



Carved wooden effigy of Eshu the Trickster C19th



Meeting the Orishas

The Divinities of the West African tradition of Ifa

Marsha Scarbrough

Oba Odumade is an indigenous ceremonial leader and master drummer of the Yoruba people from West Africa. He emphasised to me that Ifa is 'a focused spiritual practice. It's not magic. It's an ancient technology for healing people and communities.'

He explained that this technology heals through a complex combination of vibration, psychological archetypes, herbal remedies and identification with the primal energies of Nature.

He told me: "In my tradition, drumming, dancing and chanting are forms of prayer. The rhythms I play and teach are sacred vibrations coded to create healing."

This made perfect sense to me because I knew that quantum physics defines matter (including us) simply as electrons vibrating at various rates. This indigenous wisdom recognises that positive vibrations (certain rhythms, repetitive movement, chants) can realign energy that has fallen out of harmony.

As Oba translated the lyrics of the chants, I recognised affirmations of positive outcomes: 'I am alive and well!' and 'Something good is happening!'

"Ifa addresses the complexity of human psychology with a specific belief system," Oba continued. "In this mythology, Oludumare is the energy of

creation, perhaps equivalent to the western idea of God. Oludumare is the intelligence above all. It's not a being. It's simply energy.

"Before people and animals come to live on Earth, they have to answer to Oludumare about what they want to do here. So when difficult things happen, we can't ask why. We must just accept.

"Oludumare presides over the orishas, who are intermediaries between humans and Oludumare,"

Oba elaborated. "Orishas are actual historic persons who have ascended to divine status after their deaths in the distant past, like Catholic saints, but each orisha also embodies universal energy that is identified with a natural element. For example, Oshun, the orisha who represents the energy of love and eroticism, is a beautiful woman, but she is also the river."

Oba was intelligent, quick and charming. I told him I'd like to learn more about Ifa. He explained that learning dance, drumming and the religion all go together and invited me to take his drumming and dance classes. I jumped at the chance.

As I learned more about drumming and dance, I learned more about the

orishas, because each orisha has specific songs, rhythms and dances. Each orisha also has particular colours and favourite offerings.

Like gods and goddesses in the ancient Greek pantheon, the orishas' relationships to each other reflect complex human behaviours including love, lust, anger, violence, adultery and betrayal. Oba claimed the Greeks stole their mythology from the Yorubas. The similarities are striking. Oshun is the equivalent of Aphrodite.

Like Hermes, Eshu plays tricks and serves as messenger to the other divinities. Yemoja/Olokun rules the seas like Poseidon and Shango throws thunderbolts and exacts justice like Zeus.

As I got to know the major orishas, I recognised that they were archetypes. Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, noticed that certain images, symbols and concepts (such as the 'Great Mother,' the 'Wise Old Man' or the 'Trickster') appear cross-culturally from ancient times to the present.

He speculated that these archetypes arise from the collective unconscious and speak to us through our individual dreams and our communal mythologies. Jung wrote that the number of archetypes is limitless. Oba tells us that in Ifa there are at least 400 orishas, maybe more.

Oba was clear that the orishas are metaphors for different aspects of human nature, yet orishas are also actual elements of our natural world (such as the river, fire or the ocean). Oba taught that we all have all the orishas within us and Ifa ceremonies allow us to experience their different energies. Similarly, Jung believed archetypes considered together reveal the complexity of the human psyche, and experiential encounters with archetypal energies, allow us to understand the divine nature of their wisdom.

"Ori means head, mind or consciousness, and, Asha means culture or character. Those words combine in orisha," Oba explained.

"Usually one orisha rules each person. We call that dominant spiritual energy or personality characteristic our 'head.' We use ceremonies and offerings to invoke other orisha energies to balance our personality and improve our relationships with others."

According to Oba, each orisha is a channel of energy, and ceremony tunes us in to those channels. I speculated that Jung would approve of Ifa technology.

