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TALES
OF
YORUBA
GODS
AND
HEROES

By the same author

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The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People
Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.
Haiti Singing
Vodoun in Haitian Culture
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TALES
OF
YORUBA
GODS
AND
HEROES

BY
HAROLD COURLANDER

Decorations by Larry Lurin

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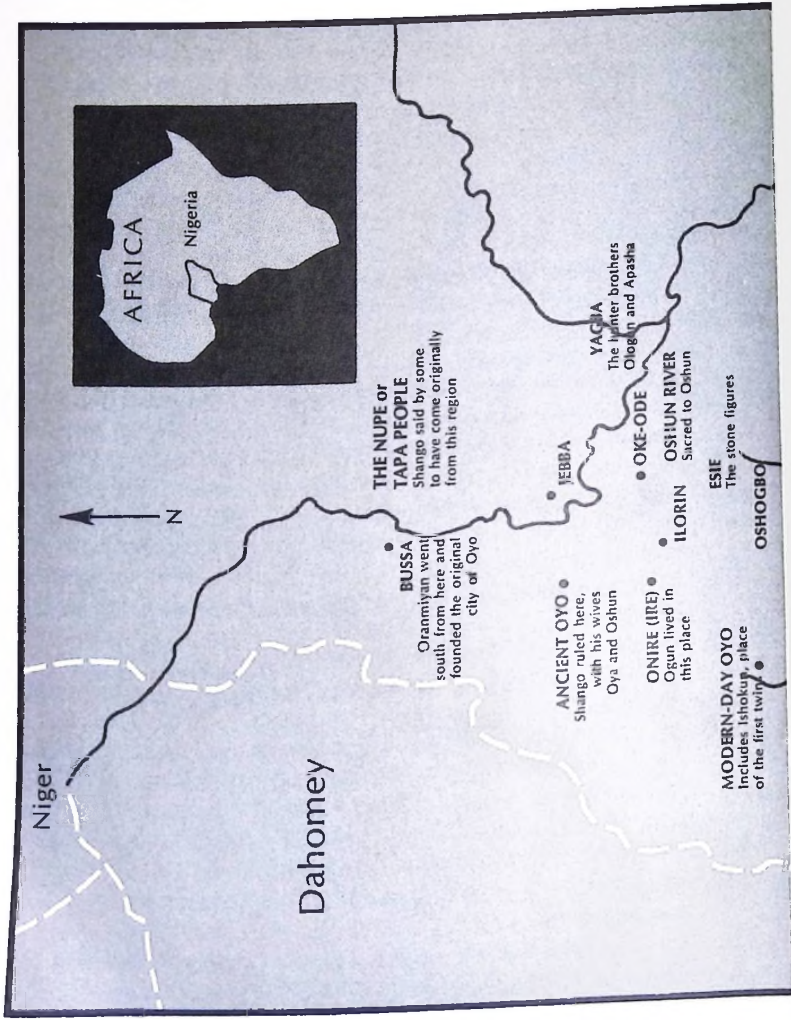
THE MYTHS, LEGENDS AND TALES IN THIS BOOK WERE GATHERED over a period of several years from Yoruba storytellers and informants.

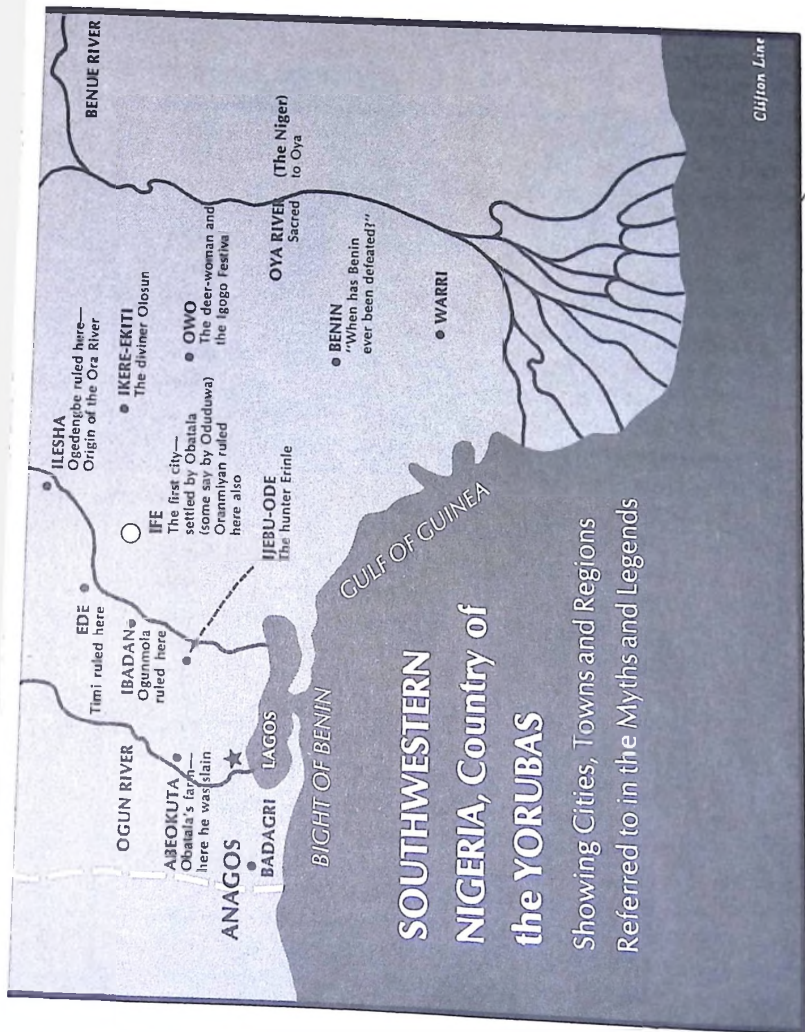
Foremost among all those to whom I owe a debt of gratitude is Ezekiel Aderogba Adetunji, originally from Ilesha, now of Lagos, my principal informant and researcher. His enthusiasm and dedication in our pursuit of Yoruba legends and heroic tales, and his patient checking and verification of narratives requiring backgrounding or further explanation, were important elements in the making of this book. Without his unstinted help and participation this collection would surely have been much more difficult to achieve.

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EARTH AND SKY

Olunrète!

Earth and Sky

Went hunting.

They killed a bush rat.

Earth claimed to be the elder,

Sky also claimed to be the elder.

Then Sky-owner moved away.

The yam roots stopped growing,

The maize gave no more kernels,

Mothers went searching for water,

Babies became faint and cried.

Lunrete!

SONG from a tale explaining why Orun (Sky) and Ile (Earth) are far apart. In the beginning Sky and Earth were close friends. They regarded each other as equals. They went hunting together, they killed a bush rat. Earth said he was senior to Sky, and therefore he claimed the bush rat. Sky said he was senior to Earth, and therefore he claimed the bush rat. They disputed who was the elder. So Sky departed upward, leaving the bush rat behind. In this way Sky and Earth were separated. Because Sky was angry he withheld the rain. Drought and famine came to humans. The people sent the vulture to the Sky carrying the bush rat. After that the rain fell again.



THE YORUBAS

THE YORUBA PEOPLE, OF WHOM THERE ARE PROBABLY MORE THAN ten million, occupy the southwestern corner of Nigeria along the Dahomey border, and a branch of the Yorubas, the Anago people, extends into Dahomey itself. To the east and north the Yoruba culture reaches its approximate limits in the region of the Niger River, though there are ample reasons to believe that ancestral cultures directly related to the Yoruba once flourished well north of the Niger.

Portuguese explorers "discovered" the Yoruba cities and kingdoms in the fifteenth century, but it is believed that such cities as Ife and Benin, among others, may have been standing at their present sites at least four or five

hundred years before the European arrival. And archeological evidence indicates that a technologically and artistically advanced people—possibly proto-Yorubas—were living somewhat north of the Niger in the first millennium B.C. Sophisticated terra-cotta art found at Nok, about three hundred miles north of Ife, has a stylistic relationship with later Yoruba art. The Nok terra-cotta was made about 300 B.C., and the Nok people were then already working iron.

Tradition says that Ife was the first of all Yoruba cities, and that the kingdoms of Benin and Oyo came into being later. Oyo and Benin probably grew and expanded as a consequence of their strategic locations at a time when overland trade became increasingly important in West Africa. The city of Benin was accessible by river from the sea, which gave it added importance as a link in the trade routes. Ife, unlike Benin and Oyo, never developed into a true kingdom. But though it remained a city-state it had paramount importance to Yorubas as the original sacred city and the dispenser of basic religious thought.

Until relatively recent times the Yorubas did not consider themselves a single people, but rather as citizens of Oyo, Benin, Yagba and other cities, regions or kingdoms. Oyo regarded Lagos and Owo, for example, as foreign principalities, and the Yoruba kingdoms warred not only against the Dahomeans but against each other. The name Yoruba was applied to all these linguistically and culturally related peoples by their northern neighbors, the Hausas.

The old Yoruba cities typically were urban centers with surrounding farmlands that extended outward as much as a dozen miles or more. Some of them had earthworks around their perimeters for defense, either mound walls or ditches, or a combination of both. Ijebu-ode, for example, is described as having had a forty-foot-high earthwork, comprised of a ditch and a bank, enclosing an area of some four hundred square miles.

Both Benin and Oyo are said to have been founded by

Ife rulers or descendants of Ife rulers. Benin derived its knowledge of brass casting directly from Ife, and the religious system of divining called Ifa spread from Ife not only throughout the Yoruba country but to other West African cultures as well. A common Yoruba belief system dominated the region from the Niger, where it flows in an easterly direction, all the way to the Gulf of Guinea in the south.

As an accident of history, Yoruba cultural influence even spread across the Atlantic to the Americas. Slave wars launched by the kingdom of Dahomey against some of the Yoruba kingdoms, and slave wars between the Yorubas themselves produced untold thousands of captives who were marched to seaports and sold to European traders. Yoruba slaves were sent to British, French, Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the New World, and in a number of these places Yoruba traditions survived strongly. In Brazil, Cuba, Haiti and Trinidad, Yoruba religious rites, beliefs, music and myths are evident even at this late day. In Haiti the Yorubas were generally called Anagos. Afro-Haitian religious activities give Yoruba rites and beliefs an honored place, and the pantheon includes numerous deities of Yoruba origin. In Brazil, Yoruba religious activities are called Anago or Shango, and in Cuba they are designated Lucumi, and in both of these places the pantheon of major Yoruba deities has survived virtually intact, along with a complex of rites, beliefs, music, dances and myths of Yoruba origin.

Today a preponderant number of Nigerian Yorubas—about eighty percent—profess affiliation with Christianity or Islam. But ancient beliefs and traditions run deep, and Yorubas widely share and value the oral literature that contains within it both the historical experience and reflections on the human condition.



THE GODS, HEROES AND OTHER PROTAGONISTS

THE ORISHAS—THAT IS TO SAY, THE GODS—THE NEARLY ORISHAS and the heroes of Yoruba tradition are innumerable. There are literally hundreds of orishas, ranging from the original and supreme sky deity Olorun to the local protective deities of regions, towns and villages. Best known and most widely served where traditional religious life survives are a dozen or so “greater” orishas who, under the supreme Olorun, were active in earthly affairs after dry land had been created by Obatala, whose name signifies King of the White Cloth. Some of the greater orishas played roles in the ordering of human life on earth, and some are personifications of natural forces and phenomena.

Thus Obatala is the shaper of infants in the wombs of humans and, by extension, the special protector of all who are malformed. Ogun is the essence of iron and the patron of all who depend on iron. Shango is the owner of lightning and the wielder of the thunderbolt. Sonponno is the force of smallpox. Olokun is the ruler of the sea and the marshes where the sea has intruded. Some of the greater orishas represent more abstract forces and ideas. Orunmila, the eldest son of Olorun the Sky Deity, is the archdiviner who, through the reading of palm nuts or cowries, perceives the meanings and intentions of Olorun. Stated differently, he is a personification of fate. Counterbalancing Orunmila is Eshu, the essence of uncertainty and accident. He is the force of randomness and whim that defies certainty and turns fate aside. When Eshu appears there is a flaw in the sequence of events, a disruption of heavenly intention that causes men to turn into unforeseen trails and trials.

The "lesser" orishas have more limited gifts, sometimes specialized but more often general in character. They may be invoked for many types of services to humans—for health, fertility, good crops and protection against enemies. At some point down the scale some of the minor orishas may become scarcely distinguishable from a category of beings who are less than orishas but more than humans. And this category of beings, in turn, blends into the order of epic human heroes and other persons who have performed memorable deeds.

In short, at the top of the hierarchy are those who are great orishas beyond dispute. At the bottom are humans who have distinguished themselves in life but who have remained members of the human family. And in between are those whose exact nature may be less definite. But all have power in human affairs because it is considered that dead ancestors live on, unseen, and continue to be interested in the fortunes and behavior of those who are physically alive. Just as the orishas are invoked and placated, so are

the ancestral dead and, indirectly, those not yet born. Not only must these various forces be dealt with by the living, but also random spirits of many other kinds.

Traditions about the orishas may be argued among regions and cults. An orisha may have one name in one place and another elsewhere. There sometimes are differences as to which orisha performed a particular deed, or how he first appeared or how he ultimately gave up his physical form and became an invisible force. An account given in Oyo may not correspond to one heard in Ife, Benin or Lagos, all of which have preserved their own interpretations of ancient events, whether historical or legendary.

The major orishas are generally believed to have existed at the beginning of things, when dry land was created below the sky by Obatala (or, in the Ife account, by Odu-duwa). The creation myth says that after the land was made by Obatala numerous orishas who had been living in the sky decided to go down and live among humans. But as the legends point out, most deities did not originate in the sky but on the earth. While the creation myth says that Obatala (or, alternately, Odu-duwa) founded Ife, some recorded accounts based on oral tradition say that the city was first settled by people who came from the north or east, and that it was their leader who turned the ground solid and who later came to be considered an orisha.

There are ample reasons to believe that the orishas—other than Olorun himself—were not invented, but were either rulers of ancient city-kingdoms or persons who performed deeds of distinction and came to be deified after death. The process of deification becomes clear in stories depicting the emergence of minor orishas. Moremi became a sacred personage after she saved the city of Ife from predatory raiders. (See the story, "Moremi and the Egunguns.") A local diviner, Olosun, became sacred and was treated as an orisha after becoming a benefactor of the town of Ikere. (See "Olosun of Ikere-Ekiti.") Some of the

orishas may have been imported, along with the appropriate legends, from neighboring cultures. What the circumstances were that made some humans orishas and others merely heroes, we shall probably never know.

Parallels between various Yoruba myths and those of the Norse and the Greeks are obvious. Like the Greek gods, the Yoruba orishas are deeply involved in the affairs of humans when they are not preoccupied with their own affairs. They are receptive to pleas for intervention in human life; their virtues or vanities are human attributes raised to godly stature; and they can be fallible, arbitrary or whimsical in their attitudes and actions. If a human oba were to give way to the passion and fury frequently indulged in by Shango (see "Shango and the Medicine of Eshu"), he would not be thought well of; but because Shango is more than human his violent outbursts are judged not so much as flaws of behavior as phenomena in nature. This of course does not preclude a silent judgment about acts of injustice. No Yoruba can hear how Shango plotted against the heroes Gbonka and Timi (see "Two Warrior Heroes, and How Shango Departed from Oyo") without recognizing that he is doing reproachful things. But who can reason with an orisha acting out of base motives? The only answer for humans is placation.

There is nowhere in the Yoruba oral literature any apparent effort to play down the unpardonable side of an orisha's character. The orisha does not have to be "good" to be worshipped. Two of the major orishas in particular are generally depicted as wise and compassionate. But they can also be stern, sometimes even obstinate, ridiculous or erratic. Other less exalted orishas are praised and pleaded with not only to gain favor, but also to stave off the misfortunes they are capable of laying on humans. Yet the orishas have amoral characters. A person struck down by one of Shango's thunderbolts is not considered to have been punished because he committed an evil deed, but because he

offended the thunder deity. Like storms, winds and floods, the orishas are forces that exist and have to be coped with. But they also have the power, if they have the will, to make life better for humans.

On the other hand, the orishas themselves are sometimes abused—by other gods and by humans. That Ogun has received his share of abuse, and Obatala more than his share, comes out in a number of stories. Almost incidentally, it seems, some of the stories note that certain individuals achieve a sacred or deified status only after having been subjected to maltreatment or suffering. Oshun becomes a full-fledged orisha when she enters the river after having been humiliated by a co-wife. Oya becomes an orisha beyond doubt after she and Shango have been driven out of Oyo. The babalawo, or diviner, named O turns into the Ora River after being killed by the people of Ilesha. The babalawo Olosun becomes an orisha after an attempt on his life by the ungrateful people of Ikere. The orisha Obatala is killed by people living at Abeokuta, after which pieces of his body are regenerated into a number of lesser orishas. Akuko, a citizen of Owon, becomes transfigured into a cock after being executed for a crime he did not commit.

While there is little sentimentality in traditional Yoruba narrative, all these transmutations and deifications suggest an unstated, perhaps subconscious, awareness that some benefaction or recompense is due to those who have been victimized by cruel or unjust actions.

The stories that follow are fragments out of a rich and still-living Yoruba oral literature. They contain elements of a half-remembered past and a still more ancient past that has become blended and diffused with myth. And most of them are reflections of religious belief and of the Yoruba concept of man's relationship to the countless forces among which humans have had to live since the beginning.

SOME OF THE ORISHAS APPEARING IN THESE STORIES

- OLORUN** (Owner of the Sky)—The supreme orisha, ruler over the sky and the earth beneath the sky. Called variously *Oba-Orun* (King of the Sky), *Olodumare* (Owner of Endless Space), *Eleda* (Creator), *Oluwa* (Lord) and *Orisha-Oke* (Sky God).
- ORUNMILA** (The Sky Knows Who Will Prosper)—The eldest son of Olorun, and the deity of divination. He is widely known by the name *Ifa*, the word that designates divining and the paraphernalia of divining. Because he has the knowledge of this art, which in a sense reveals the intentions of Olorun, he has the authority to speak to humans for the Sky God.
- OBATALA** (King of the White Cloth)—Said by some to be Olorun's second son, by others to be merely one of Olorun's favorite orishas. He is the one authorized by Olorun to create land over the water beneath the sky, and it is he who founds the first Yoruba city, Ife. *Obatala* is Olorun's representative on earth and the shaper of human beings. He is known to some Yorubas as *Orisha-Nla* or *Olufon*.
- OGUN**—The deity of iron, and consequently the patron orisha of all humans for whom iron has particular significance, such as smiths, hunters and warriors. Also known as *Ogun Onire* (Ogun, Owner of the Town of Ire).
- ESHU**—The orisha of chance, accident and unpredictability. Because he is Olorun's linguist and the master of languages *Eshu* is responsible for carrying messages and sacrifices from humans to the Sky God. Also known for his phallic powers and exploits. *Eshu* is said to lurk at gateways, on the highways and at the crossroads, where he introduces chance and accident into the lives

of humans. Known by a variety of names, including *Elegbara*.

SHANGO—The orisha of the thunderbolt, said to have ruled in ancient times over the kingdom of Oyo. Also known as *Jakuta* (Stone Thrower) and as *Oba Koso* (The King Does Not Hang).

OYA—One of Shango's wives, orisha of the Niger River.

OSHUN—One of Shango's wives, orisha of the Oshun River.

OLOKUN (Owner of the Sea)—Female deity of the sea and marshes. Some Yorubas believe *Olokun* to be male rather than female.

SONPONNO—Deity of smallpox and related diseases. Also called *Olode* (Owner of the Public), *Ile-Gbigbona* (Hot Ground) and *Ile-Titu* (Cold Ground).

ORISHA-OKO—The orisha of agriculture, patron of farmers.

OLU-IGBO (Owner of the Bush)—Orisha of the bush and jungle.

OSANYIN—An orisha of curative medicine and divining.

ODUDUWA—According to Ife tradition, that city's first ruler. Called the Father of Ife and, by many, of all Yorubas. Regarded in Ife as the orisha who created dry land and performed feats elsewhere attributed to Obatala.

ORANMIYAN—A son of Oduduwa who ruled over Benin and later, on his father's death, over Ife. Considered, like his father, an orisha, *Oranmiyan* also is sometimes called Father of Ife. Sometimes he is referred to as *Oranyan*.

YEMOJA—Deity of the Ogun River, and in some accounts identified as a wife of Ogun.

AGEMO—The chameleon. Not an orisha, but he appears in the creation myth as the Sky God's messenger.

(Names of minor orishas, heroes, heroines and others appear in the glossary.)

THE YORUBA WEEK

Ojo-Aje, Day of Aje, orisha of money

Ojo-Awo, Day of the Secret, sacred to Orunmila, the diviner orisha

Ojo-Ogun, Day of Ogun, orisha of iron

Ojo-Shango, Day of Shango, orisha of the thunderbolt

Ojo-Obatala, Day of Obatala, the orisha who shapes human beings

THE
STORIES



I

THE DESCENT FROM THE SKY

IN ANCIENT DAYS, AT THE BEGINNING OF TIME, THERE WAS NO solid land here where people now dwell. There was only outer space and the sky, and, far below, an endless stretch of water and wild marshes. Supreme in the domain of the sky was the orisha, or god, called Olorun, also known as Olodumare and designated by many praise names. Also living in that place were numerous other orishas, each having attributes of his own, but none of whom had knowledge or powers equal to those of Olorun. Among them was Orunmila, also called Ifa, the eldest son of Olorun. To this orisha Olorun had given the power to read the future, to understand the secret of existence and to divine the proc-

esses of fate. There was the orisha Obatala, King of the White Cloth, whom Olorun trusted as though he also were a son. There was the orisha Eshu, whose character was neither good nor bad. He was compounded out of the elements of chance and accident, and his nature was unpredictability. He understood the principles of speech and language, and because of this gift he was Olorun's linguist. These and the other orishas living in the domain of the sky acknowledged Olorun as the owner of everything and as the highest authority in all matters. Also living there was Agemo, the chameleon, who served Olorun as a trusted servant.

Down below, it was the female deity Olokun who ruled over the vast expanses of water and wild marshes, a grey region with no living things in it, either creatures of the bush or vegetation. This is the way it was, Olorun's living sky above and Olokun's domain of water below. Neither kingdom troubled the other. They were separate and apart. The orishas of the sky lived on, hardly noticing what lay below them.

All except Obatala, King of the White Cloth. He alone looked down on the domain of Olokun and pondered on it, saying to himself, "Everything down there is a great wet monotony. It does not have the mark of any inspiration or living thing." And at last he went to Olorun and said, "The place ruled by Olokun is nothing but sea, marsh and mist. If there were solid land in that domain, fields and forests, hills and valleys, surely it could be populated by orishas and other living things."

Olorun answered, "Yes, it would be a good thing to cover the water with land. But it is an ambitious enterprise. Who is to do the work? And how should it be done?"

Obatala said, "I will undertake it. I will do whatever is required."

He left Olorun and went to the house of Orunmila, who understood the secrets of existence, and said to him, "Your

father has instructed me to go down below and make land where now there is nothing but marsh and sea, so that living beings will have a place to build their towns and grow their crops. You, Orunmila, who can divine the meanings of all things, instruct me further. How may this work be begun?"

Orunmila brought out his divining tray und cast sixteen palm nuts on it. He read their meanings by the way they fell. He gathered them up and cast again, again reading their meanings. And when he had cast many times he added meanings to meanings, and said, "These are the things you must do: Descend to the watery wastes on a chain of gold, taking with you a snail shell full of sand, a white hen to disperse the sand, a black cat to be your companion, and a palm nut. That is what the divining figures tell us."

Obatala went next to the goldsmith and asked for a chain of gold long enough to reach from the sky to the surface of the water.

The goldsmith asked, "Is there enough gold in the sky to make such a chain?"

Obatala answered, "Yes, begin your work. I will gather the gold." Departing from the forge of the goldsmith, Obatala went then to Orunmila, Eshu and the other orishas, asking each of them for gold. They gave him whatever they had. Some gave gold dust, some gave rings, bracelets or pendants. Obatala collected gold from everywhere and took it to the goldsmith.

The goldsmith said, "More gold is needed."

So Obatala continued seeking gold, and after that he again returned to the goldsmith, saying, "Here is more metal for your chain."

The goldsmith said, "Still more is needed."

Obatala said, "There is no more gold in the sky."

The goldsmith said, "The chain will not reach to the water."

Obatala answered, "Nevertheless, make the chain. We shall see."

The goldsmith went to work. When the chain was finished he took it to Obatala. Obatala said, "It must have a hook at the end."

"There is no gold remaining," the goldsmith said.

Obatala replied, "Take some of the links and melt them down."

The goldsmith removed some of the links, and out of them he fashioned a hook for the chain. It was finished. He took the chain to Obatala.

Obatala said, "Now I am ready." He fastened the hook on the edge of the sky and lowered the chain. Orunmila gave him the things that were needed—a snail shell of sand, a white hen, a black cat, and a palm nut. Then Obatala gripped the chain with his hands and feet and began the descent. The chain was very long. When he had descended only half its length Obatala saw that he was leaving the realm of light and entering the region of greyness. A time came when he heard the wash of waves and felt the damp mists rising from Olokun's domain. He reached the end of the golden chain, but he was not yet at the bottom, and he clung there, thinking, "If I let go I will fall into the sea."

While he remained at the chain's end thinking such things, he heard Orunmila's voice from above, saying, "The sand."

So Obatala took the snail shell from the knapsack at his side and poured out the sand.

Again he heard Orunmila call to him, saying this time, "The hen."

Obatala dropped the hen where he had poured the sand. The hen began at once to scratch at the sand and scatter it in all directions. Wherever the sand was scattered it became dry land. Because it was scattered unevenly the sand formed hills and valleys. When this was accomplished, Obatala let go of the chain and came down and walked on the

solid earth that had been created. The land extended in all directions, but still it was barren of life.

Obatala named the place where he had come down Ife. He built a house there. He planted his palm nut and a palm tree sprang out of the earth. It matured and dropped its palm seeds. More palm trees came into being. Thus there was vegetation at Ife. Obatala lived on, with only his black cat as a companion.

After some time had passed, Olorun the Sky God wanted to know how Obatala's expedition was progressing. He instructed Agemo the chameleon to descend the golden chain. Agemo went down. He found Obatala living in his house at Ife. He said, "Olorun instructed me this way: He said, 'Go down, discover for me how things are with Obatala.' That is why I am here."

Obatala answered, "As you can see, the land has been created, and palm groves are plentiful. But there is too much greyness. The land should be illuminated."

Agemo returned to the sky and reported to Olorun what he had seen and heard. Olorun agreed that there should be light down below. So he made the sun and set it moving. After that there was warmth and light in what had once been Olokun's exclusive domain.

Obatala lived on, with only his black cat for a companion. He thought, "Surely it would be better if many people were living here." He decided to create people. He dug clay from the ground, and out of the clay he shaped human figures which he then laid out to dry in the sun. He worked without resting. He became tired and thirsty. He said to himself, "There should be palm wine in this place to help a person go on working." So he put aside the making of humans and went to the palm trees to draw their inner fluid, out of which he made palm wine. When it was fermented he drank. He drank for a long while. When he felt everything around him softening he put aside his gourd cup and went back to modeling human figures. But because Obatala had

drunk so much wine his fingers grew clumsy, and some of the figures were misshapen. Some had crooked backs or crooked legs, or arms that were too short. Some did not have enough fingers, some were bent instead of being straight. Because of the palm wine inside him, Obatala did not notice these things. And when he had made enough figures to begin the populating of Ife he called out to Olorun the Sky God, saying, "I have made human beings to live with me here in Ife, but only you can give them the breath of life." Olorun heard Obatala's request, and he put breath in the clay figures. They were no longer clay, but people of blood, sinews and flesh. They arose and began to do the things that humans do. They built houses for themselves near Obatala's house, and in this way the place Obatala named Ife became the city of Ife.

But when the effects of the palm wine had worn off Obatala saw that some of the humans he had made were misshapen, and remorse filled his heart. He said, "Never again will I drink palm wine. From this time on I will be the special protector of all humans who have deformed limbs or who have otherwise been created imperfectly." Because of Obatala's pledge, humans who later came to serve him also avoided palm wine, and the lame, the blind and those who had no pigment in their skin invoked his help when they were in need.

Now that humans were living on the earth, Obatala gave people the tools they needed to perform their work. As yet there was no iron in the world, and so each man received a wooden hoe and a copper bush knife. The people planted and began the growing of millet and yams, and, like the palm tree, they procreated. Ife became a growing city and Obatala ruled as its Oba or Paramount Chief. But a time came when Obatala grew lonesome for the sky. He ascended by the golden chain, and there was a festival on the occasion of his return. The orishas heard him describe the land that had been created below, and many of them decided

to go down and live among the newly created human beings. Thus many orishas departed from the sky, but not before Olorun instructed them on their obligations. "When you settle on the earth," he said, "never forget your duties to humans. Whenever you are supplicated for help, listen to what is being asked of you. You are the protectors of the human race. Obatala, who first descended the chain and dried up the waters, he is my deputy in earthly affairs. But each of you will have a special responsibility to fulfill down below." As for Obatala, he rested in the sky for some time. After that, whenever he wanted to know how things were going at Ife, he returned for a visit. The city of Ife lived on.

But Olokun, the orisha of the sea on whose domain land had been created, was angry and humiliated. And so one time when Obatala was resting in the sky Olokun decided to destroy the land and replace it again with water. She sent great waves rushing against the shores and flooded the low ground everywhere, causing marshes to reappear on every side. She inundated the fields where humans were growing their crops and drowned many of the people of Ife. All that Obatala had created was disappearing, and mankind was suffering. The people called for help from Obatala, but he did not hear them. So they went to the orisha Eshu, who now lived on earth, and begged him to carry to Obatala word of the disaster that was overwhelming them.

Eshu said to them, "Where is the sacrifice that should accompany the message?"

They brought a goat and sacrificed it, saying, "This is the food for Obatala."

But Eshu did not move. He said, "Where is the rest?"

The people said, "We do not understand you. Have we not brought a sacrifice for Obatala?"

Eshu answered, "You ask me to make a great journey. You ask me to be your linguist. Does not a person make a gift to the lowliest of messengers? Give me my part, then I will go."

So the people gave a sacrifice to Eshu, after which he left them and went up to the sky to tell Obatala what was happening to the land and the people over which he ruled.

Obatala was troubled. He was not certain how to deal with Olokun. He went to the orisha Orunmila to ask for advice. Orunmila consulted his divining nuts, and at last he said to Obatala, "Wait here in the sky. Rest yourself. I will go down this time. I will turn back the water and make the land rise again." So it was Orunmila instead of Obatala who went down to Ife. As Orunmila was the oldest son of Olorun, he had the knowledge of medicine, and he had many other powers as well. He used his powers in Ife, causing Olokun's waves to weaken and the marshes to dry up. The waters of the sea were turned back, and at last Olokun's attempt to reclaim her territory came to an end.

Having accomplished all this, Orunmila prepared to return to the sky. But the people came to him and asked him to stay because of his knowledge. Orunmila did not wish to stay in Ife forever. So he taught certain orishas and men the arts of controlling unseen forces, and he also taught others the art of divining the future, which is to say the knowledge of how to ascertain the wishes and intentions of the Sky God, Olorun. Some men he taught to divine through the casting of palm nuts. Others he taught to foretell the future by the casting of cowry shells or sand or chains. Afterwards, Orunmila went back to the sky and, like Obatala, he frequently made visits to the earth to see how things were going among human beings. What Orunmila taught men about divining was never lost. It was passed on by one generation of babalawos, or diviners, to another.

Earthly order—the understanding of relationships between people and the physical world, and between people and the orishas—was beginning to take shape. But all was not yet settled between Olokun, the orisha of the sea, and the supreme orisha Olorun. Olokun considered ways in which she might humiliate or outwit the Sky God. The powers of

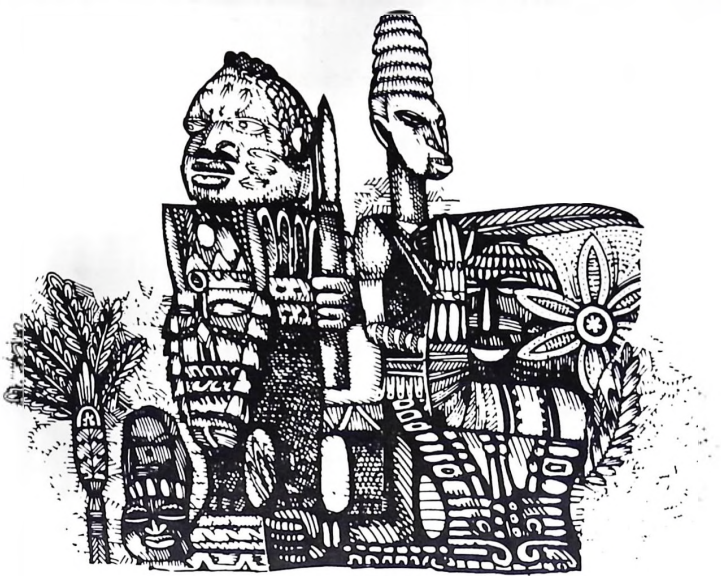
the sky deities had proved to be greater than her own. But Olokun had the knowledge of weaving and dying cloth, and she had clothes of delicate textures and brilliant colors. She believed that in this respect she excelled all other orishas, including Olorun himself. So one day she sent a message to Olorun, challenging him to a contest to show which had the greater knowledge of clothmaking.

Olorun received the challenge. He thought, "Olokun seeks to humiliate me. Nevertheless, she has unequaled knowledge about the making of cloth. Yet, how can I ignore the challenge?" He thought about the matter. Then he sent for Agemo, the chameleon. He instructed Agemo to carry a message to Olokun. Agemo went down from the sky to the place where Olokun lived. Agemo said to Olokun, "The Owner of the Sky, Olorun, greets you. He says that if your cloth is as magnificent as you claim, he will enter the contest. Therefore he asks that you show me some of your most radiant weaving so that I may report to him on the matter."

