# ORISHA:
# The Gods of
# Yorubaland

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# The Gods of Yorubaland

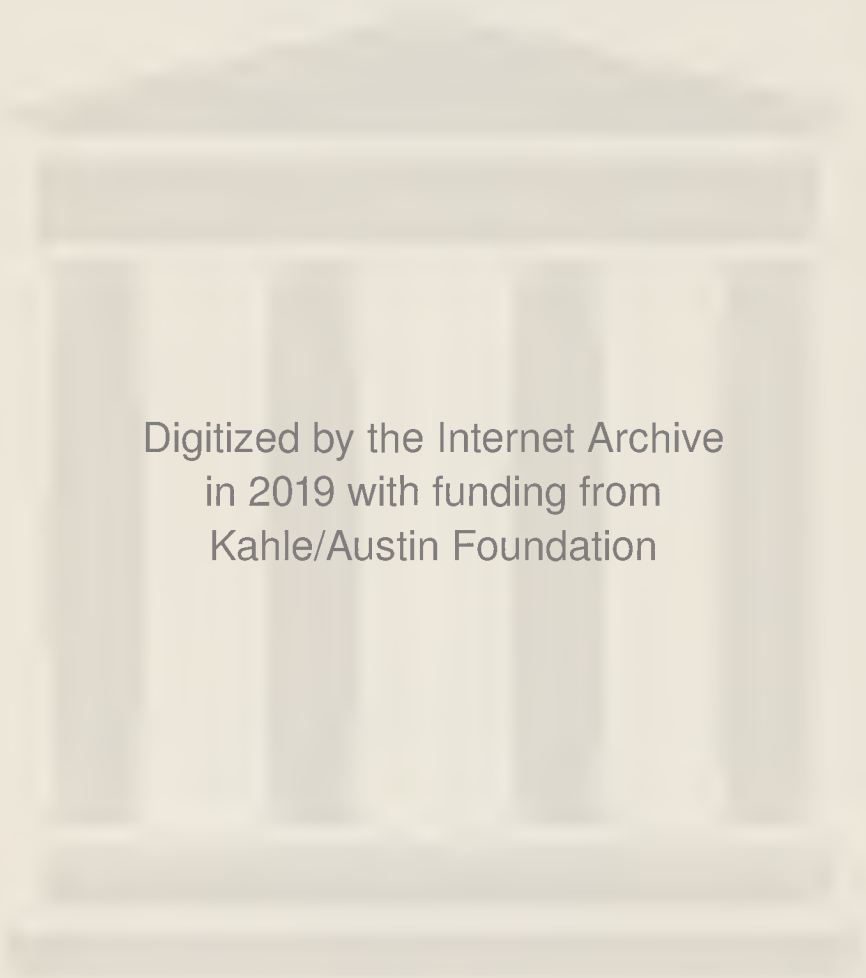
BY JUDITH GLEASON

art by Aduni Olorisa

Atheneum 1971 New York

Library of Congress catalog card number 70-134809
Published simultaneously in Canada by McClelland & Stewart, Ltd.
Manufactured in the United States of America
by Halliday Lithograph Corporation
West Hanover, Massachusetts
Designed by Harriett Barton
First Edition

*With gratitude to my teachers,*
*friends and sponsors:*
*Sunta, Suzanne, Lionel and Frank,*
*and with hope for the future*
*as incarnate in*
*Tombo Bradford and Oba Hanson*



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# The Orisha, cast of characters

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| *Eshu* | messenger, trickster, principle of uncertainty, disorder |
| *Oba* | one of Shango's three wives, a river |
| *Obatala* | creator who shapes each child in the womb, model of ethical purity |
| *Oduduwa* | founder of Ife, imposer of world on water |
| *Ogun* | father of iron, also a hunter, warrior |
| *Oranyan* | Oduduwa's son, ruler of Ife, later founder of Oyo |
| *Oshun* | Shango's most beautiful wife, a river |
| *Oya* | Shango's favorite wife, winds and storms, the Niger river |
| *Shango* | third king of Oyo, dispenser of justice, thunder |
| *Obaluaiye* | "King of the Earth," one whose real name is too dangerous to mention |
| *Yemonja* | mother of waters and of all the orisha |
| *Ifa* | principle of order, embodiment of knowledge, oracle |
| *Orunmila* | personification of the above, not, strictly speaking, an orisha |

# Eshu

At the roundabout in Ibadan,
Outside that endless traffic circle,
I, a stranger, stand
Waiting for the light to change.

They've erected your altar
In the market place,
Annointed it with palm oil
And sent you off on
Several errands.
No wonder the horns
Honk coded messages
Of exasperation.

Creation's indulgent child,
Thumb sucker, father of invention,
Humpty-Dumpty, look here,
Let me cross,
Join any stream—northbound, east, or west;
I've got my passport,
My bilingual bicycle,
I'm doing my best.

With yesterday's hammer
You hit today's nail on the head.
Why should I get the point in my rear?

I'm tired, gasbag;
I see you now,
Your eyes blink black and red.

Nowhere eludes you.
Let me get on with my journey
To the heart of Yorubaland.
I'll buy you a kola at the oba's market
As soon as I get there.
Now begone, confusion,
Absentminded messenger.

# Yemonja

I am Yemonja, mother of the waters and of all the orisha. My body is the source of motion. When I dance the rolling of the sea, my wrists hover like kingfishers. Before dawn I arise from my quiet lagoon to bathe. Luxuriously I immerse and skim, simulating eternity, until along the narrow path I see a stately procession of sisters, round-bellied water pots balanced on their heads, babies firmly tied to the hollows of their straight backs. Then I disappear beneath the thick, grey surface of the ordinary.

The women are the pillars of a home in Yorubaland. They rise early in a silence cut by cockcrow to sweep away impurities. When the husband goes to the farm, they finish cleaning the courtyard; they bathe their children until those little bodies gleam in the sunlight like polished ebony; then they wash their cooking utensils, clothes, everything; then they prepare to carry their goods to the marketplace: stacks of deep-dyed adiré cloth, little packets of smooth cornmush wrapped in banana leaves, handfuls of miniature red peppers, calabash ladles or enamel pans, straw nests for scrubbing, thread and needles, fresh kola nuts, thin bushrats

stretched upon sticks—anything some people might be needing. Nor do they neglect to prepare food, to gather firewood; and when the husband returns, they say, "E kãbo o, oko mi," and place the steaming platter of soup before him, the mounds of pounded yam, cassava, cornmeal or beans; and after he has eaten he is breathing leisurely.

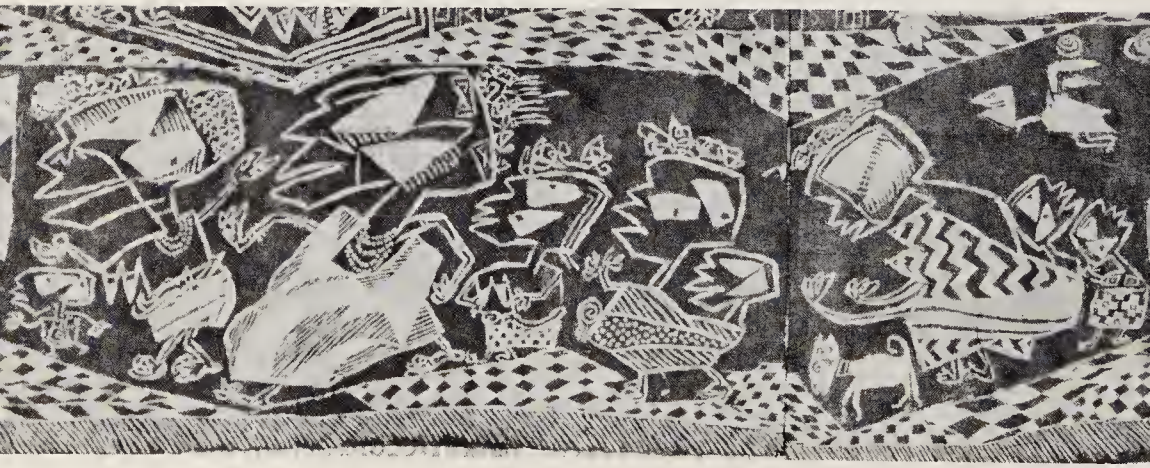
I am the ancient mother of fishes. I am moist earth, sometime wife of Aganju, my brother, the owner of the dry uncivilized land to the north of here. My first son was Orungan, the tall one who fills the space between earth and sky, Orungan, strong as the air we breathe.

Listen, one day when Aganju was away hunting, Orungan seized me. "O malediction!" I cried. "You have done a forbidden thing. I am the woman who lies down on a bed of biting ants only to be struck, without warning, by a snake. I had just finished polishing the walls of my sanctuary, set all my pots upside down in their rightful places, swept the dry leaves from the path, and now everything in this beautiful world we inhabit will be chaotic, disarranged, strayed from its hallowed position, littered, menacing, barbed and

broken." And wringing my hands, I ran here and there among the reeds, twisting, turning, trying to escape his advances, the consolations he was all too eager to offer for his misdeed. For still he pursued me, would have me again. Finally there was no place else to go. With feet astride I rewrapped my flapping *irobirin* from right to left, tucked the loose end firmly in and faced him, determined to disappear into the ground rather than surrender. His hands reached out to grasp my waist and I fainted, fell back, striking my head against a stone. And from my swelling breasts gushed streams.

Then, as my nourishing waters began to inundate the earth, creating lakes in low places, rivers, intricate brooks and hidden sources, my generous belly burst open to release sixteen orisha: Olokun the ocean; Osha the lagoon; Shango, his brother, and his three wives; Ogun, and his brother the hunter; Oke the mountain; Oko the farm; Aje, wealth; Sun; Moon; and dread Obaluaiye. I've forgotten the name of the other one, for I am old. Times have changed. Women no longer kneel nor men prostrate themselves before their elders as often as before. Many shrines, neglected, have become hidden by forest creepers; ancient trees have been cut down; and young people, dissatisfied with the old life, have been enticed elsewhere.

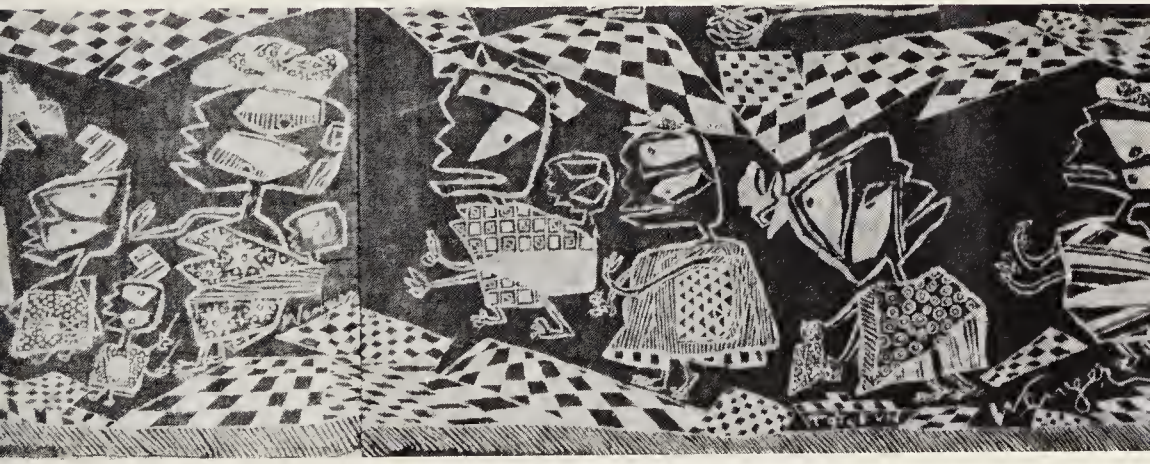
Will my history be forgotten? Listen, at the place where my body, through violence, gave birth to the world, the



grandfathers of men erected a holy city called Ife, meaning distention. But my spirit fled west again in the direction of Abeokuta. Here and there all over Yorubaland I have infused various waters with my sacred energy, but it is at Abeokuta that I flow most freely, beneath bridges, past the great rock, down rapids and continuously out to sea.

They have given me a place of honor in Amida Market, Ibora quarter. My house is fringed with grasses like a queen's veil. No one sees my face. But once a year they carry my sacred image in procession and my sacrifice down footpaths to the river. What will it be? If I say cow, it will be cow, if sheep, sheep. None shall fail in their generosity. For I am Yemonja whose breasts reach down to her knees.

I wear pure crystal, occasionally interlaced with blue glass beads. Without my laughter there can be no peace in the family. Is it love you desire? I am she. Some dance with a bit of scarf in their hands. I prefer a fan, made of palm leaves or peacock feathers, ornamented with seashells. Slowly I gyrate around the room, enticing, enticing; for although I am old, no woman excells me in allurement. My underskirts are as white as foam on the surface of the sea, my outer garments are deep indigo, my headtie is as lively as kingfishers' wings, although sometimes I wear a pearl-fringed crown to indicate my regal nature. Occasionally a distraught look comes into my eyes and I begin to rush about the room, bewildered, as if searching for somebody.



Mother of fishes, container of secrets, I alone can reveal the source of my anxiety. Listen, but never tell, listen: Briefly, from time to time, upon the surface of my fan, as if it were a mirror, I see reflected the face of Orungan. Of Orungan—yes, he.

Women, they are the pillars of the Yoruba family. They wash everything clean. When their husband returns, they give him hot food and cool water to drink. Early in the morning they sweep, inside the house and outside in the courtyard they sweep as the wind puckers the surface of the sea, as the wind bends the heavy branches of the mango trees and in the dry season spreads a film of fine red dust over everything.

Above, in the blue sky, low clouds veer in from the seacoast, forming and reforming images of what has been and will be. The wind comes up. Out there in the sea furrows form. Arms reach out to grasp the unwary fisherman. I am Yemonja, mother of waters, of all the orisha, of all currents of feeling that draw hands together, of voices whispering in the night, "Come sleep with me, come sleep with me." Listen, become my music, increase like fishes, drink at my sources, dance me; for although I am the oldest woman alive, I am the most supple, the most beautiful. Deep blue beads alternating with translucent crystal.

# Eshu

There were two friends who loved each other like yam porridge and pepper soup. Whenever they went out, they wore identical cloths. Their farm plots, thanks to the chief's respect for their friendship, were adjoining. The path to and from the village was all that divided them as they worked, and all day long they called across courteous greetings:

"Good-day my very special friend, I hope the sun is not beating too hard upon your shoulders."

"Not at all, my dear age-mate; I salute you for working so steadily in the heat."

"May your soil yield even finer crops than mine."

"My compliments upon your new wife; may she bring forth sons to commend your industry."

"Salutations on the coming cool of the evening."

"May the sun not deceive you into lingering too late in the field."

And so on, as weaver bird converses with weaver bird, these friends continued to embroider their amity.

Until one day an old man walked down the path between them. It was Eshu. He was wearing a pointed cap, black on

one side and red on the other. He held his pipe to the nape of his neck and slung his stick over his shoulder so that it dangled down his back instead of over his chest as he usually carried it. The two friends answered his greeting, then went on with their work and thought no more about him until, late in the afternoon as they prepared to go home, one of them said, "I wonder what business that old man had in our village?"

"Whatever it was, he must have completed it quickly," said the other.

"How do you know?"

"Because he left before noon, don't you remember? Long before our wives brought out our dinners."

"True, he passed by midmorning," said the other, "but he was heading into the village, not out of it."

"Nonsense," said his friend, "he was going in the opposite direction, up country, not towards the village as you said. Perhaps you've confused him with another. This traveler was an old, old man with a stick slung over his shoulder. You know, the one who used to wear a black cap."

"Don't take that tone with me. I know precisely who he is, and today he looked exactly the same and, as always, his face was following his pipe bowl into our village."

"You looked at his pipe, but I saw his feet. For all we know, he may have been puffing through a hole in the back of his neck; but this much is clear: That old man in his brand new red hat was leaving our village farther and farther behind him."

"How absurd to talk about backwards pipe-smoking. You're just trying to throw me off the track."

"Not at all. There are infinite possibilities in this world, which only a clod like you would fail to consider. For example, it's perfectly possible, although unlikely, that the sun won't set this evening. What I saw I saw, without error, and you, too stubborn to admit your lack of observation, your

lack of imagination, retaliate by accusing me of playing with the facts just to get a wedge under your bulk. Why shouldn't a man buy a hat of a different color? And why shouldn't he invent a new way of smoking? I've half a mind to cut a hole in the back of my neck just to show you it can be done."

"And stop the sun, I suppose. I've always thought you a little mad, and now I'm convinced of it. Some witch is eating you. You ought to go to a doctor—"

"So that's it! I don't care what you think. You're impossible. I can't imagine why I ever found you good company. Your stupid face revolts me. I can't stop myself," he said, hitting his friend over the head with his hoe.

"So you admit you're mad, mad enough to pick a fight with me. Well I accept the challenge. Crazy or not, there's but one way to deal with unreasonable aggressors." And with that he threw his one-time friend flat on his back.

"Crude, evil-tempered man," said the other, "flat-footed rhinoceros, illegitimate offspring of a mortar and pestle. Begone. I don't care how late it is. I wouldn't walk home at midnight with you. Our friendship is finished. Dead. No words will ever pass between us again."

When the chief heard of the astonishing quarrel between these two whose loyalty he had always supposed more durable than that of other men, he sighed deeply and went off to perform a sacrifice to Eshu. The next time village council met, he reallocated the land so that henceforth the former friends would work at opposite corners of the communal tract. Then, holding up an old hoe for all to see, he said, mysteriously, "The sacrifice that iron refused to make is what's eating him."