Oba introduced us to the orishas through ceremonies in their honour. At the celebration for the trickster, Eshu, also known as Elegba, we dressed in white and brought offerings of red wine, cigars or hot peppers. We arrived after dark.

Low light created mysterious shadows. Red and black fabric draped the walls. In one corner, candles illuminated a child-sized effigy with goat horns and hooves, standing on two feet, playfully brandishing a sceptre topped with an erect phallus.

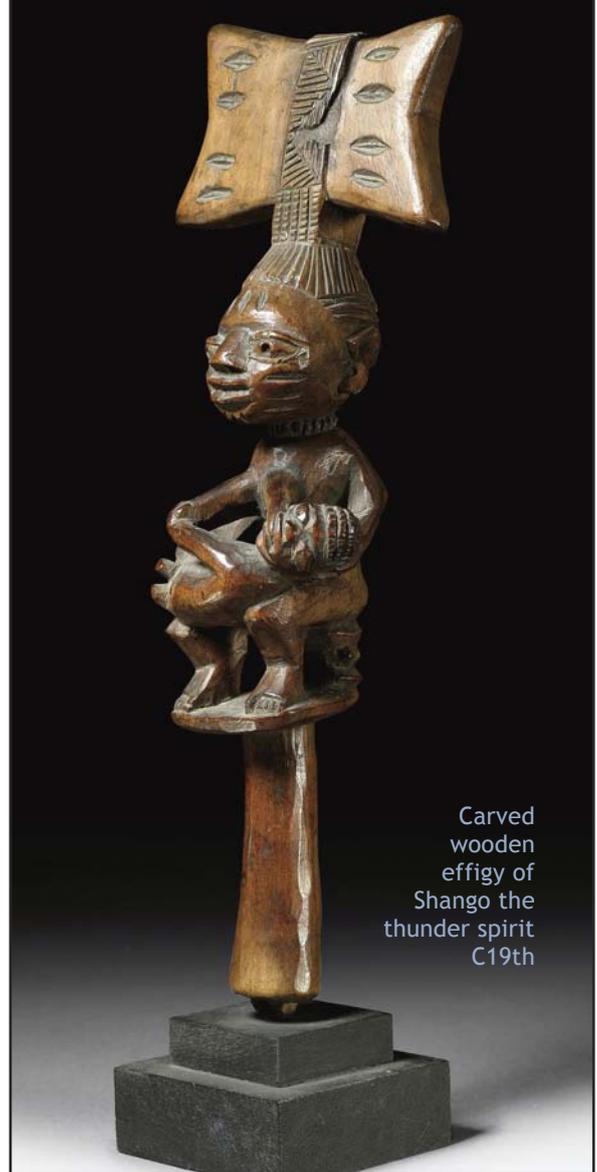
Oba appeared in his white ceremonial robes accented by strands of red and black beads. He wore a peaked cap with sharply-pointed flaps extending from each side. This 'dog-ear hat' heightens the wearer's intuition, allowing him to hear what humans cannot hear, to sense what's hidden. The hat looked ridiculous, but Oba wore it with such natural confidence that it became a badge of power.

"This is Eshu, the trickster. He lives behind our head and pushes us to make mistakes. He whispers in our ear to get us to make bad choices. When we acknowledge him, he will come out in front of our face where we can see him and honour him. Then he becomes the messenger to all the other orishas, so we always honour him first in every ceremony. Missionaries in Africa thought he was the devil because of his red and black colours, goat horns and hooves, but we Yoruba don't have the concept of the devil.

"He is our shadow. When we call him Elegba, he is the community's shadow. Elegba likes to start arguments and create conflict between people.

"Eshu makes his home at the crossroads, so he oversees our life choices. His companion is the vulture. He likes cigars, wine, whisky, chili and alligator pepper. He uses the shepherd's crooked stick to keep us in line."