Because Olokun was vain she could not refrain from showing her cloths to Agemo. She put on a skirt cloth of brilliant green and displayed it to the chameleon. As Agemo looked at it his skin turned the exact color of the skirt. Olokun then put on an orange-hued cloth, and Agemo's skin turned orange. When Olokun brought out a red skirt cloth, Agemo's skin turned red. Olokun was perturbed. She tried a cloth of several colors and saw the chameleon's skin reproduce it perfectly. Olokun thought, "This person is only a messenger, nothing more. Yet in an instant he can duplicate the exact color of my finest cloth. What, then, can the great Olorun do?"

Seeing the futility of competing with Olorun, the orisha of the sea said to Agemo, "Give my greetings to the Owner of the Sky. Tell him that Olokun acknowledges his greatness."

Thus Olokun withdrew her challenge to the Sky God, and Olorun remained supreme in all things.



2

THE ORISHAS ACQUIRE THEIR POWERS

NUMEROUS ORISHAS WERE LIVING ON THE EARTH, BUT THEY DID not yet have all the powers for which they are now known. When knowledge was needed to accomplish an important thing, the orishas, like ordinary men, appealed to Olorun or to Orunmila for help. But one day the orisha called Oko thought, "Here I am, living among humans. But what distinguishes me? If the people need something they go to Orunmila for it. If I need something I also must go to Orunmila. Why should this be? If I had the knowledge of a certain thing people could call on me for help, and they would not have to importune Orunmila." Orisha-Oko went to where Orunmila was living on earth. He said, "I have no powers that distinguish me from the humans created by Obatala. You, Orunmila, who are spokesman for Olorun on

earth, endow me with some special attribute. If this is done people can appeal to me for help in many things.”

Orunmila pondered on what Orisha-Oko was asking. He said, “Yes, perhaps there is reason in it. Let me consider the matter.” Orisha-Oko departed.

Now, the orisha called Ogun was thinking similar thoughts. “Am I not an orisha? I should have special powers greater than those of humans.” He also went to where Orunmila was living. He said, “Whenever some important thing is required by the people they come to you. Their demands are heavy. It is Orunmila this and Orunmila that. Give me special knowledge of some kind so that I can do something to keep the world going.”

Orunmila answered, “Yes, I have been thinking about it. I will see what can be done.”

The minds of the other orishas turned the same way. Eshu, who already had the knowledge of language, went to Orunmila seeking more knowledge. Shango went to Orunmila, Sonponno went to Orunmila, Olu-Igbo went to Orunmila, Osanyin went to Orunmila. And after them still more orishas went, all asking for a special gift of some part of Orunmila’s understanding of the world and its forces.

Orunmila was distressed. He thought, “I hold all the orishas equal in my affection. If I give anything to one of them the others will surely complain that I denied something to them and they will hold it against me. There are many powers to be shared. To whom should I give one power or another?” Because the matter weighed heavily on him, Orunmila hardly touched his food. He could not sleep at night. His wives and servants worried about him. Orunmila took to walking by himself in the open country and pondering the question of how he might divide the powers among the orishas. He was walking in the fields this way one time when he met Agemo, the chameleon.

Agemo said to him, “You, Orunmila, spokesman for Olorun on earth, why are you so heavy with care?”

Orunmila answered, “One by one the orishas come to

me, saying, 'Give me a special power so that I can relieve you of some of your burdens.' But there are so many powers, some great, some small. If I give something small it will be held against me. If I give something large to one, the others will resent it. I want to treat all the orishas equally. How can I do it so there will be harmony instead of dissension?"

Agemo said, "Perhaps it would be best to leave the distribution to chance. Return to the sky. Then send messengers to announce that on such and such a day you will pour the powers down on the earth. Let each orisha catch what he can or retrieve it from the place where it falls. Whatever powers an orisha collects in this way will be his. By sending your messengers you will have given everyone equal notice, and no one can say, 'Orunmila has neglected me.' "

On hearing Agemo's advice, Orunmila's mind rested, for now he saw how it could be done. He said, "Agemo, though you are small your name will be great. I will share out the powers and the knowledge by raining them on the earth."

Orunmila returned to the sky and prepared things. Then he sent messengers down to the places where the orishas lived. The messengers went from the house of one orisha to another. They said, "Orunmila has instructed us to announce that he will dispense the powers from the sky. On the fifth day following this one you are to go out into the open fields and wait. Orunmila will scatter the things you want. They will fall here, there and anywhere. Grasp what you can as it falls or retrieve it from the ground. One of you will acquire one thing, others will acquire others. In this way the special knowledge will be distributed, and no one can say Orunmila prefers one orisha over another."

The orishas said, "Orunmila does a good thing. Thank him for us. We will receive what he rains down on us."

On the fifth day they went into the open fields and waited. Then the powers began to fall from the sky. The

orishas ran here and there with their hands outstretched. One orisha caught one thing, another caught another. Some of the powers eluded their hands and fell in the tall grass or among the trees. The orishas went searching in all directions. Now, some orishas were fleet while some were not. Some were more agile or stronger than others. Those who were swifter, or stronger or more persistent were able to get larger or more desirable portions of what Orunmila was bestowing. But everyone received something.

Because Eshu was one of the strongest, and because he did not hesitate to push anyone aside, he gathered a very large share of the powers, one of which was the capability of destroying anyone who offended him. He acquired the power of phallic strength and the power to deprive his enemies of their virility. He received the power of turning men back from their purposes and of turning order into disorder. And all these things were in addition to the power of language that he already possessed. Because of all these attributes possessed by Eshu, orishas and humans thereafter treated him with special respect and sought to avoid his enmity.

The orisha Shango, through what he picked up in the fields, became the owner of the lightning bolt, and therefore he acquired the name Jakuta, the Stone Thrower. Later, when he became the ruler of the city of Oyo, he was called Oba Jakuta.

Orisha-Oko received the power to make crops flourish, and human beings supplicated him to make their yams and grain grow.

Sonponno became the owner of smallpox, and both orishas and humans dreaded his power.

Osanyin acquired special knowledge of curing and divining, and Olu-Igbo became the orisha of the bush country and the forest.

Each orisha received something.

This is how the orishas who went to live on earth came by their special attributes.



3

WHY ESHU LIVES IN THE OPEN

SLOWLY THE PROCESSES OF EARTHLY LIVING WERE BEING ORDERED, but much remained to be done. Whenever Orunmila came down from the sky to see how things were going, the orishas, the humans and the animals besieged him with questions about one thing and another. It still had not been determined what place each creature should have in the scheme of things and where he should live, and Orunmila was overwhelmed with inquiries about these matters.

It was the orisha Eshu who proposed that all such problems be dealt with in an orderly way. He suggested to Orunmila that every orisha, human and bush creature be presented with a simple proposition to which he would give

a direct response. The nature of each individual's reply would determine his fate and his style of living.

Orunmila accepted Eshu's proposal.

He asked the guinea fowl if it would agree to wear a cord around its neck. The guinea fowl answered, "No, I do not want a cord around my neck."

"Very well," Orunmila said, "the guinea fowl will not wear a cord."

Many other creatures were asked the same question and gave the same answer. So they were spared the ordeal of being tied. But when Orunmila questioned the goat, the goat answered flippantly, saying, "Do you think you can do it?"

Instantly the goat had a rope around its neck, and to this day all goats and their relatives, the sheep, continue to suffer this humiliation.

When Orunmila questioned the horse whether it would agree to carry a load, the horse also replied disrespectfully, saying, "Who can force me to do it?"

Instantly there was a man on the horse's back and a bit in its teeth. To this day the horse is a servant to humans and is always carrying men or heavy loads. Men ride horses in war or in peace, and there is no escape from it.

According to the answers the creatures gave, they received a way of life from Orunmila.

While all this was going on, Eshu, whose character was compounded of mischief, was considering how he might say something to confuse Orunmila.

Orunmila spoke to a man, saying, "Man, do you choose to live inside or out?"

The man answered, "Inside." And so Orunmila decreed that henceforth all humans would live in houses.

Then, unexpectedly, Orunmila addressed Eshu. "You, Eshu, how is it with you? Inside or outside?"

Eshu was startled to be called upon, for he had been busy thinking how he might outwit Orunmila. He replied

quickly, "Why, outside of course." Then he corrected himself, "No, on the contrary, inside."

Orunmila understood that Eshu was thinking of creating confusion. He said, "It was you, Eshu, who proposed that a direct response be given to a simple question. But you gave an answer that left the issue hanging. Therefore I must act according to the first words that came from your mouth. Henceforth you will live outside and not in a house."

This is the way it has been ever since. Eshu lives in the open, at the gateway, or on the trail, or in the fields. Whenever humans make an image of Eshu out of mud or clay it is kept outside in conformity with Orunmila's decision, though the images of all other orishas are kept inside to protect them from the elements.



4

IRON IS RECEIVED FROM OGUN

THE ORISHAS AND THE PEOPLE WERE LIVING THERE IN THE LAND created by Obatala. They did the things that are required in life, orishas and humans alike. They hunted, cleared the land so that they could plant, and they cultivated the earth. But the tools they had were of wood, stone or soft metal, and the heavy work that had to be done was a great burden. Because there were more people living at Ife than in the beginning, it was now necessary to clear away trees from the edge of the forest to make more room for planting.

Seeing what had to be done, the orishas met to discuss things. It was said, "Let one of us begin the great task by going out to fell trees and clear the land. When this has been done we can plant our fields."

All agreed except for Olokun, who said, "Do what you want, but it has nothing to do with me, for my domain is the water. The land and the trees were not my doing."

Osanyin, the orisha of medicine, said, "I will clear the first field." He took his bush knife and went out to the trees and began his work. But his bush knife was made of soft metal and it would not cut deeply. After a while it became twisted and bent and it would not cut at all. He returned and said to the other orishas, "I began the work, but the wood is too hard. My bush knife is defeated."

So Orisha-Oko, the orisha of the open fields, spoke, saying, "My bush knife is strong. I will cut the trees." He went out. He worked. The sharpness went out of his bush knife. He returned. He said, "Yes, it was the same with me. My bush knife is dull and twisted."

Then Eshu with the powerful body took up his bush knife and went into the bush. He remained there for a while, and when he returned they saw that his bush knife was broken and bent. He said, "I cleared brush and dislodged stones, but the metal of my bush knife is not hard enough, it lacks spirit."

One by one the other orishas went out and tried, but the metal of their knives was too soft. They said, "What kind of a world are we living in? How can we survive in this place?"

Until now Ogun, who had been given the secret of iron, said nothing. But when the other orishas had tried and failed he took up his bush knife and went out. He slashed through the heavy vines, felled the trees and cleared the forest from the land. The field grew larger, the edge of the forest receded. Ogun worked on until the darkness began to fall. Then he returned. When he arrived he displayed his bush knife. It glittered even in the greyness that precedes the night. It was straight and its edge was sharp.

The orishas said, "What is the wonderful metal lying within your knife?"

Ogun answered, "The secret of this metal was given to me by Orunmila. It is called iron."

They looked at his knife with envy. They said, "If we had the knowledge of iron nothing would be difficult."

Ogun constructed a forge in his house. Because he was a hunter he forged an iron spear for the killing of game and a knife to cut away the hides. Because he was a warrior he also forged weapons of war. As for the other orishas, neither their hunting weapons nor their battle weapons were good. They had to rely on traps to catch their game, and often, when their luck was not good, they had no meat at all.

The orishas discussed Ogun's secret on and on, saying, "If we had the knowledge of iron we would be equal with Ogun." And afterwards they would say to Ogun, "Give us iron so that we too can be great in hunting and war."

Ogun always answered, "The secret of iron was entrusted to me by Orunmila. He said nothing about giving it to others." And so for a long time Ogun remained the sole master of the spear, the bush knife and other weapons.

The orishas did not give up importuning Ogun. At last they came to his house and said, "You, Ogun, are the father of iron. Be our father also. We need a chief. Become our ruler, and in exchange for our loyalty and service give us the knowledge of making iron."

Ogun considered everything. One day he announced that he would accept what they were offering. So they made him their ruler. He became the Oba of orishas in Ife and all the surrounding territories. Ogun taught them the making of iron. He built forges for them and showed them how to make spears, knives, hoes and swords. Soon every orisha had iron tools and weapons. Then humans began to come from distant places asking for the secret of iron. Ogun gave them the knowledge of forging. A time came when every hunter and warrior had an iron spear.

But though Ogun had accepted the chieftaincy over the

orishas, he was above all else a hunter. And so when the knowledge of the forge had been given out, he clothed himself in the skins of animals he had killed and returned to the forest to get game. He was gone many days. Life in the forest was hard. He slept on the ground or in trees. He pursued the animals a great distance, arriving at last at a place called Oke-Umo, near where the city of Ilesha now stands. There he caught up with his game. He killed many animals, skinned them and cut up the meat. After that he returned home. When he came out of the forest he was dirty, his hair was matted, and the skins he wore were smeared and spotted with the blood of his game.

The orishas saw him arriving. They said, "Who is this dirty stranger coming from the forest? Surely it is not Ogun, whom we selected to be our chief?" They were displeased with Ogun. They said, "A ruler should appear in dignity. His clothes should be clean. His hair should be oiled and combed. How then can we acknowledge this unclean person as the one who rules us?"

The orishas turned away from Ogun. They went to his house, saying to him, "We expressed faith in you by making you our Oba. But now you are indistinguishable from the lowliest hunter, and the air around you reeks of dead flesh. What we gave we now take away. You are our Oba no longer."

Ogun said, "When you needed the secret of iron you came begging me to be your chief. Now that you have iron you say that I smell of the hunt."

The other orishas went away. Ogun took off his hunting clothes made of animal skins. He bathed, and when he was clean he put on clothes made of palm fronds. He gathered his weapons and departed. At a distant place called Ire he built a house under an akoko tree, and there he remained.

The human beings who had received the secret of iron from Ogun did not forget him. In December of every year

they celebrate, in his honor, the festival of Iwude-Ogun. Hunters, warriors and blacksmiths, and many others as well, make sacrifices to Ogun as their special protector. They offer food at the foot of an akoko tree. They call him Ogun Onire, meaning Ogun the Owner of the Town of Ire. And they display animal skins and palm fronds in memory of how Ogun was rejected by the other orishas after he had given them the knowledge of the forge.



5

SONPONNO'S EXILE

THE ORISHAS WHO HAD SETTLED IN THE LAND CREATED BY Obatala worked together in the fields and in this way demonstrated to humans the benefits of communal labor. They invented the game of ayo, or wari,* so that they could amuse themselves in times of leisure. They introduced on the earth some of the ceremonies that they had performed when they had been living in the sky. They invented drums and other musical instruments and perfected singing and dancing. Life went on. It was good.

One year, at the time of the yam harvest, the orishas held a festival. They gathered in the center of their town to

* See glossary.

feast on game brought from the bush and crops brought in from their fields. A large amount of palm wine was prepared and placed in the center of the gathering in an earthen pot. The orishas ate, drank palm wine and danced.

Only one orisha, Sonponno, to whom had been given the secret of smallpox, did not dance. Sonponno had a wooden leg and had to move about with the aid of a walking stick. So he sat quietly while the festivities went on. But, like all the others, he frequently dipped his gourd into the pot of palm wine and drank. Everyone had much palm wine. They began to laugh. They began to speak loudly. There was shouting. When the orishas sang, their voices were not true. When they danced, their legs became unsteady and they staggered this way and that.

Someone noticed Sonponno sitting alone near the palm wine. He was offended. He said, "Why is it that Sonponno does not dance with us?" Others called out to Sonponno, urging him to get up and join them. "Join us, join us," they said, and some of them tugged at him to make him get up. But Sonponno sat without moving from his place. Because he was ashamed of his wooden leg he held back.

The others went on dancing and dipping their gourds in the palm wine. They began to taunt Sonponno. "Get up, get up," they called. "Do not sit there forever like a dead antelope."

Sonponno could no longer stand the taunts of the orishas. With the aid of his walking stick he stood up. He adjusted the flowing garment that he wore so it covered his wooden leg. Cautiously he joined the dancers. He commenced to dance. But he was unsteady from drinking so much palm wine. The others also were unsteady. They could not control their movements and they jostled one another this way and that. One of the orishas bumped into Sonponno. Sonponno sprawled on the ground and his wooden leg was exposed for everyone to see. The orishas laughed. Someone called out, "Wooden leg! Wooden leg!" Others

joined in the taunting. They made a song out of the words.

Sonponno was overcome with shame. Then anger overtook him. He struggled to his feet. There was more laughter. Sonponno struck out with his walking stick. He struck one person, then another. The orishas were surprised. They were too befogged with palm wine to move away. Only when they felt the sting of Sonponno's stick on their backs did they begin to run. They scattered in all directions. The dancing came to an end, and Sonponno alone remained in the dance court.

The orishas went to their houses. Each person who had been touched by Sonponno's stick fell ill. Their eyes became red and sores broke out on their skin. News of the affair was carried to Obatala at a distant place. Obatala was angered. He said, "The orishas shamed Sonponno for something he could not help. They should not have done such a thing. But Sonponno should not have taken matters into his own hands. He should have come to me for justice. Those who ridiculed him have been punished by smallpox. But because Sonponno became the judge of his own affair he also must be punished."

Obatala dressed in his white clothes. In his hand he carried his cow-tail switch ornamented with cowries, and he went to Sonponno's house to judge him. Sonponno saw Obatala coming, and he fled into the bush. On discovering that Sonponno had run away, Obatala proclaimed: "He has gone to the bush. Very well. There he must remain, for he cannot be trusted to live in the community."

From that time on, Sonponno never lived among other people, but by himself in the bush. Nevertheless, at one time and another he caused smallpox to come to orishas and humans. He was much feared, and for this reason people avoided calling him by his right name, Sonponno. They alluded to him by indirection, calling him *Ile-Gbigbona*, meaning Hot Ground; or as *Ile-Titu*, Cold Ground; or as *Olode*, Owner of the Public; or merely as *Baba*, meaning

Father. Even those who worship him fear him, for still today he is the one who sends smallpox to torment people everywhere. And who knows the one he will touch with his staff? For it is said of Sonponno:

“He feasts with the father of the household, but he strikes down the father’s son in the doorway.”



6

THE SCATTERING FROM IFE

IN THE BEGINNING, WHEN OBATALA CREATED THE HUMAN RACE, it was only Ife that was inhabited. Life was good for the people. Whatever they needed was provided by Olorun the Sky God or by the orisha Orunmila. Every family had its fields, and every field produced good crops of yams, manioc or corn. If there was something lacking, the people sent messengers to Olorun to ask for it. And whenever Olorun heard that people needed something to make their lives better he gave it to them. No person had less than enough, and no one had more than any other person in Ife. All shared equally in the things provided to them by Olorun and the other orishas.

But in the crowded marketplace one day a certain man of Ife looked around him and said, "Why is it that everyone looks the same? Everyone speaks the same. Everyone's color is the same. Every person has the same amount of everything. No man has more or less than the next one. There is a sameness among people. There is no variety."

A discussion began. People in the marketplace argued. One person said, "Yes, it is true. Why must I have no more than other people?" Someone else said, "There is no denying it. The sameness among people is monotonous." Another said, "The orishas are different from one another. We too should be different." Some people argued against it, saying, "No, there was wisdom in the way all humans were made alike and given equal portions of things. Let us be satisfied the way things are." But most of the people of Ife became infected with the idea that to be equal with others was to be deprived of something.

And so they began to make complaints to Olorun. Olorun received their complaints, and he sent a messenger to discuss things with the people of Ife. First one person, then another, sought out Olorun's messenger and asked for something that other people didn't have. One wanted a larger house. Another asked for more yams. One wanted more money. Another asked for servants and slaves to do his work for him. Some objected to the color of their skin and wanted it darker or lighter.

The messenger returned to the sky and told Olorun what he had heard down below. Olorun was disturbed. He sent his messenger again so that he would better understand the people's complaints. The messenger went back to Ife. Day by day he heard people ask for this or that. Again and again he reported to Olorun what the people were saying. In the beginning Olorun listened patiently, but at last he said, "These humans are becoming unbearable. Tell them to stop their complaints. They should be satisfied the way things are."

Again the messenger went to Ife. He said to the people who were complaining, "I have reported everything to Olorun. I have told him what you want. He has considered your requests. He says that humans are ungrateful and unreasonable. In the beginning he arranged the world so that you would all be equal in appearance and in the things you own. This is the way of harmony. What you are asking for can bring only dissension and conflict."

The people did not like what they heard from Olorun's messenger. They insisted on having the things they wanted. So the messenger reported once more to Olorun. And this time Olorun said impatiently, "Very well. Give them what they want."

The next time the messenger appeared in Ife he began distributing things among the people. The man who asked for a lighter skin received it. The one who wanted a darker skin received it. Some received more land, some received servants and slaves, some received gold. And after everything had been given out the messenger returned to the sky, and there he remained.

People began to quarrel about who had received the better gifts from Olorun. Some complained that they deserved more. People of different colors became proud. They looked at one another with suspicion. Those who owned more looked down on those who owned less, and people who had less tried to get something from the ones who had more.

To all the things they had demanded, Olorun added something. He gave them different languages. Whereas in the beginning everyone had spoken the same language, the language of Ife, some now began to speak Ibo, or Hausa, or Fon, or Arabic. The people had difficulty in understanding one another. They began to separate. Some left Ife, going to the north. Some went southward, some east or west. They settled in different places, and built new cities. This is how different tribes and nations came into being.

Whereas in the beginning all people had been equal in

all things, the demands they made on Olorun caused them to separate and disperse. Since that time the world has never been the same.



7

MOREMI AND THE EGUNGUNS

IN THE DAYS WHEN IFE WAS STILL YOUNG THERE WAS A DISTANT city called Ile-Igbo. Between the two cities was a forest, and neither one knew of the other's existence. No person of Ife had ever passed through that forest, nor had anyone from Ile-Igbo.

But one day a hunter from Ile-Igbo went out in search of game. He became lost in the forest and wandered many days without knowing which way to go. He began to give up hope, thinking, "The forest has swallowed me. Now I am coming to the end of my life." Then, when his despair had nearly killed him, he emerged from among the trees, and there just a little beyond he saw the city of Ife. He looked in

wonder, for he had never heard that such a place existed, but he did not approach the city. After he had rested he reentered the forest and, in time, he found his way back to Ile-Igbo.

He told the Oba of his own city what he had seen. The Oba thought, "As is well known, there is no such city as the one he describes." Nevertheless he sent messengers to check on the hunter's story. The messengers entered the forest. They pressed on. After some days they were saying to one another, "The hunter told our Oba a wild story. There is no city out here in the wilderness." Then they came to the edge of the forest and saw Ife standing there. They saw Ife's fields on all sides. They saw the fertile gardens and the granaries filled with food. They watched the people of Ife come and go, but they did not make their presence known.

The messengers returned to Ile-Igbo and reported to their Oba. They said, "The hunter's words were true. On the other side of the forest stands a prosperous city. Its gardens are full of all kinds of growing things. Its granaries are full of grain. Its market is full of people selling manioc, corn and yams."

The Oba of Ile-Igbo reflected on what he heard, for while Ife was prosperous his own city was not doing well. The gardens of Ile-Igbo did not grow enough food, and often there were families that had to eat wild roots because their crops were poor. The Oba thought, "Why should that other city prosper while mine suffers?" He called his counselors together. They discussed the matter. And it was decided to send an expedition to Ife and loot it of food. But Ife appeared to be strong, with many warriors. So the Oba's counselors devised a plan.

Instead of arming themselves with spears and other such weapons the men of Ile-Igbo disguised themselves as Egunguns, messengers from the land of the dead. Some were dressed as Ololu, or Beater, Egunguns and carried clubs. Some were dressed as Alapa-Nsanpa Egunguns and

had long arms hanging down at their sides. Some were dressed as Etiyeri Egunguns, with long protruding ears affixed to their heads. All the Egunguns wore masks, and their bodies were covered with raffia. They were fearsome to see, and even the people of Ile-Igbo were terrified.

The Egunguns went through the forest and arrived at the edge of Ife. There they rested for a while. At a signal from their leader they entered the city, dancing, gyrating, singing and making strange sounds.

The people of Ife were struck with fear and ran away into the bush. Then the Egunguns pillaged Ife. They took food from the granaries and the gardens. They took everything that they could carry. After that they disappeared into the forest and made their way back to Ile-Igbo. The Oba was happy. The people were happy. Now there was plenty of food for everyone in Ile-Igbo and there was no need to worry about the crops in the fields.

But the food stolen from Ife did not last forever. A time came when it was gone. And so the Oba met again with his counselors and decided to send another pillaging expedition to Ife. Once again the men dressed in the costumes of Egunguns and went through the forest and caused the people of Ife to flee from their city. Once again they looted the houses, granaries and gardens and returned home.

The looting of Ife became a way of life for Ile-Igbo, whose people neglected their own gardens even more than before. Whenever Ile-Igbo ran short of food another expedition was sent to Ife. Life in Ife became hard. Though the people there worked industriously they no longer had enough to eat. They planted, gathered their crops, and then the mysterious Egunguns came out of the forest and took everything away.

In Ife there was a woman named Moremi. She went to the Oba of Ife, saying, "These spirits from the forest, where do they come from? Where do they go? Why do dead spirits need to consume the food of the living? If things go

on this way, Ife itself will die and become a dead spirit. We should find out about these Egunguns. Therefore when they come again I will remain in the city and learn why they continue to harass us.”

The Oni, or Oba, of Ife objected, saying that it was taboo for women to watch the Egunguns, that to remain in the city was too dangerous. Moremi insisted. The Oba called on some of the elders of Ife to come and discuss what Moremi proposed. The counselors said, “If things go on this way Ife will dry up and fall away from the face of the earth. Something must be done. Let Moremi do as she wishes.” Having heard his counselors, the Oba of Ife agreed.

Moremi went to the sacred brook called Esinminrin. She supplicated the brook, asking for help against the Egunguns. She pledged that if she could save Ife she would give her young son Olu-Orogbo as a sacrifice.

In time the Egunguns again swarmed into Ife. The people fled to the bush, all except Moremi. She remained behind, and when the raiders entered her house they found her there. Not knowing what else to do with her they took her back to Ile-Igbo and brought her to the Oba. The Oba of Ile-Igbo found Moremi beautiful. He made her one of his wives. Little by little Moremi learned about the way Ile-Igbo had been deceiving Ife and reducing it to poverty. The people of Ile-Igbo began to forget that Moremi came from Ife. She waited for an opportunity to escape.

One night when she was with the Oba, Moremi brought him a great deal of palm wine and he drank heavily. Sleep came upon him. Moremi dressed herself in rags so that she looked like a beggar, and in the darkness she made her way to the forest and began the long journey back to Ife. Each night she climbed a tree and slept in the branches to be safe from wild animals. When the sun rose she resumed her walking. At last, after many days and nights, she came again to Ife. There was happiness in the city when she returned.

People called out to one another, "Moremi who was carried away by the Egunguns has returned!" They crowded around her house. There was singing and dancing.

Moremi disclosed everything she had learned in Ile-Igbo. Everyone was surprised to hear that the mysterious beings who came out of the forest were not really messengers from the dead, but raiders dressed in masks and raffia. They decided on a way to deal with the Egunguns when they came again.

Life went on. Then one day the Egunguns from Ile-Igbo again emerged from the forest and entered Ife. This time the people did not run into the bush. They went to their fires and lighted torches. As the Egunguns approached the houses the people ran out with their torches and set fire to the raffia costumes of the raiders. Soon all the Egunguns were aflame. They went this way and that in panic, running, falling, crying out. Some were blinded by the smoke and ran into the spears of the Ife warriors. Some died in the flames that enveloped them. Only a few managed to get out of their raffia costumes and escape to the forest. Those who found their way back to Ile-Igbo told the Oba what had happened. It was the last Ile-Igbo pillaging expedition to Ife. The Egunguns never came again.

There was a festival in Ife. The people praised and honored Moremi for her courageous act that had saved the city. But for Moremi it was not yet over. She had pledged that if she saved Ife from the Egunguns she would sacrifice her son Olu-Orogbo to the sacred brook Esinminrin. She carried out her promise. She went to the brook with her son, all of Ife walking behind her. There was a ritual, and there at the edge of the running water Olu-Orogbo was sacrificed. The people returned home. Moremi's heart was filled with grief.

But when everyone was gone a strange thing happened at the place of the sacrifice. A golden chain descended slowly from the sky. Olu-Orogbo stood up. He took hold of

the chain and was raised into the sky, where he lived on under the protection of the Sky God Olorun.

Ife also lived on.



8

ORANMIYAN, THE WARRIOR HERO OF IFE

In Ife tradition it is Oduduwa, rather than Obatala, who is credited with coming down from the sky to create dry land, found the city of Ife, and become the first ruler of that city. This story about Oranmiyan, the son of Oduduwa, belongs to Ife, and it is given here without any attempt to reconcile it with the tradition that says Obatala was the city's first ruler.

ODUDUWA RULED LONG OVER IFE. ORUNMILA, IT IS SAID, WENT TO rule over Benin, where he remained for some time. But after a while Orunmila tired of his life there and returned to the sky. Affairs in Benin did not go well after Orunmila departed. The people sent messengers to Oduduwa asking him to come and take charge of Benin. Oduduwa was reluctant to

leave Ife. He said, "If I go to Benin to give it a father, then Ife will have no father." The people of Benin continued to implore Oduduwa for help. At last he agreed to go to Benin. He took his son Oranmiyan with him to that city. He took charge of Benin's affairs, and he remained there until he heard he was much needed back in Ife. Oduduwa named Oranmiyan as ruler of Benin, after which he returned to govern Ife again. But Oduduwa did not live forever. When he knew he was going to die he sent for Oranmiyan. Oranmiyan made his own son ruler over Benin and returned to Ife, and as Oduduwa wanted him to do he became the Oni, or Oba, of that city.

By this time there were numerous kingdoms scattered across the earth, and war had come among humans. Because Ife was the first of all cities and because it was great in the minds of men it was envied everywhere. For this reason the Obas of other places sought to vanquish Ife and diminish its reputation. But just as Ife's name was great, so was the name of Oranmiyan. For he was fierce and valorous in war. Whenever the enemy came to attack, Oranmiyan led Ife's warriors into battle. Wherever the heat of the battle was, that was where Oranmiyan was to be seen. Warrior heroes of many other cities came face to face with Oranmiyan in the fields and were slain. The sunlight flashing from Oranmiyan's long sword struck terror into the hearts of those who sought to destroy Ife. Oranmiyan was the first on the battlefield and the last to leave, and his path could be seen by the corpses left behind by his weapons. The heroes of those times were numerous, but Oranmiyan was the greatest of them all, and while he lived Ife could not be subdued.

But Oranmiyan grew older. A time came when he knew that death would take him. He called the people together. He said, "Soon I must go. When I am no longer here, continue to live as heroes. Do not let our enemies make Ife small in the minds of men. Continue to be courageous so that Ife will go on living."

The people said to him, "Oranmiyan, you are the father of Ife. Reject death and remain here with us."

He answered, "No, it is not possible. Nevertheless I will not forget Ife. If great trouble comes to the city call me. I will give the old men the words to say, and when these words are spoken I will come back to help you."

He called the elders of Ife together and gave them the words. Then he went to the marketplace, all of the people of Ife following him. He arrived there. He struck his staff into the earth. It stood upright in the center of things. Oranmiyan said, "This is my mark. It will stand here forever to remind you of the courage of heroes." The staff turned into a shaft of stone which the people named Opa Oranmiyan, Oranmiyan's Staff.

Then the warrior hero Oranmiyan stamped his foot on the ground. The earth opened. He descended into the earth and it closed behind him. This was how Oranmiyan departed from his people.

Word reached far-off places that Oranmiyan no longer lived. The Oba of a distant city said, "Well, now, he is gone and Ife is defenseless. It is time to bring Ife to its knees." He gathered a force of warriors and sent them to destroy Ife. When the people of Ife saw the enemy approaching they went to the old men to whom Oranmiyan had given the secret words, saying, "Send for Oranmiyan quickly or Ife will die." The old men went to the marketplace and called Oranmiyan for help. There was a thunderous noise and the earth shook. The ground opened and Oranmiyan came out, his weapons in his hands. He led the warriors of Ife into battle. When the enemy saw Oranmiyan's weapons flashing in the sunlight terror overcame them. Those who were not killed turned and fled. The warriors of Ife pursued them until at last no living enemy was visible. Then they returned to the city. Oranmiyan stamped his foot on the ground of the marketplace. The earth opened. He descended. The earth closed over his head.

After that for many years Ife was not molested. People in other places said, "Ife remains great because although Oranmiyan is dead he is not truly dead."

There was a festival in Ife. There was drumming, dancing and singing. People feasted and drank much palm wine. Many of them became drunk. Darkness came. The festival went on. Someone said, "Oranmiyan should be here to dance and sing with us." Others said, "Yes, let us bring him out to lead us in our enjoyment." They went to the marketplace where Oranmiyan's staff was standing. They called on Oranmiyan to come out of the ground and join the festivities, but he did not appear. Someone said, "He will not come unless the secret words are spoken, the words that only the old men know." So they went through the city and found some of the elders to whom the words had been entrusted. They brought the old men to the marketplace and asked them to do what was necessary to bring Oranmiyan out of the ground.

The old men protested saying, "No, it is not a good thing to molest Oranmiyan because of a festival. Let him rest. He should be called on only in times of great need. Those were his instructions."

But the people persisted, saying, "Do what is necessary, old men, for we want Oranmiyan to lead us in the dancing and singing."

The old men continued to protest. Yet at last they said the words: "Come swiftly, Oranmiyan. Ife is in danger."

The ground thundered and opened. Oranmiyan emerged, his weapons in his hands, his face fierce with the courage of a warrior. Because it was dark Oranmiyan could not distinguish one person from another. He believed that the men in the marketplace were the enemy who had come to destroy Ife. He began fighting, thrusting with his spear and slashing with his sword. He struck at anything that moved, killing many men of Ife. The city was in turmoil. People ran in every direction, Oranmiyan pursuing. The killing went on.

The dawn came. Light fell on the city. Now Oranmiyan could clearly see the corpses lying on the ground. He saw the tribal scars on the cheeks of the dead, and he knew then that he had been slaughtering his own people. Grief overcame him. He threw his weapons down. He said, "I was asked to come quickly because Ife was in danger. Therefore I came, and in the darkness of night I killed many of the people of Ife. Because of this terrible deed I will not fight again. I will return to the place from which I came. There I will remain. I will never again come to Ife."

