he rushed back to Ife. He sent messengers ahead to Obalufon, threatening to kill him. Obalufon fled to Iddo Oshun and later to Ifon. Oranmiyan took back his mother and installed himself as King of Ife.

When the Oloyo was in difficulties with his neighbours, Oranmiyan set out to help him. After the enemies of Oloyo had been defeated, Oranmiyan built a huge palace in Oyo and lived there for many years. When he grew old, he decided to return to Ife. He left his son Shango behind to rule Oyo.

Oranmiyan's tomb can be seen in Ife today.

# 14 Shango

Shango was a warrior king who led his armies in all directions and exacted tribute from all the neighbours of the Oyo kingdom. But his people became tired of fighting and they pleaded with him to cease the endless raids. They argued that too many of their sons were dying and that they did not have enough hands left to plant the yams in the fields.

Shango was willing to listen to his chiefs and his people, but his army leaders were impatient. They had grown rich and powerful through the booty they had collected and they were not willing to stop their annual expeditions.

There were two among them, Timi Agbale-Ilofa-Ina and Gbonka, who openly defied the King. Shango thought how he might be able to rid himself of the two army leaders and finally decided to pit one against the other. Timi had been sent to establish himself in Ede, where he was to protect the boundary of the kingdom. But Timi had grown more and more independent, had started to collect tribute and behaved more and more like a king in his own right.

Shango sent Gbonka to fight Timi in Ede, hoping they might kill each other. Timi met Gbonka with his famous





arrows, but Gbonka carried powerful charms and the arrows would not hit him.

Gbonka pronounced a powerful incantation:

Leaf plucked with right hand
Right hand has incantation
Leaf plucked with left hand
Left hand has character
By force by force
The rafter sleeps in the ceiling
It does not stir
Sleep!

Immediately Timi fell asleep. Gbonka took him prisoner and carried him to Oyo. The King was alarmed, and he thought of a way to protect himself from Gbonka. He ordered the two warrior chiefs to repeat the fight at Akesan market in Oyo. But in front of the king and all his people

Gbonka repeated the feat of putting Timi to sleep. And this time he cut off Timi's head at once.

Now full of his victory and conscious of his immense magical power, Gbonka defied the King. He cried: 'Kabiyesi Alaiyeluwa, I see now that you wanted to see me killed. But what charm have you got to rival my own? People fear you, because fire comes out of your mouth. But I will prove to you that your fire cannot harm me!'

Immediately he ordered a big fire to be lit on the market. 'Pour shea butter and oil into the fire, tie my arms and throw me inside it', cried Gbonka. 'The fire will not be able to touch me.'

When Gbonka was thrown on the pyre it was found that fire could not harm him. Everyone was terrified, and Gbonka cried again:

'All the fire of this town cannot touch me. Abdicate your throne or I will drive you out of this town.'

Fearful of Gbonka, all Shango's followers deserted him. Only his senior wife, Oya, remained loyal to him. Shango left the town with Oya and decided to seek his mother's home in Tapa (Nupe land). But the disappointment with his people was too great. He hung himself from a tree in the forest and then ascended to the sky on a chain.

Oya gathered his friends who proceeded through the town singing 'Oba Koso', meaning: 'The King did not hang himself'. They soon established their supremacy again in the town and Shango defended his followers with lightning and thunder.



# 15 Shango and his brothers

Shango was the youngest son of Oranmiyan and Yamase. His older brothers disliked him, because they did not think he was courageous in war.

But Oranmiyan liked his youngest son better than the rest, and when he was about to die, he went to the forest and deposited all his wealth in the branch of a hollow tree. He then instructed Shango, that immediately after his father's death he should go and hang himself from the branch in the forest. If at any stage he faced serious trouble, he should consult a magician called Onikoso.

As soon as Oranmiyan had died, Shango was persecuted by his brothers and he decided to follow his father's advice. He went to the forest and hanged himself from the branch. The hollow branch came crashing down and all of Oranmiyan's wealth came tumbling out. Shango fled into an uninhabited area and there he founded a new kingdom, where he lived in peace with all his neighbours and where he never waged any wars. There were continuous feasts and celebrations in the new town and people from all the neighbouring kingdoms came to settle there.

When his brothers heard of this, they sent messages to him, announcing that they would wage war on his city. Shango was not prepared for war and in his fright he went to consult Onikoso, the magician.

Onikoso prepared some medicine for Shango, that he had to place in his mouth. As Shango was unable to collect the medicine himself, he sent his wife Oya. Onikoso advised her not to open the calabash that contained the medicine. But Oya was curious, and on her way she opened the calabash and she ate a little bit of the medicine.

As soon as she opened her mouth, fire came out of it: she had become an *orisha*. When she reached the palace the enemies were already threatening the town. Shango hastily put some of the medicine in his mouth and fire burst out of him. The flames destroyed all his enemies.

Then his brothers ate of the medicine too and they too became *orisha*.

Whenever Shango spoke, flames shot out of his mouth. His people were terrified and they sent him parrots' eggs, to indicate that he had been rejected.

Sad and disappointed, Shango returned once more to the forest to hang himself. But as soon as he had placed the rope round his neck, he felt the ground give way under his feet and he disappeared into the ground.

His loyal servant who had accompanied him ran back to the city to report the incident. Everybody came to look at the mighty hole in the ground where Shango had disappeared, and they began to mourn his death. From below, Shango threw stones up into the air and all those who said he had died were killed.

# 16 Shango and the origin of tribal marks

King Shango wanted to move his capital from Oko to Oyo and was wondering how to go about the conquest of that town.

At that time Shango was anxious to find out the name of his mother, who had died when he was very young. He knew that she had been the daughter of Elenpe, the King of the Tapa. He sent two slaves to Tapa land, asking them to make sacrifices to his mother in the palace of



the King, and instructing them to listen carefully to the name that would be mentioned during the ritual.

One of the slaves was a Hausaman and he did not pay attention when the sacrifice was offered, and he returned to the King unable to tell him his mother's name. But the other slave had listened carefully and told Shango that his mother's name was Torosi.

Shango was furious with the Hausa slave and ordered 122 lashes to be inflicted on his body with a sharp razor. However, the scarifications that resulted appeared very beautiful to the King's wives, and so to please them Shango also had two long marks incised on his own arm, running from the shoulder to the thumb. This *eyo* mark is still reserved for the royal family.

Shango then sent the Hausa slave to the Oloyokoro to show him the beauty of the scarifications. He let him know, that he himself had received scarifications on his body and he suggested to the Oloyokoro that he too and all the chiefs should adopt the new custom.

Three days later, when the Oloyokoro and his chiefs were all prostrate, trying to recover from their operation, Shango attacked the town and conquered it easily.

# 17 Shango the usurper

One day Shango turned himself into a small child and he went to confront the King on his throne. He told him to leave the throne; that he, Shango, was the real King. The King called everybody and asked who was the father of this child that wanted to disturb him on his throne. No one knew him. The King ordered his servants to kill the child and throw him in the river. They took him away.

The servants returned from the river. But before their arrival, the child had already reappeared before the throne. The King was amazed. He said: 'How is this possible? He was killed by these men, and now he has returned. Perhaps if I have him killed by women, he will not return.'

But when the child heard him, he began to jump and play around and perform miracles; the women pursued him. He saw a big hole; he jumped over it; he jumped up a tall tree, he climbed down again; he ran to the forest and found a mighty tree; he jumped and appeared to hang from the tree with a rope; he was dead. The women returned to the palace and said: 'The little child has hanged himself.'

The King ordered a big sacrifice to be made. He bought a cow, a ram, a cock, a chicken, oil, snail, shea butter, tortoise, wild duck, guinea fowl and pigeon. He ordered his servants to dig a ditch underneath the tree where the child hanged himself. He asked them to throw all the sacrifices into the ditch and to cut the rope.

But as the corpse fell from the tree the child came back to life and everybody was amazed. The child said: 'I did not hang myself.' They went to see the King. He was surprised and went to the forest to see if it was really true.

When he returned to the palace the child was sitting on his throne. The King commanded him to surrender it. But the child refused. He said that his name was Oba Koso and that he had now become the sacred vehicle of the King.

Thus Oba Koso seized the throne.



# 18 Shango and Oya (I)

Shango had a powerful medicine that made him the most fearful King in the whole of Yoruba country. He carried part of this medicine in his mouth and caused fire to rush from his mouth whenever he spoke. He had given the rest of his medicine to his wife Oya to look after, but Oya, who was curious and jealous of Shango's immense power, stole the calabash containing Shango's charm and hid it. When Shango discovered this, he was furious. He tried to seize Oya, but she fled to the palace of Olokun, her brother. Shango hid behind the sun and followed her across the sky right up to the place where sky and water meet.



While Shango was battling with Olokun, Oya escaped to her sister Olosa, the lagoon. Shango pursued her again, and she fled to the house of a man called Huisi. She begged him to defend her, but he said that no human being could fight an *orisha*. Oya gave him to eat of Shango's charm and Huisi became *orisha*. He tore a tree out of the ground and attacked Shango. Shango picked up a canoe and they joined in battle. None could defeat the other. Exasperated, Shango hit the ground with his foot. The earth opened and Shango descended, pulling Huisi after him.

Oya fled to Lokoro (near Porto Novo) where she stayed and where an important shrine was built to her.

# 19 Shango and Oya (II)

Shango had a powerful medicine that made fire come out of his mouth. This frightened men and *orisha*. Shango had eaten part of this medicine and had given the rest to Oya to keep.

But Oya was fascinated by the medicine and instead of looking after it she ate the rest herself. Now she too was spitting fire and Shango was furious. He threatened her and she ran away to her brother, Olokun, the god of the sea.

Shango pursued her and he wrestled with Olokun. Oya escaped to her sister Olosa (the lagoon) and Shango followed her again. When Shango came to Olosa, she knelt before him and begged forgiveness. Shango liked beautiful women. His anger died and he slept with her. In the meantime Oya escaped to Lokoro (near Porto Novo).