# Obatala, Young

TO MARJORIE WHITE

*"A gentle character it is that permits the rope of life to stay unbroken in one's hand."*

Listen, if you would worship Obatala, your character should be clear as water drawn from the spring early in the morning. If you asked me, I should have to tell you, and even if you didn't ask me I would tell you about Obatala, the one they call the largest of all the orisha: he who holds the scepter, horn of ivory, he who gives us cause for laughter, he whose presence imbues others with nobility.

Listen, earth covered by sky contained everything—and nothing. When Oludamare, the owner of the sky, decided to open Ifa's sixteen eyes of destiny, he could see no farther than the middle region of the universe and that appeared to be a watery waste. He looked again. Deep below, the Owner of the Earth, the great mother, was silent. Only a rustle, a sough without leaves, a pause in the infinite stillness, a hint of freshness eddying over bones gave intimations of vitality.

Before withdrawing his concern, the Heavenly Owner of each today sent two sons down to the middle region. To the elder, Obatala of the white robes, he entrusted a packet of black soil and a chicken with five toes; and into the deep pot

of the younger, Oduduwa, he put twenty-one iron bars.

Iron formed itself into links, and the two brothers held on until at last they found themselves suspended by a long chain. Who knows how long they would have dangled there in the emptiness had not the Owner of Immensity thrown a seventeenth kernel down into the waters below their feet. Now uprose Igi Ope, the primeval palm, offering them vast and wholesome support among its far-reaching branches. Overjoyed, Obatala praised Igi Ope, singing:

O king of the land of the living,
Giver of life,
Palm,
Source,
Shelter,
Welcome, I greet you for growing.
Hard clay does not easily permit
Visits to the dead;
Your roots give access,
Your fronds prevent the unwary,
Your midribs, a broom
To banish impurities.
Your kernels contain many rooms,
Two hundred and fifty-six
Pots of wisdom.
O palm tree,
Fuel, food, roof,
Sure column, continuous fluid,
New life's impossible without you.

Then the brothers looked down from the crown of Igi Ope, and Obatala said, "I see furrows cutting across dry places in the swamp; between thick copses, patches of cleared ground bristling with pineapple, drooping with plantains, hummocks from which early crops of white yam have sprung. Surely mankind has been here before us."

"No," Oduduwa said, "you are mistaken, brother. Those are but welcoming ripples upon the surface of the flood, pulsations of earth's pressure drum announcing our arrival."

"Anything is possible, *didun, dundun,* to those who say one thing meaning another," said Obatala. "But before we go down to make a world, let us refresh ourselves up here a while longer."

No sooner had he uttered this wish than iron molded itself into a tool—the first of its kind, something between a

knife and a chisel.

"I greet you for versatility, father," Obatala said. Then taking hold of the handle, he proceeded to cut fibres out of the midribs of several palm fronds. These he braided into a rope with which to ease himself up to the highest branches. There with one end knotted securely about his waist, he braced himself flat footed against the bole and used iron's gift to make a quick incision at the growing point. Catching the flow of sap in his hands, he sang as he drank:

Palm wine,
Pure and cool,
Sweet dew of the morning,
Light and dry in the afternoon,
Effervescent milk,
Nothing's sweeter
To tongue or stomach,
Heart or brain,
Than palm wine,
Palm wine.

When he had drunk his fill, Obatala climbed back down to his bower and fell asleep. Then Oduduwa, the younger, saying, "Greatness, here am I," seized the packet of soil, together with the five-toed chicken, and shinnied further down the bole, below the branches to the place where it bulges out like a python's stomach ache. Here, hanging on with his knees, Oduduwa opened the packet and shook the contents out upon the surface of the waters. The black stuff did not dissolve but rather stuck to itself, became first a paste, then a glob, then a mound, then grew and grew until it became a knoll and, eventually, Ara Hill, which still stands on the outskirts of the holy city of the Yoruba. Now Oduduwa let the chicken go. She flew down and began to scratch the soil on the hill, spreading it across the watery waste until her

claws began to blunt themselves on bedrock. "Stop, that's enough for now," Oduduwa said. After which he climbed on down, alighting first upon Oke Ara, where he founded a city called Ile Ife, meaning "place that is wide." For the city is older than the generations of mankind.

Sometime later Obatala awoke. Disappointed, and mildly angry at himself for having outslept the grounding at Oke Ara, he asked his father for another task to perform, a work of comparable importance. The Owner of Breath forthwith commissioned him to create human beings.

No sooner had Obatala touched earth than he set off in search of the finest white clay, the kind that will withstand fierce heat. When he finally found what he was looking for, in the north, he purified it by washing and laboriously carried it back to the place set aside for his working—a quiet grove in the eastern environs of Oduduwa's palace.

Unashamed to do woman's work, he tried pots first, just to get the feel of his material. Kneading the clay with his toes, then submitting it to the pressure of his palms, Obatala at length formed it into balls. These he rolled into coils, which he wound round and round, carefully building up and out and then up and in to form an imploring mouth at the top. Finally, he smoothed the surface tight and left the whole to dry.

As Obatala worked on, the unspoken emptiness of his finished pots began to distress him, so he took time out to go palm wine tapping. Returning with more than enough of the heady stuff, he bestowed contentment upon the creations in his courtyard. Morning and evening from that time on he continued to fill his generous containers, and between times he happily worked the moist clay, singing:

Nothing exceeds the whiteness
Of the froth on the lips of a jar
Containing palm wine.
Little by little is best;
Perfection is always next in line;
Palm wine fresh from the tree is sweet,
But palm wine that has rested awhile
Doubly refreshes,
Mounts to the head and blossoms
Like silk cotton.
Lively spirit, I salute you,
Palm wine.

At last Obatala felt himself prepared to execute his commission. Taking a long draught of his enlivener, he began allowing the clay beneath his finger tips to suggest all the shapes that make up the bodies of men and women: the rounded limbs, the swelling instep, straight back, ripening breasts, the elegant column of the neck, the tapering cylindrical head—sacred vessel of strength. But in reality he was envisioning inner qualities.

As each part emerged, he, the serene craftsman, carefully elaborated the details and let them speak of healing complexities. With a little wooden stick he incised each toenail; outlined each bead on every bracelet, anklet, necklace and close-fitting headdress; grooved a line along the hem of the waistcloth; etched in the folds and the brisk finality of the hip knot. And then at last with soft fingers he began to model the features of the face: pressing the nostrils in as he flared the resilient cartilage out to the surface of the cheek, pushing the upper lips into flat curves guarding their secrets,

teasing the eyeballs out from inside their sockets and then, again taking up his tool, cautiously cutting away the lids on the exterior until potent sleep disclosed itself as controlled meditation. Moistening the edges of every part, Obatala then put the wholes together; and when all dampness had been given time to evaporate, he piled broken palm shells round, kindled a blaze, and fired his delicate creations.

The first results pleased Obatala and he stationed them like spirit masqueraders about the shadowy grove, took another long draught of palm wine and began again, this time praising himself as he worked:

> He who makes eyes, makes nose,
> It is Obatala, the one who deals in choice clay,
> Whom you will serve.
> I fashion free man, and I fashion slave,
> Both sing praises to Obatala.
> If you turn out to be the owner of buck teeth,
> You may blame me
> For not sufficiently covering them;
> I create as I please;
> But if you would crack your riddle, you must
> Sing praises to Obatala.
> What occurs to the eyes,
> Affects the nose,
> And all things involve Obatala.

Then, in his exultation, the master began to improvise. First he striated the faces to make them more interesting, endowed them with light and shade of their own, raised furrows extending from hairline to chin, saying, "Just as humanity will work the earth, so shall they suffer iron's knife and permit weatherings, scratches, gashes, cuts reminiscent of all elements that ever play upon primordial stuff."

What matter if he'd run out of white clay, no need to

interrupt, to chase off north again, there was plenty of local material strong in iron and vigorous with decay. Taking another long draught, Obatala took up this rich red clay, washed most of the sand out, and began to experiment with other forms.

Animals first—a chameleon clinging to a rock, a tethered ram, an owl absorbing the night through perforated eyes; then an inarticulate servant with a broad face, stubborn protruding jaw, pronounced brow ridges and lines of future disobedience drawn down from heavy nose to wide mouth; then a moron with a blown-out head, pointed at the brow, the jutting eyes of a frog and lolling lower lip; then hunch backs, shriveled limbs, legs bowed with rickets. All these created Obatala.

Exhausted, the great one lit enormous bonfires about the yard, downed another pot of palm wine, and retired into his snail's hut to sleep it off.

When he awoke, Obatala heard a noisy crowd outside reviling him. "What's this?" he asked himself. "Can it be that overnight the great owner of creation came down to breathe the breath of life into the lot? I'd not have thought them fixed enough for that. But, what's done is done."

Slowly Obatala rose from his bed, covered himself with his stiff white cloth, entwined himself in his white beads, took up his scepter and ventured out into the yard.

"Malediction, malediction upon the presumptuous," the people cried, "Down with the bloated head."

"Peace, everyone," he said. "Do not scorn Obatala, praise him. Do not ask to be unborn; live life. I can see that those noble figures standing among the trees in the twilight of my grove are content with their destiny, but unless they sacrifice they will be no freer than their servants. And as for you, the foreign, the deformed, the down and out, the crippled, the exaggerated, again I say, do not despair. As I recognize myself, I shall protect you. Never shall you know

want, for all men shall henceforth consider you sacred to me. Now, all of you, let gentle character so modify your features from within that eventually your faces may radiate a calm, benevolent dignity. Be reborn. Dissolve. Allow self to become someone, but wear your uniqueness lightly. Emanate, expand beneath the delicate crust. I too, I shall be redeemed by love, for I swear henceforth in the name of iron and in the sight of all never again to drink palm wine. This I give up. Forgiveness is a deeper draught," said Obatala.

And from that day it has been, in Yorubaland, as the great sculptor said. Among his misformed favorites may be found albinos of the first clay, the kind that takes so well to firing, and their grotesque relatives, the sharp-nosed whitemen.

Salutations to the compassionate Obatala.

# Obatala, Old

In the early days there was much confusion. There were, apparently, many orisha, but few men knew to which orisha they belonged, and nobody knew what was fit to sacrifice and when. Nor did anyone know when to go forth and when to remain at home; why certain misfortunes befell and how others could be prevented. So Obatala, who continued to feel accountable to his creations, went back up the palm tree to see if anything could be done.

Oludamare, The Proprietor, again and for the final time, focused his eyes upon the middle region, saying, "Only heaven knows how. . . . Take Orunmila, my optimist, down with you. He shall advise everyone, yourself and all the orisha included, my haphazard son; but do not forget, it is you who are senior . . . to effect deliverance. Goodbye for many a season's change. Like a cloud I withdraw into my permanence."

No sooner had Orunmila and Obatala set foot upon the ground than Orunmila, the newcomer, began to shell nuts picked on the way down. "You see, my friend, hope for mankind was contained in palm tree all along," he said

evasively, "but you were too preoccupied with self-gratification to discover it."

Obatala laughed at this insinuation. "Why should you abstain from wine on my account? Here, be seated pleasantly on my front porch, and I'll ask my eldest daughter to bring you a pot. See, here are two newly decorated drinking gourds, one for guest, one for host, and a calabash of fresh spring water. Such is my lot; but friendship does not require identical cloths."

"Sometimes it does," answered Orunmila, "now for example. Fill up my gourd with water and let us get to work. Not that I've given up wine. On the contrary. Palm fronds formed the path through which my mother pushed me into the world, and not to persist in yearning for that with which she nursed me would mark me guilty of ingratitude and reveal a lack of filial piety. But now you and I must reach the same pitch of sobriety. You have iron. Will you be good enough to carve me a divining tray while I call leaves to help me, mumble, mumble, wash my sixteen Kernel-eyes. Termites have already prepared the dust upon which I'll write the signs. When you've finished the tray (be sure you incise Eshu's face four times along the rim), we've but to scoop up a sufficient quantity of dust from the base of your rickety roof props."

When all was prepared, Orunmila enclosed the sixteen palm nuts in the hollow of his closed hands, shook them rapidly like seeds in a gourd, then grabbed all he could in his right hand. Since only two remained in his left hand, he made a single stroke with his middle right finger on the dusty surface of the divining tray. He repeated this process seven times. With each try the results were the same. Completed, the first sign was fixed thus:

I I
I I
I I
I I

upon the dust that stood for earth. Eji-Ogbe, Orunmila named it and forthwith began to expound its meaning.

The divination by palm nuts went on as soon as all the possibilities within Eji-Ogbe had been told. Each time Orunmila shook the sixteen palm nuts in both hands and caught as many as he could in the right hand. When there were two remaining in the left hand he would make a single mark on the dusty tray and throw again. If he caught all but one, he made two marks; if he caught all or if more than two remained behind in the left hand, it did not count; he would begin again. Eight successful throws and recoveries made a complete set, a "sign." And he proceeded until he had accomplished all the 256 possible patterns for odd-or-even thrown eight times in two rows.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| I | I | | II II |
| I | I | These were the extremes | II II |
| I | I | | II II |
| I | I | | II II |

What these patterns signified is something else again. No other knowledge is of any use to those who would elucidate

them. No one diviner-priest today knows even half the possibilities for conduct opened up by each set or pattern; he knows only part of what each of the 256 *odu* have to say, to foretell. Only Orunmila knows all, and that day on Obatala's porch he chanted all eventualities in his own guarded oracular mode. The sun waited, hovering above the horizon, for him to accomplish this extraordinary feat. Not so Obatala. Had the sculptor paid close attention, he might have emerged as omniscient as Orunmila himself. But the air grew oppressive with too much wisdom, and from time to time Obatala dozed off, awakening now and again when he heard his own name mentioned.

In the beginning, however, the creator was almost embarrassingly attentive. The words of the oracle were obscure, it's true, but once he caught their drift he began to speak himself in Orunmila's mode, teasing his friend by pretending stubborn ignorance, while in fact, he was participating in the unfolding of symbols.

"Eji-Ogbe," repeated Orunmila triumphantly. "First things first. Is it not remarkable that the first sign brought forth should apply directly to you?"

"Not at all," said Obátala. "Procede if you please, to tell the sweat on my brow."

"I, Heaven Only Knows," said Orunmila somewhat pompously, "say it should be done little by little. It is bit by bit that we should eat the head of the palm rat."

"Which palm rat?" interrupted Obatala.

"You'll find out soon enough," hissed Orunmila, "have patience. We should measure the length and measure the breadth—"

"I agree," said Obatala, "but what will we find if we do?"

"Young palm fronds reaching higher than old fronds. Now I tell you, no forest's so dense that *iroko* cannot be seen, no music so loud that the gong can't be heard—"

"The *igbin* drums are strong enough for me," said

Obatala.

*"Mine is important, mine is important,* is the white heron's cry; but clearly palm tree's affair is most important."

"Thorny *okan* sprouts then quickly creeps up to the road," ventured Obatala.

"But the trample of man's feet keeps it from spreading beyond," said Orunmila. *"Mine is important, mine is important* is the cry of the white heron; but palm tree's affair is most important."

"Clearly," added Obatala, laughing outright. "Orunmila, you have succeeded in persuading me to be silent. You are indeed wiser than I. My cloths are white, yet they can always be sullied. Your leaves will be green from recent through eventual. Storm clouds rumble for the blind; for the deaf, there's lightning. I've had plenty of warnings. First I foreswore palm wine, and now I shall swear never to mistake Ifa nuts for the ordinary kind."

"Stop, my friend," Orunmila replied. "Some modesty is becoming, but overmuch is as unseemly as pride. It is you who are senior, not I. Though your cloths may be sullied, yet they may always be washed, and no one will ever hear of their death. They will simply wear to shreds. And these rags and tatters of yours one day will cover us all in our beds. The sky is immense, yet it grows no grass. Lord of life, I stretch out my hands to you. Here, take back your staff of authority. Ifa is cool, refreshing, open-eyed; but it is you whom we shall call Father."

What makes a hornbill stop laughing? If the same thing happened to the vulture, it would become stiff on its legs. Oduduwa, the founder of Ile Ife, resented Obatala's increasing strength, the deference shown him, and with the help of his son succeeded in driving his elder brother out of town. Eventually the two became reconciled once again, and Obatala was content to allow his younger brother full authority

within the walls while he continued to enjoy preeminence among those forest-dwelling Igbo people who had always been his very special friends and protectors, those who, he still had every reason to suspect, had lived there long before Oduduwa landed.

One day it suddenly occurred to Obatala that he was growing old, and he at once determined to make a long postponed visit to a very dear friend, Shango, Oduduwa's great-grandson, now reigning king of far-flung Oyo.

Never having forgotten palm tree's paramount importance, Obatala straightway consulted Ifa. And through the sixteen nuts, the hands and voice of the Father of Secrets Orunmila spoke to him:

"There is no room for two authorities in one kingdom, you must not go."

"But I shall be only a guest," Obatala argued, "say what you will. As the river, hitting a snag, slips its neck under the root and keeps on flowing, so there must be a way of avoiding trouble."

"The way is hazardous, and you are not getting any younger."

"You needn't tell me; I know I'm old, that's precisely why, say what you will, I'm going. What sacrifice must I make? Go on, tell me."

"Very well," said Orunmila, "but first let me cite you a precedent, tell you a legend."

"Orunmila," said Obatala, making himself more comfortable on his mat, "are you not growing more talkative with the years?"