He stamped on the earth. The earth trembled and opened. Oranmiyan went down, and the earth closed behind him. Never after that was he seen in Ife.

His staff, in the form of a shaft of stone, still stands at that place, reminding people of the great warrior hero who once ruled over Ife, and of the slaughter that occurred because he was asked to help when the city was not really in danger.



9

THE FRIENDSHIP OF ESHU AND ORUNMILA

HOW CAN IT BE EXPLAINED THAT ORUNMILA, THE ELDEST SON OF the Sky God, was a warm friend to Eshu, who continually plagued both orishas and humans with disorder and disruption? For they were opposite to each other in many ways. Orunmila brought the knowledge of the Sky God to humans, while Eshu carried the words of humans to the Sky God. Orunmila's character was calm, while Eshu's was like a hot fire. Through the use of divining shells, Orunmila conveyed to men the intentions of the supreme god Olorun and the meanings of fate. But Eshu strove to turn Olorun's meanings aside, so that events would take an unintended course. Orunmila smoothed the road for humans, while Eshu lurked on the highway and made all things uncertain. Orunmila's character was destiny, and Eshu's character

was accident. Yet these two orishas were in friendship, and this is how it came to be so.

It is said that Orunmila was on a journey with some traveling companions. They were still some distance from home. His companions were carrying nothing, but Orunmila carried the bag in which he kept his divining tray, his divining cup and the palm nuts with which he read the future. Those who traveled with Orunmila envied his knowledge of divining and wished nothing more than to possess the bag that contained the knowledge.

One of his companions said, "Orunmila, you must be tired. Let me carry your divining bag."

Another said, "On the contrary, it is I who should carry the bag for Orunmila."

They argued over who should carry the divining bag. But at last Orunmila said, "No, let us end it. I am not tired. It is only proper that I should carry the divining bag."

When Orunmila arrived at his home he pondered on the incident, wondering who among his companions was truly a friend and who was not. He thought of a plan that would reveal what he wanted to know. He sent out messengers with the word that he had died. Then he hid behind his house where he could not be seen. There he waited.

After a while one of his companions came from another village to express his sorrow. He said to Orunmila's wife, "Where is the body of my good friend Orunmila?"

Orunmila's wife answered, as she had been instructed, "It is already buried."

The man said, "Yes, his death is painful to me. Orunmila and I were the closest of friends. Many times I gave him money and refused to let him repay me. However, he said that when he died he would leave me his divining nuts, his tray and all the secrets of his profession."

"It appears that you were indeed one of his best friends," Orunmila's wife said. "But misfortune! His divining bag has disappeared."

The man went away disappointed. Another man came crying out, "Orunmila, my best friend, why have you died like this? Nevertheless, do not worry about your divining bag and all it contains, for I shall take the greatest care of it."

Orunmila's wife said, "It would be good if you could take care of it. But an unfortunate thing has happened. The bag cannot be found. It is said that he felt death coming to him and that he sent his things to Olorun the Sky God from whom he received the knowledge of divining."

Another man came, saying that Orunmila had promised to give him all the paraphernalia for divining the truth of life. Everyone who came asked for these things.

At last Eshu arrived. He said, "What comfort is there for one who has lost a friend? I walk on Orunmila's path, I sit in his house, but Orunmila is not here and I know I will not see him again. For you, his wife, the sorrow is surely greater. Each day you prepared his food you said to yourself, 'This is the food of Orunmila.' Now what can you say? Only, 'Once I cooked the food of Orunmila, but now he is gone.'"

Orunmila's wife answered, "Yes, the sorrow is great. But you were his companion in life. Did he owe you money? Did he promise to leave you an inheritance? If he did, I will pay it for him."

Eshu said, "No, he owed me nothing and promised me nothing. On the contrary, it was I who owed money to Orunmila. After I return to my home I will send it, even though it is too late for him to receive it in his own hand. It was not I who was generous with Orunmila, it was he who was generous with me."

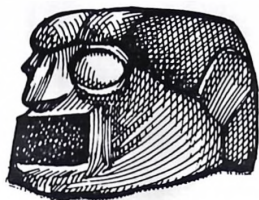
Orunmila's wife persisted. She said, "But surely he must have promised to leave something for you. Perhaps his divining tray and the sacred palm nuts through which the purposes of Olorun can be told?"

"No," Eshu said, "for he was too wise to do such a

thing. The secret of life is not in the palm nuts, but in the mind of Orunmila himself."

And now Orunmila left his hiding place behind the house and entered the room, saying, "You, Eshu, are my true friend."

So it came to be said thereafter, "No friends can be closer than Orunmila and Eshu."



10

ESHU AND DEATH

THERE WAS ONE BEING WHO DID NOT FEAR ESHU. HE WAS IKU, or Death.

Iku heard of the things Eshu did to harass people. He asked, "Why does no one reprimand Eshu? Why is he allowed to go unpunished?"

People answered, always in the same way, "Why, who is brash enough to berate him? It would only bring disaster."

Iku said, "Very well. Then it is I, Death, who must deal with Eshu."

Iku sent a message throughout the land of the Yorubas announcing that he would meet Eshu in battle.

When Eshu heard of the challenge he said, "I am not

afraid of Iku. Let us meet. Let us fight." He went to Orunmila, his friend, saying, "Death wishes to fight me to find out which of us is the stronger."

Orunmila replied, "Who can fight Death?"

Eshu answered angrily. He said, "Who can fight Eshu? Arrange the matter for me. We shall meet. We shall fight. I will destroy him."

So Orunmila arranged for the combat. The day of the battle arrived. Iku came with his retinue of singers and drummers. Eshu came with his retinue of singers and drummers. People came from everywhere to see the battle, and the crowd stretched from the marketplace to the outer edges of the town.

Eshu went forward, brandishing his great war club. He sang out words of contempt for Iku:

"Iku's father will have no son!
Iku's sons will have no father!
Iku's wife will have no husband!
How foolish of Iku!"

Eshu's singers and drummers took up the song. The excitement was great. Then Iku advanced, holding his sword and shield. He sang:

"Where is the family of Eshu
That will bury him?
Who will wash his body
And prepare it for burial?
Who will sit with the body
Until it enters the grave?
Who will place his drinking cup on top
When the grave has been filled?
Let them gather quickly."

Iku's singers and drummers took up the song. The noise in the marketplace was deafening.

Then the two fighters came together. The struggle began. The dust stirred up by their feet rose and hung like a dark cloud in the air. Eshu struck with his club again and again. But Iku was swift and agile. Not once did Eshu's club touch him. Eshu struck mighty blows. When his club hit the earth there was the sound of thunder. His club made the sound of wind as it went through the air. At last Iku seized Eshu. He threw him to the ground and wrested the club from his hand. He raised the club over Eshu to kill him.

There were cries of alarm in the crowd. Orunmila ran forward and took the club away from Iku, saving his friend from destruction. And so it was that although Eshu was defeated by Iku he did not die but lived on. And so it came about also that men said, "One cannot take life away from Death."



II

OSHUN LEARNS THE ART OF DIVINATION

OBATALA, KING OF THE WHITE CLOTH, HAD LEARNED THE ART OF divining with palm nuts and cowries from Orunmila. Many persons had come to Obatala to ask him for the secret of divination. But Obatala said he had been given this knowledge in trust, and that he could not lightly pass it on. Now, among those who wanted to learn how to cast cowries was a beautiful woman named Oshun who was the wife of Shango, or perhaps not yet the wife of Shango; this the story does not tell us. Oshun came to Obatala many times, saying, "Teach me how to read the meanings of Olorun through knowledge of Ifa." But though he was much attracted to Oshun because of her beauty, Obatala refrained from teaching her.

One day Obatala went out from the city to a nearby river to bathe. He removed his clothes and hung them on the bushes, and after that he went into the water. While he was bathing there, the orisha Eshu, who seeks to derange the order of things, passed near the edge of the river. He saw the white clothes hanging in the bushes and recognized them to be Obatala's. He called out, "Is the King of the White Cloth still a king when he has no cloth?" He took Obatala's clothes and carried them away with him to the place where he lived.

Obatala came out of the water. He was naked. Of the clothes he had left on the bank nothing remained. He thought, "How can I return to the city? Even for the lowliest of persons it would be a great indignity. For Obatala it is even worse."

While he stood wondering what to do next, Oshun came along the trail. She saw Obatala standing sad and dejected. She asked him about his trouble. Obatala told her how Eshu had stolen his clothes. Oshun said, "I will get your clothes back from Eshu."

Obatala answered, "No one can reason with Eshu. It is useless."

But Oshun insisted, "Yes, I can do it. But in exchange, will you teach me the knowledge of divining?"

Obatala, who had refused Oshun many times, said, "Yes. If you bring back my clothes for me I will give you the knowledge."

So Oshun went to the place where Eshu was to be found. Eshu, when he saw her, became enamored of her beauty. And because Eshu was Eshu he sought at once to have intercourse with her.

Oshun said, "No, it is not for such a reason that I am here. You have annoyed and humiliated Obatala. Give me his clothes. I will take them back to him."

But Eshu could think only of lying with Oshun and he was not willing to discuss anything else.

Oshun was willing to speak only of Obatala and what Eshu had done against him.

At last they came to an agreement. Oshun lay with Eshu, and after that Eshu gave her the clothes.

She returned to the riverbank where Obatala was waiting. He received the clothes. He put them on. He returned to the city.

Remembering his pledge, he taught Oshun how to cast cowries and palm nuts. In this way Oshun learned how to discern the mind of Olorun the Sky God.



12

ORUNMILA'S VISIT TO OWO

IN THE PLACE WHERE HE WAS THEN LIVING, ORUNMILA DECIDED one day to make a journey to Owo. Before beginning the journey he cast his sixteen divining nuts to reveal the safety or the hazards of the road, which is to say the intentions of the Sky God Olorun. The first time Orunmila cast the divining nuts they said to him, "What is to happen the diviner will not know." He cast again, and the divining nuts said, "Even the Father of Diviners cannot perceive it." Now, Orunmila should have pursued the matter, because the truth had not been made clear, but he was impatient to go to Owo and so he put his divining nuts away and began his journey.

The distance to Owo was long, and Orunmila was five days on the road. On the first day of his journey he met his friend Eshu who was going the other way, returning from Owo. They greeted one another and parted. On the second day Orunmila again met Eshu coming from the opposite direction. Eshu said, "Yes, I am returning from Owo." Orunmila pondered on this and wondered about it, for it was strange that two persons going in opposite directions should meet twice on the road. On the third day, as well, he met Eshu coming from Owo. Orunmila was troubled about the meaning of these events. But he did not stop to consult his divining nuts because he was eager to arrive in Owo as soon as possible.

On the fourth day Eshu lurked on the outskirts of Owo. When he saw Orunmila approaching he placed some fresh kola fruits on the trail and left them there. He went forward and greeted Orunmila again.

Orunmila said, "Eshu, my friend. Are you just coming once more from Owo?"

Eshu answered, "Need friends doubt one another? What is, is."

But Orunmila was not satisfied that all was well. Nevertheless he was almost in sight of Owo. He thought, "Only a little distance and I am there. There is no need to consult the divining nuts."

He went on. He found the kola fruits left on the road by Eshu. Because he was tired by his long journey he picked up the kola fruits and began to eat to refresh himself. At this moment a farmer of Owo appeared, carrying his bush knife in his hand. He said, "You, whoever you are, are eating kola fruits from my tree."

Orunmila answered, "No, I found the kolas on the trail. I saw no tree. Therefore I took the fruits to refresh myself."

But the farmer was angry and spoke harshly. He attempted to take the kolas away from Orunmila. There was a

struggle, and in the fighting the farmer's bush knife cut the palm of Orunmila's hand. Orunmila turned back from Owo and sat by the side of the road, thinking, "This is an evil thing. When have I ever taken something that was not mine? Yet in Owo it will be said that I am a stealer of kolas."

Night came. Orunmila slept on the ground. But Eshu, who had seen everything, went into the city when everyone there was asleep. He went into every house. With his knife he cut the palm of every sleeping person, even that of the Oba himself. Then he went out of the city to the place where the farmer who had fought with Orunmila lived, and cut his palm also.

On the fifth day Orunmila awoke. He resumed his way to Owo. At the entrance of the city he met Eshu. Eshu greeted him, but Orunmila was reproachful. He said, "Eshu, the matter becomes clear. We are friends, yet you have made my way hard."

Eshu said, "Orunmila, we are truly close friends. Do not hesitate. Enter the city. If there is trouble I will speak for you. You will not receive injury in Owo. On the contrary, good things will come to you."

Orunmila and Eshu entered Owo together. The farmer, he who had claimed the kola fruits, was there. He saw Orunmila coming. He went to the Oba and complained, saying that the robber of his kola tree was approaching. He demanded that Orunmila be punished. So the Oba had Orunmila brought before him.

The farmer made his complaint again, and described the struggle over the kola fruits.

After that Eshu spoke for Orunmila. He said, "A stranger comes to Owo with trust. He suspects nothing, for he has no enemies. He asks for nothing, because he already has everything. Yet Owo accuses him of a crime. Where is the evidence? And how can a thief of the kolas be identified?"

The farmer answered, "We struggled on the road. My bush knife carved a wound in the palm of his hand. Therefore let the man show his hand, because that is where the evidence is."

The Oba said to Orunmila, "Yes, open your hand so that everyone may see the truth."

Eshu, speaking for Orunmila, said, "This stranger who has not committed any offense has been singled out. Although many persons could have stolen kola fruits, only he is accused and questioned. Therefore let every citizen of Owo also reveal the palm of his hand."

The Oba said, "Yes, let it be done."

So Orunmila opened his hand and held it out, and the people of Owo did likewise. And every hand in Owo, including that of the Oba and the complaining farmer, had a fresh red cut.

Eshu said, "If a mere cut is the mark of guilt, then all of Owo is guilty."

The Oba agreed, saying, "It is true. This stranger is innocent. He should be indemnified for the false accusation against him."

The people of Owo brought gifts of every kind, including chickens, goats, kola fruits, palm wine and cowries, and gave them to Orunmila.

Why Eshu did what he did to his close friend Orunmila is not said. It is said only that Eshu, being what he is, could not refrain from doing it.



13

THE DIVISION OF THE COWRIES

OYA AND OSHUN, WHO WERE WIVES OF SHANGO, AND YEMOJA, who was a wife of Ogun, were together in the market of Oyo one day. Eshu entered the market leading a goat. He saw that all was peaceful. And because Eshu is what he is, he planted dissension to grow. He approached Yemoja, Oya and Oshun, saying, "I must leave the city on an important affair. My friend Orunmila is waiting for me. Therefore sell my goat for me and I will give you half of what is earned. The price is twenty cowries, ten for you and ten for me."

Yemoja, Oya and Oshun agreed, and Eshu departed. The goat was sold for twenty cowries. Yemoja, Oya and

Oshun put ten cowries aside for Eshu and began to divide the ten cowries which were their share. Yemoja counted them out. There were three cowries for each of them, but one cowry remained. She could not make the three shares equal. So Oya tried to make the division. She made three piles, and each pile contained three cowries, but one cowry was left over. Then Oshun tried, but still there was one cowry too many. The three of them began to argue about who should get the largest portion.

Yemoja said, "It is proper that the eldest should get the largest portion. Therefore I will take the extra cowry."

Oshun said, "No, where I come from it is said that the youngest should be treated most generously. So the extra cowry should be given to me."

Oya said, "The matter is in dispute. It has always been said that in case of dispute between the eldest and the youngest, the major portion should go to one who is between the two. So the extra cowry should be mine."

They could not resolve the argument, and they called on a man in the marketplace to divide the cowries equitably for them. He took the cowries and laid them out in three equal piles, but the tenth cowry was still in his hand. He said, "Now, how can ten be divided into three equal parts? One is left over. Who deserves it? According to all I have heard the eldest deserves it because she has been longest in the world and has suffered more than the others. Therefore let us give the cowry to the eldest among you."

But Oya and Oshun, who were the second oldest and the youngest, rejected his advice. They refused to give Yemoja the largest share.

Another person was asked to divide the cowries. He counted them out, but he could not divide them evenly. He said, "There is no way to do it. An extra cowry must be given to one of you. Who shall get it? It has been taught to us that in situations of this kind the youngest person should be favored, for the youngest has been in the world the

shortest time and has received fewer benefits than the others. The youngest child is pushed aside in games, the youngest hunter always walks behind, and the youngest wife has the hardest life. Therefore when an unequal division is necessary the youngest person should receive the advantage."

Yemoja and Oya would not agree. They said, "No, we have never been taught such a thing as this. We cannot accept it."

So still another man was asked to make the division. He counted out three piles of three and put the extra cowry to one side. He said, "Now, it is held by some that the eldest person should get the extra portion, and it is held by others that the youngest should receive the extra portion. So who among you is both elder and younger? It is the one who is neither eldest nor youngest. Oya is senior to Oshun, and she is junior to Yemoja. Thus she meets both conditions. Give her the extra cowry."

But Yemoja and Oshun rejected his advice. They refused to give the extra cowry to Oya. So the division still was not resolved.

Eshu returned to the market and came to where the three were arguing. He said, "Where is my portion?" They gave him his ten cowries, and after that they asked him to divide their ten among them in an equitable way.

Eshu gave Yemoja three, Oya three and Oshun three. The tenth cowry he held back. He put it in a hole in the ground and covered it with earth. He said, "The extra cowry is for the ancestors. In the sky it was always done this way. Whenever someone receives something good he should remember the dead. When crops are brought in from the fields, a first share should be given to the dead. When there is feasting, a portion must be offered to the dead. When there is a sacrifice to the orishas, some part of it should be given to the ancestors. So, also, with money. This is the way it was done in the sky, and so it must be on

earth. When anything comes to someone he should share with the ancestors. Had you remembered this there would have been no dispute over the cowries.”

Yemoja, Oya and Oshun acknowledged that Eshu was right and they agreed to accept three cowries each.

Because of what transpired in the market of Oyo, people were scrupulous thereafter in giving a portion to the dead ancestors whenever they received new crops or good fortune.



14

SHANGO AND THE MEDICINE OF ESHU

THE ORISHA SHANGO RULED FIRMLY OVER ALL OF OYO, THE CITY and the lands that surrounded it. He was a stern ruler, and because he owned the thunderbolt the people of Oyo tried to do nothing to displease or anger him. His symbol of power was a double-bladed ax which signified, "My strength cuts both ways," meaning that no one, even the most distant citizen of Oyo, was beyond reach of his authority or immune to punishment for misdeeds. The people of Oyo called him by his praise name, Oba Jakuta, the Stone Thrower Oba.

But even though Shango's presence was felt everywhere in Oyo, and even beyond in other kingdoms, he wanted something more to instill fear in the hearts of men.

He sent for the great makers of medicine in Oyo and instructed them to make jujus that would increase his powers. One by one the medicine makers brought him this and that, but he was not satisfied with their work. He decided at last to ask the orisha Eshu for help. He sent a messenger to the distant place where Eshu lived. The messenger said to Eshu, "Oba Jakuta, the great ruler of Oyo, sends me. He said, 'Go to the place where the renowned Eshu stays. Tell him I need a powerful medicine that will cause terror to be born in the hearts of my enemies. Ask Eshu if he will make such a medicine for me.'"

Eshu said, "Yes, such a thing is possible. What kind of power does Shango want?"

The messenger answered, "Oba Jakuta says, 'Many makers of medicine have tried to give me a power that I don't already have. But they do not know how to do it. Such knowledge belongs only to Eshu. If he asks what I need, tell him it is he alone who knows what must be done. What he prepares for me I will accept.'"

Eshu said, "Yes, what the ruler of Oyo needs, I shall prepare it for him. In return he will send a goat as sacrifice. The medicine will be ready in seven days. But you, messenger, do not come back for it yourself. Let Shango's wife Oya come for it. I will put it in her hand."

The messenger went back to Oyo. He told Shango what he had heard from Eshu. Shango said, "Yes, I will send Oya to receive the medicine."

On the seventh day he instructed Oya to go to the place where Eshu was living. He said, "Greet Eshu for me. Tell him that the sacrifice will be sent. Receive the medicine he has prepared and bring it home quickly."

Oya departed. She arrived at the place where Eshu was living. She greeted him. She said, "Shango of Oyo sends me for the medicine. The sacrifice you asked for is on the way."

Eshu said, "Shango asked for a great new power. I have finished making it." He gave Oya a small packet

wrapped in a leaf. He said, "Take care with it. See that Shango gets it all."

Oya began the return journey, wondering, "What has Eshu made for Shango? What kind of power can be in so small a packet?" She stopped at a resting place. As Eshu had presumed she would do, Oya unwrapped the packet to see what was inside. There was nothing there but red powder. She put a little of the powder in her mouth to taste it. It was neither good nor bad. It tasted like nothing at all. She closed the medicine packet and tied it with a string of grass. She went on. She arrived at Oyo and gave the medicine to Shango.

He said, "What instructions did Eshu give you? How is this medicine to be used?"

Oya was about to say, "He gave no instructions whatever." As she began to speak, fire flashed from her mouth. Thus Shango saw that Oya had tasted the medicine that was meant for him alone. His anger was fierce. He raised his hand to strike her but she fled from the house. Shango pursued her. Oya came to a place where many sheep were grazing. She ran among the sheep thinking that Shango would not find her. But Shango's anger was hot. He hurled his thunderstones in all directions. He hurled them among the sheep, killing them all. Oya lay hidden under the bodies of the dead sheep and Shango did not see her there.

Shango returned to his house. Many people of Oyo were gathered there. They pleaded for Oya's life. They said, "Great Shango, Oba of Oyo, spare Oya. Your compassion is greater than her offense. Forgive her."

Shango's anger cooled. He sent servants to find Oya and bring her home. But he still did not know how Eshu intended for him to use the medicine. So when night came he took the medicine packet and went to a high place overlooking the city. He stood facing the compound where he lived with all his wives and servants. He placed some of the medicine on his tongue. And when he breathed the air out of

his lungs an enormous flame shot from his mouth, extending over the city and igniting the straw roofs of the palace buildings. A great fire began to burn in Oyo. It destroyed Shango's houses and granaries. The entire city was consumed, and nothing was left but ashes. Thus Oyo was leveled to the ground and had to be rebuilt. After the city rose again from its ashes, Shango ruled on. In times of war, or when his subjects displeased him, Shango hurled his thunderbolts. Every stone he threw was accompanied by a bright flash that illuminated the sky and the earth. This, as all men knew, was the fire shooting from Shango's mouth.

The sheep that died while protecting Oya from Shango's thunderstones were never forgotten. In their honor, the worshippers of Oya have refused to eat mutton even to the present day.



15

OBATALA'S VISIT TO SHANGO

THE GREAT ORISHA OBATALA, WHO HAD DRIED UP THE WATERY wastes and shaped human beings out of clay, decided one day to visit Shango, who ruled in Oyo. "Prepare things for me," he said to his wife, "so that I can make a journey. I want to see my friend Shango, the Stone Thrower."

His wife prepared food for Obatala to take with him on the journey. She instructed that Obatala's clothing should be washed and made spotless. Obatala had no drummers to go ahead of him and announce his coming. He was known everywhere by the white clothing he wore, and thus he was called the King of the White Cloth. But when his wife slept that night she dreamed that although Obatala's white cloth-

ing was washed again and again, dark spots appeared on it whenever it was dry. When she awakened she said, "Obatala, do not go to Oyo. In my dream the white cloth would not become clean."

Obatala answered, "But the cloth is indeed clean, whatever you dreamed. I will begin my journey to Oyo."

Nevertheless, before he started the journey Obatala went to the house of Orunmila, the orisha of divining, and asked him whether the visit to Oyo would be a good one. Orunmila brought out his divining tray and cast his palm nuts. When he had finished he said, "Do not go to Oyo, for misfortune will meet you there."

Obatala said, "How can misfortune meet me in Oyo? It is my friend Shango who rules in that place." He returned to his house. He put on his white clothes. He began the walking.

On the road to Oyo he met the orisha Eshu sitting under a tree. They greeted each other. Obatala said, "Why do you sit here waiting?"

Eshu said, "I am waiting for someone to place this bowl of palm oil on my head so that I can carry it."

Obatala helped Eshu lift the bowl, but as he did so the oil spilled over and stained his white robe. Seeing this, Obatala did not continue toward Oyo but returned home and changed to fresh clothing. After that he began the journey again.

On the road he met Eshu once more, and again Eshu asked for help in getting the bowl to his head. Obatala, whose good deeds were many, could not deny help to Eshu. So he helped lift the bowl of palm oil. Just as before, the oil spilled and made spots on Obatala's robe. For the second time Obatala turned back and went home for fresh clothing. Once again he met Eshu waiting at the roadside. This time the bowl of palm oil was larger than before.

Eshu said, "Obatala, help me raise the bowl to my head."

But the soiling of his white clothing had been a bad omen, and Obatala answered, "No, this time I can not do it. Twice already my white robe has been stained."

Eshu became angry. He said, "You refuse?"

Obatala said, "Yes, put the bowl up by yourself."

Eshu said no more, but with his hand he splashed oil on Obatala's clothes. Because Eshu was known to do violent things when angry, Obatala did not make an argument. He kept silent and departed. This time, however, he did not turn back but continued on toward Oyo, thinking now of his wife's dream and of the warning given to him by Orunmila.

When he had traveled far and was nearing Oyo he saw a white horse grazing nearby. He thought, "This horse lost in the bush can only be Shango's. I will take him along." He took the horse with him. As he approached Oyo, Shango's servants came looking for the horse. When they saw Obatala they seized him and beat him, saying, "This is the thief for whom we have been looking!" They continued beating Obatala all the way to Oyo, and there they threw him into a prison yard without listening to his explanation.

Time passed. Obatala remained a prisoner. Shango knew nothing of the affair. Many weeks went by, yet no one came to release Obatala. In the beginning Obatala had thought, "Surely someone will come to undo this evil." But no one came, and at last Obatala was overcome with anger. He caused a drought to fall upon Oyo. No rain fell. The fields dried up. The crops did not grow, and the people of Oyo began to feel hunger. Still no one came to release Obatala. So he caused sickness to come into the city. It traveled from one house to another and people began to die.

Seeing the disaster that was overtaking Oyo, Shango sent for his diviners. They cast their palm nuts, their cowry shells and their divining chains, and when they were finished they said to Shango, "An exalted personage wearing a spotted white robe has been imprisoned in Oyo. It is he who

has sent us drought and disease. Unless he is released there will be no rain, no food, and no life remaining in the city."

So Shango began a search of his prison yards, and in one of them he found Obatala, King of the White Cloth. Obatala's whiteness was soiled with dirt, his beard was unkempt, and his skin was covered with dust. Though he considered himself the greatest of all rulers, Shango prostrated himself before Obatala like an ordinary person, saying, "You, Obatala, who made all things possible, what terrible fate brought you here?"

Obatala replied, "I came only to visit Shango, Ruler of Oyo. On the way I first met Eshu, who soiled my clothing and twisted accident into my journey. I found your horse in the bush and led him to the city. But I was treated as the lowest of criminals, placed here and forgotten."

Shango said, "Great Obatala, it was not known to me."

Obatala answered, "Can a ruler be said to truly rule if he does not know what his servants do with the authority he has given them?"

Shango said, "A thing like this will not happen in Oyo again."

Because Obatala was the creator of humans it grieved him to see them suffering. He caused the rain to come again and the crops to grow, and the sickness fell away from Oyo.

It was Eshu who caused things to go badly with Obatala. Misfortune came to the King of the White Cloth because Eshu stained his clothing with oil. And in memory of this event people who are going on a long journey still say:

"Eshu who splashed oil on the clothes of Obatala,
Please do not soil my white clothing with oil."



16

THE QUARREL BETWEEN OYA AND OSHUN

AT THE TIME WHEN SHANGO RULED OVER THE CITY OF OYO HE had numerous wives, among whom were Oya and Oshun. In most respects these two women were equal in Shango's affections. But whereas Oya had the knowledge of cooking, the food Oshun prepared did not please Shango at all. Oshun admired Oya's understanding of the secrets of food, and she also envied it. Oya admired Oshun's beauty, and she also envied it. Though they did not speak of it openly there was rivalry and jealousy between them.

Now, every year on a certain day there was a festival in Oyo commemorating the time when Shango became the ruler of the city and the lands around it. On this day all

work stopped. There was music and dancing everywhere. Acrobats and wrestlers gathered and displayed their skills. Processions of many kinds went through the city to the sounds of horns and drums. People sang songs of praise for Shango, and poets recited Shango's great deeds and declaimed on Oyo's fame. Obas and regional chiefs came to Oyo from faraway places to participate in the festivities. For these rulers and honored personages Shango always gave a feast, and he also gave out gifts to the people of the city.

The time of this festival was approaching. The city was preparing things. Shango called on his wives to carry out their responsibilities so perfectly that no criticism of any kind would fall on him or his household. Oya and Oshun were given charge of preparing the food for the feast. Shango admonished them to put aside their frictions and think only of the importance of the occasion.

The day of the celebration arrived. Remembering Shango's admonitions and wishing to please him, Oshun put away her pride and went to Oya for advice. She said, "It is true that in all things having to do with the knowledge of food you surpass me. Whatever you prepare pleases Shango, and whatever I prepare distresses him. But I want to do nothing today that will make him unhappy or bring ridicule on his household. Therefore, Oya, instruct me. Give me the secret of making food good to the taste."

At first Oya thought, "Yes, we must not do anything to chagrin Shango on this occasion." Then she thought, "Why should I do anything to enhance this woman in Shango's affection?" And so at last she said, "Have you never noticed that I always wear my headdress low to cover my ears? Beneath the headdress is the answer to your question."

Oshun said, "What can this have to do with the cooking of food?"

Oya said, "Long ago I cut off my ears so that I could

use them as a special ingredient in the food. To everything I prepare for Shango to eat I add a small amount of this ingredient. Now very little of it is left. But the proof that my story is true is that Shango finds my cooking good. A small portion of my ear makes poor food good and good food delectable. This is my secret. I have now told you everything I know about cooking. But never speak of this to anyone."

Oshun answered gratefully, "No, I will never speak of it." She returned to her own quarters and began to prepare soup. She was determined to do anything that would please Shango. She severed her ears and dropped them in the soup. After that she covered her wounds with her headdress and suffered her pain silently. She thought, "Today, at least, Shango will find no fault with me. His guests will not be able to say, 'Shango's wife knows nothing about food.'"

The day progressed. It was a great festival. The important personages who were guests in the city gathered at Shango's house. They sat with Shango on the skins of leopards and lions. Shango called for Oya to bring food. She brought it in a large bowl, from which a share was given to everyone. The food was sweet. The guests said to one another, "Only at Shango's house is such incomparable food served."

Then Shango called on Oshun to bring what she had prepared. She brought the soup, giving a share to each person. They ate. They did not enjoy it. Shango complained about it. The guests turned to one another, saying, "Is this the kind of food that ought to be served at the house of the great Oba?"

Suddenly one of the guests discovered two human ears floating in his bowl. In horror he dropped his food on the floor and fled from the house. Everyone saw the ears lying there, and they put their own bowls aside and departed quickly.

Shango was filled with disgust at what he saw. Shame

and anger overtook him. He sent for Oya and Oshun. He demanded to know how the ears got into the food. The women looked at one another silently. Oshun did not wish to reveal Oya's secret. But at last Oya said, "The ears are Oshun's. She put them into the soup thinking to make it more palatable." Still Oshun did not speak. Oya said to Shango, "Remove her headdress. See for yourself."

Shango took off Oshun's head cloth. He saw the wounds where her ears had been. Oshun said, "I only wanted to please you. I learned the secret from Oya. She also removed her ears to use in preparing food." Shango took off Oya's head cloth. Oya's ears were there, unmuti-lated.

Seeing that she had been tricked by Oya and disgraced in Shango's eyes, Oshun said nothing more. She left Shango's house and departed from Oyo. She traveled on, never looking back, until she came to a large river. She entered the water. She disappeared. Oshun became an orisha, the spirit of the river. This is how the Oshun River got its name.

Oshun was never forgotten in Oyo, nor did she forget the people of that city. As an orisha she helped them whenever she could. She gave the gift of fertility. From that day until the present, barren women have gone to the banks of the Oshun River and given sacrifices there, supplicating Oshun to give them children. Without Oshun's help, many persons who were born and lived on in Oyo would not have lived at all. But Oshun never forgave Oya for causing her to cut off her ears and become ridiculous in Shango's sight.



17

TWO WARRIOR HEROES, AND HOW SHANGO DEPARTED FROM OYO

SHANGO LIVED ON IN OYO. IT WAS A TIME OF WARS AMONG THE Yoruba cities, and little by little Oyo's influence spread, until Shango was master of the whole country. His armies had subdued everyone who opposed him, and all the other Obas acknowledged Oyo as supreme. Only after this was there peace. As he had in war, Shango now governed with a strong hand, though some say he ruled with a force that was no longer required.

Among the warriors who had fought in Shango's armies there were many heroes, but the greatest of them all

were Timi and Gbonka. Because of their valorous deeds they were known everywhere. People remembered this battle and that battle in which the two heroes had fought, and recalled their accomplishments.

Shango could not escape hearing these recollections. He thought, "I am the Alafin of Oyo, the Oba of Obas. My armies have conquered everything. Other Obas recognize the supremacy of Oyo. Yet it is not me that people praise. People everywhere are saying 'Timi-this' or 'Gbonka-that.'" Shango brooded. He began to consider how he might rid Oyo of the two heroes.

One day he sent a messenger to instruct Timi to come to the royal house. When Timi arrived he was accompanied by a drummer who beat out sayings of praise for the hero. A crowd of people followed, some of them dancing. This was the way things were done when a great hero went from one place to another. Now, Shango felt gratitude for the loyalty of Timi in the wars, and his jealousy and his gratitude wrestled within him. But the sight of so many people celebrating Timi's great deeds made Shango's heart hard. He decided to send Timi away.

He said, "In the city of Ede things are not good. The people there do not show the proper respect for Oyo. They forget that they are the servants and I am the master. Go and rule over Ede. Grind down those who seek trouble. Bring order out of disorder. Remain there, be Ede's father."

Timi said, "Great Shango, I will do what you ask. When have I ever failed to strike a blow for the honor of Oyo? Do not doubt it, Ede will praise you and be your servant."