Although Shango forgave Oya, she is still afraid of him.



Whenever Shango pursues one of his enemies, Oya runs for safety. That is why Oya's stormwind always precedes Shango's thunder.

# 20 Obatala and Shango (I)

Obatala decided one day to visit his friend Shango, whom he had not seen for many years. Before undertaking the journey, he went to consult the *babalawo* (oracle priest). The *babalawo* consulted the Ifa oracle and declared that the journey should not be undertaken, for it would result in Obatala's death. But Obatala longed to see his friend and he asked whether there were not any sacrifices he could bring to make the journey possible.

The *babalawo* finally agreed that Obatala could undertake the journey without risking death, but that in any case it would turn out a disastrous journey, in which much suffering would come Obatala's way. The only way to avoid death would be never to complain about anything, never to refuse a service, never to retaliate. He would have to carry three white garments, black soap and shea butter.

Obatala set out. He walked slowly, because he was old and he supported himself on his pewter staff.

After some time, he met Eshu, sitting by the road. He had at his side a large pot of palm oil. Eshu asked Obatala to help him lift the pot on his head. Obatala did so, and Eshu poured the red oil over Obatala's head.

But Obatala remembered the *babalawo's* advice. He did not complain, went to the river, had a bath, rubbed his body with shea butter and put on a clean gown. He



resumed his journey, but Eshu played the same trick on him twice more. First he poured charcoal over him, and then palm-nut oil. Again Obatala tolerated Eshu's mocking laughter without complaint, took his bath, donned his new robe and walked on.

Finally he arrived in Shango's kingdom. Shango's horse had run away on that day. Obatala recognised the royal horse-trappings and he caught the horse. Just as he was feeding it some ears of corn, Shango's servants appeared and they accused him of stealing the horse. They dragged Obatala into the city and threw him into prison.

Seven years of misfortune followed in Oyo. Drought was ruining the crops. Epidemics killed off the domestic animals. The women were barren. Shango finally consulted Ifa and was told that the cause of all this was that an old man had been wrongly imprisoned. He investigated and finally Obatala was brought before him. Shango



immediately recognised his friend. There was a joyful reconciliation. Shango ordered his servants to go and wash Obatala, observing absolute silence as a sign of respect. He dressed him in white robes and sent him home with rich gifts.

# 21 Obatala and Shango (II)

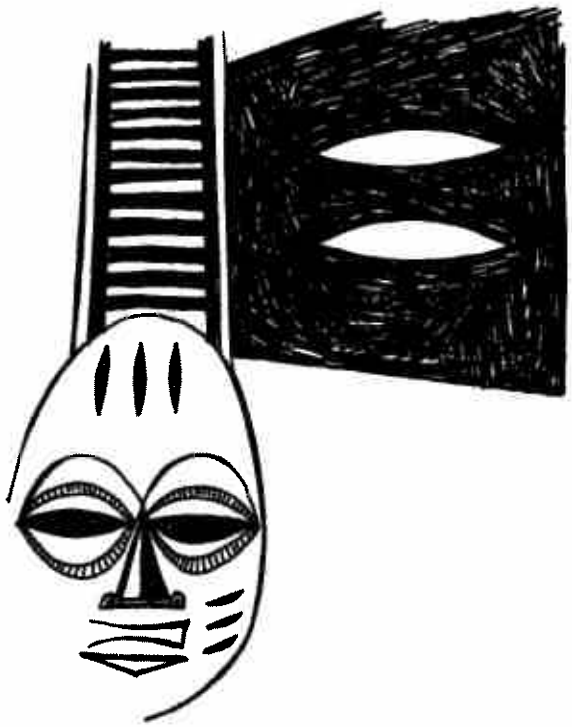
Obatala, the mother of Shango, had a lot of work. So much so, that in the end she consulted Ifa. Ifa advised her to go to the house of her son Shango, who was a King. But before setting out on her journey, she should bring a sacrifice of maize. Ifa also told her, that she would meet three misfortunes on her way, but that she must keep quiet and carry on with her journey.

At first Obatala met Eshu disguised as a charcoal-seller. Eshu asked Obatala to help her with her load. Obatala complied but Eshu put her coal-black hands all over Obatala's clean white garment. Obatala was about to protest – but she remembered Ifa's words and continued on her way.

After a while she encountered Eshu again, disguised as a fruit-seller this time. 'Help me to put down this basket' the fruit-seller said. Obatala did so, but Eshu upset the fruit over her head and soiled her dress again.

Obatala said nothing, cleaned her dress and set out on the journey again. She carried a bundle of maize cobs under her arm.

She soon came into a bush, where a drought had been reigning for many years. Shango's horse, which had disappeared for twelve years, was living in this bush. When it saw the corn under Obatala's arm, it followed



her hungrily, hoping to snatch it. Obatala chased the horse away, but it kept returning, and finally they arrived together at a place where they were seen by Shango's soldiers. They recognised the horse and seized the woman. They dragged her in front of Shango's throne. But Shango recognised his mother, was overjoyed, and jumped like a ram until he fell down in front of her feet. It was many years since he had seen her.

Shango built a house for his mother, and from that day onwards he mixed the red beads of his necklace with the white beads of Obatala.



# 22 Oya

Oya was an antelope who transformed herself into a woman. Every five days, when she came to the market in town, she took off her skin in the forest and hid it under a shrub.

One day Shango met her in the market, was struck by her beauty, and followed her into the forest. Then he watched, as she donned the skin and turned back into an antelope.

The following market day Shango hid himself in the forest, and when Oya had changed herself into a woman and gone to market he picked up the skin, took it home and hid it in the rafters. When he returned to the bush, he met Oya who was desperately trying to find her skin. Shango took her home to his other two wives, Oshun and Oba, who had not yet given him any children. Soon Oya became mother of twins. Bursting with jealousy, the other two wives worried Shango every day to tell them the secret of the new woman: where had she come from? What was her family? How had he found her?

At last, Shango gave in. He told one of the wives how he had found Oya, making her swear to keep the secret.

However, the woman began to sing a cunning and bantering song:

She eats she drinks
her skin hangs in the rafters.

Oya became very excited on hearing these words. As soon as she was alone, she looked in the rafters, found her skin, turned back into an antelope and ran off to the forest.

When Shango returned, he pursued her and tried to make her return to him. Challenged, she charged him with mighty horns. But Shango appeased her by placing

a big dish of *akara* (bean cakes) in front of her. Pleased by the offering of her favourite food, Oya made peace with Shango and gave him her two horns. When he was in need, he only had to beat these horns one against the other and she would come to his aid.

# 23 Ogun

Ogun was a restless warrior. He roamed about, fought many battles, and carried the booty back to his father Oduduwa in Ife.

Ogun conquered Ara and killed the Alara.

Ogun conquered Ire and killed the Onire.

Ogun installed his son as the Onire.

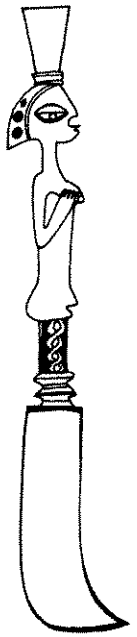
Then Ogun went off on other expeditions and he stayed away for twenty years. When he returned no one recognised him.

He happened to arrive in the midst of a ceremony in which the worshippers were forbidden to speak.

Ogun saw gourds standing on the ground and asked the people to give him some palm wine. The gourds were empty, but the people were unable to tell him so, because they were not allowed to speak. Ogun, who was extremely tired and thirsty, was furious when he saw the people so inhospitable. He drew his sword and slew many of them.

When his anger calmed down at last, his son the Onire appeared. Ogun realised now that he had been killing his own people. Overcome with sadness and remorse, he decided to leave the world. He told the people that every warrior had to come to rest in the end. But he promised that if ever they were in grave need he would return





to help them. He said that where he entered the ground, he would leave a chain; and whenever they were attacked by enemies they should pull it. Then, pointing his sword to the ground, he disappeared into the bowels of the earth.

Ogun kept his promise. And whenever the people of Ire were in danger, and they pulled the chain, he came to defend them. But there came a time when a young man who had never seen a war doubted the words of the elders, and he wondered whether Ogun would actually appear when he pulled the chain. So he pulled the chain casually and Ogun came rushing out. He stormed into the village and killed many people. When Ogun saw that he had killed his own people and that they had not listened to his words, he decided not to come again.

# 24 Ogun and the origin of circumcision

Olorun created Ogun and the woman Olure, and he asked them both to descend to the world. Olure did not want Ogun to accompany her, and so he remained in the sky.

Olure went on her way, but after some time she came to a huge tree that had fallen across the road. She could not cut it, or cross over it. So she returned to Olorun and asked him to send Ogun to cut the tree.

Ogun came to cut the tree and open the road. Olure was sitting down with her legs apart, and a chip of wood flew between them and entered her vagina. Ogun went back to Olorun and Olure went on to the earth. But the chip of wood made her suffer and she returned to Olorun once more, asking that Ogun should cut it out.

Before Ogun agreed to do so, he asked Olure whether she would marry him. She agreed; but if he had been more patient it would now be the women who ask the men for marriage.

Ogun removed the wood chip with his knife. But a scar remained, and that is the beginning of female circumcision.

Olure walked ahead and Ogun followed her. That is why to this day women don't respect men: they walk in front of their husbands. All men are Ogun, all women are Olure.

They went to Ado Ekiti. Ogun had intercourse with his wife. But as the sperm would not come out quickly enough, Ogun cut the tip of his penis. That is the origin of male circumcision.



# 25 Ogun confronts Oduduwa

When Oduduwa ruled in Ile Ife, he sent his son Ogun to make war all around, to subdue all the towns and kings in the area. Ogun destroyed many towns and brought home a lot of booty. He greatly enlarged his father's empire.