"Not a wit. You should have stayed alert the first time. Everything is repetition. Permit me to recall vulture's case to mind. How did that bird manage to achieve old age? By following my advice. I told him to sprinkle divining powder on his head."

"So you did," said Obatala, "I remember perfectly. But it

was Eshu who made that powder stick to the pates of his descendents so that all, even in their youth, look old enough to be their own great-grandparents. I don't see the relevance—"

"Little by little," Orunmila said, "it is patience that becomes king. Listen, long before the world began, sky and earth went hunting; but their luck was poor and between them they managed to bag only one palm rat. How to divide it? Sky said, 'I'm the man, and I shall have it all.' 'No, I'm the eldest,' said Earth, 'the whole belongs to me.' 'Well then, take it,' said Sky, 'but you'll regret having denied me.'

"Once back home, sky tied up all the rains so that earth was unable to yield. Trees sighed in their withering until only silence fell from their aching branches; grasses grew brittle and shrill in the wind then slowly lay down upon the parched ground to be trampled to dust by thirst-crazed animals. Earth had the good sense to consult me and I told her to send the rat's head up to the sky together with her apologies. Earth did as she was told, made a sacrifice, but nobody would deliver it.

"At last vulture, the only well-fed bird, volunteered his services. Upon arrival he was given a small gourd and told to take it down to his mistress in return for her apology. But curioisity led vulture to open the gourd on the way.

"At once rain began to fall, with violence. Everything that could move took shelter; and by the time vulture arrived upon earth every nesting place was filled, and he, was so drenched that everywhere he knocked he was refused hospitality. 'A dripping guest makes a wet nest, get away from here,' his former companions cried, pecking or clawing him or striking him on his head. So vulture had to content himself with huddling bald and bedraggled on a bare limb until the rain stopped—which, eventually, it did, but not until clay had become mud, savannah swampland, and future Ile Ife but a tree-studded sea."

"I don't see the application of this tale to my case," said Obatala, "but I suppose in retrospect I shall. Now tell me what to sacrifice in order to avoid vulture's fate for, in my ignorance, your words have had the unexpected effect of making me even more anxious to begin my journey."

"All right," concluded Orunmila, "what must be must be. Everything can always be arranged. I cannot really alter events, only deflect danger. Your sacrifice shall consist of three white cloths, to be offered at appropriate times along the way; and besides these you must take along shea-butter soap. Furthermore, you must do everything that's asked of you along the way, refuse no service, make no complaint."

"Why should I?" asked Obatala. "To eat *awusa* seed is not so difficult as to drink water afterwards. I am not unacquainted with bitter aftermaths. But a vulture can never be in such distress as to be considered less than a chicken."

"In that case," Orunmila said, "I wish you long life and a pleasant journey."

Obatala wrapped up three cloths and a piece of soap, as he'd been told, and next morning before second cockcrow set forth upon the road.

At midday, emerging at last from the forest, he saw Eshu leaning up against the trunk of a baobab. At the trickster's feet was a heavy basket of charcoal. "I've been trailing brushfire," Eshu announced, "picking up his droppings as I go; but so rich have I become, two hands are not enough to raise this basket up to my head. Would you please help me?"

"With pleasure," said Obatala, letting go of his staff, "although quite frankly your way of talking irritates me. Is it because you want to conceal the location of your charcoal pits? No danger of my stealing anything," Obatala muttered, stooping down still further to get a good grip on the bottom of the basket. While he was thus engaged, Eshu quickly snatched the basket up and dumped the contents upon the old man's back. Obatala said nothing but rose and hobbled off to the nearest stream, stripped off his gown, washed it with the soap made of shea butter, and left it there on a flat rock as an offering. Then he bathed himself, put on a fresh gown and proceded on his way up country.

Along the grass walled road that winds out of Ilorin to meet the steep path down from the potters' village, Obatala encountered Eshu again. This time the trouble-maker wore a clay pot on his head. "Yesterday I left the dye works with a flood of indigo," he said, "and today I return with a suitable container. I find, however, that the longer I walk, the heavier my load. I would rest awhile. Would you be kind enough to stop and help me lift it down?"

"Surely," Obatala said, extending his arms; but no sooner had he got hold than the pot slipped from his grasp and spilled blue dye all over his head and shoulders.

"Clumsy fool," said Eshu. "Shakey fingers should never

volunteer to thread a needle." To which Obatala, the imperturbable, said nothing, but rather retraced his footsteps to the dye works on the outskirts of Ilorin.

He stopped before two women who were expelling the excess color from their dyed cloths in cauldrons of clean scalding water. Behind them were strung the results of their labors—square after square of smartly patterned *adiré* cloth. Obatala asked them if they'd mind if he threw his soiled gown in the rinsing water. "Not at all father," and with blackened hands they took it off, stirred it about with a stick, rung it out and hung it upon the line with the others. "What's the matter, father?" they asked. "You look disappointed."

"It's far from white," he sighed, "sky-dipped, I'd call it. O well, perhaps the sun will do the rest. Here, take some shea-butter soap for your pains; it's all I have to give you. I must be on my way. Don't take my cloth down. Just leave it hanging until the wind tears it to shreds. Good-bye for now, and many thanks for your kindness."

Way beyond Ilorin, on his way out of the town of Esie, Obatala encountered something anyone else would have thought most unusual: a group of soapstone people encamped among plots of vegetables. Stopping to listen to their story, he praised these resolute figures, saying:

> Endurance is cool,
> The only sacrifice sure
> To be accepted
> By the owner of all life.

Then he bade them good-bye, promising upon his return to plead their cause before the Elesi, ruler of the town, whose rudeness was responsible for their situation. Why won't he take them in now that they've turned to stone, Obatala wondered. Surely the Elesi could find a place to line them up, or

he could build a special sanctuary. Does he not sense retaliation? When the doors of hospitality are kept closed, how can prosperity enter? And yet, they say they've been here seven years and I see no signs of impoverishment anywhere about. How can this be? Is there no justice in this world?

Hardly had he uttered these words to himself when he saw Eshu again in the form of a scarecrow with a calabash on its head. "It's about time," the wiley one snapped. "Here, hold this and take my place for a minute while I dance about to get some feeling into my legs." Obatala complied immediately. But just as he was bracing his own legs to accommodate the pressure of the unfamiliar burden on his head, Eshu kicked him in the ribs. The calabash, it turned out, had been brim full of red palm oil. And Obatala was soon dripping with it. He picked himself up off the ground and, forgetting all about the unfortunate soapstone people, set forth at once in the direction of a tall line of trees that promised a river, where he could wash and change.

Dressed in his last white cloth, the old man gingerly made his way across the harvested stubble towards Oyo. Surprised to see a beautiful white stallion galloping towards him, Obatala rummaged about for a forgotten stalk of grain and, holding it out for enticement, said, "Come, return with me to your master. He will be overjoyed to receive you back from the very hands that once presented you to him."

Just then one of the palace slaves appeared, arms waving above the rise of the hill, mouth open wide and shouting "Stop! Thief!"

"What's that you're saying? Nonsense, my good fellow, you have made a mistake," Obatala started to say; then, remembering Orunmila's advice, thought the better of it, bit his tongue and was silent. The man's shouts brought others converging upon the place where Obatala stood mutely caressing the horse's mane. The first man to spy the runaway led him off, presumably towards the stable; and the others,

as soon as the first man was out of hearing, raised their cudgels and fell to beating Obatala mercilessly. When all had given full vent to their violent rage, they carried the unconscious old man inside the walls of Oyo and threw him into the dungeon.

For seven years he lay there on the foul straw while his crooked bones knit themselves as best they could. And for seven years Shango's kingdom withered beneath the heat of a pitiless sun. Despairing of rain, all streams withdrew northward to the Niger or southward to the Ogun and with them went all wild game excepting the baboons. They sat with shriveled haunches upon the rocky heights of Oke Alafin and Oke Idi Ogun and stared through hollow sockets down upon the land, down upon the flat roofs of deserted markets, down upon the worn walls of the palace, down upon the face of a land lashed by winds, scar tissue pitted porous by drought and gradually eaten by decay.

At length Shango, fearing his kingdom would disappear entirely before rain came, fearing disgruntled mobs as well, decided to consult the oracle. Then Orunmila through his nuts and his priest revealed the source of the disaster to be injustice done to an old man, more specifically, it emerged, to an old man who was a very special friend of both Orunmila and Shango.

Horrified, the king called all his people together and asked if any one could remember an old man's being unjustly treated seven years before. A slave spoke up: "O king I greet you with this news. Seven years ago some of us caught an old tramp stealing something, I've forgotten what it was, and not wanting to trouble you with minor affairs, we simply carried him off to prison. You could hardly call that unjust treatment, though. If he was a friend of yours, we had no idea of it at the time. He's still there I suppose, alive or not. I myself didn't put him away, and no one ever looks in on the prisoners."

"Do you happen to remember," Shango asked, his voice cold with suppressed rage, "did you happen to notice how the old man was dressed?"

"In white robes, like a northerner," the slave replied, "I remember thinking it odd that he should not have disguised himself for prowling around—"

"You fool!" Shango exploded. "That was no northerner, no thief at all, but my dearest friend, my dearest friend." And striking off the slave's head with his axe, the king rushed, blinded with tears, to the prison.

"Father, my oldest and kindest friend," said Shango. "How can even you forgive me?"

"Like bitterness of *awusa* seed after water is drunk, the taste of friendship lingers long in the mouth," said Obatala. "But you must not take all upon yourself, for you are not entirely to blame, in fact hardly at all. Your slaves were perhaps a bit hasty; and had they been taught proper respect for their elders, they never would have crippled these old legs of mine; but for the most part I myself am the guilty one. You see, long ago when Orunmila and I were new in the world, I asked him to disclose my horoscope. Well, the elucidation was complicated and long, but it all boiled down to the fact that if I refused to sacrifice a calabash of salt and a white night gown, I would know shame on earth.

"I stayed up most of that night drinking palm wine, my dear friend, although I had sworn never to touch it again, drinking palm wine and thinking things over, and over. At last, as the froth of the palm wine rises over the rim of the bowl and mounts to the head, so my thoughts rose and I saw, still fresh from the fire, all the products of my exalted imagination, all that I had created and unwittingly set forth on arduous paths. Why should they know shame upon the earth and not I? In the end I decided not to make the sacrifice.

"Toward dawn, when all the world save Eshu and witches slept, the prankster crept into my hut. Slipping my drinking bowl under my gown, he secured it to my shoulder blades forever and then threw salt in my eyes so that when I awoke I found myself weeping. Blind I was not, despite cruel rumors to the contrary. My sight returned, but not my thirst. That's forever sealed up in this disfiguring hump on my back you've always been too polite to notice. No, no, my friend, you are not to blame for my just portion of shame on this earth. But all the same," he added, "you ought to keep a tighter reign on your temper."

At midnight Shango summoned all the virgins in the city and ordered them to seek fresh water from untroubled springs. Shortly after dawn they returned, single file, with brimming pots on their heads. Then began the great bathing of Obatala.

When they had robed him in cloths as white as their own, the young girls fed him delicate snail's meat cooked in clarified shea butter. Then Shango called upon the palace musicians to bring forth sixteen newly made *igbin* drums; and as these praised him, the mature women danced eight measures with supple shoulders and eight measures bent over with swaying buttocks. Delighted by the performance, Obatala said, "From now on, Shango, you must wear your red beads interlaced with white to commemorate our everlasting friendship."

When it was time for Obatala to leave Oyo, he decided not to go all the way back to his grove outside Ile Ife but rather to build himself a hermit's house in the wild wood he called Igbo. Because he was badly crippled from the blows he had received seven years before, Shango sent him forth with an attendant named Atawoda (that which one brings upon one's own head). This man begged his new master to permit him to exterminate all the surly retainers who had

done the old man wrong, but Obatala said, "In time, Atawoda; there are better ways to achieve one's ends than by violence. It is bit by bit we must eat the head of the rat, as Orunmila is fond of saying."

Now Obatala had a special charm. Some say it was Oya, Shango's favorite wife, who had brought it down from Tapa, or was it Ibariba country? But however he came by this charm, once settled, he buried it beneath the floor of his remote house in Igbo. And sure enough, one by one his enemies, not only Shango's slaves but all who ever had done him injustice, were attracted to the front door. Irresistibly drawn, they entered; and one by one they went out, deformed.

Then one day, envious of his master's power, Atawoda, to whom Obatala had given some land for farming, went up to the top of a hill overlooking the house and grounds. When he saw the old man come out to stroll contentedly along the path to the woods, Atawoda, knowing him at once by his white robe, pushed a huge rock off the escarpment, crushing Obatala and scattering him to the four corners.

From his secret home in the branches of Igi Ope, Orunmila descended at once. By performing a special rite he was able to gather together all the far-flung bits of Obatala in one calabash, which he then hid beneath the ground in the eastern environs of the palace of Ile Ife.

Obatala, immense orisha,
Placid craftsman
Who fashions children from blood,
I have but one cloth to dye deep indigo,
I have but one headtie to redden with camwood,
Yet you have modeled me five children;
It is Obatala I must worship.
Obatala of the white robes,
Patient kneader of choice clay,

You rest everywhere like a swarm of bees,
Stay by your children,
And as they evolve,
Fill them with your intoxicating laughter.

# Eshu

A king's son was very rich. He was told by the royal diviner-priest to sacrifice in order to avoid being frightened by people; but since such a mental state was inconceivable to him, the young man refused to perform his obligations to Ifa.

When his father died, he said, "Who is there on earth to compete with me for the late king's title? There being no such competition, who on earth can validate the decision of neighboring chiefs in council?" He did not, as was customary, go the rounds, hoping to impress the kingmakers with his qualifications; but, rather, gathered all the gifts he would have distributed to secure favor in the coming election, hung a rope to the sky, and climbed up to present the lot to Olorun, the sky's owner.

When Olorun saw a man's head moving into view, the great one said, "You're here now; but don't ever do this again." The former king's son said, "All the same, it's a pity there is no one on earth my equal," and prepared to descend.

As he was climbing down, Eshu cut off the under side of

the rope. Quickly the young man began to pull himself back to sky's place, only to have Eshu sever the upper end of the rope. The young man was left dangling in midair, with nowhere to go, with the sun beating on him, with no food to sustain him, dangling, like a spider with no web, dangling. . . .

# Ogun

TO WOLE AND LIAIDE

The day Ogun came down from the heights of Oke Ori he was clothed in fire and wore a garment of blood. As the Father of iron descended, he pulled the night behind him. Stars struck his forsaken hilltop, flared upward, then fell again, hissing into swamps and rivers. Ogun's eyes blazed as he came on, black as soot and smeared with blood from his kill.

The women in the marketplace shrieked when they saw him, pulled their sashes tightly about their babies and fled, knocking stalls down in their haste, overturning baskets, spilling kola nuts and treading upon trays of hot peppers. Mortified, the Hunter halted long enough to strip an oilpalm of its fronds and cover himself, then proceeded on his way to the palace of his father, Oduduwa.

"Good-day, Father, I salute you in your prosperity."

"O, o," Oduduwa answered.

"How are all your wives and children?"

"They exist, thank you."

"You sent for me. I have come in peace."

"No one would have guessed it, had you not said so,"

Oduduwa replied. "May you go forth in war."

"Against whom?"

"Against everyone, eventually. But first against the Igbo, then, ranging wider, against the Tapa who even now may be seen crossing the Niger to harass our settlements. You shall be my field marshal, chief of seventy captains of the guard, all of whom shall be equipped with coronets as well as with staffs of authority, batons that henceforth shall be called 'invincible.' "

"Very well," said Ogun, "but those who follow the captains into the field ought not to go empty-handed. I shall make them weapons the world has never known before, blades finer than the sunbird's beak yet stronger than cudgels torn from the armpits of the baobab, durable as green grass by the riverside, swift as Eshu, more deadly than the elephant." And saying no more, he strode out of the palace, cracking the lintels, splintering the doorjambs as he passed through the portals on his way to the open.

That night he went down to the river. It was dry season, and most of the waters had retreated north leaving withered flanks of river exposed on either side of the arroyo, clay flesh fit for quarrying. Like white fat threaded through sides of beef, there were veins of quartz along the riverbanks. Breaking through these with his bare hands, Ogun uncovered rich layers of gravelly laterite. With ecstatic fingers he extracted the ore. His conquest complete, he wrapped the iron in hides, then hauled the sacks one by one up to the base of Oke Ori and thence to the mouth of a cave that served him as retreat from eyes of man and beast. Here no one would dare disturb him in his work, for Oke Ori was his place, the hill-head he worshipped, the lair of his ferocious existence.

Once forest and cave had sufficed him; now, for his new work, he needed cleared space. Hacking away a courtyard, he lit greenwood fires all about the edge of it to warm the ore and, at the same time, to manufacture charcoal. Then he went back down to the riverbed to fetch a quantity of moist clay sufficient for the construction of a furnace. This he modeled in the form of two intersecting cones, a form that recalled a woman's shape. One final task he completed before dawn: with his old stone chisel, he drove a wedge into a tree stump, ripped out the heartwood and lined the cavity with hot coals. Then, hushing the low fires with handsful of loose soil, Ogun hunched wearily into his cave and slept out the course of the sun.

Arising at nightfall from his bed of stone, Ogun went first to the burned out tree stump. Fitting a trimmed branch as pestle to this mortar, he began to pulverize the warm ore, one handful at a time. He sifted the powder in a reed basket, washed the heavier particles in pure spring water, and set them to dry in hollowed log troughs. Then he went back into his cave to prepare for the arrogant transformation.