He went to his house and prepared for his journey. He hung his medicine bundles and his talismans around his neck and his arms. He took the bow and the flaming arrows he used in war. He mounted his horse and with only a few warrior companions he rode away to Ede.

Shango thought, "Now I have disposed of one of the heroes. He will surely meet his end trying to take Ede." But then news began to come back to Oyo that Timi and his companions had fought the finest warriors of Ede and defeated them. When that was done, Timi became the ruler of the city and all the lands around it. Timi's name had become greater than before. And, as time went on, Ede grew in strength and reknown. Shango was eaten by anger. He devised a new plan to be rid of Timi.

He sent for the second hero, Gbonka, and instructed him in this manner: "Go to Ede for me, where Timi has taken the seat of the Oba. When he departed he promised to make Ede the servant of Oyo. Instead of that he has made Ede proud and vain, as though Oyo were merely a village of no consequence. When you reach Ede challenge Timi, defeat him and bring him back. Because you have powerful medicine you cannot fail in this matter."

Gbonka listened. He felt no anger for Timi, only close comradeship. He said, "Great ruler of Oyo, I hear what you want me to do. But Timi and I fought side by side through the bloodiest of Oyo's wars. When one of us bled, both bled. When one struck down an enemy, so did the other. We have relieved our thirst from the same cup. How can I now fight with Timi? For one of us will surely die."

Shango answered, "Yes, I have thought of it. But your medicine is powerful. It will prevail over Timi without causing anyone to die." Yet in his mind Shango was thinking, "When two heroes like Timi and Gbonka meet in battle one must die. If it is Timi I will have only Gbonka to deal with. If it is Gbonka I will have only Timi to dispose of."

Gbonka said to Shango, "I will go to Ede. I will talk to Timi as to my companion of many wars. I will persuade him to return." He went to his house. He placed his medicine bundles and his talismans on his arms and around his neck. He took his antelope horn in which was kept the most powerful of his jujus. Then he rode away to Ede, his

drummer walking in front. The drummer beat out Gbonka's praise names and the great deeds he had performed in battle.

The people of Ede, in time, heard the drumming. They went to the edge of the city to see who was coming. They were overcome with awe at the sight of Gbonka. He was strong and fierce, and his body was nearly covered with leather medicine bundles. So many talismans hung from his head that his face was nearly obscured, but behind them his eyes shone like sparks in the darkness. He carried a long spear, and on his shield were the marks that all men knew to be the sign of Gbonka of Oyo.

The Ede people ran to Timi's house, calling out that Gbonka was coming dressed for battle. When Gbonka arrived there Timi was standing at his door waiting. Gbonka dismounted. He said, "Timi, my companion in war, Shango has sent me to bring you back to Oyo. Let us prepare for the journey."

Timi said, "You, Gbonka, who rode by my side to do great deeds, you are welcome to Ede. But I can not go back to Oyo with you, for I am the Oba in Ede now."

They spoke this way, two friends one to another, and gave their arguments.

Timi said, "Gbonka, you must return to Oyo alone. Time has changed many things. Shango sent me here to control Ede. Here I must stay."

Gbonka said, "Shango did not send me merely to ride here and ride there. He said, 'Bring Timi back to Oyo.' He said, 'If Timi does not choose to come, bring him by force.'"

Timi said, "Likewise, when Shango sent me here he did not say 'Go to that place and return.' Therefore I do not return."

Gbonka said, "If I cannot persuade you by words, then we must fight to decide the matter."

Timi said, "Gbonka, can you use your weapons against me? I am your friend and your companion of many wars."

Gbonka answered, though his heart was sick, "Yes, it is that way. Therefore prepare yourself to fight."

Timi entered his house. When he came out his arms and chest were covered with medicine bundles and talismans. In his hands he held his bow and his flaming arrows.

The people of Ede pleaded with the heroes, saying, "You men are closer than brothers. What you are doing is not right."

But Timi said to the people, "Stand back and do not come between us." So they backed away. Timi's drummer began to play Timi's praise names. Gbonka's drummer began to play Gbonka's praise names. Timi placed a flaming arrow in his bow. But Gbonka did not raise either his spear or his shield. He held only his medicine horn in his hand. He sang a song that ended with the words :

"When a child sleeps he drops whatever he holds in his hands.

Sleep now, Timi, and let go your bow and flaming arrows."

Instantly Timi fell into a deep sleep. His weapons dropped from his hands and he fell to the ground. Gbonka approached him with his spear poised. But when he looked on Timi's still face, Gbonka put his spear down. He ordered the people to put Timi on his horse. Gbonka mounted his own horse and rode away, taking Timi with him to Oyo. When he arrived he went directly to Shango's house and put Timi on the ground. He said to Shango, "We fought, but before he could release his arrow I put him to sleep. As you wanted me to do, I have brought him back to Oyo."

The people who had gathered in Shango's courtyard demanded that Timi be awakened. Gbonka awakened him. Timi stood up. The people ridiculed him with phrases and laughter. Gbonka turned away silently and went to his own house and entered.

Shango was deeply troubled, for once again he had the two heroes in Oyo. He thought about the matter for some days. Then he sent for Timi and said to him, "Things did not go well. I foresaw that you would defeat Gbonka. Instead, he put you to sleep with his power of medicine. Now the people of Oyo ridicule you. Of all heroes you are the greatest, and your medicine is more powerful than Gbonka's. Therefore injustice has been done. Will you leave the matter there? You cannot live from day to day hearing people say, 'There goes Timi, once great, but now humiliated by Gbonka of Oyo.' In Ede even now you can hear it said, 'Timi who made himself Oba of Ede, he fell asleep in the face of a single warrior.' If you choose to fight Gbonka again I will announce it to the city."

When they had faced each other in Ede, even with their weapons in their hands, Timi had felt like a brother to Gbonka. But now his shame choked him and he longed to fight. He said, "Yes, I will meet Gbonka once more, and may death come to one of us."

Shango sent criers out through the city. They called, "Atoto-o! Atoto-o! Two warrior heroes meet! Gbonka and Timi are going to fight!"

The next morning the two men appeared before Shango's compound prepared to fight. Everyone in Oyo was there. The heroes faced each other calling out taunts back and forth. Their drummers beat out their praise names. There was great excitement. Timi released a flaming arrow from his bow. As the arrow began its flight, Gbonka pointed to the east with his medicine horn. The arrow turned and went to the east. Timi released another flaming arrow from his bow. Gbonka pointed his medicine horn westward. The arrow turned to the west. Timi sent arrow after arrow at Gbonka, but Gbonka's medicine horn turned them all aside. And when Timi's arrows were nearly gone, Gbonka sang the same song he had sung in Ede. The final words of the song came from his mouth:

“When a child sleeps he drops whatever he holds in his hands.

Sleep now, Timi, and let go your bow and flaming arrows.”

By the time Gbonka had finished singing, Timi lay sleeping on the ground. The people praised Gbonka. He awakened Timi and left the place of the combat.

Shango was not satisfied, because both heroes still lived. One day he sent for Gbonka. He said to him, “The tree has been bent, but still it continues to grow. You have bent Timi, but still he lives. The contest was never finished. Therefore you must fight again.”

Anger seized Gbonka. He said to Shango, “Twice I fought with Timi to please you. Twice I defeated him, but you will not let the matter rest. What can it mean except that you will not be satisfied while the two of us remain alive? Very well. I will fight a last fight with Timi. When that is done the contest will be between you and me. Either you or I will have to leave Oyo forever.”

And so the two heroes met again in combat. A great crowd gathered from all the countryside around Oyo. Musicians beat out the praise names of Gbonka and Timi on their drums. Shango sat on a chair placed on a leopard skin. There was much excitement. The fighting began. Just as he had done before, Gbonka felled Timi to the ground with sleep. But this time Gbonka took his sword from his scabbard and cut off Timi’s head. He turned and threw the head in Shango’s lap, saying, “Here is the head you wanted so much.” People cried out in dismay that Gbonka behaved with such contempt for Shango. Shango stood up, his eyes red with anger, letting the head fall to the ground. He ordered his guards to seize Gbonka and put him to death.

They built a large fire there where the fight had taken place. They tied Gbonka with heavy cords and threw him

into the flames. The people gathered around to watch Gbonka die. But instead they saw him standing in the fire, his eyes fixed on Shango. When the cords that bound him had burned away, Gbonka walked from the flames unharmed. The people of Oyo fled in terror. Only Shango and his wife Oya remained. Gbonka approached Shango and struck him with his medicine horn, saying, "Now, Shango, you are finished in Oyo. You must leave within five days. Never will you return."

Shango opened his mouth and a great flame shot out and enveloped Gbonka. But Gbonka withstood the flame and was unharmed in any way. And then Shango knew that Gbonka could not be conquered.

Four days went by. The people turned away from Shango and sang praise songs for Gbonka. In the evening of the fourth day Shango made ready to leave Oyo, and in the darkness of night he and his wife Oya went out of the city, traveling toward Nupe.

Thus it was that Shango abandoned the kingdom over which he had ruled. He never reached Nupe, however. As he and his wife went through the bush country, Oya became more and more disheartened about the exile from Oyo. Shango hardly spoke. He was afflicted with shame that he had been driven out by Gbonka. They stopped after a while to rest.

Oya said in despair, "I can not go any farther. Oyo is my home. In Nupe I will be a stranger without friends."

Shango answered, "I have been deserted by all of Oyo. The people are like leaves that move with the wind. I, Shango, ruler of everything, have been abandoned. Only Oya accompanies me on the road. But now Oya wants to go back to Oyo."

Shango left Oya sitting there and went into the forest. He prepared a rope, tying it to the limb of an ayan tree, and he hanged himself.

Oya waited for him to return. When she was rested she went to look for him. She found Shango's double-bladed ax

lying on the ground. She went farther, and she saw Shango's body hanging from the ayan tree. She fled back to Oyo, crying out that Shango had hanged himself in the forest. People were sent to get Shango's body so that it could be properly buried. They found the double-bladed ax where Shango had left it. Farther on they found the ayan tree and saw the rope hanging from it, but Shango's body was not there.

They returned and reported what they had seen. The subchiefs of Oyo met in council to discuss the mystery. Some said that since Shango's body could not be found he probably was not dead. Others argued that he must have killed himself, because Oya had seen him hanging from the ayan tree. The weight of opinion was that Oya had reported the truth. "Oba so," people said, meaning, "The Oba hangs." But suddenly the sky darkened and the wind began to blow. A storm enveloped Oyo, and a great bolt of lightning cleaved the air. The lightning struck again and again. Thunderstones rained down on the city and many houses burst into flames.

Then a loud voice proclaimed: "I, Shango, do not hang! I have merely returned to my place in the sky!"

The people prostrated themselves on the ground. They cried out to one another, "Oba koso! Oba koso!" meaning, "The Oba does not hang! The Oba does not hang!" After this the thunderstones stopped falling on the city of Oyo.

From his place in the sky Shango kept watch over the goings-on in Oyo and punished those who spoke evil against him. Anyone struck by lightning was adjudged to be one of Shango's enemies, and he was not buried near other graves but in a separate and isolated place. The ayan tree, from which Shango departed the earth, became sacred, and from that time on people have made sacrifices to Shango at its foot. And whereas formerly he had been known as Shango or as Jakuta, the Stone Thrower, he now was also called Oba Koso, The Oba Does Not Hang.

As for his wife Oya, she did not remain in Oyo. She

once again departed from there and traveled northward toward Nupe. After many days she arrived at the great river that separated the land of the Yorubas from the country of the Nupe people. She looked across the water. She said, "In that place I will be an exile. People will forever say to each other, 'See, there stands Oya of Oyo. Once she was the wife of the great Shango, but now she is the most miserable of women.' Can a person go on living this way?"

Oya did not try to cross the river. Instead, she went into the water and disappeared. She became the spirit of that river, which thereafter was called by her name. Thus two wives of Shango lived on as river orishas, Oshun as the spirit of the Oshun River and Oya as the spirit of the Oya River, which is also called the Niger. But the enmity between Oshun and Oya never came to an end. They avoided each other. And this is why the Oshun River and the Oya River never meet.



18

OBATALA'S FARM AT ABEOKUTA

OBATALA OWNED A FARM AT A PLACE NAMED ABEOKUTA, WHERE the city by that name still stands. When Obatala apportioned land in the beginning, after creating humans, he kept the most barren and stony share for himself. His farm at Abeokuta was more rock than soil, and everyone asked, "How can crops be grown at such a place?" But because Obatala was a great orisha the crops he planted grew abundantly among the stones. People observed that while they had to work hard from morning until night to grow enough to eat, Obatala's farm was always green even though he worked only a little. Whether there was much rain or none, whether he tended his fields often or rarely, there was never a lack of grain or yams.

People began to speak of it. They were resentful. They said, "What kind of a person can Obatala be? He gives us portions of land that begrudge us our food, while he keeps for himself a portion that grows more than he can eat." After a while they were saying, "How long are we to suffer with such a tyrant?" In time they spoke such words as, "If we had Obatala's land we would be fortunate. How can we obtain it?"

They forgot that Obatala had created land over the watery wastes and that he had made the first human beings. They said, "It is time to be rid of Obatala. Let us destroy him." But they did not know how to do it. They discussed the matter for many days, until one man proposed that Obatala be killed by stones. They agreed that stones should be rolled down on Obatala from a hill near his farm.

They went to the top of the hill where some enormous stones were resting. When Obatala passed by on the way to his fields they dislodged the stones and sent them rolling downward. Obatala was battered by the stones. His body was broken into many pieces and scattered across the land.

The word went from one place to another that Obatala had been destroyed by envious men. The orisha Eshu received the news. He was saddened. He went to Abeokuta to verify the story. When he found it was true he went up to the sky and reported the tragedy to Olorun. Olorun sent Orunmila to find Obatala's body and bring it back. Orunmila went to Abeokuta. He searched for a long time, gathering all the pieces of Obatala's body, and he carried them back to the sky so that Olorun could give life to Obatala again.

Olorun gave Obatala's parts life, but each part became a separate orisha. Instead of one Obatala there were numerous gods created out of his fragments. These orishas came to be called Orisha-Nla. Each one was less than Obatala, but all together they were the sum of Obatala, so that Obatala lived on in another form. This truth came to be

understood by humans. Even now many men call Obatala by the name Orisha-Nla, and this name recalls the evil deed carried out at Abeokuta.



19

THE WOMEN'S WAR

IN ANCIENT TIMES IN THE CITY OF ILESHA, BEFORE THE COMING of wars between kingdoms, there were women rulers as well as men. One generation followed another in peace. Sometimes a woman ruled, sometimes a man. At last there came to be a woman ruler named Aderemi. She governed over Ilesha well.

Then one day it was reported that an army of warriors from another kingdom was on its way to attack the Ilesha people. This was the first time that Ilesha had had to fight for its life. There were no precedents to follow in protecting the city, no way of saying, "Oba So-and-so fought this

way," or "Oba So-and-so fought that way." Aderemi brought her counselors together. Some were men, some were women. They discussed things. They argued about the best way to drive the enemy away. The men counselors said that the Ilesha warriors should carry spears and shields into battle, and also war clubs, bows and arrows. But the women counselors argued otherwise, saying that the proper weapons for defense were wooden staves like the long pestles with which people pounded their grain into meal. They also contended that eggs contained the power to neutralize the jujus of the enemy, and that, therefore, eggs also should be used. The argument among the counselors was heated, but at last Aderemi declared that her female advisors had prevailed.

The men counselors said, "What man is going to the battlefield armed only with a pestle and an egg?"

Aderemi replied angrily, "Very well, let the men stay in the city and do the tasks that have to be done here. The women will defend Ilesha."

She ordered the women to arm themselves and prepare for the fighting. They took their long pestles from their mortars. They made their clothes tight and put war paint on their cheeks. Each woman took an egg and held it in her left hand. Then they gathered before Aderemi's house.

Aderemi exhorted them to have courage. She said, "Go out and find the enemy. Throw eggs before them to counteract their medicine. Attack and drive them back like dogs to the place from which they came, so that they will never again molest the city of Ilesha."

However, the men continued to protest, saying, "This is not the way it has to be done."

Aderemi answered sharply. She said, "Put away your advice."

The women warriors went out with their pestles in their right hands and their eggs in their left. They found the enemy. The enemy warriors laughed when they saw the women coming with pestles and eggs to defend Ilesha. They

called out, "Are there no men in the city? Go back. We did not come for wives, we have wives of our own."

The women of Ilesha heard the insults. They threw their eggs at the invaders, saying, "Just as your jujus have now been made sterile, so will you also be helpless." They went forward and attacked the enemy with their pestles. But the enemy warriors fended off the pestles with their shields, and they fought back with clubs, spears, bows and arrows. Many Ilesha women fell on the battlefield. The others turned back. Now the enemy attacked, and the Ilesha women fled to the city. Arriving there, they went into their houses and threw down their pestles.

The men of Ilesha saw how things were. They went to Aderemi and said to her, "This thing is too big for you. In time of peace you ruled well. But now that war has come you try to grind the enemy as though they were merely corn. This is the nature of women. Therefore we cannot have a woman ruler in Ilesha anymore. From now on Ilesha must have a warrior chief as its ruler." They went into council and they selected a man to be Oba over the city and all the lands around it.

Under the orders of the new Oba the men armed themselves with spears, shields, knives, clubs, and bows and arrows. They went out of the city shouting battle cries. They attacked the enemy. They turned the enemy back. They drove the enemy from their fields. The enemy were in confusion and disarray. The battle went on until the only enemy in sight were those lying dead on the ground. After that the men of Ilesha went home. They said, "It is done."

They reaffirmed that henceforth Ilesha would only have men as rulers. They said, "Obatala made all humans and he loves them equally. Yet each person excels in a particular thing. Women are authorities on pestles and eggs. That is their nature. Men excel in the defense of their homes. Let us respect the differences with which we are endowed."

Since that time only men have ruled over Ilesha, and only men have gone out to fight the enemy.





20

THE COMING OF THE ORA RIVER

ONCE THERE WAS A PROLONGED DROUGHT AND FAMINE IN ILESHA. The rain did not come and the crops withered in the fields. People planted again and again, but nothing grew. They dug deep wells in search of water, but there was nothing but dryness down below. Animals began to die of thirst and hunger. The people of Ilesha also suffered. Every family had its dead and its dying.

The Oba of Ilesha sent messengers around the country calling for all the babalawos, diviners and medicine men, to convene in the city. The babalawos came. The Oba instructed them to do what was necessary to make the rain fall. The babalawos discussed how they might end the ter-

rible drought. They made jujus of one kind and another, but nothing happened. Every day there were more deaths in Ilesha from thirst and hunger. The Oba sent out more messengers. They traveled to distant cities and sought out other babalawos. More babalawos arrived. They consulted their palm nuts and made medicine. But the water remained in the sky and the earth turned to dust. Those who died were as numerous as the living. People said, "Surely this is the end of Ilesha and all the people who live here." Many departed from the city seeking homes elsewhere and were never heard of again.

Then one day a stranger arrived in Ilesha. By the shells and medicine packets he wore all over his body people knew him to be a babalawo. They said to him, "You, stranger, don't you know that Ilesha is a dying place? Why do you come here?"

He answered, "I have come to see the Oba."

They took him to the Oba's house. When the Oba showed himself the stranger prostrated himself on the earth. He said, "I heard of the misery in Ilesha. I have come to make medicine so that the rain will fall again."

The Oba answered, "You come now when more than half the city is dead. Why did you wait so long? What is your name, so that Ilesha will remember the babalawo who walked so slowly?"

The babalawo said, "Great ruler of Ilesha, my name is O. It is not that I walked slowly. I live in a very distant place and the news of Ilesha's misfortune took long to arrive there. When I heard the way things are going with Ilesha I began the journey at once. Now I have arrived. I will do what I can."

The Oba said, "You, O, what can you do for us? Other babalawos have come and failed."

O sat on the ground before the Oba and his counselors. He opened his bag and took out a chain of divining shells. He dropped the shells on the earth and read them. This he

did again and again. At last he said, "The orishas who provide water are annoyed with the people of Ilesha. This is what the shells reveal. They say the people here have neglected the rituals and forgotten to make sacrifices to the orishas. Because the orishas are offended they withhold the rain. This is the cause of the drought and the famine."

The Oba became impatient. He said, "Yes, we know that something like this is responsible. But what we need to know is what we can do now to please the orishas. Other babalawos have said, "Do this," or "Do that," but the orishas are not satisfied. Ask your shells what is required of us so the orishas will be appeased."

Over and over again the babalawo cast his chain of shells on the ground and read their meanings. At last he said, "What is required is a sacrifice made of seven cola nuts, seven alligator peppers, seven fish, seven bush rats and seven of every other edible thing. They are to be mixed with the blood of a stranger and placed at a crossroad."

The Oba sent for all the things that were named. When his servants returned they had everything except one—the blood of a stranger. Secretly they told the Oba that O, the babalawo, was the only stranger in Ilesha. The Oba consulted his counselors. They said, "If O is the only stranger to be found in Ilesha, then it is clear that it is his blood that must be used. Otherwise the orishas will not be appeased. Let us go ahead, one thing at a time, and when the proper moment arrives we will kill O and add his blood to the sacrifice." So this was what they decided. They brought everything that had been gathered and put it down before O.

O asked, "Where is the stranger's blood?"

They answered, "Begin preparing things. We shall add the blood when everything else is done."

O saw the way things were going. He understood what was in their minds, but he did not speak of it. He proceeded with the preparation of the sacrifice. He thought, "If they

intend to use my blood, there is no escape from it. Yet if they are conspiring against me, at least I can see to it that they do not benefit from their treachery." And so while he was putting the ingredients together he withheld seven cola nuts, which he buried in the ground. He worked on. He finished his work. He said, "Well, now, all is ready, except for the one thing you left to the last."

Hearing this, the Oba gave a signal to his guards, who seized O and bound him. They cut off his head and added his blood to the sacrifice, which they then carried to the crossroad. Even before they reached that place, clouds formed in the sky over Ilesha. By the time the sacrifice was set down at the crossroad, heavy rain was falling. The people of the city were happy. They caught rainwater in bowls and cups and stored it away in their houses.

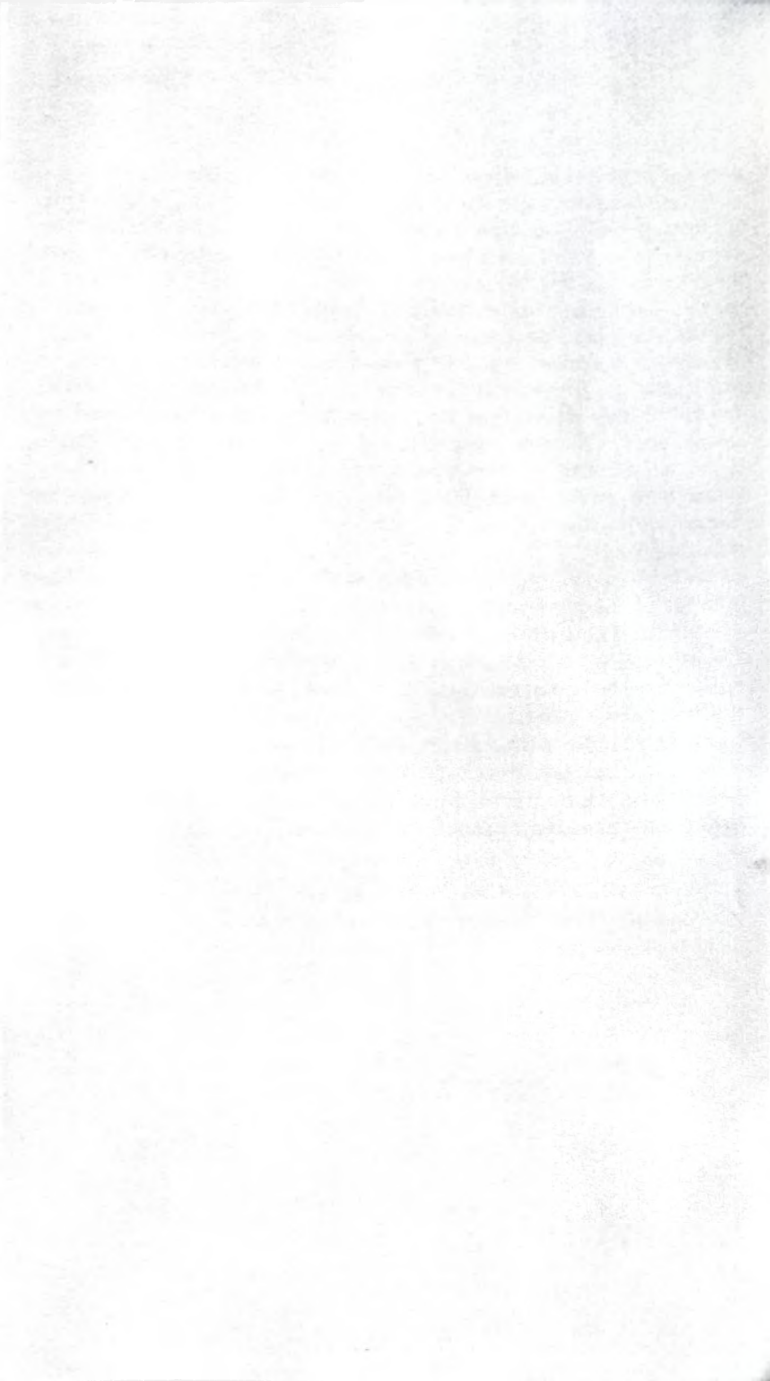
The Oba ordered his servants to take O's body away and throw it into the bush. This they did, leaving the body lying on the ground. The Oba of Ilesha was not comfortable about what he had done. He thought, "This man O must have had powerful medicine to make the rain fall. Perhaps he will try to take revenge." So the next morning the Oba sent some of his servants to check on O's body. They found it just as it had been left. They returned and reported, "O ra," meaning, "O's body has not decomposed." What the Oba heard worried him, for a body was supposed to decompose. The following morning he again sent his servants to check on the body. Again they returned and said, "O ra," signifying that the body had not decomposed. The third day the servants reported in the same way. For seven days they reported the same thing. By that time everyone in Ilesha was saying, "O ra," and the Oba was deeply disturbed.

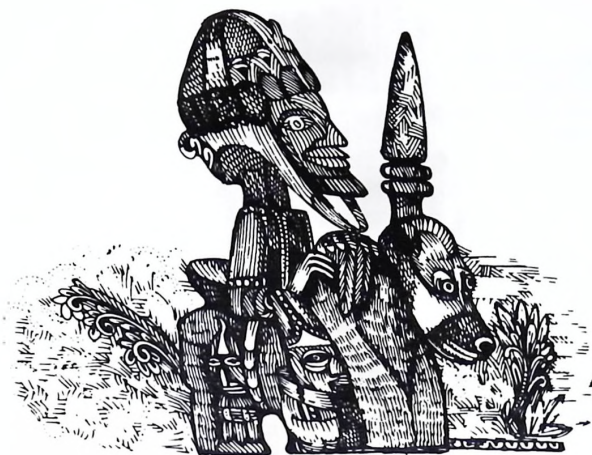
On the seventh day O's body transformed itself into a river. The river grew large and turbulent. It flowed in a great torrent into the city of Ilesha. The streets became flooded. The water rose and entered the houses, drowning the people who lived in them. It flowed on until it reached

the house of the Oba. Many of the Oba's family and servants were caught in the flood and washed away. The Oba and some of his wives and children escaped into the hills where the water could not reach them. But the city of Ilesha was devastated by the flowing river.

Once again the Oba called for babalawos to come and find out what could be done to cause the river to retreat. The babalawos assembled. They cast their shells and their palm nuts on the ground and studied them. At last they told the Oba, "O understood that you intended to use his blood in the sacrifice. Therefore he withheld seven cola nuts. This caused the orishas to become angry with Ilesha. They turned O's body into a rushing river to punish us. This is the cause of the misfortune. Let the cola nuts now be added to the sacrifice."

So the Oba ordered seven cola nuts to be carried to the crossroad and added to the sacrifice. The river began to subside. The water drained out of the destroyed buildings. Flooded fields came into view. The river became small and changed its course. It continued to flow, but its water was contained between banks. People returned to the city and rebuilt their houses. Time went on. But the saying, "O ra," meaning "O has not decomposed," was never forgotten. From this saying the river took its name, O ra, or Ora, and by this name it has been known ever since.





21

OGBE BABA AKINYELURE, WARRIOR OF IBODE

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN WAR WAS EVERYWHERE IN THE LAND, and in those days there were many warrior heroes. Among all the heroes whose names were heard in the mouths of men, none was more famous than Ogbe, a man who lived in the town of Ibode in the west. When Ogbe went into battle only the great champions of other cities came forward to fight and test his weapons. And all those who challenged Ogbe in war, who remembers them now? For they felt the weight of Ogbe's sword, the blood of their lives ran out on the battlefield, and their names faded away and were forgotten.

In the times in which Ogbe lived it was said that a

warrior should not drink palm wine when his country was at war, for drinking made a man's arms heavy and slowed his spear. It was said, "If one drinks, let him drink. If he fights, let him fight. But the two cannot live together in the same house." Yet Ogbe was swift and he was strong. More than once he went out fighting with the warmth of palm wine inside. It did not make his arms heavy or slow his weapons.

Ogbe had many wives, as befitted a great champion, and he had many children in Ibode. Of all his sons he loved Akinyelure best. Perhaps this was because of all his wives it was Akinyelure's mother who was dearest to him. And the sign of his affection was that he called himself Ogbe Baba Akinyelure, Ogbe Father of Akinyelure. By this name he was known in far-off places.

Now, one day Ogbe returned from fighting at a distant frontier. In Ibode there was a festival celebrating his victories. Drumming, dancing and singing went on all day and into the night. The people sang of Ogbe's prowess and the war horns signaled Ogbe's praise names. When the first celebration ended another began. Day after day the warriors of Ibode celebrated, and many cups of wine were drunk. During these festivals Ogbe drank mightily. Because he was a great hero no one said the words, "If one drinks, let him drink. If one fights, let him fight."

While the town was just beginning to stir one morning a messenger came with word that an enemy force was approaching Ibode. Ogbe and the other warriors of the town prepared for battle. Seeing his father taking up his weapons, the young Akinyelure said to him, "This time I too will go out to repel the enemy." Ogbe looked at his son. He saw that Akinyelure was now a man. He answered, "Yes, prepare yourself also. Take your spear. Take your battle-ax. We shall stand and fight together, side by side, and rain death on those who want to conquer Ibode."

The warriors went out to meet the enemy. The fighting

was great. The feet of the fighting men stirred up the dust and made a dark cloud hang over the battle. Ogbe and Akinyelure moved together. Where one fought the other fought. The sun moved across the sky and still the battle went on. Ogbe's battle-ax glistened, and the enemy in front of him melted away. They turned their backs and fled into the bush. The men of Ibode called out, "The enemy flees!" It was only then that Ogbe saw that Akinyelure was not at his side. He searched across the fields and found Akinyelure lying dead among the dead. A great grief descended upon Ogbe. The exhilaration of battle ebbed from his body. He dropped his weapons on the ground.

When the other warriors of Ibode gathered their dead and prepared to return to the town, Ogbe merely stood looking at the corpse of his son. They said, "Ogbe, let us return."

But he answered, "No. You return to Ibode. I will stay here. How can I go back now? How can I face the wife whose son I allowed to die on the battlefield?"

His friends said, "This is not the way it is with a hero. Men fight, men die, but one must go on living."

Ogbe refused to return to Ibode. He stood on the battlefield. He sang:

"I, Ogbe, Father of Akinyelure,
Possessor of many wives,
Father of many children,
Champion of many wars,
Slayer of many enemies!
In all my days until now
No shame has fallen on me!
How could I know Akinyelure
Could not strike before and behind,
To one side and the other?"

I brought him to the battle
And I gave him no shelter under my spear.
How can I now speak to his mother
Who is dear to me, saying merely,
‘One must go on living’?’

His friends urged him again, pleading with him,
“Ogbe, take up your weapons and return with us.”

He said, “No, leave me here. I would go to another country, but I would only hunger for the love of my wife whose son I allowed to die. No, here I will stay and take root, for I have nowhere else to go.”

When Ogbe said these words he took root where he stood and became an iroko tree.

Although he never returned to Ibode he was never forgotten. From that time on the people of Ibode offered sacrifices at the foot of the iroko tree once each year in memory of Ogbe Baba Akinyelure.



22

THE BURNING OF THE ELEKUTE GROVE

NEAR THE TOWN OF OWON IN EARLY TIMES THERE WAS A SACRED grove called Elekute. In this grove, filled with trees and wild brush, ceremonies and sacrifices took place, and it was here that ritual dancers came to put on their masks and costumes. Because the grove was so sacred to the people of Owon, the elders of the town took special measures to preserve it from destruction. It was the custom for farmers to burn their fields before planting them, and there was concern that Elekute might be destroyed by spreading flames. The council of elders in Owon discussed at length what the penalty should be for burning the grove, and they agreed at last that the punishment should be death.

Among the men who sat in council and deliberated on the question was a person named Akuko. His family was well known and greatly respected in Owon for its generosity and the many good deeds it had done in behalf of the town. Akuko himself was industrious. His fields were well kept. He often gave corn to those who were in need. He shared the responsibilities of defending the town. And whenever men gathered to discuss important matters he was listened to.

This respected man Akuko was walking one day on a trail outside the town. He saw two small boys huddled together crying, and he stopped to ask them about their trouble. At first they were unwilling to speak, but he urged them, quoting the proverb, "Even a large tree is felled by the woodcutter," meaning that no difficulty is too large to be overcome.

At last the older of the boys said, "We were going from Owon to our father's farm. We were carrying embers so that our father could have fire out there. We walked along this trail as we have always done in the past. And a wind came up and blew sparks from our embers into the Elekute Grove and set it afire. Now we will be punished. As everyone knows, we will be hanged."

Akuko was troubled. He thought, "Surely the town will not demand punishment for these boys, who meant no harm to the sacred grove." But again he thought, "Yet it was definitely agreed that the penalty would be the same for any guilty person, whether man or woman, adult or child." He thought, "I am a man. I am capable of defending myself. Can these small boys stand before the people and plead their case? All they will be able to say is, 'A wind blew sparks from our embers into the Elekute Grove.'"