One day he went to Ire Ekiti, where the people had angered him. He destroyed everything and killed the King. He cut off the Onire's head and put it in a bag. He gathered all the prisoners together and led them to Oduduwa.

But Oduduwa's chiefs heard that Ogun was going to present him with the head of the dead Onire. They ran to their King and said: 'Ogun wants your death. His conquests have made him proud and he desires to usurp your throne. He is coming to present you with the Onire's head; and you know that no king must ever see the severed head of another king.'

Oduduwa quickly sent a delegation to meet Ogun outside the city gates. After much persuasion, Ogun handed the head to them. The danger was over and Ogun was brought before his father.

Oduduwa wanted to rid himself of his fierce son and he said: 'I give all these prisoners and all this booty to you. Return to Ire and be their King and rule over them.'

# 26 Ogun and the food-seller

There was a food-seller who was very poor. One day she consulted the Ifa oracle to find out how she could improve her lot. She was advised to sacrifice chicken, pigeons and as much as was in her power. She did everything she was told.

A few days later Ogun returned from a war. He had defeated the enemy and had carried away rich spoils. But his men were now tired and thirsty, and Ogun led them to the woman and asked her to feed them. She willingly served them all she had. When they had finished eating, Ogun found that he had no money to pay. However to satisfy the woman who had looked after his men so well, he left her a large part of his booty and so, unexpectedly, she found herself extremely rich.

# 27 Erinle and Ogun

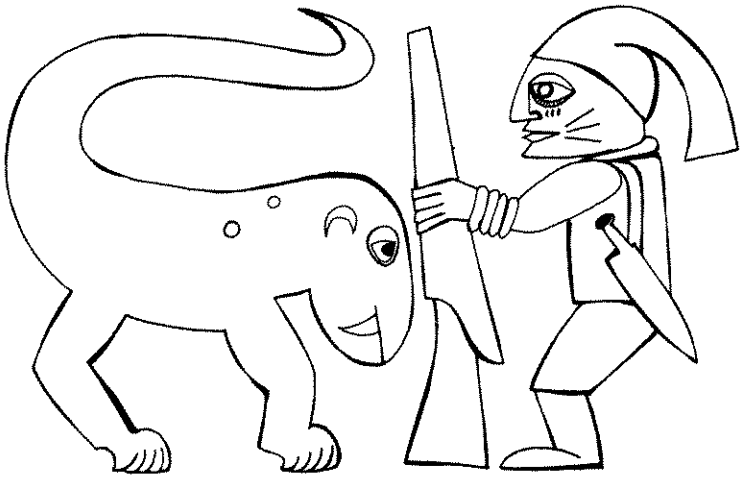
Yemoja Ogunle had three sons by her husband Ogun Alagbede: Eshu, Akoro and Igbo.

Igbo had matted hair like a ram. Eshu was troublesome and always lived around Elegba. Akoro worked on the farm and Igbo was a hunter.

Yemoja Ogunle abandoned Eshu, who always behaved badly, and made him stay outside the house.

One day she went to consult the oracle and she was told: 'One of your sons is a hunter. If he goes hunting during this moon, he will not return home, because Osanyin will charm him.'





Yemoja returned home and warned Igbo not to go out hunting. But he disobeyed her and went out with the other hunters. They met under a large iroko tree. From there they went off to hunt separately, and decided to meet again under the same tree before returning home.

In the bush Igbo met Osanyin, who liked him at sight and wanted him to stay with him. He prepared the necessary leaves and Igbo fell asleep and did not wake up while the hunt was on. When he woke up, he had been transformed into Ode (Erinle) and did not remember what went on in the world of the living.

When the hunt was over, the hunters met under the tree, but Igbo was missing. They blew their horns to call him, but in vain. He did not return.

When the hunters told his mother that his brother had not come back, Akoro became restless. He wanted to go and find his brother. He went into his father's workshop and forged seven objects: pickaxe, mattock, hatchet, scythe, lance, cutlass, and shovel. He put them on his shoulder and went out in search of his brother. He cut

a path through the thick bush and penetrated deeper and deeper into the forest until he met his brother, who was all dressed up in ceremonial feathers, ready to go hunting. He lifted him on his shoulders and carried him home.

But Yemoja refused to receive the disobedient son in her house. Then Akoro said: 'If you don't want Igbo, you don't want me either. I cannot live without him. I shall follow him and I shall never see you and my father again.' He returned to the bush with Erinle and he became Ogun.





Osanyin also felt he could not live without Erinle. He went to find him. Osanyin and Ogun quarrelled over Erinle. In the end the three *orisha* made a pact: they lived in the forest together and they shared the use of iron amongst them.

Yemoja Ogunle was desolate at having lost all her sons and she threw herself to the ground and she became a river.

Ogun Alagbede was the only one who died a natural death – that is why he does not 'mount the head' of *orisha* worshippers.

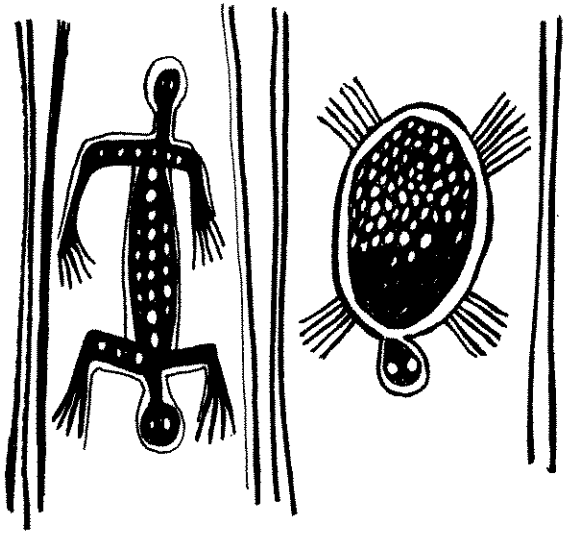
# 28 Oluorogbo

Oduduwa was a war-leader, who founded the holy city of Ile Ife. From there he sent out his sons to found the other Yoruba kingdoms. Among those who received crowns from him were: the Alaketu, the Onisabe, the Orangun, the Awujale, the Alara, the Ajero and Oranmiyan.

Even though his sons went in every direction to found other cities, Oduduwa was continuously being harrassed by the Igbo people who lived in the forest around him.

The Igbos dressed up in straw masks and raided the city. The Ifes, believing them to be spirits, fled in fear and allowed their city to be looted and their women to be seized.

Then one day Moremy, Oduduwa's favourite wife, decided that she would discover the means of defeating the enemy. She went to Esinmerin river and asked for help. The river goddess said that she would reveal the secret of the enemy, provided that Moremy agreed to



sacrifice her only son. Moremy agreed and she was told how the enemy could be overcome.

Following the river goddess's advice, Moremy allowed herself to be taken prisoner at the next raid of the Igbo people. Being a very beautiful woman, the King of the Igbos soon took her for himself.

Gaining the King's confidence, Moremy discovered that the raiders were ordinary men, dressed in straw masks. She escaped back to Ife and revealed everything to Oduduwa.

At the next raid the invaders were met with firebrands. They were utterly defeated and their King was taken prisoner. Oduduwa allocated a quarter to the Igbo people within the city walls and he gave their King an Ife chieftaincy title.

Moremy went to the river to fulfil her obligation. Oluorogbo, her only son had to be sacrificed to Esinmerin river.



However, as soon as the young boy was sacrificed he ascended to heaven on a chain and he became an *orisha*.

His shrine can still be seen in Ife today.

# 29 Sakpata

A hunter called Molusi came across an antelope in the bush. He tried to shoot it, but the antelope raised a front paw and immediately dark night descended in the middle of the day. When the light returned, the hunter saw Aroni, the one-legged forest spirit, who promised to give him a powerful charm.

Aroni explained to the hunter what ritual he would have to carry out and he gave him a leaf to plant near his house. He also gave him a whistle, which he could blow if he ever needed Aroni again.

Seven days later, many people fell sick with smallpox in the town and many died. The hunter returned to the forest and blew his whistle. He said to Aroni that the charm he had given him had killed many people. Aroni explained that it was not a charm; it was Sakpata. He said that to prevent people from dying he must build a shrine for Sakpata, that all the world must obey him, and he explained to him what ritual to perform for him. He gave him the leaves that were needed and explained how Sakpata would kill his worshippers and bring them back to life.

Finally Aroni gave him the medicine with which to cure the people who had fallen ill.

This happened at Vedji, near Dassa Zoume.

# 30 Shonponna

The-dog-is-looking-at-me
The-dog-is-selling-honey-at-the-market
Are the names of the *babalawos* who cast Ifa for Ogun
Who cast Ifa for Eshu, who cast Ifa for Orisha-Oko
Who cast Ifa for Shango, who cast Ifa for Orunmila
Who also cast Ifa for Shonponna the last born of them!

There was a man called Babaniyangi, who was the father of five children: Ogun, Eshu, Orisha Oko, Shango, Orunmila and Shonponna. When he was about to die he sent into the world for his five children, but before they reached heaven, he had already died. They performed all the funeral rites for seven days. Then they returned to the world.

On their way back they became tired and sat down under an iroko tree. They were thirsty and sent Shonponna, the youngest, to fetch water from the river. But before Shonponna returned from the river, they divided their father's property. One took his horse, another his clothes, another his money. They shared everything and they forgot their father's last-born.

When Shonponna returned he asked for his own share. They told him that they had forgotten him. So Shonponna became angry and he left the place in a rage. But Orunmila called him back and told him to return to their father's place in heaven. There he would see a bow, an arrow, a stick and a string. That was to be his share.

When Shonponna returned to heaven, he found everything as he was told. On his way back to the world he met Orunmila on the road. He asked Orunmila to consult the oracle for him. Orunmila sent him to one of his apprentices, called Awolaje.