Emerging at length, he stood fully strengthened, in the

open. He blew his trumpet, and the forest danced. He put on his cap of blood, and the trees blazed for miles around. He wrapped a serpent around his neck, and down in the swamp the sedges whispered to one another, stags grew fresh horns and seven birds flew up to the top of the oilpalm. "I come, I come," Ogun chanted, cavorting about the yard.

Below in the farms men and boys threw their digging sticks down and rushed back to their compounds crying, "All roads to the open are barred; turn all wine pots upside down in the courtyards; fetch the women washing their clothes down river and tell them to come indoors."

He began the smelting at midnight. Into the open neck of the furnace he poured three bagsful of irondust in the name of Eshu who goes before, and on top of these, sixteen bags of black charcoal in the name of Orunmila who sees and orders all. A handspan's distance from the ground, east, west, north and south he cut four windows into his furnace, and into these openings he put clay pipes and then, swelling out like a toad, blew a single blast into each hole.

"Now breath of life," he cried, "enter these clay nostrils, animate the slumbering flames to purge away dross. Let all impurities be consumed in ecstasy. Oya," he called across the abyss, "owner of storms, buffalo woman, come drive your winds like eager souls of the dead to animate this image."

Hearing his call, Oya arose from her Niger bed and came to Ogun.

Next day the smoke from the open-necked furnace hid the sun and kept everywhere dark so the smelting could continue. Down in Ile Ife everyone slept and so, in the cave, did Oya and Ogun.

When midnight came round again, restless Oya was already up preparing beans for Ogun, beans with hot pepper sauce. But when he awoke, the smith had but one thought. Without even greeting Oya, he rushed out into the yard to

look at his iron. Unsealing a little opening below the kiln, he allowed the metal to run out through a channel he'd prepared for it in the earth. With a wooden stick he prodded the sluggish globs into the quenching trough he had dug and doused them there with palm wine.

As soon as the metal was calm, he carried it into the cave, flattened it out on a boulder with a heavy stone press, then hammered out the last impurities with a shaft of granite. Too exhilarated to eat, he told Oya not to pester him with her attentions, then sent or rather drove her out with his hammering.

In the center of his hearth he had long ago, on the advice of Orunmila, buried a thunder-struck palm trunk. Into this he now drove a flat-topped wedge of crude iron. Next he banked the coals of Oya's cooking fire and set clay pots out upon it. Into each pot he put a small amount of metal to heat. Then he took two *agere* drums and made bellows (for strengthening the fire) out of them in this way: Loosening the skin heads, he attached them by thongs soaked in resin to twin bamboo poles. Standing the cylinders upright, he made a hole at the base of each and into these holes inserted equal length clay pipes slanting down to a common funnel. After setting this funnel upon the bed of coals, he cemented the drums in place and set a mortar stool a convenient distance away. Then he called Oya, bandaged her eyes so that never having seen she would never be able to reveal the process, sat her down and told her to pump the sticks up and down, steadily. She mustn't talk, but she could hum his tunes he said, if she wanted to.

So hour after hour she plied the bellows to keep the fire hot and the metal on the fire soft while Ogun struck the anvil and created tools of iron. First he fashioned tools for himself—shaft hammers large and small, a chisel and a transverse hammer, a billet, an adze and tongs. Then he forged implements of war—swords, knives both stabbing

and throwing, cutlasses, iron tips for arrows and matchets for clearing paths. And as he worked he praised himself out loud so that force would continue to flow from his head to his hands to the iron:

> Ogun of the massive shoulders,
> Bloom of the hearthside,
> The one with the flaming eyeballs,
> I am he.
> From now on you may say I am not only the way through the forest,
> You may recognize me in the place of quarrels,
> On the trampled grass of the battlefield,
> In the warrior's right hand,
> In his bloodshot countenance.
> Praise Iron and his numberless progeny:
> Hammer is the son of Ogun,
> Thunder's axe is the son of Ogun,
> Sword is Ogun's eldest grandchild,
> And sword's unborn gun.
> The stone is the mouth
> That speaks with seven tongues.

"Oya," said the smith, "I am thirsty. . . . No, no, don't put those poles down; it's bad luck; I don't want the fire to die down. I wish you could stoke it for me as well, but clearly that's impossible. Keep on with your blowing, though, and I'll fetch some wine. Would you like some?"

"Ogun," she said, "I have had about enough. This is not love, it's slavery. No, not that I'm tired; I can stick it out as long as you can; but I swear by the iron on the anvil that next time you'll have to get somebody else to do this work for you. You say you're thirsty. Small wonder. I've never sat in such heat. But there is no more wine. You poured it all

into the trough. If you want something beside water, why don't you go out and call down to some of your soldiers, those guardians of the kingdom you've been so busy equipping with weapons. Let them get up off their mats."

"Too far, they'd never hear me," said the smith, deliberately welding tang to blade at white heat then striking the clinker off with his smallest hammer. "And besides, you know very well I don't want anyone to come anywhere near this place."

"Then call the vulture on the crown of the *akoko,* ask him to tap palm wine for you. Call the hornbill living up in the baobab. Ask the bushfowl to be your tapster. Or the cattle egret."

"All right," said Ogun, "I will. And what I will is done."

The next night, when all fires were out in the smithy, Orunmila came to pay a call on Ogun. "Arrogant handyman," said the oracle, "you think you can make anything, but you never forged palm nuts."

"Nor ever will I," said Ogun laughing. "Don't worry. In that quarter your competence goes unchallanged."

"Ogunda-wori," said Orunmila, marking the sign on the bare ground, "You have fortunate hands; but those who can't build houses don't have to have recourse to treetops; those without hoes don't have to eat dirt; the unskilled don't have to be satisfied with the makeshift. Ifa provides, but only if Ifa is relied upon. Strong may be your right arm, but in other respects you are not so fortunate. However, he who would sever, must shed blood. You may find yourself alone; but the chances of your avoiding disastrous quarrels would be greater if you slaked the world's thirst with dog's blood now and again. Your old stone is hungry."

As the oracle spoke Ogun grew increasingly irritable. When Orunmila had finished, he angrily said, "All right, one sacrifice, but after that, I warn you, do not seek me out

again. To ask a hunter to kill one of his dogs is like asking him to blind himself, to transform his legs into mudfish, to tear his heart out of his trunk. Nevertheless, my head shall be gratified, this once, the hole soldered suddenly with the best."

So saying, Ogun took hold of his favorite, the one called Drive-a-buffalo-into-the-bush because he was so brave, bound his forelegs behind his back as if he were a human being, gagged his muzzle, and with one stroke of the knife severed his head. "Drink me dread life!" he cried.

When he had annointed the anvil with blood, Ogun heard Orunmila saying, "From now on whenever sacrifices are made, priests shall invoke you as owner of their implements."

"Some consolation for the loss of my nose," said Ogun.

Ogun led the guardians of the kingdom against the Igbo people, the partisans of Obatala and all the white orisha. The trees who witnessed that battle shed their leaves, and the shrubs who saw it grew thorns. Ogun killed on the right, killed on the left, and no town was safe while the owner of a cap of red parakeet feathers was cavorting about.

He returned to his forge at the base of Oke Ori to find not only that Oya had deserted him, but that she had absconded with his seven finest weapons—prototypes of all the rest. Gone. The place was a shambles—char, shards, bones, loose rocks and tools strewn everywhere. It was not the kind of place a woman would choose to live in. If he had taken the time to build a little house for her at the edge of the clearing. It wouldn't have taken long. If he had got a bellows boy to do the work she did that night. If he had said, "Woman, stay away from me until I've had a chance to wash up; don't even cross the threshold; don't look at me, my face is blackened, my mouth is blackened, my jaws are smudged with blacking." If he had said . . . but what need was there for her to rob him of more than herself? Were not memories, emblems enough? If . . .

But instead Ogun built up the fire again, called a young apprentice in to ply the levers, and began to experiment with a new metal. Into a warming pot he poured gold grains. He tempered and fused them, coaxed them into liquid, flattened the lively ore upon a soapstone bed, stretched it to utmost resiliency, then spun it out into fine threads, which, wound upon iron spools, formed the most elegant ornaments—bracelets, earrings and pendants.

He dared not send all these things to Oya for fear she might say, "So you would have me back! Don't be ridiculous. Why did you waste your time making such delicate things for me? Why don't you offer them to that seductive river, Oshun? They're just the sort of gifts she covets. Or use them to turn an ordinary girl's head." So in the fierceness of his solitude, Ogun hurled the delicate ornaments into the fire, cursing the impulse that had given birth to them.

Abandoning his wilderness for a time, Ogun moved down into Ile Ife. He constructed a compound, took a wife and eventually welcomed his first son into the world with the

name Ogundamsi, meaning Ogun-wears-damask.The boy grew up to be kind to Ogun. While the father was off warring or hunting, the son would prepare favorite foods for his homecoming, roasted dogmeat, snails cooked in oil, fish in sharp sauce, and bean pudding.

Returning one day from breaking an enemy town in the name of Oduduwa, his father and king, Ogun encountered a charming fugitive in the forest near Eluti. He took the girl home with him, married her, and gave her a house of her own in his compound. When Oduduwa saw her buying fish in the market place, he went to Ogun and asked if by any chance she were still unmarried. Ogun lied and said she was, so the king, claiming her as his due, took her off to the palace. When her first son was born, the child revealed a double fatherhood in his skin. Half of him was light and the other half dark, which is how his worshippers still paint themselves for ceremonies. The king named this strange son/grandson Oranyan, meaning The Compulsory; and when he realized how exceptionally brave Oranyan was, he forgave Ogun his deceit. Immediately when Oranyan came of age, Oduduwa sent him upcountry to wage war on the Tapa. Hearing of this honor, Ogun said, "Well done, let Oranyan inherit here. My crown belongs to Ogundamsi; but it remains to find a kingdom."

Leaving Ile Ife behind, Ogun hunted his way through the eastern hills and forests until at length he came to a place called Igbo Irun, near Ire. Returning to the capital, Ogun prematurely placed his beaded crown on Ogundamsi's head and led him forth to rule over the new territory. But rather than go back to his warrior's existence as chief of the guards of Oduduwa's kingdom, Ogun decided to stay on at Igbo Irun indefinitely. He had a mind to resume blacksmithing.

He had no desire to recall the patterns Oya stole. Let others make them. Now he was all ablaze to forge weapons of peace for Ogundamsi's people; and as he worked he

praised himself to a new tune:

Live, Ogun, Live,
With one arm he clears the road,
With the other he tills the farm,
With the right hand tills the soil,
With his left hand incises the face,
And the foreskin is his also.
Stranger, beware of Ogun,
Circumciser's knife is Ogun,
And the sacrificial knife also.
Traveler, if you would live to complete
your journey.
You'd better kill a dog to Ogun.

Eventually he was moved to go back to Ile Ife to see how things were getting on in his compound without him.

To his sorrow he found out quickly how long he'd been gone: long enough for jealous neighbors to have taken over his property, spent his wealth, sold his beautiful woodcarvings, abducted his wives; so he decided to return to Igbo Irun forever.

But he'd been gone from there longer than he thought, too. Just where he thought himself almost arrived home, he happened upon a new town, an unexpected settlement in mid-forest. On the cleared ground in the shade of the market tree a group of men were seated drinking palm wine.

"Good-day," said Ogun, approaching, "I hope you are all enjoying yourselves." There was no answer.

"Welcome," he began again, "good afternoon." Silence.

"Surely a stranger bold enough to enter the precincts of an unknown town deserves the courtesy of an answer." No sound.

"Well then," said Ogun, icily now, "since you all are preoccupied with drinking, suppose in your persistent silence

you offer me drink. No one more than I is qualified to forgive single-minded devotion to the task at hand; and palm wine, when steadily drunk, is worth more than words, certainly more than wives, but never more than good manners. Come on now, brothers, I've been following the hunter's path for a long, long time and I am very thirsty." No answer.

"If I don't drink wine, I must slake my thirst somehow."

Blind with fury, Ogun unsheathed his sword and slashed off all heads but his own. Stooping, as the custom was, "to slake his thirst," he realized with a shudder that this was not enemy blood. He was alone, and these were his own people.

Just then Ogundamsi rushed forth from the nearby cult house. Horrified at what his father had done, the son fell on the ground before him and begged his pardon for inadvertently being the cause of such impiety. During Ogun's absence he, upon the advice of the oracle, had decided to move the town to a more propitious place called Ire, place

of blood. The women, he explained, were presently confined indoors because the men were engaged in a secret drinking ceremony during the course of which all had been enjoined to keep silence.

"And so they have," said Ogun bitterly. "Ogundamsi, I can endure no more. No matter how remarkable the vitality of a man, the time comes when, unable longer to tread the earth, he must find a quiet place. I dare the final separation." And with that he plunged his sword into the ground. Immediately earth opened to swallow him up.

It was there in Ire that he became an orisha, to be seen no more save as a large head-rock, or as a lump of iron, or as seven rods, an iron bracelet, a gong, a wire trilling in the blood.

But he lives. Ride your long-horned bike over the steel paving—ga-run, ga-run—between the girders of a bridge. Along the curbs see soft-fendered cars rot into the cobblestones. Along the sidewalk a child rides a toy made of a burned out baby carriage welded to a bashed-in market cart. Oil seeps through the litter and down the cement stairs to the junky's cellar. In the vacant lot next door there are spare parts, scrap iron. Pedestrian, curb your dog. Bedsprings, white enamel bathtub coffins, tin cans rust along storefronts. Inside, upstairs, lead leaks from the paint. Outside men sit on cartons, without speaking, without offering anybody anything to drink. They are drummers. One of them pares his fingernails with a knife.

# Eshu

Once Eshu set an irreverant woman's house on fire.
She dropped everything and ran home.
Returning to the marketplace, she found that thieves had
taken all her trade goods.

# Shango

TO BILL

*Prelude:* If you would know how Shango came to be king of Oyo, you must recall the history of the founder of Oyo, Oranyan, heir of Oduduwa, king of Ile Ife.

It is night time. The kerosene lantern has been brought out and placed in an enormous basket so that the warm glow will diffuse itself, make a homely space inside the protective walls of the compound. You are seated on a straw mat beside your brothers with your hand stroking the sleek yellow-brown head of your favorite dog. An old man is talking . . .

Man knows today, only Ifa can tell of tomorrow; but man does not own today, nor Ifa tomorrow. There is no medicine for old age. This I well know, but there are compensations. At the bottom of the water jar rests the sediment of experience; and over in the corner are heaps of rags worth far more than a young man's new clothes. Yet, were it not for the dead, even an old man would know less than nothing. I am no longer so young as to be carried on my mother's back to the farm. It was long ago that I first followed my father

into the shrine to behold leather bags filled with thunder stones. When the wind blows, it parts the grasses this way and that; so memory sorts things out. I have not forgotten anything my ancestors once saw with their own eyes. "I have taken, I have eaten, it's mine," cries the white speckled bushfowl. Today only homage to the great ones shall be sung. I arrive slowly, like early evening showers; but I continue until dawn; so may all the birds save the owner of the planted seed keep quiet. . . .

Some say Oduduwa came down from the northeast, others say he descended by way of the chain and the palm, still others mention a boat; but that he founded Ile Ife cannot be doubted. Some say Oranyan was his youngest son by a sea goddess, others his grandson; but that he was the youngest of seven children is undeniable.

When the time came for Oduduwa to divide his inheritance, the first born, a daughter, took his garments. The headdresses of Oduduwa devolved upon the second child, also a princess. The third, a son, got Oduduwa's cowries; the fourth, his wives; the fifth, his cattle; the sixth, his

beads. And when the youngest, Oranyan, returned from his wars, there was nothing left for him but territory.

"Good," Oranyan said, "my word has triumphed. Never try to take this land from me, for I have the wherewithal to defend it. Only a fool would try to roll up the mat of the earth; and beneath the earth is something still more permanent. From my iron roots will grow lances, javelins, hatchets and cutlasses enough to dominate everywhere. Now if out of generosity I cede each of you a far-flung plot to till, your children must out of gratitude come back each year to pay me tribute. By Oduduwa's leave, all seven of us shall wear rich crowns from which a rain of beads must fall to conceal our sacred faces; but no new king shall be installed on this earth without my permission. And except he first touch my staff of justice, no crowned Oba anywhere in the world may exercise authority, no more may lesser rulers of towns either put on coronets or take up rods without first journeying here to Ile Ife."

So the first born took Oduduwa's garments to Owu; and her son, by a priest, became the Olowu, renowned for his magic. The second daughter married a priest (or, as some say, Eshu) and became ancestress of the Aleketu. The third took the cowries southeastward towards Benin; the fourth his wives to Ila; the fifth his cattle to Sabe; the sixth his beads to Popo kingdom; and Oranyan, who remained at Ile Ife, eventually became the wealthiest of them all from annual gifts of cattle, cloths, wives and cowries.

The day came when distant quarrels begun by Oduduwa and never finished seemed more urgent to Oranyan than everyday affairs in Ile Ife. So leaving the sacred treasures of the kingdom in the charge of Adimu, a trustworthy slave whose mother belonged to Obatala, the king led a group of followers north in the direction of the caravan routes to Mecca. But an army of black ants barred their way, and they were forced to take an alternate route through Tapa

country. There, the Tapa refused to let them ford the Niger. What could they do? They could not complete their journey. The old scores would have to remain unsettled. Yet to return to Ile Ife so soon would be to return to humiliation; so Oranyan went to ask the king of Ibariba where he might settle down temporarily. This great magician gave Oranyan a charmed boa to follow until it should stop and stay in the same place for seven days. There he might build a town, the king of Ibariba said.