After some thought he said to the boys, "When you return to the town say nothing about the burning. I will speak of it my own way. Give me the embers and go on to your father's farm." He took the embers and went back

into the town. Already word was going from mouth to ear, "The Elekute Grove has been burned! The Elekute Grove has been burned!" Akuko went to the house of the chief. He said, "An unfortunate thing happened. I was carrying embers to my fields and a wind came up and blew sparks into the Elekute Grove. I came directly to you so that you would hear the story exactly as it occurred. I meant no harm to the town."

The chief answered, "This is an important matter. It belongs to the entire town. It was my family of counselors who decreed the burning of the grove to be a serious crime." The chief sent messengers through the town to call his counselors together. He addressed them, saying, "Akuko comes to me. He says, 'It was I who burned the Elekute Grove, but I had no evil intent. I was walking along the trail carrying embers. A wind came up and blew sparks into the bush. This was how it happened.'"

The counselors said, "Let Akuko himself speak about it."

Akuko said, "All the people of Owon know my family. We have never done any mischief in the community. We carry no shame for anything, for we have never injured anyone. I, Akuko, was going out to my fields carrying embers. The wind came up and blew sparks. Am I a master of the wind? I did not leave the trail. I did not approach the grove. The wind took sparks and carried them there. Have I ever done anything against Owon's welfare? Let us forget this matter and go on living."

But an elder replied, "Slowly, slowly. Let us consider things. The counselors met and discussed this question. They agreed it would be a serious crime to burn the Elekute Grove. It was decreed that whoever should commit this crime would die by hanging. You, Akuko, were you not there among us? Did you not concur in what was decided? You said, 'Yes, I agree with everything.' Now you say, 'Let us forget the matter and go on living.'"

Another man spoke. He said, "Akuko tells us this and that He says, 'My family is respected.' An elephant is large but he can walk gently. An important family also should walk gently. Akuko was carrying embers, but it was his responsibility to see that no sparks escaped. When we agreed on the penalty was it said by anyone that the punishment would be for one kind of person and not for another? Did Akuko himself say, 'If the wind comes up we will forget the matter'?"

Many persons spoke in this fashion. Then one of the counselors said, "Yes, the council agreed on everything, and Akuko has acknowledged what he did. There is no dispute on these things. However, Akuko has been generous in Owon. Many persons have accepted seed from Akuko's granaries to plant in their fields. And who here has not sat drinking palm wine with Akuko? Has not Akuko given out gifts at one festival and another? When the enemy comes does he not take up his weapons like the rest of us? What is there to say against Akuko except that sparks rode the wind from his hand to the Elekute Grove? Let us consider this question in moderation."

They talked back and forth. At last there was a decision. Because of his good name Akuko would be allowed to pay a fine of 2,400,000 cowries. If he did not present this many cowries to the town by the fifth day of the week, Ojo-Obatala, he would be hanged instead.

Akuko's spirits were heavy. He said, "Never has my family owned such wealth. Where will I ever obtain so many cowries? Could even an Oba pay a fine like this?"

He went to his relatives for help. They gave him all the cowries they had, but it was not even a beginning. He went to other people in Owon asking for loans, promising to repay with interest. Some people had no cowries to give him. Others refused, saying, "No, Akuko, you could never repay such a large sum of money. Where would you find it?" Still others answered in a hostile manner. They said, "Because you come from a good family, that does not

excuse your crime. If someone else in Owon caused the Elekute Grove to be burned would it be said of him, 'He never did anything like this before. Let us excuse him'? No, it would be said, 'Hang him quickly.' "

Ojo-Obatala, the fifth day, came. Akuko went to the chief and said, "My family has given all its wealth. My friends have given everything they can. But it is not even a beginning. Where could anyone find 2,400,000 cowries?"

The chief answered, "In that case the sentence must be carried out."

People seized Akuko, tied his arms behind him and began marching him toward the place of execution, which was on the far side of the river.

Akuko said, "Have all you people forgotten the generousities of my father and my grandfather?"

They answered, "Do not plead for your life, Akuko! Be courageous in the face of death!"

Akuko saw that the people wanted him to die. He said, "I see that you really intend to hang me. But now listen to what I have to say. I always wanted good things for the town of Owon, yet Owon wishes me evil in return. If you execute me it will bring great misfortunes on Owon. The crops in the fields will sicken, and never again will food be plentiful. Never again will a native of Owon prosper, no matter how hard he works."

People said, "Akuko, you are talking too much! Prepare to hang!"

Akuko went on, "If I am hanged the men of Owon will grow impotent before their time and be unable to procreate. The town will wither away."

People called back, taunting Akuko, "Hang, Akuko, hang!"

While they marched Akuko toward the place of execution in a procession, Oge, the chief drummer of the town, walked ahead, making his drum say, "Akuko hangs! Akuko hangs! Akuko hangs!"

Akuko addressed the drummer, saying, "You, Oge,

whose drum speaks these vengeful words, if I am hanged you will be among the first to die in the next battle with Owon's enemies."

People shouted, "Akuko, your curses are meaningless! Bring your talking to an end!"

Akuko called out, "May the river run uphill and return to the place from which it came!"

People laughed. They said, "Rivers never run uphill! Rivers never run uphill!"

The procession reached the ford in the river. The people looked in awe. "Look!" they said to one another. "The water flows the wrong way! It is running from the low ground to the high ground!" What they saw increased their hostility toward Akuko. They tied a cloth around his mouth so that he could not speak any more words. They began to ford the river. In the middle of the crossing, Akuko stopped for a moment and washed his legs. People wondered about this, but they kept pushing and tugging Akuko until they reached the other side.

And there, at the execution place, Akuko was hanged to a tree.

People said, "Well, the matter is finished. He who burned the Elekute Grove is dead," and they returned to their homes.

But the matter was not yet really finished, for Akuko's curses on the town of Owon were alive. The next time the warriors of Owon went out to fight the enemy, Oge the drummer whose drum had said, "Akuko hangs! Akuko hangs!" was among the first to die. As time went on the town's fields dried up and the crops diminished. The men of Owon became impotent at an early age and were unable to have offspring. For this reason the population of Owon decreased. Owon was once a thriving place but it was withering now. After a while all the families of Owon became poor. They had nothing and they no longer hoped for anything.

Owon's river continued to flow the wrong way. People gave sacrifices at its banks, imploring it to reverse its course, but their supplications were never answered. To this day the river flows the wrong way, a reminder of Akuko's execution.

As for Akuko, he was reincarnated as a cock. And even now, after so many generations have lived and died, great care is taken to wash the legs of a cock before it is killed. This is in memory of Akuko's stopping in the river to wash his legs before he was hanged.



23

THE OBA'S FOOD

IT IS SAID THAT AN OBA OF OYO ONCE INSTRUCTED A SERVANT TO go through the city and find the best of all foods, to be served at a certain feast.

The servant went to a place in the city where they were slaughtering cows. He examined all the parts of the slaughtered animals and finally selected a beef tongue. He returned.

The Oba saw what his servant brought back. He was surprised. He asked, "Why did you bring a tongue of beef when there were so many things to choose from? I instructed you to bring the best of all foods."

His servant said, "Great Oba, the tongue is the finest

thing to be found. Is it not true that with a tongue a man can speak? With his tongue he can instruct his servants and advise his sons how to live. With his tongue an Oba commands his city and calls his warriors together for battle. With their tongues two friends can commune with one another. The diviner communicates with his tongue what he reads in his Ifa. With a tongue the bard recites the history of heroes, and with a tongue an exalted personage commends the bard. And does not a counselor influence the ruler of a kingdom with his tongue? Of all distinguished foods a tongue is surely the most remarkable."

The Oba of Oyo thought, "This servant is very discerning. What he says is true. But he disturbs me. He speaks down to me. I will test his understanding further." He said to the man, "Indeed, the tongue is the finest thing there is. But now I need something else. Go back and secure for me the worst of all foods."

The servant departed. He went where he had been before. Again he bought a beef tongue and brought it to the Oba.

The Oba looked at the tongue. He said, "Why do you bring a beef tongue? You testified that a tongue is the best of all foods. But I sent you to get the worst, not the best."

The man replied, "Great Oba of Oyo, the tongue is the worst as well as the best."

The Oba said, "Now, how can it be the worst if it is also the best?"

His servant answered, "The tongue is a bad thing. With his tongue a malicious man speaks harmful words, starts evil rumors, and brings misfortune to the community. With his tongue a servant may deny the authority of his master. And does not a master use his tongue to speak harsh words to his servants and slaves? With their tongues a man's wives stir up dissension and disrupt the household. A counselor uses his tongue to give bad advice to the Oba, and the Oba, with his tongue, orders his warriors to go out

and meet their death. And does not the executioner use his tongue to order a man to bend down and be beheaded? Yes, great ruler, Owner of Oyo, the tongue surely is surely the worst of all foods to be found.”

The Oba, it is said, reflected on the observations of his servant and could find no fault with them. He thereupon dispatched the man to a small town near Oyo and made him a chief over the people of that place.



24

OGEDENGBE'S DRUMMERS

IN THE DAYS OF CONSTANT WARS AMONG THE KINGDOMS OF THE Yorubas, a warrior hero called Ogedengbe lived in the city of Ilesha. Ogedengbe ruled firmly in Ilesha, and in other kingdoms he was feared and respected, for it was said that once he had undertaken war against an enemy he would not relent or turn back until his work was finished. He attacked enemy cities and sacked them, taking gold and slaves as his prize. He pursued his enemies to the most distant places to cut them down. Wherever the fighting was most fierce, there Ogedengbe would be. His name was heard with attention in far-off villages, and, at the rumor that Ogedengbe was approaching, people went away into the bush with their cattle and hid themselves.

In other kingdoms people asked each other, "How can Ogedengbe be disposed of? He is like a plague of ants. He comes out of the bush to eat everything that lies in his path. If Ogedengbe were not loose in the land we could go on living, each man in his fields and each city in its place. But now every city is in danger."

The city of Ibadan was then ruled by another warrior chief called Ogunmola. Ogunmola decided one time that he would attack Ilesha and destroy Ogedengbe. He assembled his army. He prepared for the expedition. And when everything was ready Ogunmola's forces set out. They reached the outskirts of Ilesha.

A great battle began. Ogedengbe's warriors met the army from Ibadan in the fields. When night came they rested, but when the sun rose again the battle resumed. The two armies moved from one place to another. They drifted across the land. Other cities became involved. The war spread, leaving suffering and death in its wake. Finally Ogedengbe defeated Ogunmola, who returned with his shattered forces to Ibadan.

But Ogedengbe's anger was not yet stilled. It was said that the city of Benin had conspired with Ibadan in the attack against Ilesha. So Ogedengbe decided to punish Benin. He began the expedition. As he rode his white horse his drummers went on ahead. Their drums spoke like this:

"Ogedengbe is coming,
Ogunmola is finished,
Now it is Benin's turn.
Benin, prepare yourself,
Prepare to bury your corpses."

The sound of the drums was heard far away. Whenever Ogedengbe's army passed through a village there was no sign of human beings and the fields were empty. For every-

where it was said that Ogedengbe's drums and war horns spoke only the truth. When the drums said that Ogunmola had been defeated, everyone agreed that it must be so.

Word of Ogedengbe's approach came to Benin. The ruler of that city met with his counselors to discuss the situation. They sent a messenger to Ogedengbe. He said, "Our people say there is no need to make war on Benin. Benin has done nothing hostile to you. The people know of your courage and achievements, and they praise you. Ogedengbe, turn back and leave Benin as it stands. This is the message I have brought you."

Ogedengbe spoke harshly. He said, "It is just as I thought it would be. The city of Benin whimpers like a child. Hear my drums, for they speak only what is true. The drums say, 'Now it is Benin's turn.' Return to the city and tell your Oba what I have said."

The messenger returned to Benin. He reported Ogedengbe's words. Once again the people of Benin sent a messenger to plead with Ogedengbe not to make war on the city. Again Ogedengbe rebuffed the messenger. His army arrived at Benin, surrounded the city and dug a moat around it to prevent the inhabitants from escaping. Benin was besieged. The Oba of Benin, the subchiefs and the counselors discussed their situation. They foresaw that the city would be destroyed and their army defeated. While some said, "Let us go out and fight," others said, "No. Listen to Ogedengbe's drums. They recall his great victories over other cities. They speak only what is true."

After the argument had been going on this way for a long time, one of the elders of Benin said, "Can Ogedengbe's drums say only one thing? What are drums, after all? They are objects made of wood and hide. They say only what drummers make them say. Ogedengbe's drums can say other things. They can speak of Benin's greatness also."

People answered, "Now, Ogedengbe's drummers are dear to his heart, for the words their drums speak remind

him to be courageous, and his warriors also take courage from the sound. Why, then, would the drummers make their drums tell of Benin's greatness?"

The elder answered, "I will tell you about this thing. The drummers play what pleases Ogedengbe because he pays them well. Does a musician live who does not play what he is paid for? Very well. Let us be patrons to the drummers."

The people saw merit in it. They collected cowries from whoever had cowries, and the Oba and the subchiefs gave the greatest share. They appointed a messenger. In the dark of night the messenger took the cowries and went out of the city to the place where the drummers were resting.

The messenger said to them, "Your drumming has been heard. In the city the people have praised it. They say you are truly great musicians and poets. The tones of your drums are so perfect that no one can mistake their meanings. The people of Benin would like you to drum something for them before the battle begins tomorrow. For this small deed they will give you ten thousand cowries."

The drummers talked among themselves. They agreed. They asked, "What do you want our drums to say?"

"Why," the messenger said, "just a small phrase. Have your drums say, 'When has Benin ever been defeated?' Have them say, 'Never has Benin been walked on by its enemies.'" He gave the drummers the ten thousand cowries and went back to the city.

The light of the morning sun began to be visible. Ogedengbe ordered his warriors to prepare for battle. They made themselves ready for the attack. Ogedengbe mounted his horse. The drums began to play. But instead of reciting Ogedengbe's praise names and recalling his great deeds the drums said:

"When has Benin ever been defeated?

Never has Benin been walked on by its enemies."

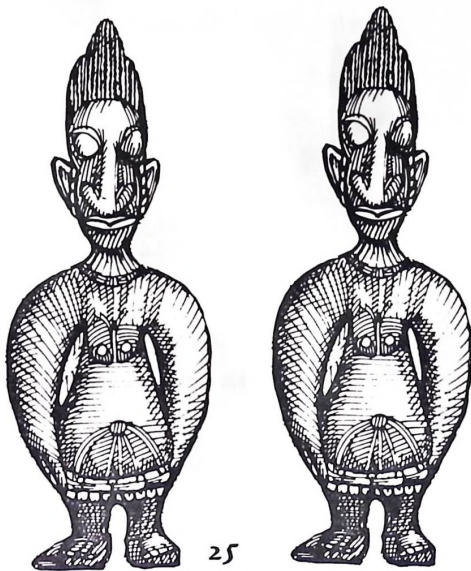
All in Ogedengbe's camp heard the drums and were surprised. Anger filled Ogedengbe as he heard the drums say over and over:

“When has Benin ever been defeated?

Never has Benin been walked on by its enemies.”

Doubt came to Ogedengbe. He thought, “It is true. Benin has never fallen in war.” His fury for battle softened. His warriors with their weapons in their hands, they too were thinking, “Have Ogedengbe's drums ever spoken a falsehood? What they say now is so. Benin has never been beaten to the ground. Although it has many enemies, Benin has only survived and grown greater.”

Ogedengbe's eagerness to attack Benin diminished, until at last he ordered his fighting men to withdraw to the outskirts of the city. There he had his drummers executed for making their drums say at the very moment of attack, “When has Benin ever been defeated?” After that Ogedengbe and his army returned to Ilesha.



HOW TWINS CAME AMONG THE YORUBAS

Fine-looking twins, natives of Ishokun,
Descendants of treetop monkeys.

Twins saw the houses of the rich but did not go there.

Twins saw the houses of great personages but did not go
there.

Instead they entered the houses of the poor.

They made the poor rich, they clothed those who were naked.

—A Yoruba song in praise of twins

IN ANCIENT TIMES IN THE TOWN OF ISHOKUN, WHICH LATER
became a part of Oyo, there was a farmer who was known

everywhere as a hunter of monkeys. Because his fields produced good crops, monkeys came from the bush and fed there. The monkeys became a pestilence to the farmer. He tried to drive them away. But they came, they went, they returned again to feed. The farmer could not leave his fields unguarded. He and his sons took turns watching over the fields. Still the monkeys came and had to be driven away with stones and arrows.

Because of his desperation and anger the farmer went everywhere to kill monkeys. He hunted them in the fields, he hunted them in the bush, he hunted them in the forest, hoping to end the depredations on his farm. But the monkeys refused to depart from the region, and they continued their forays on the farmer's crops. They even devised ways of distracting the farmer and his sons. A few of them would appear at a certain place to attract attention. While the farmer and his sons attempted to drive them off, other monkeys went into the fields to feed on corn. The monkeys also resorted to juju. They made the rain fall so that whoever was guarding the fields would go home, thinking, "Surely the crops will be safe in such weather." But the monkeys fed while the rain fell. When the farmer discovered this he built a shelter in the fields, and there he or one of his sons stood guard even when water poured from the sky. In this contest many monkeys were killed, yet those that survived persisted.

The farmer had several wives. After one of them became pregnant an adahunse, or seer, of the town of Ishokun came to the farmer to warn him. He said, "There is danger and misfortune ahead because of your continual killing of the monkeys. They are wise in many things. They have great powers. They can cause an abiku child to enter your wife's womb. He will be born, stay a while, then die. He will be born again and die again. Each time your wife becomes pregnant he will be there in her womb, and each time he is born he will stay a while and then depart. This way you will

be tormented to the end. The monkeys are capable of sending you an abiku. Therefore do not drive them away anymore. Cease hunting them in the bush. Let them come and feed."

The farmer listened, but he was not persuaded by what the adahunse had told him. He went on guarding his fields and hunting monkeys in the bush.

The monkeys discussed ways of retaliating for their sufferings. They decided that they would send two abikus to the farmer. Two monkeys transformed themselves into abikus and entered the womb of the farmer's pregnant wife. There they waited until the proper time. They emerged, first one then the other. They were the original twins to come among the Yorubas. They attracted much attention. Some people said, "What good fortune." Others said, "It is a bad omen. Only monkeys give birth to twins."

Because the twins were abikus they did not remain long among the living. They died and returned to reside among those not yet born. Time passed. Again the woman became pregnant. Again two children were born instead of one. They lived on briefly and again they departed. This is the way it went on. Each time the woman bore children they were ibejis, that is to say, twins. And they were also abikus who lived on a while and died.

The farmer became desperate over his succession of misfortunes. He went to consult a diviner at a distant place to discover the reason for his children's constantly dying. The diviner cast his palm nuts and read them. He said, "Your troubles come from the monkeys whom you have been harassing in your fields and in the bush. It is they who sent twin abikus into your wife's womb in retaliation for their suffering. Bring your killing of the monkeys to an end. Let them eat in your fields. Perhaps they will relent."

The farmer returned to Ishokun. He no longer drove the monkeys from his fields, but allowed them to come and go as they pleased. He no longer hunted them in the bush. In

time his wife again gave birth to twins. They did not die. They lived on. But still the farmer did not know for certain whether things had changed, and he went again to the diviner for knowledge. The diviner cast his palm nuts and extracted their meaning. He said, "This time the twins are not abikus. The monkeys have relented. The children will not die and return, die and return. But twins are not ordinary people. They have great power to reward or punish other humans. Their protector is the orisha Ibeji. If a person abuses or neglects a twin, the orisha Ibeji will strike such a person with disease or poverty. He who treats the twins well will be rewarded with good fortune." The diviner again threw the palm nuts and read them. He said, "If the twins are pleased with life, good luck and prosperity will come to their parents. Therefore, do everything to make them happy in this world. Whatever they want, give it to them. Whatever they say to do, do it. Make sacrifices to the orisha Ibeji. Because twins were sent into the world by the monkeys, monkeys are sacred to them. Neither twins nor their families may eat the flesh of monkeys. This is what the palm nuts tell us."

When the farmer returned to Ishokun after consulting the diviner he told his wife what he had learned. Whatever the twins asked for, the parents gave it. If they said they wanted sweets they were given sweets. If they said to their mother, "Go into the marketplace and beg alms for us," the mother carried them to the marketplace and begged alms. If they said, "Dance with us," she carried them in her arms and danced.

They all lived on. The farmer's other wives also gave birth to twins. Prosperity came to the farmer of Ishokun and his family. He was fortunate in every way.

Because of their origin twins are often called *edun*, meaning monkey. Likewise they are referred to as *adanju-kale*, meaning "with-glittering-eyes-in-the-house." The first of a set of twins to be born is considered the younger of the

two. He is named Taiyewo, meaning "Come-to-Taste-Life." The second to be born is named Kehinde, meaning "Come-Last." He is the older of the two. It is said that Kehinde always sends Taiyewo ahead to find out if life is worth living.

It was the ancient confrontation with the monkeys at Ishokun that first brought twins into the world.



26

THE STONE PEOPLE OF ESIE

IN ANCIENT TIMES THERE WAS A PROSPEROUS CITY WHERE THE modern town of Esie now stands. The ancient city also was called Esie, and it was ruled by an Oba whose name has now been forgotten. It is said that the Esie of those days was a place of great renown to which traders and emissaries came from far-off lands. Its markets were crowded and noisy with life, its fields were on all sides, and the food grown in the fields was abundant. Ancient Esie was like this. It was a thriving center where cloth was woven, iron was forged, and brass was cast. And then one day Esie's voices became stilled. No farmer tilled his fields, no iron was forged, and no cloth was woven. There was no movement at

all in that place. The city that had been alive was dead. So the old people say, and this is how it came about.

In a far-off country there were white people with great powers of medicine. They decided to visit Esie, and they sent messengers ahead to let the Oba know that they would arrive on a certain day. The message received by the Oba was that the day of arrival was sacred to the visitors. Therefore, it is said, the people of Esie should do no work on that day. But it was a time of the year when the crops in Esie's fields could not be neglected. People worried about it. They said, "Whatever was agreed to in haste, we cannot let our okra spoil." They discussed things.

Now, among the Yorubas the day was considered to begin with the rising of the sun. The citizens of Esie therefore decided that they would do their work in the darkness before the dawn.

So during the night preceding the arrival of the powerful strangers the farmers went to their fields by torchlight to take care of their okra. Goldsmiths hammered gold and ironworkers forged iron by torchlight. But the Oba remained in his house preparing to greet the strangers. His wife saw the farmers going to their fields, and she said to him, "You too should be tending your crops. If the okra is not cared for it will spoil."

The Oba said, "Yes, I would do it, but who knows when the visitors will arrive?"

His wife said, "It is dark. The day of their arrival has not come. You can return before the sun rises."

The Oba was persuaded. He went out to his fields. He worked. He watched for the sun. And when he saw the sky becoming light he hurried home. Other farmers also returned from their fields. But even as the Oba entered the city, the visitors were already there, waiting at his house. How the knowledge came to them is not clear, but they understood that the men of Esie, including the Oba, had been tending their okra.

The Oba greeted them, welcoming them to Esie. But they were angry. They said, "Was it not understood that no work was to be done on this day, which is sacred?"

The Oba answered, "Yes, no work is being done today. As you can see for yourselves, everything is quiet."

They answered, "We heard the sounds of the iron forger as we entered the city. And we saw many men returning from the fields."

The Oba said, "Why, yes, the sounds of work you heard were yesterday, while the sky was still dark. Since the sun has risen the citizens of Esie have done no work at all."

The white strangers were indignant. They said, "When we sent our message did we say anything about the sun rising or the sun not rising? We said that on this day no work should be done because it is sacred to us. Can the darkness hide things from us? No. We said there would be no work, but all of Esie was hard at work, just as though this were any day of the week."

The Oba was perplexed. He said, "Today is Ojo-Shango, beginning with the rising of the sun. Yesterday was Ojo-Ogun, which ended with the rising of the sun. How can it be said that we worked on Ojo-Shango, which is today?"

The strangers said, "Days do not begin and end with the coming of the dawn. When the sun rises the day is already many hours old. Therefore the people of Esie have been doing what they should not have been on this sacred day."

The strangers were angry that their instructions had been violated. They called on their jujus and turned the Oba to stone. They turned his wife to stone also. After that they turned every inhabitant of Esie to stone. When that was done they departed and returned to the place from which they had come.

There was no sound or movement in the city. Time passed. The houses fell down, and brush and trees grew in

the streets. The ancient city of Esie became indistinguishable from the bush, and it disappeared from the minds of men.

In time other people came to the place where ancient Esie had stood. There they settled and began building a new town. They discovered a grove in which were hundreds of stone figures. The figures were of men and women doing all kinds of work, or dancing, or playing musical instruments. There were chiefs and other public officials sitting on their stools. There were persons being tried for crimes. And there were guards holding swords. They were the citizens of ancient Esie who had been turned to stone by the white strangers.

The grove where the figures were found is considered sacred, and sacrifices are given there to this day.



27

THE DEER - WOMAN OF OWO

IN THE TOWN OF OWO THERE IS AN ANNUAL FESTIVAL CALLED Igogo, meaning bells. During this festival no drums are heard in the town, only the sound of handbells played by people as they dance through the streets. Bands of dancers and bell players go from house to house throughout the day asking for gifts. All the citizens of Owo participate in the festivities, even the Paramount Oba of the town. The Oba, like the ordinary people, goes from place to place and receives presents. The activities of the Igogo celebration are led by priests called Aghoros, who represent a search party that many years ago conducted an expedition to look for Orunsen, a missing wife of the Oba who then ruled over Owo.

The Oba in those days was a man named Renrengenjen. It is said that he went hunting, and that when he was deep in the bush he discovered a deerskin hanging in the branches of a tree. The Oba recognized the skin as belonging to a deer-woman who had transformed herself into a human. It was widely known that animals of the bush sometimes removed their skins and took on human form so they could enter the town on market day. When they had finished their affairs in Owo they returned to the bush, put on their skins and again became bush creatures. Whenever strangers appeared in Owo's marketplace people examined them closely for signs that they were antelopes, foxes or leopards in human disguise. If a hunting dog paid particular attention to a stranger people were likely to say, "Let us be careful. That person smells of the bush."

So when the Oba Renrengenjen found the deerskin he forgot about hunting. He wanted to see the deer-person who would come to reclaim the skin. He took the skin and rolled it up. He hung it on his back and climbed into a nearby tree from where he could see everything below. There he waited patiently. The sun moved in the sky. The shadows became long. At last he saw a woman coming from the town. As she approached, the Oba saw that she was beautiful. She arrived at the place where she had left the skin, but it was not there. She searched for it on the ground. She looked everywhere. Then she sat on the ground and began to cry.

Oba Renrengenjen descended from his tree carrying the deerskin. He went to where the woman was sitting, full of admiration for her beauty. She saw the skin he carried on his back and pleaded for it. The Oba spoke soft words to her, but she went on pleading. The Oba said, "Why do you want to return to the form of a deer? The human world is better. Our life is good. No one hunts us, because we are the hunters. Our fields provide plentifully for us, and we do not have to wander from place to place as the bush creatures must do. We have iron weapons, and therefore the leopards

avoid us. Human beings have superiority over the animal world. Come back with me and live as my wife in Owo. I am the Oba of the town. Just as humans are supreme over animals, I am supreme over Owo. Just as I have everything I need, you also will have everything you need in life."

The Oba went on talking this way. And finally the deer-woman saw that he was determined. She said, "If the people of Owo learn that I am a deer-person they will ridicule me and make my life unbearable. No one must ever know that I came from the bush."

The Oba answered, "I will keep the secret. I will say that you are from a distant city. But what shall I call you?"

The deer-woman said, "My name is Orunsen."

The Oba brought her back to Owo. He hid the deerskin in the rafters of his house. He took Orunsen as his wife. She was first of all his wives in his affections.

His other wives kept asking the question, "Where does Orunsen come from? Her ways are strange to us."

And the Oba always answered, "She comes from a far-off place in the south."

Sometimes they asked Orunsen herself, and Orunsen also replied, "From the south."

Time went on. There was jealousy in the household. The Oba's other wives resented Orunsen. They made her life hard. But the Oba's affection for her was strong and he made her life worth living.

One day Oba Renrengjen went on a long hunting expedition. His wives had much time on their hands. They prowled here and there looking for clues to Orunsen's origin. At last they found the deerskin that the Oba had hidden in the rafters. They brought it to Orunsen and taunted her. They cried, "Deer-woman!" and "Bush creature!" They no longer mentioned her name. They said, "Let the animal-with-the-skin-in-the-rafters do this," or, "Let Two Skins do that." They abused her endlessly. They spread the word in Owo that the Oba had taken a deer for his wife.

Orunsen said nothing in answer to the taunts she heard. She gathered her belongings and left Owo. She went into the bush. She disappeared.

When the Oba returned from his hunting expedition he looked at once for Orunsen, but she was not there. He asked his servants where she was. They said, "She went away into the bush." He asked his wives and they answered, "Oh, you mean the deer-woman whose skin was hidden in the rafters? Yes, she went away to be with her own kind in the bush." They berated Renrengjen for bringing an animal into the house to live with him.

The Oba was grieved. Without Orunsen his house seemed empty. He ordered that a search be made for Orunsen. His guards, his servants and his slaves went into the bush looking for her. They searched everywhere. And after many days of searching they returned to Owo, saying, "No. We went everywhere. We questioned everyone. We combed the bush. But Orunsen was not there."

The Oba said, "Return to the bush. Continue the searching. Do not come back to Owo without Orunsen."

But at this moment a voice was heard in the sky. It said: "Renrengjen, abandon the search. Where I am now, you cannot find me. I have gone into the sky to live under the protection of Olorun. Here no one says, 'There goes the animal-woman.'"

The Oba's guards, his servants and his slaves, and his wives as well prostrated themselves on the ground.

The voice went on: "In my husband's absence his other wives took my skin from the rafters and ridiculed me before the whole town. For this reason I had to leave Owo. But Renrengjen was good to me, and because of that I will be a benefactor of the town. Conduct annual sacrifices in my name. In exchange, Owo will flourish, no one will suffer poverty, and no woman will be barren."

Renrengjen ordered the search ended. He went into his house and remained there many days without seeing

anyone. He hardly ate. He lay on his bed silently, and his servants did not know whether he was asleep or awake. But in time the Oba came out into the world again and resumed his life.

He ordered the town to prepare a food offering for Orunsen. Cows, goats, bush cows and chickens were slaughtered for the sacrifice. Fish, kola nuts and palm oil were offered. Everyone in Owo participated. There were rituals and festivities. Songs were sung in praise of Orunsen. Bells were played in Orunsen's honor. In return, Orunsen gave prosperity and fertility to Owo.

This is how the Igogo festival began. It continues to the present day. When the priests go about playing their bells they are reenacting the long search for Orunsen in the bush. It is said that because Owo never forgets the annual ceremonies for Orunsen the people of the town continue to prosper.



28

OLOGUN AND APASHA

LIVING AT IYAGBA, WHICH IS IN THE NORTH, THERE WAS A hunter named Ologun whose prowess was known far away, even in Nupe. It was said that when Ologun went hunting he was as fast as the antelope he pursued, and no game in the bush could elude him. Now, Ologun had a younger brother who was called Apasha. Apasha heard men praise Ologun, and he also yearned to be a hunter. Many times he said to Ologun, "I will go with you to find game," but Ologun always answered, "No, I am a hunter who hunts alone. Let it be this way."

Yet Apasha persisted. Hearing men praise Ologun he was afflicted with jealousy. He began to taunt Ologun with such words as, "Need the older brother be afraid of the

younger? Is there not game enough in the bush for two? I will not kill your antelope. If I see him I will say, 'There goes the antelope of Ologun,' and I will let him pass unharmed.'

Ologun did not become angry with Apasha. He said, "Younger brother, your time will come. You also will become a great hunter. Then you will understand why I hunt alone. I kill a deer, I run on. I kill an antelope, I do not stop. I pursue a leopard, make my kill, and go on pursuing, one creature of the bush after another. The running is great, there is no end to it until the sun begins to fall in the sky. Then I return, take the leopard's skin, return and cut up my antelope, return and get my deer. One man hunting alone knows the way, two men hunting together argue which way to turn, or whether to follow the monkey or the bush rat."

There was a soreness in Apasha's heart because of Ologun's great hunting deeds. He importuned Ologun again and again, saying sometimes, "I am your younger brother, teach me the art of hunting," and other times saying in anger, "The elder is afraid of the younger."

At last Ologun said to Apasha, "Very well, then, let us go hunting together. Prepare yourself. Prepare your spear and your bow. Tomorrow we will go into the bush. We will pursue the bush animals. Whatever game you see first, it is yours. If there are two together I will take one, you will take the other. But let us not go side by side like twins. Where your game goes, pursue it. Where mine goes, I will pursue it. When the sun falls in the sky we will return and gather our meat."

So Apasha prepared. He set out his arrows and tightened his bow. He sharpened his spear and his knife. He slept. Ologun slept. They arose when the sky showed a faint light. They went into the bush, and when the sun appeared they were already far from the village. At first they saw no game or the tracks of game. Then Ologun sighted a deer and he followed it swiftly, Apasha running

behind him. Ologun caught the deer and killed it. Apasha was not yet there. When Apasha arrived, Ologun was already in pursuit of an antelope. When Ologun had killed his antelope Apasha had not yet reached that place. He arrived. He saw Ologun running after a leopard in the distance. Never had Apasha run like this. A great thirst overcame him.

Now the orisha Eshu was in the bush. He saw the hunters going here and there. He saw Ologun stop at a certain water hole and drink, and far behind he saw Apasha coming. Eshu went to the water hole. He stirred up the water, making it muddy and unfit to drink. When Apasha arrived at that place his thirst tormented him. But he could not drink the water because it was spoiled. In anger he said to himself, "My elder brother has done this in spite." He went on.

Ologun killed his leopard. He ran on, pursuing a bush hog. He came to a water hole. There he quickly quenched his thirst and continued his hunting. Eshu came to the water hole and stirred it up, making it foul. When Apasha arrived he sought a little clear water to drink, but nothing was drinkable. His anger against Ologun swelled within him. He said, "Ologun wants my life to be unlivable. He drinks, he deprives me of water." He went on.