Awolaje cast the oracle for Shonponna: he told him



that he could become more powerful than all his brothers, if he would make sacrifice. Shonponna followed the priest's instructions. After the sacrifice he returned to his father's grave and changed all the incantations. His father answered him and said that he would overcome all his brothers. He told him that his share of the heritage would not be useless. As Shonponna was returning to the world, he chanted his incantations and he shot his arrows to the four corners of the world.

The disease of smallpox began to spread through the world. This happened in Nupe land, where Shonponna was born. The people sent a message to Orunmila to find out what had caused the outbreak of the disease. Orunmila said it was he and his brothers who had made Shonponna angry, by not sharing their father's wealth with him. He advised them to sacrifice to Shonponna and asked him to forgive them.

Then the King and all his people worshipped Shonponna and the disease became powerless. And Shonponna became known as Obaluaiye: the King who hurts the world.

# 31 Yemanja

Yemanja was a woman of great beauty. But she had only one breast. Because of this, she did not want to marry, because she feared that her husband might ridicule her and expose her secret to the world.

One day she was walking home sadly from the market and she said to herself: 'How sad it is to be lonely; to return to a childless house; to have no husband to cook for.'

Ogun overheard what she said, because he was walking

along the same road. He felt a strong desire to marry her and he seized her and said: 'Do not be afraid. I know I look fierce and all the world fears me. But I will do you no harm. I will look after you and protect you; but there is one thing you must promise me: you must never make fun of my bloodshot eyes.'

Yemanja agreed to marry him. She confessed that she had only one breast and she said: 'You must promise me one thing, never touch my breast.'

For a long time they kept each other's promise. Yemanja bore many children to Ogun.

One day Ogun wanted to please Yemanja and he went into the kitchen to cook soup for her. But being unused to a woman's work, he dropped the pot, broke it and he spilled the food all over the floor. Yemanja, who had been resting, woke up at the noise. She rushed into the kitchen; and as she did not realise how the accident happened she cried angrily: 'What are you doing in my kitchen! You with your bloodshot eyes!'

Ogun could not control himself, when he heard this. He struck her and she fell to the ground. But he felt sorry for her and he knelt beside her and stroked her breast.

At this Yemanja began to tremble. She turned into water and slipped through his fingers.

Ogun was sad to lose his wife. But then he said to himself: 'Gentleness is not for me! And he left his house to go out and fight many more wars, as he used to do.'

# 32 Otin

The Oba Oke of Otan Aiyegbaju had a daughter who was born with four breasts. As the Oba loved the child,



he kept the secret from everybody but her mother. But when the daughter, whom he called Otin, grew up the Oba advised her: 'It is better for you not to marry. For however much your husband loves you, one day he will be annoyed with you and he will expose your secret to the world.'

Otin was sad, but she followed her father's advice. For several years she lived in Igbajo, a neighbouring town, as a trader. One day a hunter came to the market and was so struck by Otin's beauty, that he insisted on marrying her. Otin refused him for a long time, but in the end she agreed on one condition: That the hunter would never mention her four breasts to anybody. The hunter agreed, but only if Otin would promise never to put the *ewedu* leaf into his soup. Because his *orisha* had forbidden him to eat it.

Otin lived happily with her husband. She was his favourite wife, but this made the other wives jealous. One day they plotted together and when it was Otin's day to cook for the husband, they secretly put some *ewedu* into his soup, when Otin had gone out of the kitchen to piss.

When the hunter came home and sat down to eat, he immediately noticed the forbidden taste in the soup. Furiously he beat Otin and abused her: 'You with your four breasts, you daughter of a cow! How dare you break my taboo!' The news spread like fire through the town. Otin was abused wherever she went, and she had to flee the town. She ran back to Otan to her father's palace. The old chief Oba Oke comforted her, but she knew that the news of her unnatural breasts would soon reach the town.

In utter despair she ran into the forest and threw herself on the ground. She was turned into a river at once. Her father followed her, and when he saw that he had

lost his daughter he turned himself into a stone.

Oke the rock and Otin the river are worshipped to this day in Otan.

# 33 Orisha Oko

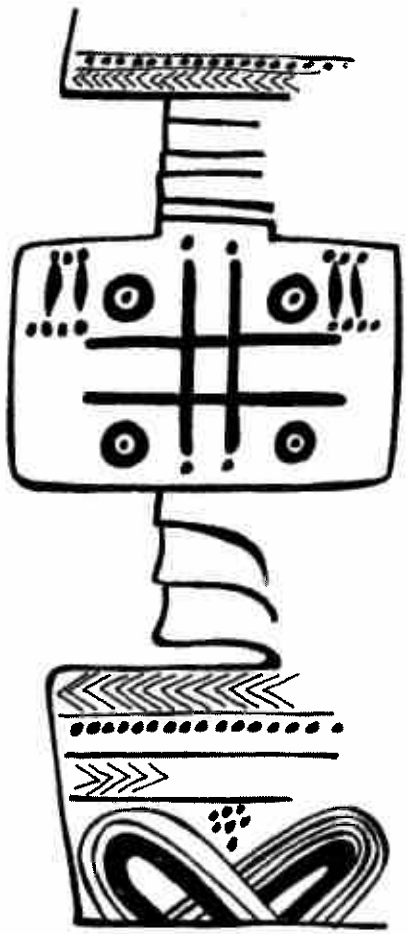
Orisha Oko was a farmer who lived in Irawo. He was known to the people as a man well versed in medicines and the lore of leaves and herbs.

Now one year, three large blackbirds appeared in Irawo and landed on the fields and ate all the farmers' crops. There was famine that year. The following year the birds appeared again and no arrow could harm them. Then people went to Orisha Oko and said: please help us to destroy these birds.

Orisha Oko prepared a powerful medicine that drove the birds away. The crops grew well, and when harvest time came, the people were so happy and so grateful to Orisha Oko, that they made him their King. But no sooner was Orisha Oko installed King of Irawo, then the people began to fear: 'Will he not use the medicine against us, that he used against the birds?' They grew more and more suspicious of him. And although he gave them no cause for complaint, their fear grew so much that one day they rose up in revolt and drove him out of the town.

The following year, however, at harvest time, the birds returned and ate the people's crops. Ruefully they went to the forest to Orisha Oko's hut and begged him to help them once more. They promised to reinstall him as King and never to rebel again. But this time Orisha Oko refused to help. So disappointed was he with the people's fickle-





ness and lack of loyalty that he decided to leave them forever. He said to them: 'I will leave you forever, but I shall leave my sword behind.'

'Any time you are in real danger, you may thrust the sword into the ground, and I will come and protect your crops. But do not use it lightly or in vain.'

With these words Orisa Oko disappeared into the ground. His sword, however, is still found in the shrines where he is worshipped.

# 34 Oro

Pakunde (close-the-door) pronounces the oracle for Asehin Bokin of Iseyin, 'Son-of-a-sieve, who drinks bad water from the very day he ascended his father's throne.'

Since he had become King, none of his wives had given birth. They consulted Ifa, and he told them that he should go and sacrifice to his father. The Asehin made his sacrifice, but the father rejected it.

Then his mother told him that his father, the one who begot him, was not a human being.

She said: 'One day when I went to the farm to fetch firewood, there was a certain animal who resembled a human being. He forced me to have intercourse with him. Then I used a trick. I split open a tree with my axe, and I asked the gorilla to put his penis inside. But when he put his penis into the cleft, I pulled out the axe. His penis was caught and he died.'

'This is why your father now refuses the sacrifice. The one you are sacrificing to is not the one who begot you.'

'Some people in this town will remember the *oro* (gorilla) who died in a tree. It is that same animal who begot you upon me.'

When the Asehin heard this, he went to the place in the forest. He found the bones of the animal and placed them in a coffin. Then he killed the ram.

When they carried the dead body into the town, they were singing:



Close the doors
Oro is coming
The son is taking his father.
All you landlords
Close the doors
The son is bringing
His father home.
Oro is coming.

They swung it through the air. Then the people in the town said: 'Truly this is a dead person speaking.'

They still call it *oro* today.

# 35 How Orunmila became an *Orisha* (I)

One day Orunmila went to meet the elephant through his anus. Orunmila ran after the elephant. The elephant also ran after him. Later Orunmila entered the elephant through his bottom. The elephant was in trouble.

Orunmila's disciples were all worried. They did not know the whereabouts of Bara Aladepetu. They traced him to the river Awinrinmogun. When they got there, they found an elephant.

They sent a message to the people who know how to cut elephants to pieces. They sent for Orinadegun, who is known as Ogun. They sent to Salageje, who is known as Oshosi. When they arrived they cut the elephant to pieces. But to everybody's surprise Orunmila had disappeared from the elephant. Instead they saw a small wooden tray and a calabash. When they opened the calabash, they found sixteen pairs of palm nuts. They gave sixteen nuts to the Alara. The Alara became King.

They gave sixteen nuts to the Ajero, the Ajero became King.

Orunmila has gone to heaven and will not return any more.

# 36 How Orunmila became an *Orisha* (II)

This is what Orunmila discussed with his disciples. Orunmila said: 'So you don't see that terrible thing coming along the road?'

They said: 'No.'

Orunmila said: 'Has anybody seen Lasope my brother?'

They said: 'We have met him.'

Orunmila said: 'How is he?'

They answered: 'He has six wives and they are all very well.'

Orunmila said: 'You met Lasope and he has six wives and they are all very well. And what about me?'

They replied: 'You are like an Iroko tree in Ansegba forest. A strong tree with leaves and roots, that is not disturbed by anything.'

Orunmila said: 'You compare me to a tree in the forest?'

They said: 'Orunmila, you are very clever. Please leave us now.'

Orunmila asked: 'Where should I go?'

They asked him to go to the house of *iki*, the palm tree.

Orunmila said: 'I have already been to the house of iki and iki made me welcome.'



They asked him to leave for the house of *imo* (palm leaf).

Orunmila said: 'I have already been in the house of imo and he is a good friend.'

They asked him to leave for Ootu Ife, where his friends were worshippers.

Orunmila said: 'I was in Ootu Ife, when you were all very small.'