The snake finally disappeared at the foot of Ajaka hill, not two days journey from the Niger; and there Oranyan established the kingdom of Oyo from which his descendants would one day assert their claim to tribute from the scattered sons of Oduduwa.

Oyo was a suitable place, but Oranyan was restless. When the kingmakers of Benin asked him to come propagate a son upon a beautiful Bini woman chosen to be the mother of a new dynasty, Oranyan, after a trial of their good intentions, was not at all displeased to leave Oyo in charge of his firstborn, Ajaka, and set off for Benin.

As soon as the wished for son was safely born, Oranyan decided to leave Benin. "Since you took such good care of the seven lice I sent on before me four years ago, I assume you will take equal pains to safeguard the life of my son. Only a child born and nurtured in the mysteries of a land is qualified to reign over its people. The heir I leave here with you should make an excellent king. I myself have no such ambition."

Since Ajaka was firmly established as ruler of Oyo, and since Adimu had already been made high priest of state mysteries at Ile Ife and deserved to be named king there also, there was really no place for Oranyan to go in the world. Around him everything had grown old—plants, animals, warriors. He alone did not grow anything but discontent. He decided to enter the earth. However, before he van-

ished, he told the people of his first kingdom that should they ever need him in war, all they need do was call and he would fight for them.

A long time went by. Fearing Oranyan might have forgotten them, the people of Ile Ife resolved to put his promise to the test. They summoned him, calling, *O akin otun, akin osi, akin n'ile,* the one who is valiant to the right, valiant to the left, valiant in the house, *akin logun, ogun wa she loni,* valiant in war, war is coming to be fought today.

At this Oranyan burst forth and began to kill everyone in sight from the woods of Ore as far as Iremo. Aghast, the people of Ile Ife made haste to identify themselves; and when Oranyan realized that he was destroying his own people, he plunged his sword tip into the ground forever. Immediately that sword turned to stone and became the obelisk, Opa Oranyan, which may to this day be visited by all pilgrims to the holy city of the Yoruba.

*The reign of Shango:* Now I am nearing my destination. There is but one more river to cross and that's a small one, clotted with weeds, spanned by a single log. An old storyteller is like a chameleon. He walks slowly, but he arrives, and he must be constantly changing his clothes. So bank the fire, pass round the bowl, and I'll soon be back, briefly this time, in the guise of Shango's predecessor. . . .

Now Oranyan's eldest son, Ajaka (He-who-loves-to-fight), was named with a hope that never materialized. His was a devious character. Being fond of graceful ornamentation, Ajaka ordered both front and interior verandas of the palace fitted with carved posts rather than plain, and he set the tailors of Oyo to work sewing elegant hangings for display on state occasions. When news reached him of the growing strength of the rival kingdom of Owo, Ajaka determined to increase his own population by magical means. To

this end he visited Oluasusu, an old man of the forest, and asked him to make three hundred wooden statues, able to breathe and move. But the wood people, far from proving useful additions to the kingdom, turned out to be both inept and disloyal. They demoralized the army of Oyo until it was unable to prevent the powerful Olowu of Owo from reversing the natural order of things and enforcing the payment of tribute upon Ajaka the Alafin, Oranyan's eldest son.

So the seven notables known as Oyo Mesi deposed Ajaka. They did not seal his doom by sending him a basket of parakeet eggs. Rather they chose exile as the more cautious means of getting rid of one whose temper did not suit the times, but who, under different circumstances, might be a welcome, calming influence.

As if divining their thought, as if foreseeing the course events would take, Ajaka departed the gates in a haughty humor. "You throw me from you like an impure thing," he said, "but know that the flowering Ako has not its equal among trees; that no matter how weary the porcupine, he can always shake his tail. Where we leave the hill is where we encounter the hill. I shall return. In seven years the citizens of Oyo will be dusting their heads with ashes."

The choice of the kingmakers was Shango, Oranyan's second son, whose bizarre behavior, from birth, had brought consternation to every heart that harbored a bad conscience. His penetrating glance, like the beak of a woodpecker, hammered away in the memory long after nightfall; and like the woodpecker he felt free to alight wherever he chose, heedless of privacy, he, the king's son to whom all doors were open. Whenever a blatant lie was told, there like a brand on the hearth stood Shango. Whenever a smooth deceiver shifted his eyes away from his friend's face for a moment, there outside in the courtyard he was sure to see Shango dancing to the *tonibobe* rhythm. This was Shango of

whom people said, "One never knows his intentions. He is a rare beast in whose company it is not easy to live." He was the sudden halt in the easy flow of conversation, the impetuous kick that sends excuses scurrying into the corners, the fierce eye that chars the roofs of makeshift existences, a knife under the fingernails of the stingy, a tornado on the head of a tortoise. And whenever jealous quarrels arose in the woman's quarters, you may be sure Shango was the cause of them.

When the kingmakers arrived with the bowl of offerings, touching him on the chest and on the right and left shoulders to let him know he had been chosen to succeed his brother, Shango was not surprised.

For Shango was the first of those who found Shango uncontrollable. His hatred of fraudulence many times had led him to smash everything in sight; and when such fits came upon him, he was at pains to confine himself to his room. In despair one day he slunk off to consult Ifa. There in the flourishing shade of the diviner's compound, the oracle spoke thus: "Leaves-help-me-rumble-rumble, can conquer the world with two hundred peppers if he tries. There is a youth going about the world like an insane person, but he shall own the palace after a while." Having made the prescribed sacrifice of one ram, six heads of cowries and two hundred pieces of quartzite, Shango bided his time. He knew the people of Oyo would eventually complain of the blandness of their daily fare. When hot spice was required, he, the owner of red peppers, would be invited to contribute his inheritance.

However, he who has no meat in the pot doesn't pepper his yam, nor does a warrior talk of revenge until he's got the hilt of a sword firmly in hand. As soon as Shango had become invested with the signs of power—the embroidered sandals, the beaded necklace and fringed crown—he sent

his favorite wife Oya off to the king of the Ibariba for a charm to insure the continuation of that power within and without the palace.

She returned, and in the privacy of his bedroom showed him a special preparation that when rubbed upon his double axe would, so the king of Ibariba said, enable Shango to attract lightning. Placed beneath the tongue, this same medicine would enable its owner to blow fire from his mouth. Shango thanked Oya and told her to keep the container in a safe, dry, secret place. He did not tell her to keep a little dash for herself, but she did.

Now Shango was ready to defeat the Oluwo and reassert Oyo's claim to preeminence. Summoning forth his enemies,

and at the same time ordering all his subjects within the walls, Shango alone walked forth upon the plain to pelt the Oluwa's soldiers with his thunder stones. Only Oya, the whirlwind that tears down trees from the top, refused to stay in the palace as she was told. As soon as Shango had turned his back on the town, she rushed out and began to sweep the path before him.

When they had finished their work, when all was silent once more, when the sun reappeared from behind its cloth of death to shine upon a ground charred with the flames of his victory, the people of Oyo crept out of hiding to welcome him at the gate, saying, *Kawo o kabieyesi,* welcome lord! Welcome home, O mighty Shango. Your eye, strange Scavenger, your eye white as bitter kola, stares the hunter out of countenance. Please don't devour our great mother's goats. *Kabieyesi,* Shango, give ear to the council of the people of Oyo. We greet you for returning victorious; we greet you for expending all that energy for us; but we fear your wrath's incontinence. No one in his right mind swats flies with a pestle. Better look at the ground with a friendly eye, like a melon. Fierce lord, step gently in the farms from now on."

Shango heeded the advice of his people, put by his axe that spit fire and cut both ways, and took up his father's staff of authority. For the next few years he ruled wisely, wishing full life span to his warriors and urging them to continue to take new wives. When he wished to capture new towns he did so by strategem and guile. And the people of Oyo praised him to the *bata* drum, saying *"Kabieyesi,* Shango. The ram is no longer difficult to live with. In his presence one can relax and begin to enjoy life."

But not forever. In the seventh year of Shango's reign, complaints reached him of the misbehavior of the Ijeshas. They were, so travelers testified, kidnapping distant townspeople right off their farms and molesting caravans passing

along trade routes to the south.

The Ijeshas, in the early days when Oranyan still ruled at Ile Ife, were considered "food for the orisha." Now that the capital was far removed from their territory, Ijeshas could no longer be so easily secured for sacrificial purposes, but they were still regarded as more remarkable for their brute strength than for their refinement. The audacity of their acts, therefore, seemed unsupportable. And besides, there had to be a free flow of trade. Shango decided that the best way to curb the Ijeshas would be to send the famous hunter Timi down to establish a frontier outpost midway between Oyo and the southern kingdoms. The place chosen was Ede.

When the caravan route was restored to safety, Timi, as a self-imposed reward for his services, began to levy customs on all passing traders. The larger part of this toll he transmitted to Oyo. After a time, realizing what good protector he was, the people of Ede elected Timi their king; and Timi began to pocket the whole of the road tax himself.

Shango raged. "What right has the ruler of an outpost to withhold monies that belong to the parent kingdom? Does he think he is Ogun that he should build his house on the road and become master of all passersby? Do the sweepings belong to the broom? Who knows, in time this small man may aspire to become greater than I? Bring me my bow," he said to his second wife, Oshun. "Together we shall go down your river and find out whose arrows contain the more fire, his or mine!"

"Gently, go gently," answered Oshun, reclining her elbows respectfully on the floor. "Why use a rock when a pebble suffices? The index finger's just the right size for the nostril; why don't you send Gbonka down to deal with Timi-the-archer? As foremost guardian of the kingdom, it's Gbonka's duty to protect your frontiers. And besides, would it not be better to have him out in the field than idly gossiping about the town, telling all who will listen how severe you

are? I for one would be glad to know if his shield is as powerful as he says it is."

Now although Shango was willing to restrain himself and delegate another to chasten Timi, he was somewhat loath to let that other be Gbonka, an ambitious nobleman who permitted himself openly to criticize the king. Gbonka dared be outspoken because he claimed to have special powers of immunity granted him by witches. Their function, as daughters of the earth, was to keep men from misusing their authority, to perch on the great tree's crown and convert evil to a profounder good. Were Gbonka's pretended powers real? If, as Shango secretly feared, they were; if it were true that the awful mothers of the night had given such a rat permission to dance in the market square at midday, then he must take that brash creature's words to mean that earth itself rejected him. Was Shango indeed guilty of harsh rule? These fears gnawed at his heart, compelled him to put all to the test. Suppose Timi won over Gbonka? Well then, he, Shango, could slip off the restraints that held his mighty temper in and fight fire with fire. Suppose his two enemies ate each other up down there in Ede? That would be the perfect solution to the knot. There remained the third possibility. What if Gbonka returned triumphant? When a tangle of felled trees lies across the path, Shango said to himself, the uppermost ought to be cut away first, and then the next.

So Gbonka went down to Ede. When he returned with Timi tied up in the ropes of a captive, Shango refused to accept this evidence of his critic's strength. "How do I, who wasn't there, know you fought fairly? Timi's arrows proved deadly to the Ijeshas. You must have caught him unawares, or disarmed him with words, or played some other deceitful trick of which, from all reports, you've quite a collection. Fight him again right here in Akesan market, so that my seven highest councilors may witness the affair."

The Gbonka squinted narrowly at the king and said,

"You sent me from you at great risk to my neck. Who are you now to impose conditions? I did what I was sent to do, and I'll do it again—seeing I have no choice. I will defend my reputation by fighting Timi here. This time, however, I will show the world how quickly I can kill, without a cry, with no fires lit to guide me to my victim."

"No," Shango said, "you must not kill Timi. Overcome him if you can, but I alone have power over life and death in Oyo."

Outside the walls of the palace, drums began to play. The

market women spread cloths over their goods and ran to get places in the front row of the circle that was already forming about the cleared area. Only the vendors of shriveled monkey's heads, lizard's intestines and other medicinal ingredients stayed by their trays, apparently impervious to the excitement. Palm wine and kola vendors, their wares on their heads, moved in, sure of attracting customers before the fight began.

When the drums informed him it was time, Timi stepped forward to address the crowd as follows: "I greet you bystanders for standing; I greet you crouchers for crouching; and those fortunate enough to have brought stools or found seats I greet you especially. I am Timi of Ede, he of the flaming arrows, guardian of the road. Thank you for coming to watch me demonstrate my skill at archery. Whatever happened down there in Ede is nobody's business here. I am Timi of Ede come to fight Gbonka fairly before you in Akesan market. When the animal dies, it becomes a carcass. The man who boldly declares I will come back safely from the wars ought to be more cautious. May the father of iron and patron of hunters hear me. May Ogun prevent powdered chalk and camwood from marking out my grave too early." So saying, he paced off the required distance, fit a shaft to his string with easy grace, pulled and released it.

Gbonka let the first three arrows flick off his shield; then he began to advance upon his adversary, activating the charm he clutched with this spell:

> Green leaf pulled off with right hand,
> Right hand gives the cry of alarm;
> Green twig pulled off with the left hand,
> Left hand is endowed with character.
> Intensely, intensely,
> The dust on the ceiling sleeps without stirring,
> Sleeps . . . sleeps . . . sleeps.

And Timi sank to the ground unconscious.

Gbonka did not stop. He continued to advance. Putting the charm back into the packet hung about his neck, he unsheathed his sword, and no sooner did he stand above the sleeping form than he struck Timi's head off, shouting,

"Lord of life and of the world, companion of the orisha, I hereby defy you. And again I shall defy you. Build me a fire. Stack the wood as high as the palace wall. Pour palm oil, almond oil and shea butter upon it; and when I shall have mounted to the top of the pyre, light it. Light it anyway you choose, with breath from your own nostrils if you can, and we shall see which of us is stronger."

Such a challenge could not go unheeded. All were curious to see the outcome. Only Shango stubbornly remained inside the palace, a scowling face hidden behind a gleaming curtain of cowries. When all had been accomplished according to Gbonka's specifications, it was Oya who rushed out to kindle the fire.

The flames blazed up, and when they subsided the astonished populace found no Gbonka. "He has disappeared," the Oyo Mesi said, hastening back to the throne room. "*Kabieyesi,* Shango, we greet you for your triumph."

"Not so fast," said Shango, "wise men should walk softly and withhold judgment till the particulars are in. Listen!"

They cupped their hands to their ears and from a distance heard that which steadily became more insistent: the sound of gong and pressure drums praising Gbonka.

"He's alive, here he comes," cried the terrified courtiers.

"Mincing along at midday like a giant rat surrounded by cockroaches," said Oshun.

"Your time is up, Shango," the kingmakers said. "You have reigned long enough. You are no longer what you were. Your head has begun to rot. Prepare yourself—"

"So, how hastily you withdraw your support," said Shango. "Well, I defy your judgment. You are wrong; and

that man lies who says anyone is stronger than Shango. It is Gbonka who is bad for the kingdom. It is he who must be put down or there will never be order nor justice in the world, only fear—foul blood, bloated lizards and fear. All I have to do is put my hand into my pouch, throw back my arm, swear by Ogun that Gbonka is a criminal, let fly my wrath . . . so! Go forth from the gates out upon Akesan market square. Look, now lies that impertinent one upon the ground. See, I have annihilated him with an oath. Go closer, if you dare. Cut open his skull and you shall find—a thunder stone."

I cannot claim to be so old as some I know, but I am no longer a child whom the sun deceives into staying too late on the farm. There are those who will tell you that Shango's reign was as Gbonka claimed, cruel and destructive. Who knows? That he could not tolerate falsity I understand very well. A man who must keep a tight reign on himself has a horror of shifting ground. But that he was deposed by the Oyo Mesi and forced to end his life is inconceivable. Certainly his wives never would have strangled him, as the custom was. That he was a king born to destroy himself is certain, but not until he was able to assume total responsibility for his own perversity. This is the meaning of *oba koso*. Listen:

It was dry season, late January, the time of the Bere festival, one of the three occasions during the year that the people of Oyo were permitted to view their king. Shango sat in an alcove draped with scarlet cloths. His face remained obscured by his crown, which exuded serpentines of strength. His embroidered sandals rested well above the flood of red velvet carpeting the floor, for his carved throne was mountainous in proportion to the space surrounding it. Through the white strands of his cowtail switch, the king's

muffled voice gave salutations for the new year, which the chief eunuch repeated in a loud voice to the crowds assembled in the large quadrangle of the outer court.

Then the shorn-headed guardians of the king's body parted a way to the grand gates, through which six farmers carrying sheaves of bere grass came dancing to flutes and drums. When the king had completed his viewing of the harvest, he disappeared to change his clothes.

By the time he reappeared in an even more magnificent costume, the state umbrellas had been brought out to form a stately avenue down which, with deliberate step, to the sound of the hollow log drum, Shango danced his annual dance with the prime minister. The promenade moved down to the entrance gate and halfway round the courtyard, where the king finally disappeared through a modest side door.

The crowd dispersed. Dignitaries who had been feasted with food from the palace strolled back to their compounds to spend the evening in the company of friends. Commoners went home to wait for their wives to finish preparing supper. Outside the mud walls of the town, ricks of bere grass ten feet tall awaited the next day's touch of the king's hands, his benediction, by extension, on everything harvested. Inside the higher walls of the palace, even the carved wood colonades seemed to relax their guard. Kites and vultures who had spent the day circling above the harvested fields returned to perch on the long rectangular roofs that sheltered the king's household. In the courtyards of ordinary households beyond Akesan market, cooking fires glowed, and in the doorways silhouettes of women could be seen stooping to distribute steaming platters of pounded cassava porridge. Hungry fingers hunched over the food, forming balls, dipping them into pungent soup. Nothing is surer than the return of hand to mouth, no exile briefer, no absence more profound.