Ologun killed his bush hog. He killed a monkey. He killed a bush cow. Again he came to a water hole and drank. And after he departed, Eshu came and stirred up the water and made it undrinkable. When Apasha arrived he saw the water had been freshly muddied. Though his thirst was even greater than before, he could not drink. Bitter anger filled him. He turned back, saying, "My elder brother wants me to die in the bush." He returned to the place where Ologun had killed the deer. There he waited.

When Ologun finished with his killing of game he also turned back. Wherever he had left the body of an animal, he stopped and cut up the meat. He cut up his bush cow, and

hung the skin in a tree. He cut up his bush rat, his leopard, his monkey and his antelope, leaving their skins in the trees. He arrived at the place where he had caught the deer, and he put down his weapons. He saw Apasha sitting there. He said, "Apasha, my younger brother. Out there I looked back for a sight of you, but you were not visible."

Apasha stood up. He said nothing. He threw his spear at Ologun and killed him. He took the deer and began to return to his village. On the way he met Eshu sitting by the trail holding his staff in his hand. Eshu's staff was wet and fouled with mud. Eshu said, "If you are thirsty, drink," and he offered Apasha a gourd of muddy water.

Apasha said, "Do you have no clear water?"

And Eshu replied, "Is this worse than the water you had during your hunting?"

Apasha could not speak. He saw now that it was not Ologun who had dirtied the water holes, but Eshu, he who twisted the meanings of Ologun. Apasha went on a little farther. He stopped. He said, "How can I return to Iyagba? My elder brother intended nothing but good for me, yet I killed him. He was a great hunter of game. What men said of him was true. Only I, the younger brother, saw Ologun's greatness. No other man has been a witness to his hunting deeds but me. Yet I cannot go back to speak of it. Can I say, 'Yes, Ologun was faster than the antelope and more fierce than the leopard'? Can I say, 'Ologun who was the champion of all hunters, he is dead, for I killed him with my own spear'? My shame and my grief are too much for me. I prefer to remain in the bush."

Apasha threw his deer on the ground. He went back to where Ologun's body was lying. He sat down. He said, "Ologun, my elder brother, here I will stay forever."

This Apasha did. He never moved from this place. He turned into a mound of earth. And when this happened, Ologun turned into a spring, from which clear water flowed so that Apasha could drink.



29

OLOSUN OF IKERE-EKITI

IN THE TOWN OF IKERE-EKITI THERE WERE ONCE NUMEROUS diviners, but the most celebrated of them was Alawe. Not only did ordinary citizens come to consult Alawe, but other babalawos came as well to learn what their own divining nuts were unable to divulge. Things went on without change in Ikere-Ekiti until a new diviner arrived there from a distant place. This man's name was Olosun. He settled in the outskirts of the town, and at first he was not much noticed. But after a while people who had been accustomed to go to the old babalawos began to consult with Olosun. Before planting their fields, or before going on journeys, or before hunting, or before engaging in commerce they had Olosun divine for them to determine whether their pros-

pects were good, or what kind of sacrifices they should make. If women were barren, or if some kind of misfortune had fallen on them, they went to Olosun for help.

Alawe, the senior diviner in Ikere-Ekiti, became envious of Olosun's popularity. He said to other babalawos, "This man Olosun brings disharmony. Things went well here before he arrived. Now everything is in confusion. People travel the path to his door as if he were Orunmila himself." When Alawe could not withstand his envy any longer he decided to ruin Olosun's reputation. He took sixteen nuts from a palm tree, carefully choosing those that had less than the proper number of eye marks. He made a ceremony over these nuts and removed from them the power to reveal the truth. Then one night when Olosun was away, Alawe went to Olosun's house. He entered. He substituted the prepared nuts for the ones in Olosun's divining bag.

For some time after that Olosun's divining was spoiled. He examined the nuts closely and discovered that they did not have the right number of eye marks. So he used cowries instead, and the cowries revealed to him what Alawe had done. He said nothing to Alawe about the matter. However, when persons came to him for help Olosun gave them a song to sing to bring good fortune to their households. These people went about singing the song—in their fields, or in the marketplace, or on the road. Other people heard the song and sang it also. The words of the song were:

"He who was firstborn has lost respect.

He tried to corrupt the words of Olosun.

He who was born last became the older brother."

Although the people who sang the song did not know its meaning, Alawe understood it. It meant that Alawe, who

had once been the paramount babalawo of Ikere-Ekiti, had lost his integrity through his improper act. It meant that Olosun, who had been the most junior diviner in the town, now stood tallest in honor. Hearing this song of ridicule, Alawe decided that he must be rid of Olosun altogether.

But Olosun's divining told him of Alawe's intentions. So he gathered his possessions and left his house. He went to a remote cave in the bush, and there he lived. People from Ikere-Ekiti continued to come to him for advice and knowledge, but he refused to divine for them. He said, "I made my home in Ikere-Ekiti thinking that I would be welcome. Now an eminent personage of the town wants to destroy me. Therefore my palm nuts will not speak to you. Take your case to Alawe. Let him tell you what is good and what is bad."

The people did not like being turned away. They became resentful, and their resentment was fanned by Alawe. He encouraged their hostility by speaking derogatory and false words about Olosun. He injured Olosun's name. If someone came complaining about sickness, bad crops or bad hunting, Alawe said to him, "The divining nuts tell us that the source of your misfortune is he who was present but is not now present, he who resides in a cave instead of a house, he who divines but refuses to divine. The divining nuts say that a man who lives alone and does not mix with the people has something to hide. It is Olosun, who arrived in the town and departed from the town, who makes your affairs go wrong."

People began to say, "How can Ikere-Ekiti be rid of Olosun?"

And when he saw that their resentments had grown, Alawe told them, "Only by fire can Olosun's influence be burned away. When it is certain that he is inside, fill the opening of the cave with dry brush and set it afire. In this way Olosun's power to bring misfortune will die."

What Alawe suggested, people did. They saw Olosun

enter his cave. They quickly filled the opening with dry brush and set it alight. A fierce fire burned, and they fed it with more brush. When the burning was over they returned to the town, saying, "Now Olosun has surely perished and we will not feel his evil again."

But the next morning Olosun appeared in the marketplace of Ikere-Ekiti, neither his body nor his clothes marked by fire. People were astonished. They were also afraid. The buying and the selling stopped. A silence fell over the town.

Olosun said, "At first there was only one person who wanted to destroy me. Then things went from bad to worse, and many people said, 'Olosun is a blight on the town, let us dispose of him.' You came to burn me to death in my cave. Did you think I would really perish? This is a town without grace. You people ask for good and repay with evil. You deserve nothing. Now Ikere-Ekiti will suffer. Your springs will dry up. Rain will not fall. Your crops will be stunted in the fields. Women will be barren. Hunger and misery will live with you in your houses from this time on."

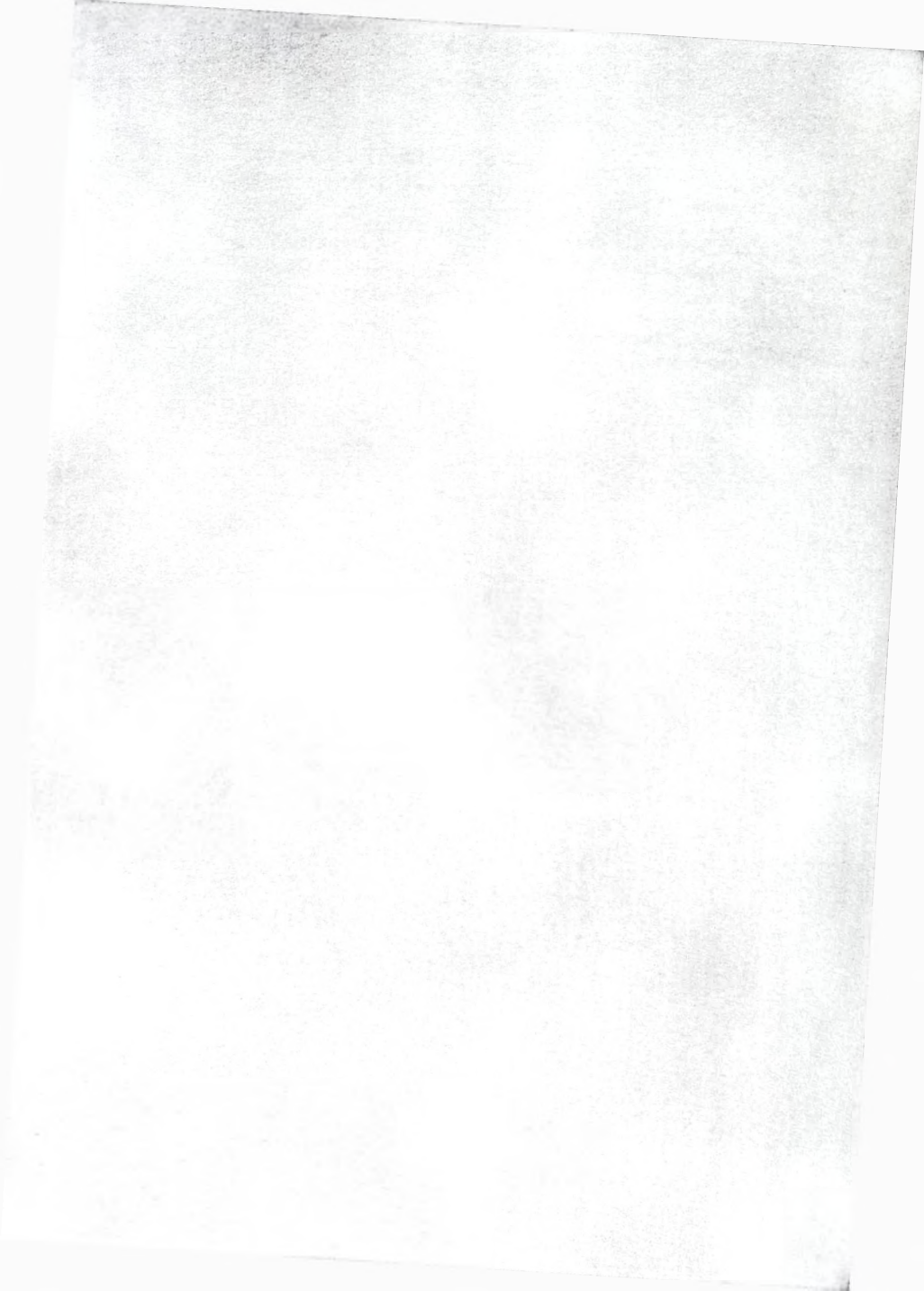
Olosun finished speaking. He returned to his cave in the bush. There he stayed. Never again did he enter the town. His words in the marketplace were fulfilled. Drought, famine and barrenness came to Ikere-Ekiti. People suffered. Again and again they went to the cave where Olosun lived and begged him to make their lives bearable. But Olosun turned them away.

Yet a time came when Olosun saw that Ikere-Ekiti would soon vanish from the earth. Compassion entered his heart. He asked for a sacrifice of cocks, hens, yams, goats and kola nuts. The people brought what was required. After that the rain began to fall, the springs began to flow, and crops grew again. So Ikere-Ekiti did not die but lived on.

As for the babalawo Alawe, people turned away from him. He was neglected and avoided. Now, no man, no matter how great he may have been, can live where he has been

disgraced. So Alawe departed from Ikere-Ekiti and journeyed toward Nupe. Whether he ever reached that place is not known.

Olosun lived on in his cave, but when at last the town was restored to health he became invisible. He was called by many praise names, including Olokuta, Owner of the Rocky Place, and from those days until now he has remained the guardian protector of Ikere-Ekiti.





30

ERINLE, HUNTER OF IJEBU

IN IJEBU THERE LIVED A HUNTER CALLED ERINLE. HE WAS unexcelled in the killing of game. Never did he go into the bush without returning with meat, and for this he was much admired by most of the people of Ijebu. But there were some who resented Erinle. They envied his successful hunting, and they also envied his popularity. These persons conspired to ruin Erinle's reputation.

How they went about it was this: they went out in the night and stole goats and sheep belonging to the Oba. The next night they stole more of the Oba's sheep and goats. At last it became evident to the Oba that thieves were at work. He sent out word that anyone who could give information about the thefts should come and tell what he knew about

the matter. The men who were conspiring against Erinle went to the Oba's house. They declared they had something the Oba wanted. A messenger carried their words inside, and after a while the Oba appeared. The men said, "It is Erinle, who is reputed to be so great a hunter, who has been taking sheep and goats from your herds. This man hunts no better than anyone else. Nor does he hunt as well as other men. He is really no hunter at all. He goes into the bush. He goes from there to where the sheep and goats are grazing. Now he takes a sheep. Now he takes a goat. What he has taken, he kills it and skins it. The skins he leaves behind. The meat, he returns with it, saying, 'I have killed an antelope' or 'I have killed a deer.' It is this man Erinle who has caused your goats and sheep to be depleted."

The Oba sent for Erinle. There was a trial. Those who wanted to disgrace Erinle testified against him. They called him the famous hunter of sheep. The Oba asked what Erinle could say in his own defense. Erinle said, "When have I ever brought home the meat of a sheep or a goat and called it an antelope? Often I have shared my kill with others. Never did anyone come to me saying, 'Erinle, this meat has the smell of goat.' Even a child can tell the difference. These people accuse me. They say, 'Erinle does not eat game from the bush. He eats from the Oba's flocks and herds.' If this is true, why, then let my name wither away and be forgotten. But who has been heard from except those who accuse me? Is there no one here who will speak for me? I have said everything. I am finished."

Now some men came forward to testify for Erinle. They said they had been with Erinle in the bush and seen him bring down deer and antelopes with his spear. Truly, they said, Erinle is a hunter of wild game.

The testimony was ended. The Oba pondered. He said, "Erinle, you have the look of a hunter. But you have heard people say this and that. Some say you kill wild game. Some say you steal goats and sheep. The scales hang even. What

one person says another contradicts. So how can I say you are innocent?"

Erinle answered, "Well, then, the animals I have killed in the bush must speak for me." He went to his house. He gathered the skins of the wild animals he had killed in the hunting. He brought them back and put them on the ground before the Oba. There were skins of deer, skins of bush cows, skins of antelopes, skins of monkeys, skins of leopards, and many more.

The Oba said, "Erinle, the bush animals have spoken for you. Return to your house. We will say no more about it."

Erinle went home. He brooded on how people had tried to disgrace him. He no longer desired to hunt. He did not sit with his friends to eat and drink. He thought, "The Oba said, 'We will say no more about it.' But if someone again steals his sheep or goats the Oba will surely say, 'That person Erinle, I should not have let him off.' Other people will say, 'Is Erinle really eating antelope, or is it goat meat?'"

At last Erinle left his house. He went to a nearby river. He entered the water, and the water received him. Thus Erinle departed from Ijebu, where he was never seen again. He became the orisha of the river.

The people of Ijebu came to regard Erinle as sacred. Men and women who wanted children went to the river to supplicate Erinle, and he gave them children. And even today an annual sacrifice is given to Erinle on the banks of the river in which he lives.



31

HOW IJAPA BECAME A SACRIFICE

AMONG ALL THE CREATURES OF THE BUSH, IJAPA, THE TORTOISE, is the most clever, and for this he is honored and praised. Of Ijapa it is said again and again, "Though he has no legs on the ground he has wisdom in his head." But what is wisdom? It is like one side of an embroidered cloth: on one side is one thing; on the other, something else again. The other part of Ijapa's character is gluttony and greed. And so Ijapa is looked up to and down upon. His shrewdness pierces like a sharp blade, while his avarice cannot restrain itself.

It is said that Ijapa used to wander from farm to farm seeking the most abundant crops on which to feed. Now,

surely Ajapa could not eat everything he found on the poorest of farms, yet his gluttony drove him to the richest of farms. He believed that where the crops were most luxuriant he would nourish himself better. And so it happened one time that he came to a farm near Oyo that was green with yams, beans, and okra, and he decided that he would stay in that vicinity until he had consumed everything.

He went among the yams and began digging them from the ground. He made a pile here and a pile there. He made bundles of the yams and put them on his back. His load was heavy, but still he put more yams on his back, not wanting to leave behind anything that he had dug from the ground. At last he was finished and he tried to depart from the field. But the load was so heavy he could not move. He struggled with his legs. His feet scraped at the earth and raised a cloud of dust, but his body remained where it was. Ijapa could have removed some of the yams, but he was unwilling to relinquish any of them. He became angry at the yams for pressing him to the ground. He scolded them. He threatened them. Still he could not move.

Darkness came. Then the sun rose again. Ijapa had been struggling all night and he had dug himself into a hole. The man who owned the farm came to take care of his crops. He saw a pile of yams on the ground. He said, "Someone has been trying to steal my yams." He picked them up and put them in a bag. On the very bottom he found Ijapa. He said, "So you are the thief!" and he put Ijapa in the bag with the yams and carried it home. When he arrived there he took the tortoise and was about to kill it. He raised his bush knife to sever the tortoise's head, but Ijapa pulled his head into his shell. Then the man took a stone in his hand, but from inside the shell Ijapa sang:

"Not with a stone is Ijapa killed.

Bury him instead under a pile of grain."

So the farmer poured a basketful of millet over Ijapa and covered him with a large earthen pot. He placed a heavy stone on the pot and went away to let Ijapa die.

The next morning the farmer returned to see what had happened to Ijapa. He removed the pot. Ijapa was not dead. He had eaten all the millet, and he was, for the moment, very contented. The farmer said, "Surely there is some way to be rid of this predator."

At that moment Ijapa saw a priest of the Osanyin cult approaching. So he sang:

"A passing stranger will take him away.
In this way Ijapa will be disposed of."

The Osanyin priest arrived. The farmer greeted him. He said, "It was told to me that I should give this tortoise to a passing stranger. Therefore I give it to you." The Osanyin priest accepted it. He went on after putting the tortoise in his knapsack. Ijapa was satisfied the way things were. Each step the priest took carried Ijapa farther from the farmer who wanted to kill him.

But the Osanyin priest was out gathering things to sacrifice to the orisha Osanyin at a special festival. He said to himself, "The orisha Osanyin has never asked for tortoise meat. Yet it must mean something that this tortoise was put in my hands while I was on the way to the shrine. It cannot be seen any other way. Osanyin desires that a tortoise be sacrificed."

He arrived at the shrine. He prepared the sacrifice. He killed Ijapa and offered his meat to Osanyin. Osanyin was pleased. He accepted the offering, and in return he brought good fortune to the priest and his shrine. For this reason tortoises have been sacrificed to the orisha Osanyin ever since.

And so, though Ijapa is wise, it is also said of him, "When Ijapa is doing something he will not stop until disaster falls upon him."



32

THE MEDICINE OF OLU-IGBO

THE ANIMALS THAT LIVED WILD IN THE BUSH AND THOSE that lived with man were equally discontented with their position in the world. Goats were kept captive for their milk and their meat. Sheep were captive for their wool and their skins. Horses were ridden with cruel bits in their mouths. Leopards, antelopes, lions, monkeys and other creatures of the bush were in perpetual fear of the men who came hunting with spears and arrows. In the fields and forests wild animals had to move with great caution to avoid the snares and the pits of the hunters.

They said to one another, "What is the reason for all this? Why have we been set apart from humans in this way? They pursue us, capture us and kill us. Was this the intention of Olorun?" Again they said, "Why were living

things made in different forms? If we walked on two legs like men and had the appearance of men our life would be different. For what is a human being except one who looks human and comports himself as a human?"

The animals discussed ways to make their lot better, but they found no answers. At last they decided to bring their case to Olu-Igbo, the supreme spirit of the bush. They sent messengers everywhere telling the animals to assemble at the place where the orisha Olu-Igbo lived. Only the monkey was not informed, because they considered him an unpredictable troublemaker, and they did not wish to have him present on so serious an occasion.

On a certain day the animals began to gather in Olu-Igbo's compound. Because many of them had to travel a great distance they did not all arrive at the same time. First some came, then others. The monkey observed that something momentous was happening. He asked one creature and then another to inform him. But they evaded an answer, saying merely, "We are merely going from one place to another as is our custom." After receiving many answers of this kind and seeing that all the travelers were going in the same direction, the monkey concluded that they were going to see Olu-Igbo. So, traveling in the treetops, the monkey went on ahead and arrived there before the last stragglers appeared. He sat silently in the upper branches of a tall tree that grew in Olu-Igbo's yard, watching and hearing everything that went on.

The animals spoke to Olu-Igbo. They entreated him to prepare a juju that would make them human. They said, "Our lives are a misery. We are hunted for our meat and our skins. We are shot by arrows, pierced by spears and caught in snares. Those of us who live with humans are abused in every way. Our lives are unbearable. Therefore we are asking you to make a medicine that will transform us. When we look like men and live like men we will no longer be harassed."

Olu-Igbo listened. Finally he said, "Very well. Wait here. I will prepare a juju." He entered his house. He remained there a long while. When he came out he carried the juju in a bowl. He set it down and the animals gathered around it. Olu-Igbo instructed them what to do. Each creature was to come to the bowl in turn and rub some of the juju all over his body.

At this point the monkey hurled a broken branch at the gathering, at the same time making a call like that of a human hunter. The branch struck Olu-Igbo's bowl and shattered it. In terror the other animals fled from the place, crying out to one another, "Run for your life! Man, the hunter, pursues us!" All of them departed. The monkey came down from the tree and examined the fragments of the broken bowl. Finding that a small amount of the juju remained, he rubbed it on his hands, his face and his buttocks. Immediately those parts of his body took on a human appearance. By this time no more of the juju was left, so the monkey abandoned the broken pot and returned to his home. By his transformed hands, face and buttocks, the bush creatures understood that the monkey had been at the gathering and obtained some of the juju. But except for the monkey all animals retained their original forms, just as they had been created, and human hunters continued to pursue them and abuse them. So it has been to the present time. In memory of the monkey's malicious act there is a saying:

"The monkey is helpless to do a constructive thing,
But as a destroyer he is to be reckoned with."

NOTES
ON
THE
STORIES



SOME GENERALIZED COMMENTS ON THE MYTHS APPEAR IN THE introductory section, "The Gods, Heroes and Other Protagonists." Comments on specific myths and legends are included in the pages to come. But it seems worthwhile to halt a moment at this place to take note of some of the themes that appear repeatedly in the oral literature dealing with the orishas, their adventures and their mishaps.

As is readily noted from a reading of the stories, divining was an enormously important aspect of traditional Yoruba life. Some accounts stress not only the value and importance of divining, but the inescapable necessity of consulting diviners if a person is to be able to cope with the living but unseen forces that surround him. The diviner customarily does not foretell the future in the manner of a

fortune teller. In reading his divining nuts the babalawo (as well as other classes of diviners) does not say, "Such and such is going to happen to you tomorrow." Rather, he implies that if a certain thing is going to be done, cautions should be observed or a particular kind of sacrifice should be made. He reassures a person about a course of action or discourages him, warns him, instructs him to do something or another to avoid an impending misfortune, restrains him from an action or guides him in carrying it out.

Ifa is the key to discreet and wise conduct in a world in which the facts are not all known, except of course to Olorun himself. Ifa is the medium through which the Sky God's knowledge is tapped so that humans will be able to handle situations whose meanings are seen as extremely complex. Almost always the advice derived through the Ifa nuts requires sacrifices to appease or placate spirits or orishas. Not only are humans constantly seeking out diviners, so are the orishas. Even before his original descent from the sky, Obatala consults the arch-diviner Orunmila to find out how to proceed. Men and orishas alike seek to get the knowledge of divining from those who have it. (See "The Friendship of Eshu and Orunmila" and "Oshun Learns the Art of Divination.") Orunmila's false arrest ("Orunmila's Visit to Owo") is a consequence of his failure to consult his divining nuts, which could have given him advance warning. In the story about the babalawo named O ("The Coming of the Ora River"), divining is the crux of the events. And in the account of how twins first made their appearance, it is a diviner who explains the role of the monkeys in the affair. In other versions of some stories in this collection, divining plays an even more conspicuous part than it does here.

Like divining, sacrifices are a continuing and unending necessity. In almost all of the stories involving relations between humans and orishas, sacrifices are mentioned or implied, and Eshu's ubiquitous presence on earth is a con-

tinuing reminder that sacrifices must be given to the gods in the sky. Earthbound orishas also must be constantly thanked or placated through sacrifices, as must the dead ancestors. In virtually all of the stories about humans transformed into orishas, the original narrations say what sacrifices are preferred by these deities. Annual festivals for the orishas are, above all, sacrifice days.

If pleased with the supplications and sacrifices, the orishas, even the less-loved and more fearsome ones, can bring good fortune, or neutralize bad fortune. Women who have not been able to conceive children supplicate the deities with whom they associate themselves, and almost any of the river gods or land gods, if well disposed toward the supplicant, may provide the wanted children.

It is noteworthy that throughout the legends there are numerous allusions to drought, famine or flood (not to mention storm and lightning), all of which are regarded as punishment from the various orishas meted out to individuals, towns or kingdoms. Story upon story tells how drought was caused by an orisha or some powerful personality, sometimes to the total destruction of a community. In numerous instances the orisha eventually relents and allows the rain to fall again and the crops to grow. Droughts and famines, the wrath of deities, sacrifices, and Ifa divining are all intermixed elements in the Yoruba myth-legends.

1. THE DESCENT FROM THE SKY

This is the most widely known version of the descent from the sky and the founding of the city of Ife, sometimes called Ile-Ife. In variants heard in the regions of Benin and Ife, the orisha who performs the great feat of covering the water with land is called Oduduwa. Other variants refer to him as Obatala or, alternately, Orisha-Nla (though some traditions say Orisha-Nla is a term designating a group of

lesser orishas). Longer and more detailed versions are known, particularly by the priesthood, but most versions generally agree on the sequence of events depicted here. As for Orunmila, or Ifa, while he appears to play a secondary role in the descent and the creation of land, Yorubas recognize his importance to the outcome. Through his knowledge of divining he is able to tell Obatala how to proceed with the expedition and how to use the snail shell of sand, the chicken and the palm nut. Later he personally intervenes to cope with Olokun. In some variants Obatala descends not on a golden chain but on a spider's thread. A version of this myth as heard in Ife (William Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, New York, 1969) has Oduduwa perform the miraculous tasks. In that Ife account, as Obatala is about to descend from the sky, he stops to socialize with friends. He drinks too much palm wine and falls asleep. Oduduwa—described as his younger brother—takes the snail shell of earth and the chicken and descends the chain, after which he creates dry land in the same fashion as, in other accounts, Obatala does. The exact spot where Oduduwa stepped on the land is called Idio, today a sacred grove in Ife.

In the Ife version Obatala's contriteness over having drunk too much palm wine with his friends, as a consequence of which he loses the opportunity to be the one to carry out the expedition, is given as the reason why he thenceforth abjures palm wine. In other versions the reason given is his drunkenness while shaping humans.

2. THE ORISHAS ACQUIRE THEIR POWERS

This story attempts to explain, almost as an afterthought, how each of the orishas came to have his special attributes. But it obviously does not explain everything, for the origin myth states that some of the orishas already had

special powers. At the time dry land was created, Orunmila already had the knowledge of divination, Eshu was a gifted linguist, Obatala had the gift of shaping human beings, and Olokun controlled the sea. The attributes of a good many other orishas, however, are not defined. In fact, distinctions between some of the orishas and the humans created by Obatala are not quite clear in the beginning.

The manner in which Orunmila here distributes the powers has clear connections with folktales known in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa that explain how wisdom came to be shared by so many people. A Yoruba tale says that Ijapa, the tortoise, monopolized all the wisdom in the world and stored it in a large jar. Attempting to hide the jar in a tall tree, the story goes, Ijapa falls and the jar shatters. People run about picking up bits of the scattered wisdom, and thus everyone gets a little of it. An Ashanti version of the tale has as its chief character Anansi, the spider trickster hero.

According to an explanation heard by William Bascom (*Ifa Divination, Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, Bloomington, 1969): "When the deities first came to earth, they had no special powers or duties, and they asked Olodumare to assign them work for which they were gifted. Olodumare said that Ogun did not know his work, and he gave him war. . . . He said that Orisala [Obatala] did not know his work, and he gave him art. . . . He said that Olokun should be a trader and that Aje, the Goddess of Money, should become a middleman . . . , buying from Olokun and selling at a profit. All the deities were assigned their specific duties."

3. WHY ESHU LIVES IN THE OPEN

The explanation of Eshu's outdoor living given here is oversimplified and evades the more plausible and widely

accepted reason for his exile from people's houses, and for his shrines being separated from human habitations. Because of his character Eshu cannot be trusted. His propensity for sexual exploits, for creating chaos, and for generally offending social sensibilities makes him, in a sense, an exile from home living. Although he is worshipped as sacred, his shrine is at the gateway of the home, or at the entrance to the village, or at some other outdoor place such as a crossroad. Significantly it is at such places that accident most readily intrudes on humans. A person begins a journey by passing through the village gateway, pursues it by going along the highway frequented by Eshu, and can be deflected from his destination at a fork in the road. Eshu's "homes," therefore, are at these various outdoor sites. The story "Obatala's Visit to Shango" is a classical example of how Eshu, with no purpose, only impulse or whim, threatens the well-being of travelers.

This tale also provides a simplistic explanation of why domestic animals are committed to live forever the way they now do. It is their fate, as interpreted by Orunmila the diviner.

4. IRON IS RECEIVED FROM OGUN

We think of iron as having come gradually into the lives of people, and perhaps, in most cases, it did. But in this myth there is something of the wonder of discovery. Like the fire stolen from the Olympian gods by Prometheus, iron, when it first appeared, must have been considered an element and a mystery worthy of godly ownership. Whether the people who later became known as Yorubas had the knowledge of iron when they arrived at Ife, Benin and Oyo, or whether they acquired it after they settled in those places, is not fully known. The ironmaking process in this part of Africa goes back about twenty-three-hundred years,

possibly more. Perhaps it began with a single forge. This Ogun myth indicates that people already had a softer metal, though it is probable that stone tools were the rule. In either case the arrival of iron must have made a considerable difference in the lives of the hunters, farmers and warriors. And it is not hard to understand how the first smith came to be designated an orisha. It is not beyond possibility that Ogun is in fact a representation of a real person who brought the knowledge of the forge and of smelting, from another place. The legend has the feel of a human life story, a somewhat idealized but truly historic happening: a man brings the knowledge of iron, and because he has this great knowledge he is made a celebrated person; but after his secret is learned by others he is no longer needed.

Palm fronds and the skins of wild animals are the insignia of Ogun in festivities and rites still held by the Yorubas. But explanations vary as to how skins and fronds came to be associated with this orisha. The following story provides an alternative explanation:

Ogun went hunting in the bush, and he returned with game. Because his hunt was successful he invited his friends to come and share the food with him. He provided a feast of antelope meat, yams and palm wine. Many people gathered at Ogun's house. They ate well, they drank well. Ogun had a large bowl of palm wine brought out. The guests dipped their gourds into it frequently. When the bowl was emptied, Ogun had more palm wine served. Everyone except a certain man, who restrained himself, drank heavily. The night went on. First one person and then another succumbed to the drinking. They fell asleep. Finally Ogun also fell asleep. All were unconscious now but the man who had drunk lightly. He took some of the clothes that Ogun was wearing. He went into Ogun's house and took all the clothes he could find there. After that he departed.

Morning arrived. The guests began to awaken. They arose and went to their homes. At last only Ogun remained. In time he also awoke. He discovered that all his guests had gone. Most of the clothes he had been wearing were gone. He entered his house and saw that his other clothes had been taken. He had nothing left but his haversack and the waistcloth on his body.

He went to see his friend, the orisha Osanyin, who lived nearby. He said, "I went hunting. I wanted to share the game with people. I gave a feast. We ate and drank. And when I slept someone stole all the clothes I owned. What is to be done?"

Osanyin scolded Ogun. He said, "Too much drinking brought you to this. In your delight with your friends you lost your discretion. Thus you have become a person with no more clothes than the poorest beggar. You have been brought down by drunkenness."

But Osanyin had compassion for his friend. He gave Ogun clothes made entirely out of palm fronds. Ogun wore them. He returned to his house and took his weapons. He went into the bush and hunted. He killed wild animals and skinned them. He tied the skins around his body with palm fronds. From that time onward Ogun clothed himself in skins and fronds. When people saw him dressed this way it reminded them of the wrong done to Ogun when he invited friends to share his food.

5. SONPONNO'S EXILE

Sonponno (also spelled Shopona, Shonpona, and a variety of other ways) is one of the most feared of orishas in Yoruba tradition. Before the advent of medical inoculation, an incidence of smallpox could devastate a whole village and spread contagion throughout the countryside. Worship of Sonponno was thought by many to offer the

best chance of immunity against smallpox, accounting for the existence of the Sonponno cult. So dreaded was this orisha that people only spoke of him by indirection, calling him Baba (Father), Ile-Titu (Cold Ground), Ile-Gbigbona (Hot Ground) or Olode (Owner of the Public). A person killed by smallpox was not mourned or given the usual death rites. His family was called on to show no sign of grief, to create a festival atmosphere, to feast, to make sacrifices to Sonponno—all as evidences of gratitude. The corpse of someone who died of smallpox was not buried but taken into the bush and thrown away, or turned over to the Sonponno priests to dispose of. Only by euphemism were smallpox deaths referred to by the community. It was said that "Hot Ground (or Cold Ground) has taken So-and-so." Worshippers of Sonponno commonly set out calabashes of palm wine for him to drink, so that he would continue happily on his way without stopping to enter a house.

Just as Eshu's character prevents him from living inside, so Sonponno's character—as seen in this story—prevents him from living within the town.

Sonponno's wooden-legged dance is depicted in some Yoruba rituals, and the allusion apparently survives in a ritual dance still to be seen in Haitian religious services derived out of Yoruba and Fon tradition. For some unexplained reason, however, in Haitian practice it is Legba—that is to say, Eshu—who dances with the wooden leg.

6. THE SCATTERING FROM IFE

While this tale does not specifically account for the founding of other Yoruba towns and kingdoms, it provides a bridge from the age when only Ife existed to the period when there were many centers of Yoruba life, and non-Yoruba life as well. Virtually all of the legends agree that Ife was the first Yoruba community (if not the first in the

world). Some fragments of the oral tradition suggest to scholars that Ife was originally settled, or taken over from earlier inhabitants, by a culturally accomplished people who came from the north or east. Ife clearly had a great influence on surrounding kingdoms and tribes. From Ife the Ifa divining cult spread to all the Yorubas. The Fon people of Dahomey acknowledge that their art of divining came from Ife. And it is widely accepted that Ife was a center of bronze casting. The bronze work of Benin is derivative of Ife casting, and Benin's early art style reflects Ife influence. Just how old Ife is has not been established, but it may go back at least a thousand or fifteen hundred years, or even approach the iron and art producing Nok culture that existed in Nigeria around 300 B.C. The explanation given here for the scattering from Ife can hardly fail to recall the Biblical Tower of Babel.