They said: 'And when was that?'

Orunmila replied: 'When cudgel was called "Iyapo" and when whip was called "Kusonoro".'

They said: 'That is a very ordinary story.'

Orunmila said: 'I am looking at my right hand. You two hundred people fall down.' The two hundred people fell down and died.

He said: 'I look at my left hand. You two hundred people fall down!' The two hundred people fell down and died instantly.

The people who were left said: 'We shall worship you, Meretelu. We shall worship you, Mesiakaraba. We shall worship you, Onikehin ahagun esinrani.'

Orunmila asked: 'How will you worship me?'

They said: 'We shall worship you with our head, like the rat in the bush, we shall worship you with our head like the fish in the river.'

Orunmila asked Igigbegi to be their priest in the forest. He also asked Ootiipa to be their priest in the palm-tree forest. Then Orunmila said: 'I am looking at my right hand. You two hundred people wake up! I am looking at my left hand. You two hundred people wake up! The electric fish has arrived! Ifa you are the one who wakes up the dead of yesterday!'

Since that day Orunmila's followers have not questioned his word. They have followed him.

# 37 Orunmila and his wife

Orunmila had a wife called Iwa. Iwa lived with him for several years, but she had no children. She went to consult the oracle. The *babalawo* said: 'If you want a child you must go to Ijero and marry the Ajero of Ijero.'

Iwa went to Ijero and sat down outside the palace. When the King saw her, he called her in. He liked her so much, that he married her. Iwa had a child by the Ajero.

But Orunmila found out where she had gone and he followed her, to get her back. When Iwa heard about this, she ran away to Ara and married the Alara. Again she produced a child for a king. But once again Orunmila followed her to Ara.

When Iwa heard that he was following her, she ran away to Ila and married the Orangun of Ila. Iwa settled down with Orangun. Then Orunmila appeared again.

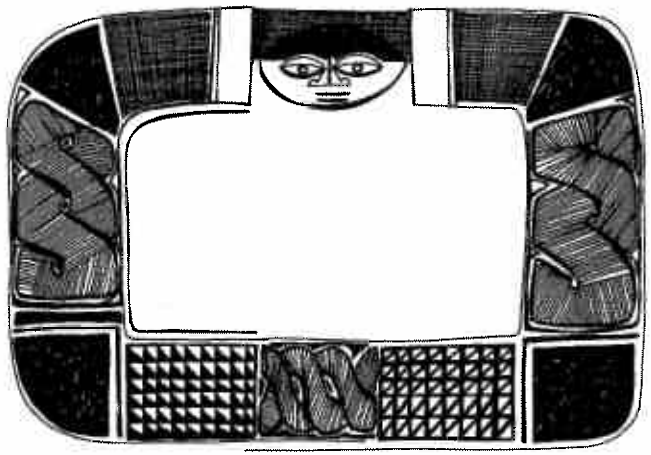
But Orunmila went to the Orangun and said: 'I have not come to take back my wife. But I cannot live far away from her. Just give me a small room in some corner of the palace and let me live there.'

The Orangun was happy to grant his request. Iwa had many children by the Orangun, but Orunmila stayed in the palace.

# 38 Osanyin

When Ifa came to the world, he wanted to have a slave to work his farm. They bought one for him in the market. Ifa sent him to cut the grass on his farm. But as the slave raised his arm to cut the grass, he noticed that he was





about to cut the grass that cures fever. He cried: 'I cannot cut this, it is too useful!' The second kind of grass he was about to cut was the grass that cures headache. He refused to destroy this too. The third leaf was the one that cures stomach-ache. Then the slave said: 'No, no, I can never destroy such important leaves.'

When Ifa heard about this, he asked his slave, who was none other than Osanyin, to tell him about the useful herbs. There were so many of these, that Ifa decided that Osanyin should always stay close to him so he could teach him the virtues and uses of plants, leaves and herbs.

# 39 Eshu (I)

There were two friends who always wore the same dress and who went everywhere together. They had sworn that they would remain friends to the end of their lives.

Ifa had advised them to sacrifice to Eshu, but they refused. So Eshu decided to disrupt their friendship.

One day they were working on the farm, a little distance from each other, when Eshu passed between them. He was wearing a cap that was red on one side and white on the other.

One friend asked the other: 'Who was that man who passed by in the red cap?'

The other replied: 'His cap was not red, it was white!'

'What, are you blind?' said the other, 'I saw distinctly that it was red!' So they argued for a while.

A little while later, Eshu returned from the other direction. The first friend saw him and said: 'I am sorry my friend: I now see that his cap was indeed white and not red. I don't know how I could make such a stupid mistake.'

But the other one grew furious: 'Are you trying to make a fool of me? Do you think I have no eyes in my head, not to see that his cap is red?' And they came to blows, wounding each other seriously.

When they recovered, they followed Ifa's advice and sacrificed to Eshu. From then on they remained close friends for the rest of their lives.

# 40 Eshu (II)

Eshu wanted to become King of Ijebu Ode. One day he appeared in the town, disguised as a wealthy traveller. He asked to spend the night in the King's palace. The King welcomed the stranger and fed him hospitably. Before going to sleep, Eshu gave the King a wooden box, which he said contained an irreplaceable treasure. He





asked the King to have the box safe-guarded during the night.

When everyone was asleep, Eshu set fire to the palace. As soon as the thatched roof was aflame, he cried: 'Fire, fire!' Before the King's servants could put out the fire a large section of the palace had burnt down. The mysterious box deposited by the stranger was consumed by the flames. Eshu called witnesses before the King to prove that he had deposited a huge fortune with the King, and demanded compensation. He became more and more aggressive and threatening, and as the King was unable to raise such a huge sum of money, the only way in which he could finally satisfy Eshu was to cede him the throne.

# 41 Eshu (III)

Eshu decided to destroy the palace of a King who never sacrificed to him.

He went to one of the King's wives, who had been neglected by her husband and said: 'If you can bring me some hair from your husband's beard, I shall make a charm for you, that will turn you into his favourite wife.'

Then he went to the King's eldest son, who was his co-regent, but who had to live in his own palace, lest he be tempted to seize power from his father. He said to him: 'The King is going out to war this night. He wants you to assemble all your warriors and meet him at the palace at night.'

Finally he went to the King and said: 'One of your wives is so jealous of her younger co-wives, that she has decided to kill you tonight. You had better watch out.'

The King pretended to be asleep during the night. He saw his wife approach with a knife. She merely wanted to cut a few hairs from his beard, but he thought she wanted to kill him. He jumped up and seized the knife. They argued violently with each other. The son had just arrived with his soldiers. He heard the screams and ran into his father's bedroom. He saw the knife in his hand and thought he wanted to kill his mother. The King saw the son with his warriors and thought he wanted to usurp the throne. There was total confusion and many people died in the massacre.



# Notes

## Introduction

(1) The kola nut is used for divination in Yoruba shrines. The nut splits into four segments. They are placed between the palms of the hands then, after the invocation to the god, they are thrown on the ground. If they fall with two faces down and two up, the answer to the worshipper's query is positive. If the relationship is one to three, the answer is negative and the worshipper must ask more questions, to find the cause of his difficulty.

(2) Tortoise, or *ijapa*, is the hero of innumerable Yoruba trickster tales. Tortoise tales are particularly popular with children. They have no religious significance but are comments on Yoruba life and manners and on the human character.

## 1 The Sun

The sun does not usually figure in Yoruba mythology. Obatala is generally known as the creator of man, and Oduduwa is known as the creator of the earth. However, Obatala-worshippers do not claim that Obatala made the sun.

This story is taken from the Ifa oracle. The story is told not so much to throw light on Yoruba cosmology, but as an example, a precedent, that proves the power of divine intervention.

The owner of the forest should have been punished for refusing to sacrifice; the iroko tree should have crushed his house and killed him. But Obatala intervenes. The tree falls, but is suspended in mid-air. The creator-god turns disaster into good fortune, converts destruction into

creation. The tree is turned into *oje* and the *oje* is wrought into the sun.

*Oje* is a white metal (its main component appears to be lead) which is sacred to Obatala. All Obatala priests wear wristlets of *oje*.

'You-don't-hear-what-I-say', the name of the 'driver of the sun' possibly suggests the inexorable regularity with which the sun follows its course. Unlike an *orisha*, the sun is not affected by prayer or sacrifice.

'To beat down on people'. The word *pa* could mean beat, kill or merely shine.

## 2 The Moon

This is not a cosmological tale. The moon does not usually figure in Yoruba mythology. The story is invented by the Ifa priest as another precedent case. Most of the tales from the Ifa corpus contain cautionary tales: so-and-so did not sacrifice, and such-and-such happened to him. Therefore, if you do not sacrifice, a similar fate will befall you.

The story contains the interesting concept that god is the creator of *every* child that is born; that the father can only beget the child after it has been created. This is corroborated by the following story which asserts that men choose their fate before they are born.

The Yoruba people believe that the moon always shows the same side to the earth, and that the other side is much bigger.

'I will use fifteen days to create man and trees.' The creation of man is usually attributed to Obatala in Yoruba folklore. In the stories of the Ifa Oracle, Olodumare is a much more important personage than he appears in the myths told by various *orisha* cult groups.



## 3 Choosing a fate

The belief that a man chooses his own fate before birth is widespread in southern Nigeria. It is found, for example, among the Binis, Ibos and Ijaws.

See for example the myth 'Woyengi' as told by Gabriel Okara in *Black Orpheus*, No. 2. Based on this myth is the play 'Woyengi' by O. Ijimere (in *The Imprisonment of Obatala*, Heinemann Creative Writers Series). It is significant that Duro Ladipo could adapt this play into Yoruba under the title of 'Oluweri', without any difficulty. The basic concept of 'choosing a fate' is almost identical in Yoruba and Ijaw mythology.

The Yoruba people see their lives as partly dominated by fate and predestination – and partly controlled by their own action. Though a man is born with a fate and a career in life, what exactly he makes of his fate depends on his own actions.