Deep inside the palace, Shango was restless. Ever since his terrible trial of strength with Gbonka, anxiety like a host of termites had been at pains to destroy not only the splendid mask of kingly confidence he wore but his very manhood. Just one oath, one stone—they alone had sufficed for the occasion; but in overcoming, he had exhausted himself. He had nothing more. Suppose he were put upon again, without the king of Ibariba's medicine, he would be unable to vanquish a lesser antagonist than Gbonka; and as soon as anyone sensed this weakness, such trials would be sure to proliferate. He still owned the medicine of course, but since the time when the people of Oyo had persuaded him to put it by, had it not perchance grown damp and useless? Oya was not the best housekeeper in the world. Hands folded behind his back, Shango strode into the royal bedchamber.

There stood a new girl he had requested earlier. He had forgotten. He was sorry. He felt unwell. Thus he dismissed her, and she, in an intricate adiré cloth called "all birds are present," her body rubbed with camwood, her hair elaborately plaited according to the latest fashion, her eyes ringed with antinomy, her wrists and ankles bracketed with ornaments, obediently prostrated herself and went away, silently weeping, smudging the antinomy. Shango shouted to the musicians in the anteroom to stop their playing. Then he called for Oya. "Go fetch me the king of Ibariba's charm," he said icily. "I trust you have taken good care of it for me."

When she brought it, saying, "Here it is, exactly as you gave it me," he said, "In quality I hope, for in quantity it is just a little bit less than it was. By Ogun, when will the world stop lying to me!" And he dismissed Oya without telling her of his intentions.

Accompanied only by a favorite slave, Biri, Shango slipped out the side door into the deserted quadrangle and thence through the great gate into the open.

As he climbed the hill behind the town, the hill known as

Oke Ajaka, where some said the king of Ibariba's snake still lived, Shango's steps slowed down, but not his resolution. Before his tenth blessing of the bere grass he must find out if his medicine would still draw lightning. Not for his own benefit. He was beginning to regain a lost perspective. Who knew when such violence would be needed to preserve the kingdom? The Ijeshas had asserted themselves once. And with Timi dead, they would strike at the caravan routes again. The rulers of a hundred petty towns might prove willing allies to Oyo's strongest enemies. Tributary kingdoms might revolt. The northern peoples seemed constant. But one never knew who or when or why. If he were not fit to meet all possible challenges, then he ought to call for the parakeet's eggs at once. Had *that* ever in the history of the world been done?

When he reached the summit, Shango paused to look down upon the glow worm fires dancing, to look down upon his palace, that shaggy sleeping elephant. Then he opened the gourd containing the medicine, put a daub under his tongue, rubbed his double axe with a generous amount of it, and raising axe to the sky opened his mouth and shouted: "Strike now and exterminate all my enemies as far and wide as the rim of Olokun the sea owner's kingdom!" But his grip on the handle was not sure enough. It slipped as he swung it in a wild trajectory, went awry and plummeted down upon his own palace.

Lightning cracked the sky. The thunder tree in the quadrangle split and, groaning, fell on its wounded side. The dry roof caught the blaze. With the bitter taste of ashes in his mouth, Shango plunged down Oke Ajaka. Rain began to fall, but water was slow to put this fire out; and by the time he arrived, the palace was finished. His entire household had perished in their sleep—all save his three river wives, Oshun and Oba who fled home, and Oya who stood now by his side.

They stood out the rest of the night in Akesan market place watching the smoldering city. When dawn came, and with it a gentle wind to blow the last of the smoke from his eyes, Shango announced his abdication.

When eighty loyal retainers tried to make him change his mind, he slaughtered them; and when eighty more applauded his resolution, he slew them, too. Then removing his beaded crown, he handed it to the ceremonial mother saying, "As hand invariably returns to mouth, so this crown, as he himself foretold, returns to my brother's head. Call back Ajaka." To the prime minister, his good friend, he presented the sacred *ejigba* beads, saying, "We shall dance no more at Bere festival time. Take these. Give them to Ajaka. From now on I shall adorn myself with chains of iron." And slipping out of his embroidered sandals, he walked across the seared fields in the direction of Tapa, his mother's country.

The journey was long, and one by one his few followers deserted until only Oya and Biri, the slave, remained with him. When they got as far as Ira, the marshy place where Oya was born, she excused herself saying she was too downhearted to continue but would rest a while among her own people and join him in Tapa later on.

Shango bade her farewell and continued walking. At last he could bear the great weight no longer and, ordering Biri to return to Oyo, left the path and hung himself from an *ayan* tree.

When Biri, from his hiding place in the bush, saw what his master had done, he rushed back to Oyo shouting *"Oba so,* the king hangs, Shango has hung himself upon the *ayan,* sworn enemy of the axe."

Priests and councilors hurried to the spot, but when they arrived they did not find Shango's body. Instead there was a hole at the base of that stubborn, twisted tree and from the rim of the hole a chain hung farther down than a man could

see. From these depths the king's voice rose, saying, "You will not find me again in the world or under earth, but in the storm clouds I shall live forever. I shall see all and send my thunder stones down to punish evil-doers, liars in particular. He who would worship me must prove himself with fire. Remember Shango."

The witnesses returned to Oyo announcing, *"Oba ko so;* the king does not hang. He has become an orisha. We heard his voice speak out from the kingdom of the dead."

But most of the people did not believe what the *mogba,* the defenders of Shango, said. They began to laugh, shouting, *"Oba so,* the king is dead by hanging," until a terrible thunder storm turned their insolence to dread.

Firestones hailed upon the heads and housetops of Shango's detractors until his justice was accomplished. "See," the loyal *mogba* said, "Shango is offended. He who

would live must placate him; for he did not hang; he became an orisha, and we who knew this all along shall be his priests, and his shrine—at the place where he entered the earth—shall be called Koso."

When Oya heard of what had happened, she hanged herself and entered the earth at Ira. She became, what she already was, the orisha of the River Niger; and because she could not bear to be parted from Shango, she became orisha of the wild winds as well, of the tempests, hurricanes and tornadoes that sweep the roads clean before him as he goes. Some have made her the patron saint of lightning. And all agree that only she is brave enough to control the swarming spirits of the dead, the *egungun* whose very masks are enough to frighten anyone—only she of all the orisha.

# Eshu

Eshu on the threshold
  Leers, swinging with the hinge;
Who knows whether he's going out or in.

When no one's watching he
  Climbs upon the hearth
  And spills salt in the soup.

Are you looking for Eshu's garden?
Follow the zig-zags,
  Those furrows are his.

Don't offend him.
Angry, he kicks a stone;
  And the stone bleeds.
Annoyed, he spreads out an ant's skin
  And plumps down on it.

Something's missing;
Eshu knows where it is.

# The Three Wives of Shango

## *Oba*

It was Oshun's turn to prepare food for Shango.

She began with the beans. Slipping off her sandals and hitching up her skirt, she stepped over the brim of the wooden tub in which the beans had been soaking all day and began to tread their skins off. Oshun laughed. Wiggling her toes she did a little dance and clinked her brass bracelets in accompaniment. The loosened bean skins began to free themselves and rise like stiff bubbles to the surface.

Oshun stopped her dance, stepped out of the tub and began to skim the husks off the top of the water. Then, reaching down to the bottom she brought the slippery beans up, handful by handful, rinsed them in fresh water and cast them into an earthenware pot. She piled dry thornbush over the dozing embers of the fire. Then she took up a pestle as tall as herself and began to pound dried yam slices in the mortar. As she worked she praised the object of her attentions, singing:

Poro, poro, elubo.
O yam you are pure white now,
But soon you shall wear a cap of beans.
Trousers of fish? Tomorrow noon.
Today only lamb shanks will satisfy Shango.
O yam, yam, yam,
Poro, poro, elubo.

When the fire was approachable, she placed her bean pot on her three hearthstones, covered the beans with water, and went back to her pounding. When the flour was fine enough for a king's palate, she sifted it in a basket, set it aside and went back to her beans, mashing them so they cooked into a thick porridge. When they were done, she took off the pot, put it on the ground and with a long heavy stick pushed and twisted the rebellious dough as if she were poling a canoe upstream, straining every muscle in her shoulders until sweat flooded her face. While a second pot of

water was set to boil, she knelt down before her stone tray to grind the ingredients for her sauce: melon seeds, onions, and hot, hot peppers. To this pulverized mixture she added small morsels of lamb, together with rich red palm oil, and put the whole on to simmer on a second fire.

A quick bath poured down upon her glistening back from a jug of cool water standing in the shade of the cooking shed, a clean cloth like a blue shadow wrapped about her vigorous body, and she was ready for the final stages of preparation.

Handful by handful she sprinkled yam flour on the steaming surface of the water, stirring steadily with her stick so no lumps would form, beating it as it thickened, like the beans, into a doughy pudding, pulling the sticky strands back and forth across the gradually opening pot to let the air in until the yam finally floated like a cloud in its container. Then she took it up on to a platter, added a mound of bean mush, and surrounded them with the pungent lamb pepper soup. At the last moment Oshun garnished her creation with a beautiful mushroom.

Her headcloth was askew. She rewound it over her ears and flung the ends into a fashionable flutter, adjusted her skirt, stooped down to pick up the platter and set off for Shango's quarters.

Half-way across the courtyard she encountered Oba, the jealous one, a heavy waterjug on her head, shuffling dejectedly along as usual.

"Good evening, Oshun," she began, "I congratulate you on the successful completion of your culinary obligation."

"Well met, Oba; what an elegant way of putting praise that I don't really deserve. I like to cook—for Shango, anyhow. Imagine being married to a man with a small appetite."

"It's obvious you enjoy it, and why shouldn't you when you get such good results. Mmmmmm, that smells marvel-

ous. Let's have a closer look. I wish I knew your secret. When my turn comes round, like as not he stomps with rage, picks the platter up and throws the contents out like swill into the courtyard. What have you got there? Some sort of mushroom? Perhaps that's what gives your soup its special savour."

"Mushroom?" laughed Oshun, carelessly, moving on past Oba in the dusk, "certainly not. Tonight, for a treat, I've added one of my own ears to his favorite sauce. If you know Shango at all, you'll know how fond of such fantasies he is. Good-bye for now, good luck for tomorrow," she called out over her shoulder.

When Shango tasted, when Shango had devoured the food Oshun brought, he swore he had never had a better meal. "Let your *bembe* drums play continuously, let there be songs and dances in honor of Oshun from now until cockcrow," he cried. "I myself will inform the musicians. Bounteous river, copious cooking pot," he said, "you are as beautiful as you are accomplished. Your eyes are wealth, your skin is soft as silt and black as charcoal. Come here, place of refuge, when the axe is after honey hid in the crevice of a rock—"

"My lord, the only fire water won't put out, I will care for no other man in my life; only let that life be beautiful," said Oshun.

Oba, who had been listening behind the door, went back to her hut in a flood of tears; and to the sound of the *bembe* drums in the courtyard, she wept out the night.

At dawn she began her preparations.

She sifted the flour over and over until it was fine as motes of sunlight before the eyes of one who lies grieving under the thatch of a darkened room. She prepared the soup well in advance, doctoring it with aphrodisiacs from the for-

est. And when the dreaded moment crept at last across the sombre yard, Oba took a deep breath, seized a knife and courageously cut off her right ear.

Hurriedly she staunched the bleeding with spiderwebs, made a compress of leaves and secured it beneath her headcloth wound round tight as a bandage. Then, afraid of fainting before she could deliver her feast, Oba picked up the platter and staggered across to Shango's entry.

"Greetings, Oba," he said, in an expansive mood, "what disaster have you managed to cook up for me tonight? My you look distraught. Your *gele*'s so disheveled. Your clothes are bespattered. Your face, your hands plead for a bath. But never mind, I take these to be signs of your single-minded devotion to your task. Step back and let my hungry fingers get to work. . .

"Ugh, what's this evil-looking piece of meat? Or is it a rare mushroom? Well, I'll give it a try. Maybe it's better than it looks. . . .

"By my axe, this is the worst yet." He spat it out. "I who can eat six pots of yam gruel and bean stew without belching, I who can put away seven bitter kolas without gasping, I—get back stupid woman—am going to vomit."

"Whatever possessed you to do it?" he later asked. When Oba told him what Oshun had said, Shango frowned sternly and forgave the jealous one; but he also said that from that time on she'd better devote herself to sweeping and washing, to plaiting baskets and weaving, to less controversial household tasks. He had plenty of women to cook for him. He didn't need her for that. But when he went into battle, yes, she could carry his shield for him as before. No, there was nothing else he could think of off hand. She must go and have someone take care of her wound. He'd see her back across the yard, but he wasn't feeling well. Perhaps he ought to take an emetic . . .

Wearily, her hand pressed close to her throbbing head, Oba walked back, too ill even to consider revenge. Never beautiful, Oba knew she was going to be too disfigured ever to approach Shango's bed. Nor would he ever call on her, for love or even, despite what he said, when he went forth to war again. O the pain, the pounding. Human life was too long . . . Was she worthless as a woman? . . . even for a river.

# *Oya*

He saw her in the market place, saw a proud restless woman strolling from stall to stall as if looking for something not openly displayed. She paused to examine the adiré cloths, spread out a few, complimented one of the women on the ingenuity of her pattern, but didn't buy. Beads? She spent a long time rummaging through the contents of a tray of miscellany—intricate designs in subtle, brilliant colors, those hypnotic glass beads. One after the other she held for a long time in her hand, then put it back. Eventually she wandered off.

She stopped decisively in front of a palm wine vendor, paid handsomely in advance, tilted back her head and drank it down like a man while he, half-hidden behind a neighboring stall, looked on in amused admiration. But what followed surprised him even more. No sooner had she finished than she smashed the empty gourd between the palms of her hands, narrowed her eyes at the vendor and said, "You cheated me; diluted with water. I can't abide that sort of pettiness." Then she turned and walked away from town in the direction of the forest.

He followed her. When she came to the great *iroko* tree, she walked right up to it, bent down between the buttress roots and reached into a crevice where apparently she'd hidden something. Still keeping himself well-concealed, he moved closer. What was it?

Fascinated he watched her take off her headtie, skirt and buba, even her underskirt, fold them up into a neat pile, push them into the crack, then, somewhat awkwardly, begin to insert her legs into tight leather trousers with hoofs on the end. As she struggled with the narrow-sleeved jacket, inadvertently he moved forward to help. Her dark-rimmed eyes saw him. Frantically she slipped the horned mask on, pulling it straight so the bold marking would fall straight. The transformation was complete. A quick kick with her hoofs made him jump back clutching his right shin.

"O beautiful antelope," he said, "don't shy away from me. Your slender neck is like . . . a column of wind in tornado season; your horns like . . . crackle of lightning; your eyes . . . your eyes—"

"Stop, you are making a fool of yourself, Shango," the long-legged creature said. "No matter how hard you try,

your praise words will always sound ridiculous, inappropriate. Only Ogun and his leather-smocked brothers know how to woo delicate creatures to the net. Besides, it was I who lured you here, not the other way around."

"Lured me? And all the time I was thinking: that's an unusual woman. Not young, not beautiful as others I have seen, compelling, rather. . . . Little did I know! Surely yours is a northern magic. Are you Tapa or Ibariba?"

She laughed, dodging his question. "You should have known me when I was young. I was in excellent condition. I used to swim the entire length of the Niger. My skin was smooth as wet clay. You should have seen me then, hair plaited into buffalo's horns. When they wanted to insult me, they called me Death-that-makes-the-hunter-climb-the-thorn-tree-and-promise-never-to-hunt-again. But I didn't care. Now I've changed. This life of a furtive creature in the society of trees has made me much too sensitive to insults. Sometimes a chance word uttered at the market place will cause tears to come to my eyes; but I haven't lost my old turbulence—quite the contrary. Listen, deep inside me dry seed pods are dancing on the locust tree. Night holds no terrors for me. Tiny stars swoosh through my arteries. Storms unbolt my dreams, race me upcountry across the plains and down as far as the sea. O Shango, I have known men of diverse character, but in the end none have pleased me. Hunters? Now I know, they woo only to tame, or to annihilate; craftsmen, only to cast images, to enslave. O king, you alone can be the master of Oya, counterweight of her freedom. Take me home with you, and together we shall live on the edge of the eddying leaf, at the most extreme limits of being; and when we die, for here I swear by iron I shall die with you, we shall become full storms, the spaces in between."

"Foolish Oya, stop pretending we are strangers. Come little queen whom the rains won't dampen. I know you as well

as you know me. Take off that antiquated masquerade and come back home to the palace. So it pleases you now to think yourself docile, middle aged? Nonsense. I forgive you. Against you my rage shall never turn for we are one soul. Come back and I shall walk beside you with renewed violence, raving that you have ground all my loves into one sauce and that from now on no other food shall satisfy me. Let the lonely hunter beware," he added in an undertone, "for I have succeeded in recapturing her his way. Mine is the story now. She will forget him. And he? To blow that fire aflame will be to court annihilation."

So she took off her wraith's clothing and carried it back to Shango's palace in a neat package, which she hid under the rafters of the house assigned to her convenience. Oba, as might have been expected, was jealous, and Oshun even more so; for in Oya both sensed a renewed recklessness with which they could not easily compete for the enduring admiration of Shango. This anxiety did not stop Oshun from subtly trying to make the returning renegade miserable—far from it; but Oya was equally determined to make herself secure in the wives' compound. One year passed, and Oshun, grown desperate, unsheathed her tongue: "You may be good cooks, you northern women, but you certainly are unkempt. Why your hair looks like a bramble bush. Why don't you plait it in a nice design, instead of drawing it up into a crest, when the fancy takes you, like a summit? Why do you never tie your *gele* in a fashionable way? It always looks as though you were bandaging a headache."