7. MOREMI AND THE EGUNGUNS

The word *Egungun* is generally translated into English as *masquerade*. According to some explanations Egunguns are regarded as representatives of dead ancestors who come, from time to time, to remind people that the dead must be respected, feared and placated. They appear in a variety of costumes, some with wooden masks, some clothed entirely in raffia and cloth. In modern times not all Egunguns are considered fearsome or sacred beings. Some are members of essentially fraternal groups, and others are considered as professional public entertainers. However, the "true" Egunguns have considerable religious significance as representatives or agents of the ancestors and are believed to have authority and power to punish the living. Traditionally, women are prohibited from looking at them, and physical contact with them is avoided by everyone. An individual who purposely or inadvertently approaches

these "true" Egunguns either in the streets or in their secret meeting places can expect to be punished by developing a physical infirmity or disease, or even by death. To the Yoruba, therefore, the panic caused in ancient Ife by the appearance of the Egunguns from the forest is a readily understood response. William Bascom (*The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, New York, 1969) says that in present-day Ife the Egungun Cult is dedicated to the worship of Amaiyegun, "the god who taught people how to make and use the costumes which mask their wearers, and thus saved the people of Ife when Death and his followers were killing them."

There are different opinions among Yorubas as to whether Moremi should be considered an orisha or merely a sacred figure. The differences have been compounded by the appearance of an interpretation that likens the story to the crucifixion of Jesus. Moremi becomes the Yoruba Virgin Mary in this interpretation, and her son Olu-Orogbo a representation of Christ. When Olu-Orogbo is sacrificed to the brook, he is in effect crucified, and his ascent into the sky to live with the Sky God, Olorun, is seen as a statement of Christ's ascension. Whether this interpretation derives out of a parallel drawn by teachers of Christian doctrine or whether it developed as an accidental syncretism is not clear. However, the theme of giving up a son to achieve a worthy social purpose is known elsewhere in African tradition, and it need not have a Christian origin. One Ashanti story, for example, tells of a woman who gave her son as a hostage in a distant kingdom so that her people could acquire the yam plant which previously they had not possessed. (See "The Coming of the Yams" in Courlander and Prempeh, *The Hat-Shaking Dance and Other Ashanti Tales from Ghana*, New York, 1957.)

Although a town by the name of Ile-Igbo exists in Yoruba country, the Ile-Igbo referred to in this story is considered to be a mythological place.

8. ORANMIYAN, THE WARRIOR HERO OF IFE

Oranmiyan, also called Oranyan, is considered in Ife to be the eldest son of Oduduwa and is frequently called Father of the Yorubas even though the title is also given to Oduduwa himself. According to the Ife myth-legend it was Oduduwa who came down from the sky to perform the feats elsewhere attributed to Obatala, and to become the first Oni, or Oba, of Ife.

Oduduwa is said to have been the progenitor of a long line of Obas who ruled over numerous Yoruba cities and kingdoms. Ife tradition says that Oduduwa had sixteen sons (note the sacred number sixteen, corresponding to the sixteen divining nuts), each one of whom was sent somewhere to govern. Until recent times, at least, many Yoruba Obas traced their lineage back to Oduduwa's son Oranmiyan and thus to Oduduwa himself.

According to one informant: "[While Oduduwa ruled at Ife] his senior brother, Orunmila, went to [rule over] Benin, from where, after a while, he returned to the sky, though some say he went to rule over Oyo. After being for some time without a ruler, the people of Benin sent a message to Oduduwa imploring him to come and govern them. So Oduduwa went to Benin, taking with him his son Oranmiyan. Arriving in Benin, Oduduwa proved his identity as the second son of the Sky God Olorun by showing the snail shell in which he had carried sand from the sky to create dry land. The people of Benin still like to carve figures of snail shells in memory of this event. After Oduduwa ruled in Benin for some time he returned to Ife, but he left his son Oranmiyan behind to govern Benin. Much later, when Oduduwa departed from Ife, Oranmiyan came back to that city, leaving one of his own sons, Eweka, to rule over Benin. Oranmiyan's descendants ruled over Benin for a long time, and over Ife. Oranmiyan had numerous sons whom he sent out to become Obas of other cities and kingdoms."

This Ife tradition ties together the histories of various Yoruba centers, in particular the histories of Ife and Benin.

Although there is virtually no contention in Ife over Oduduwa's role as the original founder and progenitor, there are differing accounts about the place from which he came. One tradition gives Oduduwa an earthly rather than a heavenly beginning. It says that Oduduwa originally lived in a Moslem community somewhere to the north and east, but that he rejected Islam and migrated with his followers until he reached Ife, where he settled. According to this account, Oduduwa's eldest son was Okanbi, but Okanbi did not rule in Ife after Oduduwa's death. It was Oduduwa's seventh son, Oranmiyan, who inherited the chieftaincy, and he subsequently ruled over the Kingdom of Oyo as well. The historian C. R. Niven (*A Short History of Nigeria*, London, 1937) says that at some point Oranmiyan decided to avenge the killing of his grandfather by Moslems in the place of Oduduwa's birth:

"He and his brothers gathered their forces and marched out of Ile Ife, leaving there one Adimu in charge of the treasure and sacred charms. The brothers quarrelled on the way and dispersed; Oranyan [Oranmiyan] tried to cross the Niger but Nupe people (or Tapa as the Yorubas call them) hindered him and he turned away up the river until he reached Bussa or 'Ibariba.'

"Here he took the advice of the chief. He could not face going back to Ile Ife without having accomplished anything at all. So the Chief of Bussa hit on the happy idea that he should found a new city and so take his people's minds off his failure in the warlike sphere."

The story says that Oranmiyan was advised to follow a snake, and wherever the snake might disappear, there Oranmiyan should establish his city. At a place then called Ajaka the snake went into a hole in the ground. At that spot Oranmiyan founded a city he called Oyo Ajaka, or simply Oyo, that became the capital of the kingdom by that name.

According to this tradition, Oranmiyan died at Oyo and was taken to Ife to be buried.

It is at this point that we hear something about Shango, the deified ancestor king of Oyo, the one who was to become the orisha of the lightning bolt. The story says that Oranmiyan was succeeded in Oyo by a son named Ajuan and then by a son named Shango.

As happens in all oral literature, there are transpositions in Yoruba traditions about the orishas. An episode associated with a particular deity in one account may be found elsewhere to relate to a different deity. The version of Shango's disappearance from the world given in the story "Two Warrior Heroes, and How Shango Departed from Oyo" says that he hanged himself and then went to live in the sky. But other variants say that he stamped on the ground and caused it to open, after which he descended into the earth and was seen no more. This, of course, was the manner of Oranmiyan's departure according to the version appearing in the text of this book. Because of this similarity some scholars consider Oranmiyan and Shango to be variants of a single personality, and others have suggested that Oranmiyan was a son of Shango, which reverses the genealogy put forward by Niven. One lesson easily learned is that the legends can't be tidied up and made to fit neatly together in time, place or logic.

The stone shaft called Opa Oranmiyan, Oranmiyan's Staff, still stands in the Ife marketplace.

9. THE FRIENDSHIP OF ESHU AND ORUNMILA

That Eshu and Orunmila are friends appears incongruous, for in many respects they are the antithesis of one another. As spokesman for Olorun, Orunmila generally reflects sympathy for human needs and causes. Eshu, although he serves humans by carrying their supplications to Olorun in the sky, is essentially a disturber and disrupter of

human affairs, a violator of the rules, a flouter of propriety, untrustworthy, and a force to be lived and reckoned with rather than loved and admired.

Yet these two orishas, in an abstract sense, are counterparts. Orunmila, the diviner, reveals and clarifies the truths and meanings of the natural order conceived by Olorun. In defining the relationships between things, events and actions he is the spokesman for a reasonable world of cause and effect. Eshu is the personification of whim, accident and miscarriage in nature. He is, in a manner of speaking, the mutation in the gene, the force that moderates what Olorun intended to be. Thus fate and the warping of fate hang in the balance over the lives of men. Their relationship is as close as the friendship between Eshu and Orunmila.

10. ESHU AND DEATH

Eshu here meets the one natural force he cannot conquer or turn aside. Death is ultimately victorious over everything. This story does not state, and Yoruba informants could not agree, as to whether Iku is or is not considered an orisha.

11. OSHUN LEARNS THE ART OF DIVINATION

One of the almost endless accounts of Eshu's perverse actions, this episode also reveals something of his sexual side. As noted earlier, one reason Eshu is not allowed to live inside is that he is sexually excessive and licentious. One story says that because of some particular sexual offense Eshu's penis is made by Olorun to stand perpetually erect, a punishment that only increases Eshu's misconduct. The sexual aspect of Eshu is portrayed in Yoruba dance rituals, as well as in ritual dances among the Fon people, where he

is called Legba. (Survivals of these performances are still seen in Haitian vodoun rites.)

The interesting question in this story is who is the victor. Did Obatala and Oshun win out over Eshu? Or did Eshu merely get his way? It seems to be Oshun who carries away the prize.

12. ORUNMILA'S VISIT TO OWO

The significance of Orunmila's meeting four times with Eshu on the road to Owo is not clear, though it seems to indicate that Orunmila should have understood that something was amiss, and that, perhaps, he should have turned back. The cryptic readings derived from the palm nuts—"What is to happen the diviner will not know" and "Even the Father of Diviners cannot perceive it"—seem to suggest an awareness of Eshu's disruptive intentions. But the divination cannot foresee the outcome of Eshu's intervention, for the reason that Eshu is the element that distorts or warps fate, which is defined as Olorun's plan or Olorun's truth. ("Truth is Olorun's guidance of the affairs of the world.")

13. THE DIVISION OF THE COWRIES

The question of seniority is important in a wide variety of Yoruba relationships and rewards and is reflected in various crises recounted in the oral literature. The brief tale telling why the sky and earth are far apart ("Earth and Sky," preceding the numbered stories) involves a dispute over whether Earth or Sky is senior to the other and over which of the two is entitled the bush rat killed during the hunt. The Yoruba tradition would normally assign to Yemoja the extra portion of the cowries. The arguments

given in this story in favor of the other two ordinarily would be considered specious.

14. SHANGO AND THE MEDICINE OF ESHU

There are a number of variants of this story, in some of which Eshu is not involved. But all agree that it was Oya who carried the medicine back to Oyo and that she tasted it out of curiosity, causing fire to come from her mouth as well as Shango's. Of special interest here, apart from Shango's newly acquired attribute of breathing fire, is Eshu's mischief. He is not satisfied with a straightforward fulfillment of Shango's request. In conformity with his character he cannot refrain from introducing some mischief into the transaction. It seems clear that he requests Oya to come for the medicine knowing that she will succumb to curiosity. Her tasting of the medicine brings about a series of unforeseen events.

15. OBATALA'S VISIT TO SHANGO

Obatala's encounter with Eshu on the highway and the unhappy events that grow out of the encounter are a classical statement of Eshu's role as the disrupter. Met with by chance, Eshu personifies, in a sense, accident. Had Obatala not met Eshu things would have been different. Had he not had to turn back twice because of the soiling of his white robe he would have arrived earlier and, presumably, not found Shango's horse, the possession of which caused him to be beaten and imprisoned. In the Yoruba mind there is a direct connection between Eshu and the unfortunate circumstances that follow. Likewise, the oil on Obatala's clothing—which should be immaculate—is perhaps more significant than an omen. The soiling actually sets in motion

forces that cannot be turned aside, as is suggested tangentially by the saying with which the story ends. It is not clear from the context whether Obatalá is supposed to be living at Ife.

16. THE QUARREL BETWEEN OYA AND OSHUN

The competition and frictions between co-wives are crucial elements in numerous West African tales. (See for example "The Deer-Woman of Owo" in this collection. In one Ashanti story a second wife who is dissatisfied with her status in the household is slow in bringing her husband his juju: as a consequence he is turned into a hawk.) Even though in traditional Yoruba life it was normal for an Oba or an important personage to have more than one wife, the polygamous household was not necessarily serene.

Both Oya and Oshun are river orishas. The tale that follows ("Two Warrior Heroes, and How Shango Departed from Oyo") explains how Oya became the deity of the Niger River.

Oshun's role in giving barren women children is frequently commented on in the oral literature. Such children have special attributes and are treated in a particular way. One informant who himself was a "child of Oshun" stated: "I was never given medicine when I was sick, and I was never bathed in warm water. Unlike other boys, my head was shaved. The name I answered to then was Olomi Tutu, meaning 'Owner of Cold Water.' This is a usual name for children given by Oshun."

17. TWO WARRIOR HEROES, AND HOW SHANGO DEPARTED FROM OYO

This legend is widely known among the Yorubas, and has frequently been included in school readers and enacted

as a play. It has a marked epic flavor and a particular dramatic quality. Shango's plot to destroy the heroes; the inner conflicts of the heroes, who had been companions in war; the looming tragedy; the buildup of tension to the point of crisis; and, finally, the defeat and inglorious fall of Shango are elements of excellent theatre. As sheer drama, the story has something Shakespearean about it.

There are varying accounts of Shango's death. One, as in the version given here, says that after he hanged himself the people of Oyo could not find his body. Another says that they came and retrieved the body and carried it back to the city. A third says that like Oranmiyan (see "Oranmiyan, the Warrior Hero of Ife") Shango stamped on the ground and caused it to open, after which he descended into the earth and was seen no more.

The death or disappearance of Shango is given here as the reason for Oya's becoming the deity of the Niger River, although other stories give other explanations.

18. OBATALA'S FARM AT ABEOKUTA

Obatala is seen here as an innocent victim of rapacious people. If one considers the various episodes in which Obatala is maltreated, there emerges a picture of a good and just orisha who is often treated unjustly. As in the previous story, which deals with Shango's death, there seems to be an inner conflict between the concept of an orisha's immortality and the fact of death. Shango commits suicide—but he does not really die. Obatala is killed—but he lives on in the form of various lesser orishas. One senses what is not stated quite explicitly—that those now known as orishas became true orishas only after death. Stated more simply, they were celebrated personages who, because of their great deeds, became deified by their descendants.

The theme of parts of a whole person or thing being

reincarnated as many separate individuals is commonly encountered in West African oral literature: an elephant is broken into many pieces and scattered, each piece becoming a whole elephant, accounting for the fact that elephants are found in widespread regions. A spider is broken into many pieces, with each part becoming a whole spider, accounting for the prevalence of spiders everywhere. Or a drum is broken and scattered, each piece becoming a drum (or a drummer), accounting for the fact that drumming can be heard in any village. In this same fashion Obatala's parts are reincarnated as Orisha-Nla, a group of minor deities. (Note that the name Orisha-Nla is sometimes used as an appellation for Obatala in the singular sense.)

19. THE WOMEN'S WAR

Yoruba women undoubtedly regard this story as apocryphal or as an expression of male chauvinism. But in the context of tradition the use of eggs as weapons is not as ridiculous as it might appear. Charms and jujus were considered to have an important role in neutralizing forces or setting forces into motion. Even the orishas and the great heroes relied on jujus and magic to cope with crucial events. And eggs—at least, eggs given the attributes of jujus—need not be regarded merely as something hastily picked up in the kitchen. In many African tales—and European as well—eggs are used as magical objects for frustrating or overcoming an enemy. In a certain Ashanti story a young man who is being pursued by elephants drops an egg behind him and it becomes a wide river; he drops a second egg and it becomes a mountain; his third egg creates a forest; and finally his fourth egg turns him into a bird. (See "The Elephant's Tail" in Courlander, *The Hat-Shaking Dance and Other Ashanti Tales from Ghana*, New York, 1957.) All this being said, however, it is clear to the Yoruba who hears

this story that the women of Ilesha dealt with their problem in a foolish way.

20. THE COMING OF THE ORA RIVER

While this story states explicitly that O's body turned into the Ora River, it does not say whether O was thereafter considered a spirit or orisha of the river. Informants were unable to give an opinion on this question, although they agreed that sacrifices are made from time to time at the river's edge to protective spirits residing there.

21. OGBE BABA AKINYELURE, WARRIOR OF IBODE

The proposition is not stated as explicitly as it might be, but it seems quite evident that Ogbe's drinking is responsible for the loss of his son. Because of all the palm wine he has drunk, Ogbe's mind is not as clear on the battlefield as it should have been, as a consequence of which he loses track of Akinyelure in the heat of the fighting. What happens, therefore, bears out the saying, "If one drinks, let him drink. If one fights, let him fight." (A notable exception to this rule, apparently, is Ogun, the warrior orisha. He alone can mix drinking with war, though some of his experiences suggest that he, also, can drink too much. One of the items included in sacrifices to Ogun is palm wine.)

Overdrinking figures in numerous legendary events. In the creation myth, for example, Obatala creates misshapen humans because he is under the influence of palm wine. Smallpox afflicts the orishas in the story "Sonponno's Exile" because in their drunkenness they ridicule Sonponno's wooden leg. A tragedy befalls the city of Ife in the story "Oranmiyan, the Warrior Hero of Ife" because the

people, under the influence of palm wine, call Oranmiyan to come out of the earth by saying the city is in danger. Again, in one explanation of why Ogun wears animal skins and palm fronds, drunkenness is blamed. (*See* the backnotes for the story "Iron Is Received from Ogun.")

22. THE BURNING OF THE ELEKUTE GROVE

Although it is described as something that really happened at Owon, the story's place in time is not established, and the name of the town's ruler not remembered. Even the name of the protagonist apparently has faded away. Akuko literally means cock, the form into which the executed man was reincarnated. Above all, the story is a commentary on rigid thinking and injustice.

Hanging seems to have been a commonplace method of execution among the Yorubas. Beheading was another method. It is referred to in the saying, "The sword was drawn from its sheath in his presence and returned to its sheath in his absence." That is to say, he was alive when the sword was drawn and dead when the sword was put back.

23. THE OBA'S FOOD

That this tale is an old one is indicated by its survival among people of West African origin in the West Indies. In a Cuban rendition the Oba is none other than Obatala, and the person sent to buy the food is Orula (Orunmila), whose answers to Obatala's questions display his deep understanding of the ways of the world. In modern Nigeria the story is told as a parable and has even been dramatized. An Afro-American variant has been found in the United States.

24. OGEDENGBE'S DRUMMERS

The account of the siege of Benin given here has a markedly historical flavor, though the reasons given for the lifting of the siege may have been appended long after the event actually took place. Like Hannibal when he was within striking distance of Rome, Ogedengbe may well have decided that he did not have the strength to subdue the Kingdom of Benin.

25. HOW TWINS CAME AMONG THE YORUBAS

In Yoruba tradition *ibejis*—twins—are a category of children quite apart from others. *Ibejis* are thought to have special powers to bring good or bad fortune, and for this reason they are catered to in a way that other children are not. Parents do everything possible to please twins, responding to whims and wants which if expressed by other children would be ignored. It is felt that if they should fail to do so the *ibejis* might be disheartened or angered, in consequence of which misfortune rather than good fortune could come to the family. In particular, the Orisha *Ibeji*, the protector of twins, might punish the parents by causing sickness or death to come, or crops to fail, or other disasters to fall upon the household. Yet the arrival of twins is always welcomed because of their power to better the lot of the parents. As is stated in the praise song with which this story begins, *ibejis* are believed to be special patrons of the poor. Various other praise songs emphasize the importance of treating *ibejis* well. For example:

Unimportant objects in the eyes of the mother's rivals [co-wives],
They are Two-at-a-Time in the eyes of their mother.

Generous children who bring good luck to their father.
 Generous children who bring good luck to their mother.
 Slight me and I will follow [harass] you,
 Praise me and I will part from [not molest] you.

Another praise song says :

Taiyewo [the first twin to arrive] asked me to greet you, and
 I do so.
 Kehinde [the second to arrive] asked me to greet you, and
 I do so.
 The ibejis asked for you to be fortunate.
 The ibejis asked for you to be wealthy.
 Had I known I would have followed the monkeys [who
 created the first twins] to Ishokun [the place where twin-
 ning began].

The Orisha Ibeji is worshipped or supplicated only by parents who have twin children, but he is widely respected by others because of his readiness to punish anyone who slights or abuses twins. If a mother takes her twin infants to the marketplace (sometimes accompanied by a drummer who sings praise songs) and solicits gifts for them, people are likely to give something lest the Orisha Ibeji become offended. The desires of infant ibejis are sometimes learned through consultations with a babalawo, or diviner. Ibejis may want their mother to beg in the market, to dance in public, or to give parties for them. The mother will fulfill such wishes as a matter of course.

The ibeji cult is widely believed to have begun at Ishokun, now merged with Oyo. Numerous accounts say it was to a home in this town that the monkeys sent the first twins. Some versions say the mother was the wife of a poor farmer, while others say she was the wife of the Oba, or town chief, who ruled Ishokun. But the totemic relationship

of twins to monkeys is usually indicated. Some of the praise names or nicknames of twins are references to monkeys—Edun, for example, meaning monkey, and Adanju-kale, meaning Glittering-Eyes-in-the-House.

Some variant Yoruba explanations of twins, however, make no reference to monkeys, and may reflect traditions and attitudes of cultural groups outside the Yoruba area, or possibly some regional, perhaps rustic, traditions among the Yorubas themselves. Among the Iyagba Yorubas, on the northern fringe of the Yoruba area, it is said that the first twins came as a result of competition between two wives of a certain oba. Neither the iyale (the senior wife) nor the iyawo (the junior wife) had given birth to a male child. Both recognized that whichever of them could produce a male heir for the oba would have an enhanced position in the household. So they went regularly to a certain shrine and supplicated the orishas for boy children. One day the iyale would go to the shrine, the following day the iyawo. Through their supplications the two wives became pregnant and produced male children at about the same time. But the orishas were particularly sympathetic to the younger wife because she was badly treated by the older wife. And so they gave her male twins, which was understood by the Oba to be a sign of heavenly favor for her. The iyawo's status in the household thereby became enhanced.

While among the Yorubas twins are generally regarded as good fortune, among some other West African cultures twins were once considered to be omens of ill fortune. One Yoruba tale reflects this contrary interpretation. It tells of a certain orisha-oba who suspects one of his wives of stealing his cowries. He lines them up and forces them to "draw straws," by which process he discovers the guilty one. This wife subsequently gives birth to twins as punishment for her crime.

Though twins began, according to some renditions of the dominant legend given here, as abikus—children who die and come back again and again to torment their parents

—the connection seems to have become vague and uncertain. Whether there was a higher mortality rate among twins than among nontwins—as would seem likely—there is no way of knowing. But the existence of an enormous number of ibeji carvings, some double, some single must mean something about the infant mortality rate in general. For the ibeji figures are records of twin children who died at an early age. These carvings form one of the most prolific categories of Yoruba wood sculpture.

Each ibeji carving represents a twin child, but it is more than a record or representation. It is considered a repository or home of a twin spirit, the object through which communication with a dead twin is achieved. If a twin dies in infancy the parents have an ibeji figure carved to “replace” it. If both twins die a set of two carvings is made. The carvings are not portraits. Except for sexual characteristics—and sometimes tribal marks or hairstyling—all the figures made by a particular carver are quite similar. If a family has some special distinction or attribute, some small variant may be indicated in the carvings. With few exceptions, the dead twins are conceived by the carver (and therefore by others) as adults, with adult sexual development and adult features. Carvings made in a particular community by various sculptors tend to have a common style, and by its style the origin of a carving can frequently be established.

The ibeji carvings are treated as though they were living. If one of the infant twins is dead the mother carries its wooden representation wherever she carries the living survivor. When she feeds the living twin she also puts the spoon to the mouth of the carving. If both twins are dead the mother tends both carvings. She may give a party for dead twins just as she would have if they were living, inviting children to come and enjoy refreshments and play games. Dead twins are not referred to as having died, but as having gone to another place, perhaps to a thriving com-

mercial center somewhere from which place they will send money or other good fortune to their parents.

The continuing necessity for pleasing the *ibejis*, whether living or dead, and for placating the *orisha* who is their guardian can be and usually is costly. But the expenditures of effort and money are weighed against the harm that displeased *ibejis* can do and the good luck that satisfied *ibejis* can bring. Out of this endless pursuit of the goodwill of twins comes the Yoruba saying, "Dead *ibeji* expenses are expenses for the living."

There is a general belief, in Yoruba tradition, in rebirth. It is thought by many that a person who dies will be reborn, sometimes in the same family, sometimes in a far-off place. If a male child born after his father's death greatly resembles his father he may be named *Babajide* or *Babatunde*, meaning *Father Comes Again*. If a mother dies in childbirth a female infant born to her may be named *Iyabo*, meaning *Mother Returns*. It is not certain to what extent naming a child in this manner may be considered merely a token of affection for the departed parent. But in the case of *abikus*, previously referred to, Yorubas do not doubt that these children die and come back again at the next pregnancy. Parents try in various ways to break the cycle of death and rebirth of *abikus*. They try to divert or discourage a presumed *abiku* child from dying. Sometimes they will disfigure it in some fashion so that its spirit companions will not want it to return to them. It may be given a name such as *Kokumo* (*Do Not Die Again*), *Igbekoyi* (*The Bush Rejects This*), *Kotoyesi* (*One Who Does Not Deserve Honor*), or *Malomo* (*Don't Go Again*).

26. THE STONE PEOPLE OF ESIE

This story is a traditional explanation of the now famous stone figures found in a grove or patch of bush near

Esie in Kwara State. According to some interpretations the figures represent people of many nationalities and tribes—not only Yorubas but Hausas, Ibos, Asians and Europeans—giving rise to the speculation that ancient Esie was a place where numerous foreigners resided, or through which they passed. The stone figures were found concentrated together in a way that clearly was intended to depict occupations and activities of a community, both workaday and ceremonial. Some of the figures show individuals performing such tasks as preparing food. Some are public officials carrying out professional duties. An Oba sits with armed guards nearby, and musicians play stringed instruments or drums, with some figures in dancing posture.

The stone figures are said to have been discovered when people from a nearby place called Oko-Ode (Lower Farm) moved to the site of Esie. According to tradition these people often heard sounds at night that resembled the clamor and voices of a marketplace. Upon investigating, they found the stone carvings.

Today the grove and the figures are regarded by some as sacred. Those who worship the figures or attach special religious significance to them call themselves "Children of the Shining Objects at the Lower Grove."

27. THE DEER-WOMAN OF OWO

Igogo is the local form of agogo, meaning bell, and the Igogo festival is therefore the Festival of Bells. The informant's description of the annual event is this:

"The sacrificial offerings at the Igogo Festival include cows, goats, fowls, bush cows, fish, cola nuts and palm oil. During the festival no drums are beaten. Only bells are played. All the citizens of Owo—men, women, boys, girls, subchiefs, and even the Oba himself—consider it a duty to participate, and they do so with great enthusiasm. Igogo

priests called Aghoros lead the dancing and other festivities. They represent the members of the searching party that went out looking for Orunsen. The Oba and his sub-chiefs take this festival to be an opportunity to collect gifts from prominent members of the public as they dance from house to house. The Igogo Festival has swallowed up the yam festival of former times, and in Owo it is said that the Igogo festival and sacrifices turn away famine and drought. Orunsen is considered by the people of Owo to be an orisha."

28. OLOGUN AND APASHA

This is a Yoruba version of a story well known among the Idoma people, who live about a hundred miles east of the Niger River. The Idoma version is in the form of an epic song or poem. It features two brothers, Oko and Onugbo, who hunt together, and includes the muddying of the drinking water. The mischief-maker in this case is a spirit horse. Onugbo kills Oko just as Apasha kills Ologun. In the village, people accept Oko's death as a hunting accident, but Onugbo is inconsolable and turns into a bird that endlessly calls out Oko's name. Since the Idoma consider Onugbo and Oko to be ancestral figures, it may be guessed that the Yoruba story is a derivative of the Idoma epic. The Idoma poem, recorded by Robert G. Armstrong, can be heard on a record of the Asch mankind series, *Music of the Idoma of Nigeria*.

Iyagba is a Yoruba site on the Niger River near its confluence with the Benue River. An account of Iyagba's origin says that in ancient days a certain regional chief (whose name is not remembered) had a dispute with his Oba and was forced into exile. He reached the Niger and settled there with his family. After he died, his wife made her living by selling cooked food to people who traveled up

and down the river. She came to be known not by her name but as Iyagba, the old woman, and the site itself was referred to as Iyagba. The term also designates a Yoruba subgroup and the region it occupies in proximity, presumably, to the place where the fleeing chief and his wife settled.

29. OLOSUN OF IKERE-EKITI

The diviner-orisha featured in this story is a local divinity for whom a festival is held every year in Ikere-Ekiti. Jola Ogunlusi ("The Olosunta Festival," *African Arts*, Autumn 1969) gives the deity's name as Olosunta, originally from the town Ado-Ekiti. Some minor details in the version given here were taken from the Ogunlusi article.

30. ERINLE, HUNTER OF IJEBU

Erinle, being a local orisha, is not widely known among Nigerian Yorubas. Nevertheless, he is remembered in Cuba, where he is considered an orisha of repute in the Lucumi cult, and where sacrifices are made and songs sung in his honor or in placation.

31. HOW IJAPA BECAME A SACRIFICE

Ijapa, the tortoise, is the Yoruba animal trickster hero, the central figure of innumerable tales, proverbs and sayings. His role in the Yoruba oral literature is comparable to that of the spider and hare in other African cultures. Like Anansi, the spider trickster hero of the Ashantis, Ijapa is shrewd, clever, and sometimes even wise; but he is also, like Anansi, greedy, lazy, conniving, self-serving, exhibitionis-

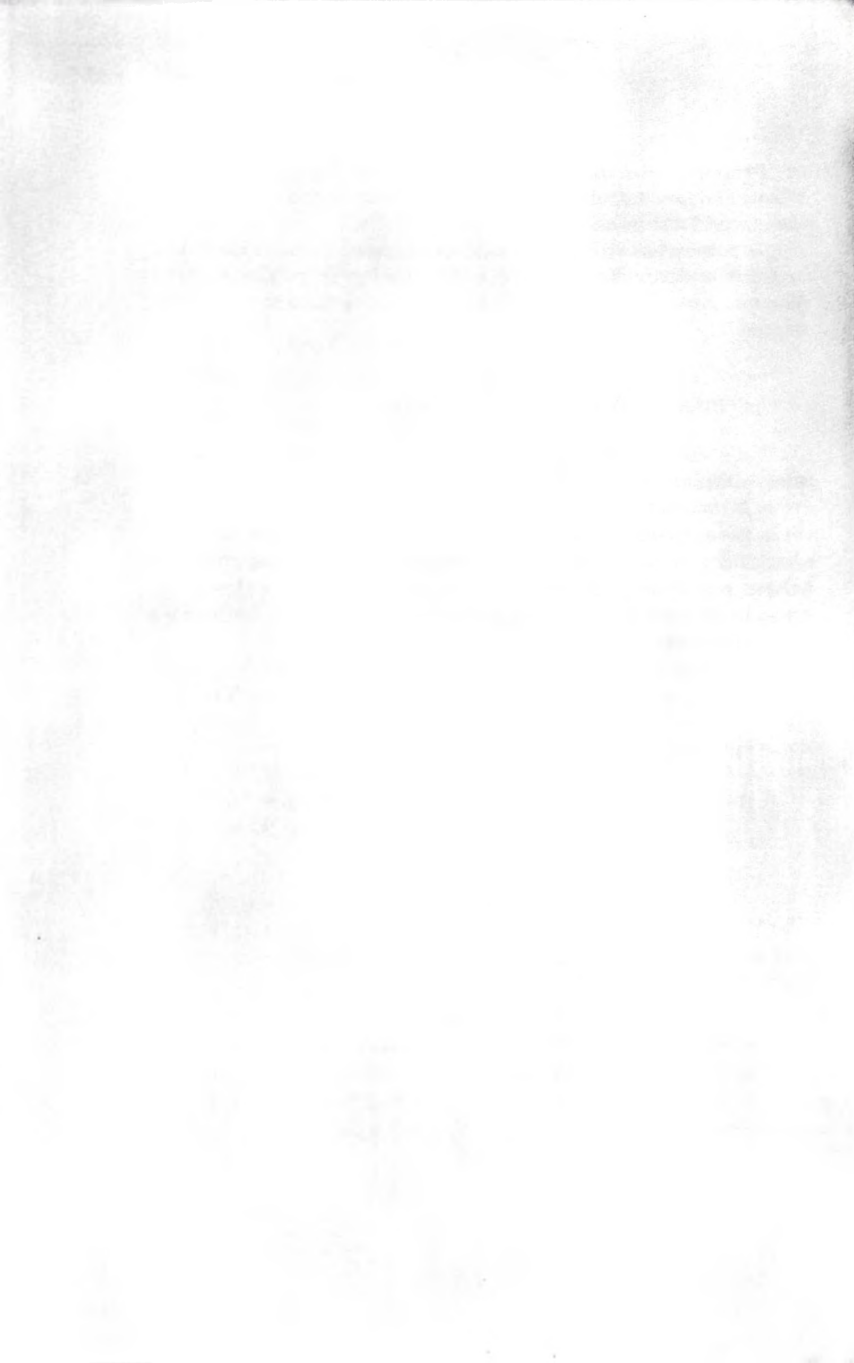
tic, preposterous and frequently stupid. His outwitting of others arouses admiration, but his character is seen as one that should not be emulated.

A somewhat different version of this tale is to be found in Courlander, *Olode the Hunter and Other Tales from Nigeria*, New York, 1968, which contains a number of Ijapa stories.

32. THE MEDICINE OF OLU-IGBO

This story belongs to the category of "how it began" tales. Innumerable African stories explain how various animals acquired their particular features, and many of them give special attention to the hands and buttocks of apes and monkeys. In an Ethiopian tale, for example, the baboon explains that his buttocks are bare like a man's because he spends so much time riding horses, as is befitting a courageous warrior.

Olu-Igbo is thought of not only as the orisha of the wild country, but of all the wild creatures living there. The animals in this story are in effect petitioning their Oba for relief from their misery.