A man picks the type of life he is going to lead, and even his death, before he enters this world. However, by establishing a very strong and intimate relationship with his *orisha*, his personal deity, he may avoid many misfortunes and strengthen his ability to cope with his destiny. There is also the concept that even though a man may not be able to avert certain misfortunes, the real value of his life depends on his ability to cope with them. Some men are crushed by them, others become mature.

A man learns how to anticipate misfortune, disease and death by sacrificing to his *orisha* and by consulting the Ifa oracle and following its instructions.

The unchangeable part of a man's fortune is symbolised by his *ori*, literally his 'head', but in this context meaning his 'inner head' or soul. The *ori* is what a man picks before birth. A man must worship his own *ori*, which is symbolised by a cult-object worked of leather

and cowrie shells. Sacrifice is due to one's *ori* in times of danger or before undertaking an important task. It is thus possible to strengthen one's *ori* and improve one's fate; though some people are said to be born with a bad *ori*, which cannot be improved by any ritual act. Sacrifice is also due to one's *ori* after narrow escape from misfortune, or after successful accomplishment of a difficult task.

## 4 Orishanla

The Yoruba say that they have 401 *orisha*, or divinities. The figure is not to be taken literally. It simply means very many, or an infinite number.

The multiplicity of gods represents a multiplicity of approaches to the divinity. The *orisha* (for example: Shango, Obatala, Ogun, Oya, Eshu, Erinle, Orisha Oko, Yemoja) are not completely separate entities; they are seen as part of a whole. The *orisha* are part-manifestations of Olodumare, the supreme deity.

This myth explains that all divinities are really part of the same arch-divinity. It also explains that the divine spirit is scattered throughout the world, and fragments of it can be found everywhere: in human beings, and even in animals, trees and rocks. It is the fragment of *orisha* that each human being carries within himself, that makes it possible for him to respond to a particular *orisha*, that makes him capable of being a vehicle for the *orisha's* spirit when he goes into a trance.

There are versions of this myth in which the slave is named as Eshu, the divinity of unpredictable fate. This makes the myth even more significant. The destruction and the scattering of the arch-divinity are no longer a mere accident: they become part of a divine plan, or an inner necessity of the universe. The effectiveness of the divine spirit depends on its ability to permeate every creature



in the world. Yoruba philosophy rejects the idea of a single, monolithic deity, which would make intimate contact impossible.

This myth also establishes Obatala as the most senior of the *orisha*. Orishanla (the big *orisha*) is in fact another name for Obatala. Obatala is here virtually identified with Olodumare, the supreme god. In many other stories, though, the two are completely distinct, with Olodumare clearly being superior to Obatala. Some tales also give seniority to Oduduwa over Obatala.

## 5 The creation of the land

This is both a mythological and a political myth. On the one hand the myth explains the creation of the earth, and it establishes the sky as being older and superior to the earth.

There are other myths which contradict this concept. There are some shrines in Yoruba country in which Oduduwa is worshipped not as the creator of the earth, but as the earth itself.

In the Ogboni society, which is a very ancient Yoruba earth-cult, a story is told about a war that raged between heaven and earth. Heaven and Earth went hunting, and they caught only one rat together. They quarrelled over who should have the rat. Earth went home angry and refused to let anything grow from her womb. All the crops died and the people starved. Then the gods sent a delegation to Earth, begging her to forgive Heaven. Earth accepted their sacrifice, and life returned.

On the other hand, the same story is told in the Ifa oracle, but the roles are reversed. Here Heaven defeats Earth, by refusing to send rain. Heaven has to be placated by a sacrifice sent by all the gods. Everybody refuses to carry the sacrifice, but in the end the vulture agrees to

carry it. He still has a bald head, because the road to heaven is very long.

In this myth the Yoruba see mankind as being placed in a tense magnetic field, the opposite poles of which are heaven and earth. In other versions heaven and water are seen as the archetypal forces of the universe. This concept has been largely overlaid and overshadowed, however, by the personalities of the *orisha*, who provide a much more complex and varied pattern of forces that rule the world.

The myth that relates how Oduduwa created the land, tries to establish Oduduwa as the senior and the leader of all *orisha*. The end of the story makes it clear that Oduduwa achieved his position of leadership by superseding his 'older brother', Obatala.

Oduduwa is associated with a specific wave of immigrants and the foundation of Ife is attributed to him. Obatala is sometimes seen as a representative of the aboriginal inhabitants of the area. Thus Oduduwa usurps Obatala's rights.

It is significant that the Oyo Yoruba, an even later wave of immigrants, claim the honour of having created the land for *their* ancestor, Oranmiyan.

In political terms the myth merely established the claim to seniority of the city of Ife over other Yoruba towns, a claim that was later challenged by the Oyo empire.

It is interesting that there is another variant of this myth, which attributes the creation of land to Oloba, the King of Oba. Oba is a very small town four miles from Akure. Other variations of the myth are known in the Midwest State, where the creation of land is attributed to Eze Chima, a western Ibo culture-hero.



## 6 Obatala and Oduduwa

This is another version of the previous myth. Its main theme, however, is no longer the creation of the earth, but the rivalry between Obatala and Oduduwa. The main function of this myth is clearly to *legitimise* the ascendancy of Oduduwa. Oduduwa is not seen as a conqueror or usurper. Rather it is Obatala's own fault (his drunkenness) that makes him ineligible for the leadership.

## 7 Oranmiyan

This is another version of the creation of earth. Here the hero is Oranmiyan, the founder-king of Oyo. It is a very political version, which tries to establish the right of the Alafin of Oyo to rule over all other Yoruba people (and his six brothers).

The myth clearly admits that the Alafin has no seniority. He is the youngest of the brothers, obviously representing a late immigrant with no real land rights. However, the myth tries to give two reasons for his ascendancy:

His military power makes him the de facto leader. ('With his right hand he seized a long sword that was sharper than the finest Ilorin razor, and attacked his brothers.')

The myth also tries to establish a moral right for the younger brother. The senior brothers have forfeited their claim, because they maltreated the younger brother, and because of their greed, which made them neglect the object of real value. We find here the motive of 'choosing one's *ori*' (See myth no. 3 p. 4). They were tempted by the beads, cowries, cloths and food, and in their greed overlooked iron and earth.

Thus the Alafin of Oyo conquered his elder brothers because he chose a good 'fate' or *ori*.

## 8 How Obatala lost the Calabash of good character

This is one of numerous myths depicting Obatala as a loser. Again Oduduwa is the one who supersedes him. Oduduwa's ascendancy over Obatala is legitimised on moral grounds.

Although it is not stated expressly, it is implied in this story (as in myth no. 5 p. 7) that Obatala is the older of the two; but he forfeits his seniority because of his foolishness.

In this myth, however, the ascendancy of Oduduwa is not absolute. Obatala becomes the creator of human beings and animals; and as such he is the greatest of all *orisha*.

The numerous stories about the defeat of Obatala can be read in two ways: politically or historically, it can be interpreted as a record of one group of immigrants establishing political power over an older group in Ife. In purely religious terms, the myths can be read as interpretations of Obatala's character. Obatala is the gentlest and the purest of the gods. Unlike Shango, Ogun, or Oranmiyan he is no warrior. His greatness comes from patience and wisdom. In a fight he does not retaliate; but though he can be humiliated, he can – in the end – not really be superseded. As the god of creation he can never destroy anything.

In stories such as this he sometimes takes second place to Oduduwa, but it is significant that in a ritual context he is always treated as the most senior of the *orisha*.

His drunkenness adds a human touch to his personality.



Great and wise as he is, he is not beyond mistakes. But he is always ready to acknowledge such mistakes.

## 9 Obatala the creator

This is the best-known myth about Obatala. It acknowledges him as the greatest of all *orisha*, second only to Olodumare. Sometimes Obatala is represented as supplying the breath of life himself. In such versions he merges with Olodumare and becomes identical with the absolute deity.

Obatala's drunkenness is used here as a delightful motif: it means that the creator assumes full responsibility for all his creatures, even the deformed ones. The Christian and Muslim gods tend to be capable only of perfection.

The myth springs from the deeply humanitarian attitude of the Yoruba people. All deformed people must be looked after by society. There are no beggars in traditional Yoruba society. Albinos, cripples and blind people have a special status in Yoruba society. As servants of Obatala, they are indispensable, because there are functions which only they can fulfil in his shrine.

Obatala's act of creation is continuous. Unlike the biblical God who creates the world in seven days and then sits back to admire his own work, Obatala has to form every single child in the womb.

## 10 Obatala and Ojiya

This is not so much a mythological as a moral tale; it comes from the Ifa oracle and its meaning clearly is that a person who follows the advice of the Ifa oracle and who brings the correct sacrifices will succeed – even if he is blind, and even if his opponent is Obatala himself.

## 11 Obatala and the witches

Another moral taken from the Ifa oracle. Witches are more powerful than *orisha* (priests of the Gelede cult in Porto Novo told me that 'Olodumare has given the witches the power to kill; and no *orisha* can protect you from them . . .') Only Orunmila, the deity of the Ifa oracle, can deal with witches. In other words; the only possible protection against witchcraft is to follow the advice of the oracle and meticulously to fulfil all ritual obligations.

## 12 Oranmiyan and the foundation of Old Oyo

This story, which comes from Oyo, tries to legitimise the ascendancy of Oyo over Ife, by creating a mythological link between Oyo and Ife. Thus Oranmiyan, the founder of Oyo, is said to have been the legitimate ruler of Ife. The Oni of Ife, on the other hand, was the descendant of slaves and achieved his priest–king position purely by accident. Consequently the Alafin of Oyo is superior to the Oni of Ife. Needless to say, this historical myth is not accepted in Ife. The myth also acknowledges that Old Oyo was built on Borgu land. It is possible that the early dynasty of Oyo came from Borgu, but tried to legitimise its conquest of a Yoruba population by linking its history with Ile Ife, the sacred city of the Yoruba.