"I'm too busy," snapped Oya, "taking care of things around here, your children included. You spend so much time bathing yourself and grooming your skin that they run around covered with dust—or would if I didn't see to them —their bottoms unclothed, their noses never failing sources of drivel. When it's time to nurse the twins, it is I who pace up and down soothing their cries, it's my feet the dogs lick,

while you are sitting somewhere in the shade letting a friend converse with your intricate scalp."

"Very well, crude woman," said Oshun angrily. "I happen to know you appeared to Shango this time in the guise of an animal. Why he insists on having you back here, I don't know. Certainly not on account of your beauty. Is it the beast in you? Your manners would indicate your wraith to be She-of-the-thick-bush-who-enlarges-her-nose-the-better-to-smell-other-people's-underthings. But there is other evidence: Those who keep company with hunters grow calloused and sulky."

"You who are so fond of listening to petitions," shouted Oya, "cup your furry hands to your big ears and hear what I've got to say, you whose big mouth is a corn thief, you whose cheeks are a purse—" And the women fell to quarreling in earnest.

They made so much noise that Shango stormed out of his chamber vowing to beat the two of them with one switch. Just as he was about to cross Oya's threshold, Oshun darted past him like a lizard.

"Look," she hissed triumphantly, "I've got it. Now watch while I tear this skin into fourteen hundred pieces. Now she'll never be able to wear it again. She'll never be able to go back to the bush. She's trapped. Now she'll have to stand and face life like the rest of us. She thought she was so special. Well now she's only an ordinary woman, and not a very nice one at that."

"Malicious wasp," shrieked Oya, following after. "Do you think you can sting deep enough to hurt me? I am the fortunate owner of seven swords and one flame, while you, you're nothing but a honey-guide, a pretty little wad of feathers. You can tear that shadow of mine to shreds. But you can never destroy me. Never."

"No, only I can do that," roared Shango, fire issuing forth from his lips, "only I can destroy both of you."

Terrified, Oshun fled upstream in the direction of Ijesha and concealed herself in a rocky hollow overgrown with watercress. Oya raced east to Jebba Island, dove in, and swam all the way down to her cousin Olokun's sea kingdom. There she enlisted the help of Eshu; and when Shango hurled a thunderbolt out upon the oily swell, Eshu caught and threw it back again so that instead of destroying anyone, it broke into pieces against the head of its initiator. This was the first and only time Shango ever was defeated, for there and then he wisely decided to make his peace with the Great Confuser. Since that time Eshu and Shango have been such fast friends that there's no offending the one without the other's taking offense. Nor did the two wives ever quarrel again, at least not openly. When Oshun returned in the rainy season, dripping with brass ornaments, she found Oya forever established as Shango's favorite wife.

"Live and let live," said Oshun, "but I don't see why anyone should blunt his axe against a rock when I've so much honey to give."

# Oshun

Oshun has many moods. Although women all over Yorubaland pray to her for children, she is strongest where she encircles her favorite town, Oshogbo. There her priests know how to heighten the beneficial properties of minerals found in her waters, how to communicate with the orisha through her messengers and symbols. But even to the uninitiated she communicates her moods. A walk along her varied edges, passing in and out and around groves inhabited since time began by Oshun herself as well as by other orisha, other spirits of earth and its vegetation, discloses some of the richness of her personality.

For example, the meditative visitor may come upon a quiet pool overhung with branches whose varied twig and leaf patterns, intricate as crinkled lines on the palm of a deeply experienced person, make the whole seem like the reflection of an adiré cloth in the pool below. Such pools enclose the gaze so that again and again the eye is compelled to look down into the dark water, immobile save for, here and there at the brim of the cup, a slender silver ripple around a stalk of tilted grass.

Further on, the forest opens out to meet flat black rocks, deeply pitted in places (these, they say, are Oshun's dyeing pots), over which one may walk out into the midst of the river when it is in a bustling mood, taking varied courses, surging past higher black rocks. Some of these strange natural sculptures are, from some vantage points, concealed by tall clumps of sedges whose white seeds may be picked and strung into necklaces. And here and there on the flat rocks lie dark brown locust pods whose vanished seeds have left dents large as thumb prints. These pods can be strung into anklets for masked dancers.

There is another place, a quiet backwater broad in scope, that goes from sloping gray rocks on the approachable shore to tall rain forest growth on the opposite side. Long exposed tree roots follow the broad rocks into the water on the near side to form honeycombed pools for minnows and tadpoles. Set back from this shore is Oshun's largest riverside shrine where, once a year, her townspeople and visitors from miles

around converge to pay her homage.

There is another crossing, a place of flat rocks and moving water whose currents subtly meet and diverge at various levels. Here all is quietly alive, from surface ripple to amber colored shallow, to depths beyond the inquiring eye. This place speaks much to the storyteller.

There are two stories of the founding of Oshogbo. They cannot be made to jibe on the surface, but must be taken as prior and subsequent currents flowing one on top of the other at the same time.

When the ruler of Ipole in Ijesha country died, his sons quarreled over his gowns; and while they were thus occupied, his only daughter, Ogidan, powerful as a leopard, took his headdress and led a group of townspeople off in search of a better place to live. Through the forest they went and eventually arrived at Oshun. To Ogidan, who was getting ready to deliver a child, this riverside place promised abundance of all the good things of life, so here she suggested they settle down. But Oshun, who used the flat rocks for indigo dyeing and was afraid they would break her pots, urged them to go on and said she would send them a sign of her good will when they came to a suitable site for their town. At last Ogidan could go no further. She called all her people together; and while they waited outside a hastily constructed shelter, she gave birth to a child who came into the world carrying Oshun's message! Ataoja, meaning born with a fish in his hands, they called him, a title still borne by the king of Oshogbo. In the course of time, Ogidan's brothers found out where she was and threatened to bring war upon the new town if she did not send back the headdress. Oshun advised her to do so, and in exchange gave her a crown of brass, the metal that transmits the force personified by the river, to present to her son as soon as he grew up. And the town prospered.

About the time that Timi was sent down from Old Oyo to establish Ede, the Owa of Ilesha, foremost of the Ijesha towns, sent the successful warrior Laro west to found a rival outpost along the trade route then in question. But when he and his men arrived at the river crossing called Ofatado (where the bow and arrow rest), Laro said to his followers, "Let us put aside our weapons of war and death. Here where we will always find fresh water, let us found a town of our own and forget the harassments of our former existence."

A few days later one of Laro's daughters, while bathing, disappeared beneath the water. This seemed like a bad omen; but as Laro stood grieving on a large rock overlooking the apparently treacherous inlet, his daughter reappeared, splendidly dressed in a saffron gown, her arms laden with brass bangles. Laro hastened to prepare offerings to bestow upon the river goddess in return for her generous kindness to his daughter.

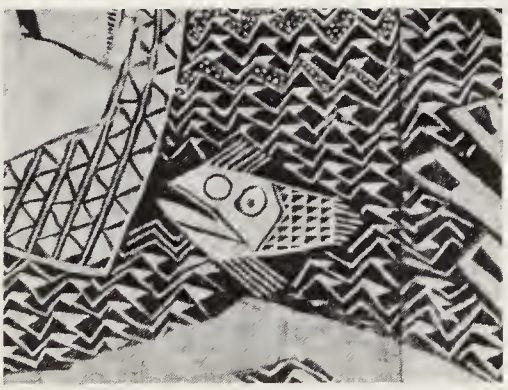
When many fish surfaced to accept his gifts, Laro said, "This is natural. She is as gracious as my daughter said. Surely all will be well for us from now on." But when one very large fish suddenly swam close to the place where Laro was seated and spit water upon him, the founder caught the spout in his cup and drank it, saying, "Surely this is an exceptional occasion." Then he reached out and the large fish leaped into his hands, saying, "From now on you and your successors may call yourselves Ataoja (He who stretches forth his hands and grasps the fish). Furthermore, if you promise not to build here upon my mistress Oshun's sacred bank but, rather, farther up upon the knoll, she will protect your town forever."

"In that case," said Ataoja, "I shall call my city Oshogbo (mature Oshun) in honor of her abundant waters. Tell her she need not fear to bury her riches in these sands. We will protect them. Tell her further that I for my part will renew

our pact each year by making offerings to you, her messengers, and that one in every four days shall be consecrated to her worship."

"In that case," said the fish, "her generosity shall not fail to make your town, her special town, prosper. Don't forget, cornmeal and honey are our favorite dishes." And with that he leaped out of Ataoja's hands and back into the river.

Every year the Ataoja, on behalf of his people, renews the original agreement. But it is a young girl, the sacred *arugba*, who bears the weight of the occasion. Leaving the crowd to stand at the communal place of worship, she walks a separate, secluded path along the river accompanied only by high priests. In a deep trance she walks to encounter Oshun herself at the place where the orisha first appeared to Ogidan, the pioneer from Ipole. To the sound of ancient incantations, she walks gently so as not to stumble, so as not to bruise the hospitable earth; and her mouth is closed upon two bitter kola nuts that she may not speak of what she meets and hears and sees.



# Eshu

Once all the orisha, neglected by men on earth, went hungry. Obaluaiye attempted to terrify men into sacrificing, but they became too depressed in their sickness to care what happened to them. Shango's wrathful thunderbolts only made men deceive themselves into thinking others responsible for their misfortunes. Ogun tried his skill in hunting, but he couldn't kill enough to feed everyone; and the fish provided by Shango's wives were scarcely sufficient for their own children.

Eshu, youngest and cleverest of the orisha, went to visit ancient Yemonja, the profoundest of them all. The mother of the waters said, "Men no longer fear death. Give them something to yearn for, then, out of gratitude, they will gladly sacrifice in order to go on living."

"I can conceive of only one possible source of such hope," Eshu said, thanking her for her counsel.

Eshu then went to call on his very special friend Orunmila. "What you suggest makes good sense," said Orunmila, "I'm amazed you thought of it. Certain monkeys have told me of such a hope, a secret lodged in the four corners of the

universe. But although I sense new sap rising in me, I'm much too tired to move about just now. I'll have to send you off to do that errand for me. Go east, west, north and south. From each direction take four parts of this secret. I'll put them together here, and we shall see what we shall see."

"Promise to feed me first whenever you sit down to eat," said the wily Eshu, "and I'll be your messenger."

"Of course," said Orunmila, "don't accuse me of bad manners."

When Eshu returned, Orunmila looked at what he had brought and said, "Palm fronds shall be the thatch to repair the breach through which disaster leaks into the king's house as into the meanest hovel. Palm nuts shall feed the orisha. Palm kernels shall be the words from which shall sprout a forest of meanings." So saying, he planted the sixteen parts of the secret in his head, and they burgeoned forth as Ifa, the force of divination.

"Now go down to earth and find me interpreters," said Orunmila, "priests who can open my sixteen windows to let men take a peek at smooth running destiny. And when they see all the lesser evils that can be avoided, the obstructions that can be cleared from their paths, they will be eager to make sacrifices to all of us. Between earth and sky shall flow sweet words then, fresh blood and renewed strength to overcome adversity."

"Don't forget my dash—my tip," said Eshu.

"O no, my friend, you shall be entitled to the first portion of every meal. Men shall not fail to give you one for the road."

"In that case," said Eshu enigmatically, "I'll always be traveling. Good-bye. I'm on my way, like the starving man who slings the sack of necessity over his shoulder and bolts for freedom. I know my fate without reading it—always on the move, that's me. But know this, my very special friend, I love discord, disobedience and change better than I love palm nuts. So I shall take every occasion to make the world dance to my music, and be fed double for my pains. Twice to get out of trouble and once to get in, that's *my* secret."

# Obaluaiye

His real name is too dangerous to mention. His face is never seen. On the day of his festival as he passes by the narrow entrances to the compounds, along the mud walls, near the doorways, thresholds, corridors, leading into houses, women rush out to give him palm strands with which, combined into an immense broom, he will sweep disasters out of town. As he passes down the road in his dry season, the unwary, the impious, the absent-minded fall off their bicycles. He's that strong.

A little girl who happens in her innocence to continue walking to market feels a gust, sees her tray of carefully wrapped cornmeal puddings or bean cakes fall to the ground at her feet. All's ruined in the dust. But he stops and gives her a few coins to make up for the lost sales; for he is not vicious, only terribly strong.

His house is on the outskirts, on the way to the furthest farms. A lonely place, clotted with sacred peregun plants. Black cloth is hung behind his altar jars.

Some places he festers in the pustules of skin diseases, rasps in the chest, distends in the rotten bowels of his vic-

tims. Other moments he is sleek, the spotted leopard, owner of earth before man began to claim it, prior to all kings, all chiefs. He is that destruction which insinuates itself into all activity, without which nothing important would ever be achieved. Father, they call him, for he is very old, outlawed again and again. How ridiculous to outlaw Him! The peregun flourishes. The leopard paints himself black and stalks under a borrowed name. No stranger can hear true tales of him. Awful to behold he is, a prowler, a hidden name.

King of the earth, they said, after the ignorant conquerors banned him last century, an outcast who wandered from place to place all over the world from Tapa country where his veiled votaries stalk through fields on stilts as far west as the little village of Pingini Vedji. Here the climate suited him so well, here he found the granite outcroppings and the spiney cactus so reassuring that he succeeded in convincing himself that he had been born there. The local people thought so too, and his cult spread from Mahiland down into Dahomey. But when the proud kings of Dahomey got wind of him they threw him out of the country saying, "There can be no owners of the land except ourselves, and with your putrid breath in our nostrils we are dying, dying of a royal disease we dare not name."

Obaluaiye returned to Yorubaland. Disguising himself in a full length mask of straw, he went to Old Oyo to seek audience with the Alafin.

The Alafin, offended that the stranger did not prostrate himself, spoke curtly, without formal greeting, "What do you want of me, old fly whisk?"

To which Obaluaiye, controlling his anger, slyly replied, "Only this, your beaded eminence, war—war on the royal family of Dahomey, who have offended me far more than I have offended you."

"O no," said the Alafin. "Trade is good. I have no desire to wage war at the moment."

"You will," said Obaluaiye, "when you hear that Dahomey has offended you, insulted your ambassadors. The king of Dahomey refused to pay his annual tribute, and even now your emissaries are fleeing home pursued by taunts of your worthless greed. Let us make common cause. You send your armies out against these presumptuous Dahomeans, and I shall provide powerful medicines for your arrow heads and spear tips, talismans of invulnerability, poisonous gases—"

"O no," said the Alafin, "I repeat. I don't want war. I seek only peace and prosperity for my people. And, if you must know, I don't believe what you say about the treatment meted out to my ambassadors."

"In that case, you shall rue the day you laid eyes on me," said Obaluaiye, parting his veil to reveal a featureless face, bleached and eaten by leprosy. Then picking a gourd from the cluster he wore about his waist, he emptied the seeds it contained into his left hand. "You too, O sluggish owner of the palace, should have asked the landlord's permission to settle here. Henceforth you too shall reap as you have sown. These are seseme, earth's favorites. On your behalf I shall strew them about your 'property,' and soon we shall see an excellent crop of activities."

So saying, Obaluaiye strode out of the palace, broadcasting seeds as he went, and the Alafin rose and followed after in astonishment. When the straw-veiled stranger reached the boundary of the sacred forest preserve, he struck the ground with a chain. Obediently the earth opened up. The Alafin went closer. At the place where he had disappeared, a short length of chain remained, sole witness of a mysterious existence.

Shortly afterwards the insulted ambassadors arrived. The Alafin ordered preparations for war to begin immediately. But the war was not to be fought during that dry season, for eleven days later an epidemic of smallpox broke out, deci-

mating the population of Old Oyo.

The Alafin consulted the royal priest of Ifa and was told that the terrifying malady was indeed the harvest of the wrath of Obaluaiye, father of all blights, creator of strong medicines. "Go to the place where Baba disappeared," said the oracle. "Place the iron links and whatever else he left behind him in a pot of water and carry the pot back to town. Sprinkle the water on the faces of the afflicted. It will open their swollen eyes, heal their running sores. Let the cult of the Old One be established outside the walls. And whenever he claims a man, let not the relatives of the victim mourn, but rather rejoice and say 'One who kills and is thanked for it has come to our house.' To his priests henceforth all victims—their bodies, their clothing, all their property—shall out of gratitude belong. For he whose name cannot be spoken is the father of our life here. Scourge and victim, owner and outcast, he, earth's inheritor, our dissolution, our destruction, our need."

# Eshu

Guardian of the uncertain gate,
You leave for Lagos on the local
And return the same day on the express,
Then sleep for three weeks on a bill of lading.

When Mr. Briefly blows his nose,
Everybody thinks the train's going to advance.
The passengers climb on board,
Settle their babies on their laps, their packages in the racks,
Then impossibility, in a uniform, sits on the tracks.
The quarrelsome quickly turn back,
But the customs officer won't let them pass;
He takes their dash money by force,
Then begins to dance, and dance,
Scattering their belongings to the four winds.
Someone tears the timetable off the wall,
Ripping the health officer's pants;
Umbrellas are unfurled,
Voluminous sleeves hitched up as a sign of rank;
Discussion begets battle,
And all engagements are won by chance.

# Ifa

My homework done, my journey ended in time,
I recklessly took up the diviner's chain and threw it
Out upon the deep-dyed cloth
On the table that had temporarily become mine.
*Ogbe-Ofun* Orunmila said: a black cloth and two
feasts,
One on this, one on the other side,
For the sake of two heads,
Were the required sacrifice.