APPENDIXES

APPENDIX I

SOME YORUBA ORISHAS WORSHIPPED IN THE AMERICAS

YORUBA RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS, INCLUDING VARIOUS ORISHAS, survive in a number of regions in the Americas where African slaves were numerous. The most noteworthy of these regions are Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Haiti. In three of those places—Brazil, Cuba and Trinidad—the Yoruba religious system was preserved in separate cults. In Haiti, Yoruba traditions were blended with those of the Fon people of Dahomey and are a part of the Arada or Dahomey system of worship. Some of the major orishas featured in the Afro-American religious life of the four areas are these:

Brazil, in the so-called Shango Cult—Olorun, Orishanla

(Obatala), Shango, Eshu, Ogun, Yemoja, Sonponno, Ifa (Orunmila) and Ibeji.

Cuba, in the Lucumi (or Dočumi) Cult—Orunmila, Erinle, Elegba (Eshu), Ogun, Babaluaye (that is to say, Obaluaye, or Sonponno), Shango, Yemoja, Oshun, Oya, Oduduwa, Olodumare (Olorun), Orisha Oko, Obeye (that is to say, Ibeji), Otchosi (i.e., the hunter orisha Oshosi), and others probably of local importance in Nigeria.

Trinidad, in the Shango Cult—Eshu, Ogun, Shakpana (Sonponno), Oya, Shango, Ibeji, Oshun and Emanja (Yemoja).

Haiti, in the Arada or Dahomey Cult—Legba (Eshu), Ogun, Osanyin (called Osain), Shango and Olode (Sonponno). Other Yoruba orishas have been merged with their Fon counterparts and are known by Arada names. One example is Marassa (Ibeji). Numerous deities not known by the same names among Nigerian Yorubas are nevertheless identified as Yoruba by their surname Anago. For example, Boulichá 'Nago, Amine 'Nago and Neg' 'Nago. In addition, there is a long list of Haitian deities considered to be Yoruba in that they are identified with Ogun. For example, Ogun Fer (iron), Ogun Mashoquette (blacksmith), Ogun Shango (warrior), Ogun Bakala, Ogun Baltaza Misho, Ogun Bachango, Ogun Batagri, Ogun Jekka, Ogun Jebba, Ogun Kenison, etc.

APPENDIX II

YORUBA MYTHS AND LEGENDS IN CUBA

IN THEIR ISOLATION FROM THE MAINSTREAM OF YORUBA TRADITIONS, the myths and legends surviving in Cuba have taken on a character of their own, even though remaining faithful—in many instances—to the spirit and substance of the originals. How many of the Yoruba tales about the orishas were actually created in Cuba in the ongoing process of explaining the gods, their deeds and their personalities, it is hard to know. Some of the stories, at least, are not commonly known among the African Yorubas. Yoruba names sometimes appear in Cuba in garbled form, though usually they are recognizable. Personalities of the orishas, their relationships to one another, and on occasion their sex have been altered.

Thus Obatala, Lord of the White Cloth, is a female rather than a male in the Cuban tradition. Cuban narrations commonly refer to the orishas as saints, a result of syncretism of Yoruba and Christian beliefs. In some of the narrations Olorun, the supreme Sky God, is referred to as Olofin, which could be a corruption of Alafin (the name given to the ruler of Oyo), or possibly some combination of Olorun and Alafin. These examples of Cuban Yoruba tales are mainly taken, in free translation, from a study made by Rómulo Lachatañeré ("El Sistema Religioso de los Lucumis y Otras Influencias Africanas en Cuba," *Estudios Afrocubanos*, Havana, 1945-1946).

THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE ORISHAS' POWERS

In the earliest days only the orishas lived on the earth. Their paramount ruler was an old man called Olofin [Olorun], who lived on the summit of a mountain so steep that only one person had ever succeeded in reaching him. A woman by the name of Obatala knew of a twisting but safe path by which she could get to the Father of Heaven and Earth. The path was known as the way to Osanquiriyan. Whenever Obatala felt the desire to do so she went up the mountain to visit Olofin, who, although he ruled, was never seen by the other orishas.

It happened one time that things on earth began to go wrong. There was a drought, and the cattle began to die and the crops failed. Hunger came among the orishas. They assembled in a crowd at the foot of the mountain and called out to Olofin, "Father, we are dying! We have hardly the strength to meet death!" But from Olofin there was no answer. The orishas grew desperate. Finally they went to Obatala and entreated her to climb the mountain to make contact with Olofin. Obatala agreed. She climbed the trail known as the way to Osanquiriyan. She reached the place

where Olofin lived, and she found him lying on the ground.

Obatala called his name several times, but Olofin did not answer. Obatala shook him, whereupon Olofin said, "I am too tired. I can't go on."

Obatala went down the mountain to the plain. She called all the orishas together and said, "The old man is too tired to go on."

On hearing this the orishas said, "If he can not go on he should turn over his powers to us. Then we will know how to deal with things."

Again Obatala went up the mountain and spoke to Olofin. She said, "The people are asking you to make a supreme effort."

Olofin answered, "I can't go on."

Obatala said, "In that case the people want you to share your powers with them."

The Father of Heaven and Earth said, "That is fair."

"Do it, then," Obatala said.

Olofin said to her, "Summon an assembly under the ceiba tree."

Obatala descended. She went to the ceiba tree. She gathered food. She cooked it with cocoa butter, which was known to soothe impatience. Then she called the assembly. The orishas came. They ate, argued and waited for Olofin. Early in the evening they saw him coming down the mountain. When he arrived he said once again, "I am tired. I can't go on."

"Father," the orishas said, "if you cannot go on give us something to help us, because we cannot go on either."

Olofin said, "I will give each person what is due to him."

"Yes," the orishas said, "but do not keep us waiting too long."

Whereupon Olofin reached for a thunderbolt and gave it to Shango. He reached for the lightning and gave it to Oya, saying, "You are the owner of the light that goes with

the thunder." He picked up the river and placed it in the hands of Oshun, saying, "You are the mistress of the river." He embraced the sea and gave it to Yemaja [Yemoja], telling her, "You are the owner of the sea." In this way, one by one, Olofin gave each orisha his power. And at last he told Obatala, "You are mistress of all the heads."

Olofin remained the Supreme Orisha, but Obatala became his deputy on earth. She became the one who protects those who fall under the anger of Ogun. She also possesses great healing powers. When somebody has been sick for a long time he goes to the Lucumi priest. The priest takes a pigeon, plucks from it a few feathers, wraps them in a white cloth and rubs the sick person with them, while reciting the following prayer [to Obatala]:

Sara yeye bakuro,
Sara yeye bakuro. . . .

The sick person recovers.

OLOFIN PUNISHES BABALUAYE

When Olofin [Olorun] gave out the powers to the various orishas he gave to Babaluaye [i.e., Obaluaye, or Sonponno] inordinate sexual strength. Babaluaye was profuse in the use of the strength given him by Olofin and was constantly lying with women.

Olofin sent his assistant, Orumbila [Orunmila], with a message for Babaluaye. Orumbila said to Babaluaye, "As tomorrow is Good Friday, Olofin wants you to keep your sexual impulses under control."

But Babaluaye answered, "Olofin gave me the power of sexual intercourse, therefore I will use it whenever I wish."

"Do what you like," Orumbila said, and he went away. During the evening of Good Thursday Babaluaye had

intercourse with Oshun. The next day he awoke with his body full of sores, and a few days after that he died of syphilis. This was the punishment that Olofin had sent him.

Oshun felt that the punishment was severe and unjust. She prayed to Olofin, asking him to restore Babaluaye to life. But Olofin refused to undo what he had done. So Oshun went to Olofin's assistant, Orumbila, and asked him to participate in a trick on Olofin. Orumbila agreed. Oshun gave Orumbila a magic honey she possessed, and instructed him to sprinkle it all through Olofin's house. This Orumbila did. When that was done, Olofin felt himself under a very pleasant power. He called Orumbila and asked him, "Who has sprinkled my house with such a pleasant thing?"

Orumbila said, "I don't know."

Olofin said, "I want you to get some of that tasty honey for me."

Orumbila replied, "No, I cannot do it."

Olofin said, "Who then can do it?"

Orumbila answered laconically, "A woman."

Olofin asked all the women around his house, "Who has sprinkled my place with this pleasant honey?"

Each of the women answered, "I don't know."

At last Olofin, observing closely who was present, noted that Oshun was absent. He sent for her, and she was brought before him. He asked her, as he had the others, "Who has sprinkled my place with that pleasant honey?"

Oshun answered, "The thing that pleases you so much, it is mine."

Olofin said, "It is very good. I want you to provide me with more of it."

But Oshun replied, "Yes, I have the knowledge of providing this pleasant honey. You have the power to take life away from Babaluaye. If you have the power to kill, you also have the power to restore to life. Bring life back to Babaluaye and I will provide you with the honey."

Olofin agreed. He brought Babaluaye back to life. Oshun

gave Olofin the honey that he wanted. And Babaluaye continued the same pursuits and enjoyments that he had had before.

OGUN TRAPS ORUMBILA

One day Olofin [Olorun] sent his assistant, Orumbila [Orunmila], into the woods to get coconuts for him. Orumbila took a bag and went out to get the coconuts. After Orumbila had gone into the woods, Ogun learned where he was and what he was doing. He went at once to the trails leading from the woods and dug deep holes in them—that is to say, traps—which he covered over and disguised with straw.

Orumbila finished gathering coconuts and began to return to Olofin's house. Passing along one of the trails he fell into one of Ogun's traps. He tried to get out, but the hole was too deep. He was unable to escape, and it seemed that there was nothing for him to do but stay where he was. He remained in the trap for several days, and when he felt his strength leaving his body he accepted the inevitability of death, and he waited for life to leave him.

Meanwhile, three sisters—Oshun, Yemaja [Yemoja] and Obatala—went to the woods together to find medicinal herbs. They heard Orumbila making sounds in the place where he was awaiting death. They went to the trap in which he was imprisoned. They heard death sounds in Orumbila's throat—*r-r-r-r. . . . r-r-r-r. . . .*

Oshun said, "Oh, my sisters, that is Orumbila!"

Yemaja said, "Oh my sisters, Orumbila has fallen into the trap of Ogun Arere!"

Obatala said, "Let us rescue Orumbila!"

Oshun took off the five kerchiefs that she wore. She tied them together and made a strong rope. She made a loop in the rope and let it down into the hole. Orumbila put it around his body and the three sisters pulled him out. They

gave him some brandy to revive him, and after that they took him home to Olofin.

WHY OBATALA TREMBLES AT THE RIVER

It is said that Ogun of Arere [Onire] used the women who went into the woods, where he lived, in a violent and angry way. He took them roughly, had intercourse with them, and afterwards drove them out of his domain.

A beautiful woman by the name of Yemaya [Yemoja] Saramagua, her curiosity excited by the tales told about Ogun, once went to the woods intending for Ogun to possess her. Ogun took her and had intercourse with her, and then ordered her to depart. But Yemaya did not wish to go. She asked Ogun to give her more pleasure. Ogun ignored her wish and drove her from the woods. Full of anguish, Yemaya went to her sister Oshun and asked for her help, for she had fallen in love with the brutal Ogun.

Oshun said to her, "Wait in your house for Ogun tonight." She tied her five kerchiefs around her waist, and taking a dish of her magic honey she went to the woods. There she encountered the savage Ogun. Ogun tried to hold Oshun in his arms, but she broke away from him, her body slipping through his rough hands. She removed the five kerchiefs from around her waist and began to dance. And while dancing she poured some of the magic honey over her body. She danced close to Ogun and he tried to catch her but he was unable to do it. She poured some of the magic honey on Ogun's body. Overcome by the power of the honey and enraptured by Oshun, Ogun followed her meekly. She went to the edge of the woods. There she lay down and let Ogun have intercourse with her.

Soon Ogun said, "Woman, let us do it again."

Oshun answered, "Let us go to my house. It will be better there."

Ogun agreed. He followed her. She led him not to her own place but to the house of Yemaya. It was now very dark. Oshun put Ogun in Yemaya's bed and lay down with him. Later she slipped away and Yemaya took her place. Without suspecting anything, Ogun enjoyed himself with Yemaya, thinking she was Oshun.

But when day came he discovered the deception and he was overcome with rage. He beat Yemaya furiously and left the house. Outside he met Obatala, and in his fury he began to beat her also. Obatala ran away, with Ogun in pursuit. She came to the river. Seeing no other escape, she threw herself into the water. Shivering with cold and struggling against the current, Obatala remained in the water until Ogun went away. Then she came out, her body shaking with cold. She went looking for a blanket to put around her. In time she found one. Thus ended the episode.

This story explains why a person possessed by the orisha Obatala trembles and shakes when he approaches the river, and searches for a shawl to cover himself.

SHANGO LOOKS FOR HIS FATHER

The orisha Agayu was the father of Shango, and Obatala was Shango's mother. But Obatala had never told Shango who his father was. As Shango grew up he was moved by a desire to know his father. So one day he left his mother's house and went looking for the father he did not know. After a long journey he came upon Agayu in the woods.

Agayu asked him, "Child, what are you looking for?"

Shango answered, "I am looking for my father."

Agayu said, "And who are you?"

Shango replied, "I am the child of Baba," meaning, "the child of my father."

Agayu's answer was to pick up a piece of wood and hit the boy with it.

Shango did not complain. He said, "You are my father."

Agayu said, "Don't come to me with such a ridiculous story."

But Shango persisted, saying, "You are my father."

Agayu gathered some sticks and made a fire. He said, "I am going to roast you and eat you."

Shango said nothing. When the fire was going well Agayu threw the boy into it with the expectation that he would die in the flames. But the fire lapped at Shango's body without doing him any harm.

The orisha Oya happened to be passing through the woods, and she saw Shango in the flames. She ran to where Obatala lived, crying out, "Agayu is burning your child!"

Obatala took her thunderbolt and handed it to Oya. She said, "Use my thunderbolt. Set the woods afire."

Oya did as she was told. She returned to the woods and hurled the thunderbolt, setting the trees afire. Agayu was frightened. He fled from the place, and some distance from there he took shelter under a palm tree.

Oyo took Shango from the fire where Agayu had placed him. She was surprised to find that Shango had not been harmed in any way. After that she brought Shango safely back to his mother Obatala.

Out of these events come the explanation of three facts that are known:

Whereas it was Obatala who originally owned the thunderbolt, Oya received the power to use it because Obatala gave it to her.

Because Shango was immune to the flames he became the master and owner of fire.

And because Agayu found refuge under the palm tree, palm trees ever since have been his sanctuary.

OBATALA'S YAMS

The woman named Obatala owned an extensive plantation of yams. She had the knowledge of making these sacred yams grow and flourish, but the secret was known to no one else. Obatala wanted to employ a man to plant and cultivate her plantation, but she wanted to make sure that such a person would be discreet and not reveal her secret. Anyone to whom she divulged the knowledge had to have the capability of keeping silent about what he knew. Now, it was Obatala's opinion that when a man has women in his life he is inclined not to be reliable in such matters, and so she sought to find a man who was sexually indifferent. She heard of a person named Orisha-Oko who, it was said, had never had or desired sexual relations with a woman. She sent for him, and after lengthy questioning she appointed him chief of her plantation and instructed him in the magic of making the yams grow. He learned quickly. He planted and he cultivated, and Obatala's yams continued to grow well. Many people sought to find out the secret of Obatala's yams and what made them flourish, but they were unable to do so. If they tried to get Orisha-Oko to say something about it, he kept his silence.

The young man named Shango had on numerous occasions implored Obatala to give him possession of her ritual drums, but Obatala's answer had always been to refuse him. Shango's mother Yemaya [Yemoja] wanted very much to help her son fulfill his desire. And so she plotted as follows: "If I can get from Orisha-Oko the secret of the yams, I can give the secret to Shango. If I can ruin Obatala's plantation, she will have no more yams. Then Shango can exchange his yams for the drums he wants."

So Yemaya went to Orisha-Oko and tried to make him divulge the secret of the cultivation of the yams. But Orisha-Oko's answer was silence. Yemaya persisted. She came back day after day, but his answer was always the same,

silence. Then one day she said to Orisha-Oko, "let us go and have intercourse." Orisha-Oko said nothing. She went to him again the next day and proposed that they have intercourse, but Orisha-Oko ignored her. Day after day she went to where Orisha-Oko was working and tried to arouse him. And then, at last, she succeeded in making desire flow in his body. Together they lay on the ground and had intercourse.

"Ah!" Orisha-Oko said. "This is a very pleasant thing we have done. We are going to do it every day."

But Yemaya demanded that he give her, in exchange, the secret of the yams, which he did. She gave the secret to Shango, who began to grow yams. And while he grew yams, Yemaya continued to meet with Orisha-Oko and have repeated intercourse with him. Orisha-Oko was so preoccupied with his new discovery that he neglected Obatala's plantation. He failed to do what he was supposed to do, and a time came when Obatala's yams were withered and exhausted. Her plantation was barren.

Then Shango brought a sack of his own yams to Obatala, saying, "This is a present for you."

Obatala said, "How did you acquire these yams?"

Shango said, "My mother has the secret of growing them."

When Yemaya was certain that Obatala had no more yams left she went to visit her. She began to negotiate for the ritual drums that Shango wanted. And in the end it was agreed that Obatala would get the yams grown by Shango, and that Obatala would give him the drums.

Shango acquired the drums, and he was acknowledged thereafter as their owner and master.

As for Orisha-Oko, he left Obatala's plantation and disappeared in the wilderness.

APPENDIX III

YORUBA MUSIC IN THE AMERICAS

Haiti: Anago Drumming

$\text{♩} = 168$

$\text{♩} = 168$

IRON
PERCUSSION

FIRST
DRUM

SECOND
DRUM

THIRD
DRUM

From *The Drum and the Hoe, Life and Lore of the Haitian People*, by Harold Courlander, Berkeley, 1960.

Haiti: Song to Ogun

Original pitch—9 st. ♩ = 152

Drums

simile

O - gun é _____ oh moin bles - sé? O - gun é _____ oh moin bles -

sé? _____ A pas m'bles - sé Fe - re - i, M'pas wè sang moin! M'pas wè

sang'm Mait O - gun _____ moin pas wè sang moin! Moin pas wè

sang'm Ba - da - gry, _____ Moin pas wè sang moin là! _____
(with slight var.)

From *The Drum and the Hoe, Life and Lore of the Haitian People*, by Harold Courlander, Berkeley, 1960.

Cuba: Drum Music for Yemoja

Lento

Okónkolo
DRUM

Itótele
DRUM

Iyá
DRUM

Accelerando

The musical score is written for three drums: Okónkolo, Itótele, and Iyá. It is divided into two sections: *Lento* and *Accelerando*. The *Lento* section consists of three measures, and the *Accelerando* section consists of 15 measures, with a double bar line after the 6th measure and another after the 12th measure. The notation uses various rhythmic values and accidentals to represent the drum patterns.

Fin.

From *La Africana de la Música Folklórica de Cuba*, by Fernando Ortiz, Havana, 1950.

Brazil: Yoruba Songs to the Orishas

SONGS TO ESHU

<i>Ibarabo-o mojoba</i>	O great one, I pay obeisance,
<i>Iba koshe omo deko</i>	A young child does not confront
<i>Elegbara</i>	The powerful one ;
<i>Omojoba</i>	I pay obeisance
<i>Elegba Eshu lona</i>	To Elegba Eshu, who is on the road.
<i>Odara kolori onejo</i>	The good one, who has no head for dancing,
<i>Sho-sho-sho abe</i>	The stubborn knife
<i>Kolori eni-ijo</i>	Has no head for dancing.
<i>Eshu tiriri</i>	Eshu the awesome,
<i>Bara abebe</i>	O powerful knife!
<i>Tiriri lona</i>	The awesome one, on the road.

SONGS TO OSHOBI

<i>Odire-c odire</i>	The family, the family,
<i>Arere bare-o</i>	The worthy and friendly,
<i>Bare are-o</i>	All the relations,
<i>Arole (g)barajo</i>	The head of the house gathers them together.
<i>Oke</i>	He calls,
<i>Okke ode</i>	He calls like a hunter,
<i>Oke</i>	He calls.
<i>Agogo olese</i>	The bells on his feet,
<i>Olesa, clesc kuta</i>	Feet, feet of stone.

SONGS TO OSAIN

<i>Pelebe mi tobe-o</i>	Flat is my knife,
<i>Pelebe mi tobe-o</i>	Flat is my knife,
<i>Obe pelebe</i>	The knife is flat ;
<i>Aku pelebe</i>	Dull it is flat,
<i>Ku aku pelebe</i>	Dull or not it is flat.
<i>Ere kanbi oje</i>	<i>Ere</i> makes a noise like a bullroarer,
<i>Arere ife-i</i>	The sound of the whistle
<i>E weti-ayo</i>	Will go into his ears beseechingly.
<i>Irere ijeje</i>	The kindness of the seventh day,
<i>Bakuroba</i>	Never to leave the king,
<i>Ibaribaba</i>	The worshiper of the father,
<i>Barisha</i>	The worshiper of the god,
<i>Ibari yeye</i>	The worshiper of the savior,
<i>Ibaba yeye</i>	The father savior ;
<i>Mama aro</i>	Without a hearth,
<i>Afi kawa da she</i>	We ourselves make ourselves
<i>Omo 'Batala</i>	Children of Obatala.

SONGS TO YEMOJA

<i>Ba uba-a</i>	If we do not meet her,
<i>Ba uba-a</i>	If we do not meet her,
<i>A woyo</i>	Though we look for her long,
<i>Sarele</i>	We shall hasten to humble ourselves
<i>Ycwashe</i>	Before our mother the lawgiver.
<i>Awadc</i>	We have arrived,
<i>Iyade lode</i>	Our mother is outside.
<i>Ba uba</i>	Should we not meet her ?

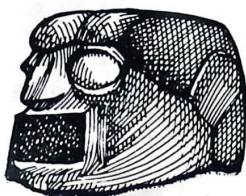
<i>Onibo to ile</i>	One who nourishes and protects the house
<i>Aya onibo to ile</i>	The wife of one who protects the house
<i>Onibo iyawa</i>	One who nourishes, the queen
<i>Iya nibo ile</i>	The mother who nourishes the household.

SONGS TO OSHUN

<i>Barewa lele</i>	The beautiful one emerges,
<i>Umale</i>	The spirit-god,
<i>Arele umawo</i>	One of the family reincarnated.
<i>Alabe Oshun</i>	Honor to the knife of Oshun,
<i>Oshun mirere-o</i>	My good Oshun.

From the album *Afro-Bahian Religious Songs*, recorded and edited by Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, Music Division, the Library of Congress, 1947.

GLOSSARY
AND
PRONUNCIATION
GUIDE



YORUBA VOWELS HAVE SOUNDS THAT ARE FAMILIAR IN THE English language. For example:

a is pronounced as in father (*ah*).

e has long and short values, pronounced as in grey (*ay*) and met (*eh*).

i is generally pronounced *ee*.

o has long and short values, pronounced *o* as in poke and like the *a* in law (*aw*).

u is generally pronounced as long *oo*.

The Yoruba consonant combination *gb* has no exact equivalent in English. The guttural *g* is sounded just ahead of the *b*.

In the following pronunciation guide, stressed syllables are indicated by capital letters. For example, ah-WO indicates stress on the second syllable. Where no capitals are shown, the stress is even throughout.

The Yoruba language is tonal, with meanings often dependent on rising or falling inflections. For the sake of simplicity, inflections are not indicated here.

The symbol ~ over a syllable ending in *n* signifies nasalization, with the final *n* suggested rather than pronounced.

- ABEOKUTA (ah-BEH-o-kōō-TAH)—A Yoruba city, formerly capital of a kingdom. Meaning: "Under the Rocks."
- ABIKU (ah-bee-koo)—A child who dies shortly after birth to torment its parents. An abiku child is said to be born over and over again.
- ADAHUNSE (ah-DAH-hōōn-shay)—A practitioner of the art of medicine or magic.
- ADANJU-KALE (ah-dahn-JOO kah-leh)—"With Glittering Eyes in the House," a praise name for twins.
- ADEREMI (ah-day-REH-mee)—A female ruler of Ifesha.
- AGAYU (ah-GAH-yoo)—A river deity.
- AGEMO (ah-GEH-maw)—Chameleon. He appears in the creation myth as one of Olorun's messengers or advisors.
- AJE (ah-JAY)—Money, or the orisha of money.
- AKINYELURE (ah-keen-YAY-loo-ray)—A man's name.
- AKUKO (ah-koo-KAW)—Cock. In this case, the name of a person.
- ALAFIN (ah-LAH-ah-feen)—Oba of Oyo, a title.
- ALAPA-NSANPA (ah-lah-pah n'SHAHN-pah)—Long-armed egungun. Literally, the egungun "who swings arms."
- ALAWÉ (ah-LAH-way)—The name of a diviner.
- AMAIYEGUN (ah-moo-AI-YAY-gōōn)—An orisha of the Egungun Cult.
- ANAGO (ah-nah-go)—A Yoruba subgroup, also called Ifonyin.

APASHA (ah-pah-SHAH)—A man's name.

AWO (ah-WO)—Secret cult, secret.

AYAN (ahn-YAWN)—A variety of tree.

AYO (AH-yo)—The Yoruba variant of a game played with beans, stones or other counters on a carved wooden game-board with rows of cups or pockets. This move, count and take game is known throughout Africa by various names.

BABA (bah-bah)—Father.

BABALAWO (bah-bah-LAH-WO)—A divining priest of the Ifa Cult.

BENIN (bee-nee)—A Yoruba city, once capital of the Kingdom of Benin.

EDE (eh-DEH)—A town. The place to which Shango sent the hero Timi.

EDUN (eh-DOON)—Monkey.

EGUNGUN (ay-GOON-GOON)—A member of the Egungun Cult, believed to be a messenger or representative of the dead ancestors. By extension, any one of several classes of "masquerades."

ELEGBA, ELEGBARA (eh-LEH-GBAH, eh-leh-gbah-RAH)—Alternate names for the orisha Eshu.

ELEKUTE (ay-LAY-koo-TAY)—The name of a sacred grove. Literally, "The Owner of the Grove."

ERINLE (EH-reen-leh)—The name of a local river orisha.

ESHU (ay-shoo)—The orisha of accident and chance, of the gateway and the highway, and the one who carries sacrifices to the sky.

ESIE (AY-see-AY)—A village site somewhat south of the city of Ilorin.

ESINMINRIN (ay-scen-mee-reen)—Name of the brook where Moremi sacrificed her son Olu-Orogbo.

FON (fawn)—A people of Dahomey, neighbors to the Yorubas.

- GBONKA** (GBAWN-kah or GBAHN-kah)—One of the heroes of Oyo whom the Alafin, Shango, wanted to be rid of.
- HAUSA** (HAH-oo-sah)—A tribal and cultural group occupying a wide territory of Africa north of Yoruba country.
- IBADAN** (ee-bah-dawn)—A city, formerly a city-kingdom.
- IBEJI** (ee-BAY-jee)—Twins. The orisha of twins.
- IBO** (ee-bo)—A tribal and cultural group in east central Nigeria.
- IBODE** (ee-bo-day)—A western city.
- IDIO** (EE-dee-o)—The spot where Oduduwa (or, alternately, Obatala) first touched dry land in his descent from the sky. Now a sacred grove.
- IFA** (ee-FAH)—Another name for the orisha of divining, Orunmila. The term is also used to designate the process and paraphernalia of divining.
- IFE** (ee-FEH)—The first, and sacred, city of the Yorubas. (Pronounced ee-fay, the word means house.)
- IGBEKOYI** (ee-GBEH-kaw-ye)—A personal name.
- IGOGO** (ee-GO-GO)—The name of a bell festival, from agogo, bell.
- IJAPA** (ee-jah-PAH)—The tortoise, the animal trickster hero of the Yorubas.
- IJEBU** (ee-JEH-boo)—A subgroup, and a region, of the Yorubas.
- IKERE-EKITI** (ee-KAY-RAY AY-kee-tee). A town. Ekiti is a region of Nigeria.
- IKU** (ee-koo)—Death.
- ILE-GBIGBONA** (ee-leh gbee-GBO-NAH)—“Hot Ground.” A praise name for the orisha Sonponno.
- ILE-IGBO** (ee-lay EE-GBO)—“Jungle Place.” A mythological city or town. There is also a real-life town by that name.
- ILESHA** (ee-LAY-ee-shah)—A Yoruba city. Meaning: “The House of Orisha (God).”

ILE-TITU (ee-LEH tee-TOO)—“Cold Ground.” A praise name for the orisha Sonponno.

IRE (EE-ray)—A place where the orisha Ogun settled. Ogun is frequently called Ogun Onire, meaning Ogun, Owner of Ire.

IROKO (ee-ro-ko)—A tree, considered to be a variety of oak.

ISHOKUN (EE-SHO-koon)—A town, now considered to be a part of the city of Oyo. Said to be the place where twins first appeared among the Yorubas.

ITIYERE (ee-tee-YEH-REH)—A type of egungun characterized by long ears. Literally, the egungun “who wears earrings.”

IWUDE-OGUN (ee-WOO-DAY O-goön)—A festival for the orisha Ogun.

JAKUTA (JAH-koo-TAH)—“Stone Thrower,” a title given to Shango, owner of the thunderbolt.

KEHINDE (KO-EEEN-day)—The lastborn of twins.

KOKUMO (KO-KOO-maw)—“He Will Never Die.” A personal name.

KOTOYESI (ko-TO-YEH-SEE)—A personal name.

MALOMO (MAH-law-maw)—“Don’t Go.” A personal name.

MOREMI (mo-RAY-mee)—A heroine of Ife who became an orisha.

NUPE (noo-pay)—A region and tribe on the north side of the Niger River, above Yoruba country.

OBA (AW-bah)—Ruler, king.

OBA KOSO (AW-bah ko-SO)—“The King Does Not Hang.” A praise name for the orisha Shango.

OBATALA (aw-bah-tah-lah)—The orisha said by some Yorubas to have created dry land where once there was only water, and to be the shaper of humans.

- ODUDUWA (o-DOO-doo-wah)—According to the Ife account, the orisha who created dry land and became the first ruler of Ife, hence of all the Yorubas.
- OGBE BABA AKINYELURE (aw-gbeh bah-bah ah-KEEN-YAY-loo-ray)—A warrior hero.
- OGEDENGBE (o-GAY-dehn-GBAY)—A ruler of Ilesha.
- OGUN (O-goōn)—Iron. The orisha of iron.
- OGUNMOLA (O-goōn-maw-LAH)—A ruler of Ibadan.
- OJO (aw-jaw)—Day.
- OKE-UMO (o-keh-oo-mo)—Umo Mountain. A site near Ilesha where Ogun is said to have hunted.
- OKO-ODO (o-ko o-do)—“Lower Farm.” A site near Esie where ancient stone carvings were found.
- OLODE (o-lo-day)—“Owner of the Public.” One of the names of the orisha Sonponno.
- OLODUMARE (o-LO-doo-mah-RAY)—Another name for Olorun, the Sky God.
- OLOGUN (O-LO-goōn)—“Warrior.” A personal name.
- OLOKUN (O-LO-kōōn)—Orisha of the sea.
- OLOKUTA (O-LO-koo-tah)—“Owner of Stone.” An alternate name for Olosun, a local orisha.
- OLORUN (aw-LAW-roōn)—The supreme deity of the sky. God.
- OLOSUN (O-LO-soōn)—The name of a babalawo who became an orisha.
- OLU-IGBO (o-loo EE-GBO)—The orisha of the bush, the forest, or the wild country.
- OLU-OROGBO (o-LOO o-ro-gbo)—Moremi’s son, the boy who was sacrificed at Ife after the egunguns were defeated.
- OLUFON (O-loo-fawn)—A praise name for the orisha Obatala.
- ONI (AW-nee)—Title of the oba of Ife.
- ONIRE (o-nee-RAY)—“Owner of Ire.” A surname of the orisha Ogun.
- OPA (aw-KPAH)—Staff.
- ORA (AW-rah)—The name of a river.

- ORANMIYAN (aw-RAHN-mee-yahn)—An ancient ruler of Benin. Said to be—after Oduduwa himself—the first ruler of that city. Considered to be an orisha.
- ORISHA (o-ree-shah)—In Yoruba belief a god or demigod. A deified ancestor.
- ORISHA-NLA (o-ree-shah n'LAH)—“Big Orisha.” Another name for Obatala. Sometimes used to refer to a group of minor orishas created out of the parts of Obatala's body.
- ORISHA-OKE (o-ree-shah o-kay)—Another name for Olorun, the Sky God.
- ORISHA-OKO (o-ree-shah O-KO)—The orisha of agriculture.
- ORUN (AW-roon)—Sky.
- ORUNMILA (aw-ROON-mee-lah)—The orisha of divining. Also known as Ifa.
- ORUNSEN (aw-roon-SHEHN)—A woman's name. The name of a local orisha.
- OSANYIN (aw-SAHN-yeen)—An orisha of curative medicine and divining.
- OSHOSI (aw-shaw-see)—An orisha of hunting.
- OSHUN (AW-shoon)—One of Shango's wives. Orisha of the Oshun River.
- OWA (AW-wah)—Title of the oba of Ilesha.
- OWO (aw-waw)—A city, once the capital of the Owo Kingdom.
- OWON (aw-wawn)—A town.
- OYA (aw-yah)—One of Shango's wives. Orisha of the Niger, or Oya, River.
- OYO (aw-YAW)—A city, formerly the capital of the Kingdom of Oyo. The original site of the city was some distance north of where it now stands.
- RENRENGENJEN (REH-REHN-geh-jehn)—An oba's name.
- SHANGO (shahn-GO)—An ancient oba of Oyo, and the orisha of thunderbolts and lightning.

SONPONNO (shawn-pawn-naw)—The orisha of smallpox and other virulent diseases that produce sores on the body.

TAIYEWOW (TAH-yay-wo)—The firstborn of a set of twins.

WARI (WAH-ree)—*See* AYO.

YEMOJA (yeh-maw-jah)—Orisha of the Ogun River. Said by some to have been a wife of Ogun.

YORUBA (YO-roo-bal or YO-roo-BAH)—(n) A member of the general Yoruba cultural group or any of its sub-groups. (adj) Pertaining to the Yoruba people and culture.



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