The myth does not give an accurate description of historical events, but does give an accurate account of a current political relationship: when the myth was told Oyo was superior to Ife because of its military might, but still acknowledged the seniority of Ife and its unique position in all ritual contexts.



## 13 Oranmiyan establishes dynasties in Benin and Oyo

The curious beginning of this myth establishes Oranmiyan as the son of both Oduduwa and Ogun, the conquering culture-heroes who laid the foundation of the kingdom of Ife.

In making Oranmiyan the founder of the current dynasties of both Benin and Oyo, it tries to establish the cultural and political unity of Yoruba country. Despite the political fragmentation of Yoruba country and although Yoruba-speaking groups moved into their present domicile in successive waves over a period of several centuries, the Yoruba strongly cling to their myth of common origin, and they have a strong sense of cultural unity underlying the diversity of cultural manifestations.

The city of Ile Ife is the symbol of this unity: whether it figures as the beginning of the world and the place where the earth was created, or as the oldest Yoruba kingdom from which all Yorubas first migrated.

## 14 Shango

This is the most widely-told story of Shango's deification. Other versions say that Shango, who had the power of provoking lightning and thunder, inadvertently destroyed his own palace, killing many of his wives and servants in the process.

Both myths have this in common: a hero-king is tired of the world and decides to end his life by suicide. His suicide generates sympathy and passionate loyalty among his followers, whose ritual acts help him to achieve the apotheosis.

Most Yoruba *orisha* have an historical as well as a supernatural personality. The transition from warrior-hero

or culture-hero to divinity is achieved by the hero's voluntary death, either by transformation (turning into river or rock) by ascent to heaven or descent into the earth. A feeling of 'Weltschmerz' usually precedes the transformation. The unique powers of the divine being cannot reach fulfilment under earthly conditions: the *orisha* is frustrated by the limitations which this world imposes upon him. Only in the other world (*orun*) can his powers find fulfilment.

The non-earthly world – *orun* – is visualised by the Yoruba people either in the sky or under the ground. That is why the metamorphosis of an *orisha* can take the form of descending into the ground – like Ogun – or ascending to heaven – like Shango.

## 15 Shango and his brothers

This delightful story was collected by Pierre Verger in Brazil. It is told in the style of a fairy-tale. One of the chief motifs is that of the younger brother who, by following his father's advice meticulously, supersedes his brothers. (The same motif is used in the Oranmiyan myth, no. 7 p. 10.)

The story incorporates the myth of Shango and Oya (see myths no. 18 and 19 pp. 27–8). A strong sense of disillusionment again precedes Shango's apotheosis. In contrast, however, to the more common versions, he does not ascend to the sky, but descends into the ground.

## 16 Shango and the origin of tribal marks

It is likely that Yoruba tribal marks go back a long time in history, and that originally they were meant to ensure that people did not infringe the laws of exogamy. As the original clan groupings grew very large, and thousands or



tens of thousands of people bore the same mark, they became meaningless in that context. The custom persisted, however, and people who had forgotten the original purpose of the marks looked for a new explanation.

This myth ventures the explanation that they were originally intended as punishment, but that they became a mark of beauty.

Currently many Yoruba offer another explanation: tribal markings began during the slave trade, they say, so that children who were taken away as slaves could find their way home when they grew up and had a chance to escape.

## 17 Shango the usurper

A very unusual story, collected by Pierre Verger in Pobe. It is told in the style of a fairy-tale. Shango appears as a kind of precocious Tom Thumb child. But in spite of its playful tone, the tale makes some characteristic points about Shango:

Shango is a usurper, who seizes the throne of Oyo. (The same point is also made in the preceding story, no. 16, p. 24, where Shango dethrones the Oloyokoro.)

Shango is a magician. All *orisha* have magic powers, of course, but Shango is one who loves to display them. To this day his priests give magical performances when they go into trances. The *baba elegun*, as the performing priest is called, displays a mixture of rather easy parlour tricks and quite astonishing demonstrations of insensitivity to pain, and of the power of mind over matter.

## 18 and 19 Shango and Oya

In the more historical myths about Shango, Oya usually appears as his most loyal wife and companion. When

all have deserted the King, Oya follows him into exile, and she is the one who initiates the worship of Shango.

In this myth, however, Shango and Oya appear as cosmic forces, rather than as King and Queen. Storm-wind and thunder are shown as related but conflicting forces.

Read in conjunction with many of the other myths about Shango, they demonstrate the complex, many-layered nature of an *orisha*.

### 20 and 21 Obatala and Shango

This myth about the imprisonment of Obatala and the subsequent reconciliation between Obatala and Shango can be read on several levels.

Historically, it could symbolise the tension between Ile Ife and Old Oyo: the ascendancy of Oyo by military force, but the subsequent recognition of Ife as the spiritual capital of the Yoruba people.

It is interesting to note that in Ede there is an annual ritual in which Ajagemo, the High Priest of Obatala, is taken prisoner and later released by the Timi of Ede. The Timi is, of course, a general of the Alafin of Oyo and he has strong links with Shango. The ritual, as still practised in Ede, could almost be called a re-enactment of this myth.

On another level the myth appears to be concerned with the different personalities of Obatala and Shango. Obatala is gentle, patient, tolerant. He never fights back, but triumphs in the end through his very patience. Shango is impatient – his quick-tempered servants, who ask no questions before throwing a man in jail, have clearly modelled themselves on him. But he is also generous, ready to see a mistake and ready for reconciliation.



Obatala and Shango are seen as complete opposites by Yoruba worshippers. It is because they are so opposed to each other, that they also feel attracted to each other. They cannot co-exist in an easy relationship – each has to go his own way. But occasional passionate encounters of these deities are exciting and stimulating.

The Cuban version, collected by Lydia Cabrera and quoted by Pierre Verger, deviates in some important aspects. Obatala is a woman, and Shango's mother. This takes some of the drama and symbolism out of the tale. The whole telling of the story is much more folkloristic than the Nigerian version.

The necklace which is referred to in the last paragraph is called *kele*; it consists of red and white alternating beads and identifies Shango worshippers. Obatala worshippers wear purely white beads and their necklace is known as *sesefun*.

### 22 Oya

The antelope–woman is a common figure of Yoruba folklore. In the story both Shango and Oya appear as the protagonists of an entertaining folk-tale. There is little to suggest that either, or both, are divinities.

Other myths see Oya, Oba and Oshun as three rivers: Oya being identified with the river Niger. Shango, the sky god marrying the three river goddesses, can be seen either as the juxtaposition of male and female forces in the universe, or as the integration of the conquering warrior tribes (the Oyo people) with the original population of the land.

## 23 Ogun

Ogun, the god of iron and war, is worshipped all over Yoruba country, but the Onire of Ire claims to be his direct descendant. Like Shango (in myth no. 17 p. 25 he is described as a usurper. This famous myth clearly describes him as an invader and as the leader of a new wave of immigrants.

The episode with the palm-wine gourds is probably the most popular tale about Ogun, and it is still a widespread custom that empty palm gourds must be laid on their side, lest Ogun suddenly appear and mistake them for full ones – with disastrous results.

The war hero turns *orisha* by disappearing into the ground. The final paragraph is not usually told and could be a later embellishment by some imaginative storyteller. It is not very widely accepted.

## 24 Ogun and the origin of circumcision

As the god of iron, Ogun is the special patron of warriors, hunters, farmers and circumcisers. This myth is told by the last group of worshippers. It represents an attempt to explain a custom whose origin has long been forgotten. This myth belongs to the same category as myth no. 16 p. 24, which is about the origin of tribal marks.

## 25 Ogun confronts Oduduwa

Ogun here is described as the impatient prince, anxious to seize his father's throne. The Yoruba people were conscious of this danger, and in Oyo they safeguarded the life of the king by making his eldest son a co-ruler. In the olden days the *aremo* (this was the title given to the oldest son) shared his father's reign, but he also had to



die with him. Thus it became the son's interest to protect the life of the father.

Furthermore, direct father-to-son succession has been ruled out in all Yoruba kingdoms. On a king's death, the succession has to pass on to another branch of the royal house. Only after the strict rotation has been followed (through two, three or four royal houses) can a king's sons compete again for the throne.

## 26 Ogun and the food-seller

This is not a myth, but a simple fairy-tale, whose function is to reassure the worshipper of the unlimited power and generosity of his *orisha*.

## 27 Erinle and Ogun

A very interesting myth, collected by Pierre Verger in Brazil. The function of this myth is to explain certain similarities between Ogun, Erinle and Osanyin. All are forest gods, all have to do with forest magic and healing. All use iron as their symbol and two of them are hunters.

The slightly overlapping spheres of influence of these three *orisha* are explained in this myth.

Very interesting is the concept expressed in the last paragraph: Alagbede, the father of three divine beings, is unable to become an *orisha*, because he dies a natural death. Although he is given certain supernatural status, he has no shrines and no worshippers. Because he did not go through the process of metamorphosis, he did not enter that sphere of existence from which it is possible for the supernatural being to 'mount the head' of the worshipper – in other words, to manifest himself through a human being in trance.

The myth thus expresses one of the most basic principles of Yoruba religion.

## 28 Oluorogbo

In complete contrast to the myths that see Oduduwa as the creator of the earth, and therefore of the whole of mankind, this myth describes him as a war-leader and conqueror. The holy city of Ife, far from being built on newly created virgin soil, is built on land that had been seized from original inhabitants and which had to be defended against their raids.

Oduduwa firmly establishes and authenticates his own reign, by integrating the aboriginal pòpulation into the city. This was a common practice of conquering Yoruba kings. Most towns in Ekiti, for example, still give some kind of honour to the descendant of the original line of kings.