My hostess said, "Here they keep everything.
First, then second loves,
Become and remain wives."
New stones sit down upon ancient hillsides;
Butterflies, cramped into night,
Incline their compassionate eyes;
And in the evening, clouds are stockpiled
To allow the wind, the costly blue sky
To drink death-in-life,
For it is masquerade time.

Scraps of cloth which refuse to lose their dye
Cling here and there to the grit of the road
Like certain leaves to the traveller's back:
Child-in-the-womb swaddled outside.
On plump young faces, ancient scars;
Ingenious footpaths to the shrines.

I will distribute small foods to the children
And depart the kingdom with a quiet mind.

# *Afterward*

The orisha survived the ordeal of slavery. They continue to be worshipped in Brazil and in the West Indies. Even where, as in the United States, no drums were allowed and where there were no statues of saints for the orisha to crawl in or hide behind, they managed to eke out an existence in subtle ways that are difficult to talk about. It is not difficult to see Jesus as Obatala reinterpreted, or Obatala become Jesus.

But of all the orisha, it is Shango who is most popular in the new world. Some places he is so big that the ancient religion, remembered from Africa, is called after him.

The Cubans who have brought his images to New York City and those Puerto Ricans who dance his rhythms say that Shango has more "roads" than any other orisha. Restless, manly, never weary of wagers, he travels all over the world, they say, through all the skies of the world. Oyo was just a beginning. The warrior king has reigned in and been thrust out of more kingdoms than can be named. But if he has known great glory, enthroned on a mortar stool and gowned in red, he has known equal misery. Shango too has been a slave.

Does anyone nowadays remember the ballad of John Henry? Who was that man who was nothin' but a man?

"Folk hero," the encyclopedias say. What's that? Listen to his praise song:

> Some say he come from England,
> Some say he come from Spain,
> But there's no such thing,
> He was an East Virginia man,
> And he died with an hammer in his hand.

Where's East Virginia?

The song says he was a two hundred-pound, pure-blooded African man, and when they took him up the mountain, the mountain was so high and he so small, that he laid down his hammer and he cried. But he picked up strength when the captain told John Henry he thought the mountain was sinking in. "Stand back captain and don't you be afraid, Lawd it's nothing but my hammer catching wind." He was a steel-driver, more than a man. Whenever they needed him to make the work go, those section gangs who dug tunnels for the railroad invoked him.

> His end was mysterious. They found him one morning
> a mile and a half from town,
> his head cut off in the driving wheel
> and his body ain't ever been found.

He had plenty of women, but his special favorite was Polly Ann, who wore a red dress and who when he took sick had the grit to take that hammer from his hand and do a day's work for her man. Oya would have done no less. And when she heard the bad news, Polly Ann went down the road and never looked back. "I'm going where my man fall dead," she said, "I'm going where my man fall dead."

*Kabieyesi* *Koso* *The End*

# *Supplementary Notes*

Gods? Divinities? What are they? Powerful, superior beings that may be called by incantations and worshipped by various acts of piety. For those who believe in them, the gods bring increase of being, the joys and terrors of participation in a process at once dynamic and serene. More specifically, they have vast personalities that distinguish them from spirits, djinns and various sorts of lesser deities, which men, over the ages, have recognized and to whom they have given credence.

We know that gods are by nature distant, hidden; but they never disappear entirely unless neglected. From time to time, under the right circumstances, they do put in an appearance; and when this happens, wise men call it an *epiphany* to distinguish the event from a vision, which may or may not be *real.* A god may be born human and live for a while among us, bearing our pain, a tragic victim of human society's limitations; or the divinity may manifest itself as divinity for a brief period, under prescribed conditions, to those specially qualified to receive such power. The priesthood and groups of worshippers have evolved ritual access

to the supernatural—sacred rites which, scrupulously followed, will break the barrier, bridge the gap that divides the worshippers from the desired unseen.

Some of the mystery of gods can be explored by turning within, by examining the inner worlds of you, of me, of poets, artists, mystics, of madmen and anonymous myth-makers. Here supernatural forces have left their traces, that, like symbols painted on prehistoric cavern walls, we can learn to decipher. The *orisha* participate in the world and in human consciousness as a group. Some cultures have narrowed the gods down to one, to whom many attributes are given (the all-wise, the compassionate, judge of the wicked, etc.) and this is widely assumed to denote progress. But there remain peoples and individuals for whom the gods must always be many, people for whom a life that does not involve the play of diverse forces is unreal, fictitious. The orisha of Yorubaland are many.

And yet, for all their African names and manners, the orisha who appear briefly on these pages may suddenly strike you as familiar: like magnified versions of characters of your acquaintance, like natural forces or elements as you have experienced them on stormy nights, or while coming to grips with materials at a work bench, or while swimming, ascending a hill, pounding the streets or walking softly through the forest. One of them may remind you particularly of yourself, of your emotions in an extreme state: you in love; you as you would be if you weren't required to control your temper; you creating out of smudges of color—a landscape! Although the worship of the orisha is limited, for the most part, to communities of Yoruba and far-flung descendants of Yoruba, they have much to tell us about the human personality. They are like immense magnifying mirrors in which we behold ourselves as potentialities. To those who believe in them, the orisha are guardians through whom one lives a more intense life vicariously, guides whose excess

of energy leads their devotees to a more placid, a more balanced existence. If this last sentence seems full of contradictions, blame it on the subtlety and depth of Yoruba psychology!

Properly speaking, orisha ought not to be called gods at all. They are forces, living attributes, revelations, dramatizations of a complicated religious idea for which we in our land have no real equivalent. We have inklings from within; but the external whispers are missing. The worship of the orisha presupposes a living nature, usually labeled and at the same time dismissed as *animism;* whereas we, too late, are paying new homage to a polluted environment. We have no sacred hills, no great trees invested with spirit; we have a few magical, medicinal leaves, but they are used to achieve a state of being quite opposed to the Yoruba tradition of natural community. The orisha are proper names, anthropomorphic forms, given to the diverse aspects of spiritual power in the creation we inhabit, in which the Yoruba believe it our highest function actively to participate. The word orisha is linked to their word for head—ori. One's head is the container and visible symbol of the essence of one's personality. The spiritual head is that which before birth "kneels," as they say, to choose a personal fate. The head is that which for all its uniqueness also contains and expresses the spirit of an ancestor reincarnated.

As the primary link between an individual human life and the unseen continuum of being, one's head must be "fed" (sacrificed to), worshipped to bring good luck, the strength to fulfill the chosen destiny—the best possible existence on earth—health, wealth, and most importantly, children. Through worship of an orisha, one is brought into relation with a group of characteristics more powerful, more life-giving than a single soul lived and relived. By following its direction, by acceeding to its demands, a man not only extends but at the same time unifies his personality. At times

of stress, ill-health or when a serious decision is to be made, Ifa, the force of wisdom with regard to Destiny itself, is consulted to determine what sacrifice made to which divinity will ensure safe conduct through life's next stage, harmonious evolution of personality and continued well-being of the close community.

The view of life upon which the religion of the Yoruba is based is not uniquely theirs. Many-ness, a world infused with spirit and spirits, the community of the dead and the living and, running through everything, a vital principle, or force, that can by certain means be increased and directed, are key notions in traditional African thought, which various peoples have developed into special cultural forms. The genius of the Yoruba, their contribution to universal human civilization, lies in the plasticity of their thought, in their passion for definition of differences, for elaboration of distinguishing features, all brought into focus by an insistence on personal presence. The orisha are their grandest achievement, but the Yoruba are also the most prolific carvers of Africa, and their drumming is renowned for its precision, complication and intensity. Cult drumming is done on varied, special instruments consecrated to the different orisha. On them the praising and summoning and generat-

ing of force is created by the beating of elaborate variations of characteristic rhythms, combined with a second, third, and even a fourth drumming pattern. Drumming, song, dance and carvings—all contribute to praise the Orisha. A few of the orisha are represented directly. Other religious carvings depict the force of the orisha within the worshipper —contained in the large coif-elongated head, the swelling eyes, the enlarged breasts, the clinging child, the vehicle of power (horse) or seat of strength (stool, throne) or vigorous flexed-kneed, firm-footed stance.

Who are the Yoruba? An African people, nine million of whom continue to live in that fertile region now known as Western Nigeria. Other Yoruba, with whom these Nigerians share a common language and culture, live as far afield as Dahomey, Togo and Ghana. Still others, descendants of Yoruba sold into slavery, retain certain aspects of the old culture in Brazil, in Cuba, and even, although they may not easily be found, in New York City.

The Yoruba pride themselves on the antiquity of their traditions. Historians suppose that their first city, Ile Ife, was founded in the ninth century, but before that, who knows? No written records were kept. What happened, was remembered, was artfully formed into legend. Traditionally the Yoruba claim to have come from the east; but modern scholars, second guessing the legends, think it likely that the culture was born out of contact between people already settled in the forests and wooded savannahs below and west of the final slant of the Niger River and invaders from the drier plains across and beyond. Who can say how cultures take shape? The Yoruba language has been itself, linguists say, for anywhere between five thousand and two thousand years.

Historically, as far back as human memory penetrates, Yorubaland has been a collection of separate political enti-

ties, urban centers each ruled by a divinely sanctioned king with a unique title—the Timi of Ede, the Ataoja of Oshogbo, the Ewi of Ado-Ekiti and so on—whose powers were limited by councils of townspeople and chiefs of important family groups, and whose decisions were transmitted to outlying districts through an elaborate network of officials.

Until the nineteenth century the Yoruba were not called, and did not call themselves, anything in common but derived their group names from the city states to which they belonged. All these retained, however, a common myth of political origin radiating from Ile Ife. This place was the home to which all newly elected kings of Yoruba states were supposed to send for confirmation of their power. One of these kingdoms, "old" Oyo, militarily far stronger than the rest, imposed its influence at times upon its neighbors and, by the eighteenth century, at the peak of its power, enjoyed dominance from Benin to the Volta River. But the strength of Oyo, the extent of its sway, was always limited by the spiritual status of Ife and by the proud independence of the other cities.

In later times, wars, invasions from the north, continually displaced Yoruba communities; but these master founders of cities resettled and built anew. They created such sprawling concentrations of adobe as Ibadan, whose inhabitants number well over half a million. These busy craft and trading centers (a uniquely Yoruba contribution to the demography of Africa), surrounded by farms, linked each to each these days by asphalt slapdashed upon immemorial red clay, project even now a sociable atmosphere of self-sufficiency. The traditional rulers still maintain large establishments, exercise political influence, and are required by custom to preside over annual agricultural festivals as well as those held in celebration of orisha whose importance still varies from town to town, from region to region.

Priests and initiates organized into cult groups continue to control the worship of the orisha. These cults, each concentrating upon the special characteristics of one deity, each recognizing the contribution of other orisha in their own ceremonies, reflect not only the spiritual state but also the traditional political state of affairs in Yorubaland. Some of the orisha are thought to be ancestors of the reigning kings of certain cities (Shango of Oyo, Ogun of Ire), and others, namely Oshun, the river, are thought to be natural forces with which the founder of a city (in this case, Oshogbo) made a contractual agreement for the mutual benefit of orisha and community. Still others are believed to have been imported or assimilated by conquest on account of powers needed or dangerous to be without. The orisha have, therefore, both a local and a universal significance.

But all Yoruba towns attach the same importance to Ifa. This source of wisdom is always assumed to have been brought in, either from the sky or from the east or from elsewhere. The Ifa priests are the keepers of a vast unwritten compendium of moral insight, linguistic development, poems, stories, myths, all the mysteries that can be hidden in words through centuries of speculation on human nature and destiny and on the ways of the orisha. These scholar-diviner-singers move freely from teacher to teacher to increase their knowledge, which they humbly admit to be a small part of the whole available to all of them put together.

Without Ifa, partially known to each single practitioner as it is, there would be no order in the affairs of men, no chance of forestalling bad decisions, calamitous actions. Without Ifa, being itself would not be lost. The orisha, as manifestations of being in its fullest capacities, are in theory numberless. The Yoruba express this immense possibility by numbers like 401 or 2001. However, the major directions of being as conceived and experienced by men are limited. Actually there are about forty active orisha in Yorubaland, and

of these nine or ten are so important, so extensively worshipped as to form a sort of pantheon, a set of the most powerful attributes of being.

When you meet a Yoruba, you can usually tell which orisha claims him. But how does he discover his cult? In the past the cults were family affairs. The son of a Shango worshipper would like as not inherit his father's vocation. But it could happen that upon the advice of Ifa, parents would consecrate an unborn child to another orisha in exchange for some favor. Or, in reading a client's horoscope, a diviner-priest might discover another orisha's claim. For followers in the new world, all the old connections having been lost, divination is a necessity; and when, after a long period of seclusion and learning, the novice at last, in response to the drum patterns of his orisha, enters into a trance to receive the superhuman personality, it is a regained African identity that is experienced as well as the power of his guardian "saint."

The particular characteristics of the orisha are expressed in various symbolic forms. Certain natural objects, such as stones remarkable for their density, color, or other properties, are believed to "contain" the orisha. Certain specially consecrated jars in shrines also contain them. Certain preferred places, whose moods coincide with those of the orisha, are acknowledged to be sacred groves where perhaps an epiphany occurred once and might again. Each orisha commands certain ritual objects and insignia, which are periodically "washed" with water containing appropriate herbs, prefers certain foods periodically "fed" him, responds best to his own rhythms when played on "his" drums, and to his own repertoire of praise songs called *oriki*.

Oriki means "salutations to the head." Short poems, a series of names and analogies expressive of qualities demonstrated, feared or desired are accumulated by all Yoruba throughout a lifetime. Sometimes the deeds of the man or

his ancestors are included in his collection. When he pays a professional to sing these praises, he feels his force, his personality enhanced. The *oriki* of the orisha, the most beautiful of all, fan the fires of the divine personality and dispose him benevolently towards the initiated singers, and, by extension, the entire community.

The relations of the orisha to mankind and to each other are enacted in ritual dramas, giving increase of power to all participants, seen and unseen. But besides the myths and sacred dramas associated with each orisha, there are many popular stories, not sacred in origin, of hunters or warriors or wives who lived long ago, of magical transformations, parables of the consequences of behavior and oblique comments on the ways of the world which, carefully interpreted, enhance one's understanding of the orisha, and contribute to his definition.

The stories of the orisha presented here are one person's interpretation of their characters, an interpretation based upon observation, upon legendary, mythic, ritual and praise material as recorded mainly by Samuel Johnson, Pierre Verger, William Bascom, Ulli Beier and E. Bolaji Idowu. All artists regard the orisha as muses demanding not slavish imitation of old forms, but pious experimentation. What forms best express them? The illustrator has devoted twenty years to this task. For me, and perhaps for some of you, this is just a beginning.

A final question remains to be asked. To what extent are the orisha still alive in Yorubaland? Despite Islam's strength, despite the confusing influence of Christian missionaries, despite increasing secularization, modernization, materialistic individualism, educated agnosticism and so on, there remains a habit of thought that sanctions ancient religious practices among priests and the common people, who carry on their observances privately, in their own compounds. There also remains a vital, artistic, ceremonious

attitude towards life that proudly encourages the public manifestations of dialogue between men and the orisha perpetuated in cult houses and secluded natural sites.

A brewer in sophisticated Lagos may return two months a year to his family village in "the bush" to regain contact with community and divinity the way he, as a child, before westernized schooling, experienced them. A sensitive young boy from a Christianized family may steal off to his sister's town to consult Ifa and sacrifice to the appropriate forces. A gentle man in Abeokuta may have decided to stay with Jesus as an orisha because he finds it less confusing; he wants to know "who's helping him"—but he has nothing against the others. Yet no reasonable person can with confidence predict the survival of the cults in the traditional style. The old priests, the "strong" men, are dying. Perhaps, at some future date, with some concessions to the modern world, a renaissance?

The latest wave of western imperialists, those who excavate old things to put them in museums (as well as in their

own living rooms), in "making sense" of "confusing" oral traditions, have, in the name of preservation, unwittingly dried up mysteries, driven secrets further into the ground. But not entirely.

Ask the resident Africanist just which of those hills surrounding ancient Ife is the sacred hill upon which the creator orisha descended, the hill where Ifa must be worshipped, and he will jovially admit he is not quite sure, gesture vaguely, then consult his houseboy who naturally gives an evasive answer, and finally send you off to the museum.

It is high noon on Obatala's day, and the drums, those instruments of art best suited to express the polyrhythmic existence of the various forces, Obatala's special *igbin* drums, are sounding. Against the interlocked patterns of two smaller drums, the deep tone of the largest establishes various phrases evocative of the creator, releases his heart beat, sounds him. It is a good sign.

Leaving the three-story cult house, which towers over the corrugated roofs of its neighbors, you go on to the museum. The sacred hill lies beyond the confines of the map; no guided tour can reach it. But the road, a local attendant says, continues past the waterworks.

Once you've found the road, those who have farms out that way don't mind telling you the right turns to avoid. There, at last, it is—Oke Ara, gray slabs of stone rising beyond high trees that clog the stream bed. You pass a little village, stop to consider the elders drinking palm wine in the shade. No one under Obatala's influence ought to drink it. The path narrows and steepens. Although shadows have begun to face east, the heat of the afternoon is at its peak. You stop to rest on the banked side of the road and suddenly, putting down your canteen of insipid water, you realize that you are sitting beside an offering of five fruits placed upon green leaves.