Moremi's sacrifice of the only son is a common motif of Yoruba mythology. The Oni of Ife, when he first told me this story in 1951 remarked: 'The story of Jesus Christ is known to us in Ife.' The analogy is still pointed out by many people in Ife. The superficial similarity between the names Mary and Moremy also tempts people to relate the stories.

## 29 Sakpata

Sakpata or Shonponna (the Fon and Yoruba names of the same deity) is the most maligned of all *orisha*.

Sakpata is the god of suffering. He teaches his worshippers to cope with misfortunes (particularly disease). If Sakpata strikes a man with smallpox, it is because he chose him, because he wants to establish a very close relationship with that person. Only the man who is not mature enough or strong enough will die of the disease. For the worthy person it is like an initiation: a death and resurrection into a maturer, richer life. 'He (Aroni) gave



him the leaves ... and explained how Sakpata would kill his worshippers and bring them back to life.'

The disease and cure brought by Sakpata is similar in nature to the death and resurrection ritual that takes place during initiation rites to all *orisha*.

## 30 Shonponna

This story is taken from the Ifa oracle. Its main function in this context is to demonstrate that justice will be done, provided a person is advised by Ifa.

The folkloristic motif of this story is the one of the youngest brother who is spurned by his seniors. They share his father's property in his absence, but he comes into his own in the end. Greed does not help a person except in the short term; because greed always blinds a person to the things which are of real importance.

Shonponna's brothers are tempted by horses, clothes and money. The real values, the magic powers and spiritual properties of their father they ignore.

The same motif is used in the stories about Oranmiyan (myth no. 7 p. 10).

## 31 Yemanja

Some accounts describe Yemanja as the great mother goddess who gave birth to all the other *orisha*. Mostly she is considered the senior of all river goddesses. She is the water of life itself.

In this delightful folk-tale she is a beautiful woman with a secret. It is significant that people can live with their defects and secrets, provided that they are not exposed or ridiculed in public. There is a Yoruba greeting which says: 'May your secret not be discovered.'

Ogun's bloodshot eyes are all too apparent, of course,

but it is the *mention* of them that he can't bear. Similarly Yemanja is not worried because Ogun knows about her breast. But he must demonstrate his respect for her feelings by promising that he will never touch the breast. His failure to keep the promise breaks up the relationship.

Yemanja becomes an *orisha* because of the way she endures her deformity, and because sadness enables her to transcend this world. This leads her into the metamorphosis which is the threshold to divine status.

Ogun appears here in a very unusual attempt to show tenderness. He soon returns to his usual life style, however.

### 32 Otin

The main motif is identical to the one found in the myth about Yemanja. And the function of this myth, like the Yemanja one, is to explain the divine status of Otin, achieved through metamorphosis. Again we have the notion of the 'secret' that has to be kept in order to show respect for a person's sensitivity.

An added motif here is the one of the jealousy of the co-wives, who decide to ruin the relationship between husband and favourite wife.

### 33 Orisha Oko

There is a Yoruba proverb that says: 'You are a king and you still want to make magic. Do you want to become god?'

In spite of the hierarchical structure of their society, the Yoruba people have always been suspicious of too much power, and their political structure was an elaborate system of checks and balances which ensured that no one interest group in the society could hold absolute power.



The number of times when Yoruba kings were forced to commit suicide, is an indication of how anxious the Yoruba people were to restrain the powers of their kings.

In this myth of the metamorphosis of Orisha Oko, we see again the familiar pattern: a man decides to leave the world, because he is misunderstood by his fellow men; he is too big for petty everyday issues, which restrict him and sap his strength. The constant tension over irrelevant or imagined issues makes it impossible for him to be as useful to the society as he wants to be. By removing himself into another sphere, where he is unaffected by such restraints, the hero can achieve his true dimension. Thus, through a super-human act of will, he goes through metamorphosis and becomes an *orisha*.

### 34 Oro

Oro is one of the most secret cults in Yoruba country. Oro is concerned with the worship of the dead. In the old days, Oro were also the executioners. When people were condemned to die by the Ogboni court, it was the members of the Oro Cult who had to carry out the sentence.

When Oro comes out at night, all non-members must stay indoors on pain of death. The bull-roarer is used to warn the people of Oro's approach.

Iseyin is a Yoruba town twenty-seven miles from Oyo.

This story comes from the Ifa oracle, and the strange explanation offered here for the origin of the Oro cult has not been heard in any other context.

### 35 and 36 How Orunmila became an *orisha*

There is some disagreement among scholars and also among Yoruba *olorisha*, on whether Orunmila is to be regarded as an *orisha* or not.

Some argue that he is merely an ingenious human being of almost supernatural intellectual brilliance. But these two stories, both from the Ifa oracle, leave no doubt that most Ifa priests anyway, regard him as an *orisha*.

The first story, in spite of its humorous tone, claims that the divine transformation took place, and that Orunmila left behind the implements of divination (Ifa wooden tray and palm nuts) when he disappeared into the other world.

The names of the two Ekiti kings – Alara and Ajero – are not to be taken as serious historical references. They are used together very frequently in the poetry and stories of Ife – almost like a poetic refrain. Rather similar is the use of a pair of bird names – Agbe and Aluko.

The second story shows Orunmila in a strange dialogue with his disciples. The disciples are clearly ill at ease with the master's questioning. They are not at all sure what he is driving at and it seems that they would like him to leave them alone. His obvious superiority irritates and frightens them. For a while Orunmila plays a kind of game with them, implying that he might be persuaded to leave them. Then suddenly with a terrifying demonstration of his supernatural powers, he forces them to recognise his divine status and to worship him.

## 37 Orunmila and his wife

To understand the real meaning of this story, one must know that the name of Orunmila's wife, *Iwa*, means 'character', or, by implication, 'good character'.

Orunmila pursues her, because he cannot live without good character. In the end he realises that good character is something he cannot monopolise: that good character must be something accessible to all and that he can gain happiness, not by owning it, but by living where it is present.



It is interesting to see that this moral tale, which comes from the Ifa oracle, has been used by some Yorubas to prove a somewhat dubious historical theory. Thus the Olokuku of Okuku, who is a descendant of the Alara of Ara claims, that the Alara, the Olokuku, the Ajero and the Orangun are all related kings. Whereas his relationship to the Alara is undisputed, a close relationship between Alkara and Ajero is not proven and a close relationship between Alara and Orangun is positively out of the question. The names of the three kings are here being used as a stylistic device, rather like their use in story no. 35 p. 51.

*Tour de force* historical interpretations of Yoruba oral traditions are very common among Yoruba people, who exploit mythology and other forms of oral tradition to authenticate a de facto political situation. Many such sources are used, when a Yoruba king tries to establish his claim of authority.

## 38 Osanyin

Osanyin is the divinity that is associated with the knowledge of medicinal herbs. Myth no. 27 (p. 38) shows the relationship between Osanyin, Ogun and Erinle. This myth tries to explain the relationship between Osanyin and Ifa. Because the oracle priest must constantly refer to leaves and their uses in his divinations, he must stay close to an Osanyin priest, through whom he can get access to much of the essential knowledge, and to whom he can refer some of the more complicated, specialised questions.

## 39, 40 and 41 Eshu

Eshu is another *orisha* who is closely connected with Orunmila. Orunmila represents order and predictability.

Into the confusion of appearances in the world he brings order: he knows which forces govern what realms of life; he knows how to choose the path that leads a human being out of the labyrinth of distress. He can prescribe the right action that will lead to the right result.

Eshu, on the other hand, represents the unpredictable element of fate. He can upset the most careful planning, the most correct ritual action. The protection of the most powerful *orisha* is useless, if Eshu decides to upset events. Therefore he must always receive the first part of any sacrifice, because unless he is appeased first the sacrifice will be in vain.

He appears as the divine trickster in Yoruba mythology; his delight is 'to turn right into wrong; wrong into right'. He revels in the absurd: 'he hits a stone until it bleeds' or 'he sits on the skin of an ant'.

The story about the red and white cap is the most popular of all stories about Eshu. It portrays him as the divine trickster, a kind of supernatural prototype of the popular tortoise figure.

The other two stories show him in a more sinister mood: a cruel avenger, who will not forgive those who fail to sacrifice to him.

Christian missionaries have erroneously identified Eshu with the devil. However, in spite of Eshu's trickster nature, and in spite of his occasional cruelty, he has little in common with the Christian devil. An absolutely evil creature is unthinkable in Yoruba philosophy. Eshu is as capable of protecting his worshippers, of giving them children, of making them successful as any other *orisha*. Numerous names like Eshumiwa testify to the fact that some Yoruba attribute their birth to the benign intervention of Eshu.



This collection of myths – some of them simple, strong pieces of narrative, others mysterious, poetic and often amusing – illustrate the religion and thought of the West African Yoruba people. Collected and translated by authors and artists long-familiar with Yoruba culture, the myths are compiled and introduced here by Ulli Beier, who himself holds two Yoruba chieftancy titles.

Some are creation myths: these explain the division of the original God into the many *orisha*, or gods, 'different routes leading to the same goal' and the development of their various functions. In the folk- or trickster-tales the *orisha* often assume different personalities, whose actions and their consequences reveal the Yoruba wisdom and customs.

The myths are interspersed with drawings by Georgina Beier of Yoruba motifs, taken from shrines, beadwork and ceremonial objects.

This book makes the myths of an orally transmitted religion available as literature to Nigerian school children, who are now often unfamiliar with their traditional mythology. It will also strengthen the interest among English readers in original African literature.

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**Yoruba Poetry**

'. . . provides exciting and insightful reading to a diverse audience. To the reader who is unfamiliar with the Yoruba language, Beier's introduction insures that he should not underestimate its richness nor the difficulties in translation. To those with little knowledge of Yoruba culture, notes are provided, placing the poetry in its proper context. It is the author's hope that in spite of the limitations he has placed on the material, the poems will "work". The excitement one feels on reading the poems dispels much doubt in this respect. On the whole, the book may be one of the best anthologies of traditional Yoruba poems compiled.' *Research in African Literatures*

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