Oba instructed us to lay our offerings at the effigy's feet as he chanted the invocation, "Eshu shiwa ju" ¹ which translates as "go in front, don't go behind me." We



Carved wooden effigy of Shango the thunder spirit C19th

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formed a circle as the drums kicked in and the song shifted to our request, "do not influence me, do not push me."

Oba demonstrated the dance by stomping one foot and shaking a fist (perhaps clutching an imaginary shepherd's crook) into the centre of the circle, then stomping the



Above: a ceremony for Oshun, the goddess of love

Right: a carved wooden effigy of a devotee of Oshun C19th



other foot and shaking the other fist to the outside of the circle.

The circle turned as we stomped and shook. The tempo sped up. We stomped and shook faster and faster, until the circle dissolved into wild free dancing. Eshu possessed dancers and pushed them into provocative moves. Ultimately, inhibitions dissolved and playful dirty dancing ruled the night.

As the energy cooled down and the celebrants started to depart, Oba warned us.

“Don’t be surprised if you see some changes in your life that you don’t like. You’ve called Eshu out. Now he will show you your shadow. You may discover dark truths about yourself.”

Ifa doesn’t offer sweetness and light, unicorns and rainbows. It gives us an opportunity to take a good look at what we hide from the world, to learn from our transgressing behaviours. If we can face the truth and find the courage to change, our darkness becomes our connection to the divine.

On the night of the ceremony for ‘the Wise Old Man,’ Obatala,

the walls were draped in pure white. We dressed in white, wrapped our heads in white scarves and brought offerings of white flowers and white candles. An altar draped in white cloth was set with a simple glass of water and a white candle. Oba appeared in his white robes, with white beads and a white cap.

“Obatala is the orisha of creation and creativity because he made the land, then he made the people out of clay. He’s represented as a white-bearded old man with a walking stick. His colour is pure white.”

He chanted the invocation to Eshu (always the first prayer of any ceremony) then asked us to face north as he chanted Obatala’s song, *Ile Bobo, Ile Orisha.*² We all faced south as he sang it again. We faced east and finally west. He translated the chant as, ‘The land belongs to Obatala because he made it.’

After we placed our white flowers and candles on the altar, Oba joyfully called out “Ajaja!”³ which asks, “Are there any spirits here?”

We responded, “A mee lo!” answering, “I am here. I am Spirit!”

The drums pounded in unison, then broke into syncopated rhythm. Dancers who’d been taking Oba’s class entered, stepping in unison, each holding a six-foot bamboo walking stick, symbol of Obatala. Their sticks struck the earth simultaneously as they marched into a circle.

Once in a circle, they started fancy choreography, leaping as they held their sticks skyward, shaking their sticks as they hopped, turning the sticks horizontally to create a square that finally morphed into a spinning circle. I was learning this in class, but I was not up to performance level, so I just held the groove.

“Obatala asked Oludumare if he could come to Earth. Oludumare asked why. Obatala said, ‘To make people worship You and praise You.’ Oludumare gave permission. Orunmilla, who was the sacred witness to Oludumare’s creation, asked, ‘What will you need?’ Obatala answered, ‘A rooster with five legs,’ and Orunmilla gave him one. Obatala came to Earth with the five-legged rooster. The rooster began digging and created five continents. That’s how Obatala made the land.

"Next Obatala made the people out of clay. When the bodies wanted heads, Obatala asked Oludumare to put the breath of life into them.

"Obatala asked each person who he or she wanted to be and what he or she wanted to do on Earth. Some wanted to be animals. Each made a choice, then promptly forgot that choice. Orunmilla captured everyone's answer, so he can help people to remember their choice.

"Obatala got drunk on palm wine. He was tired but still wanted to keep making more people out of clay. He made some mistakes, and those are people who have birth defects. He said he would be their god and guide. That's why people who are physically deformed are often spiritually strong."

Oba grabbed his djembe and pounded out 'rhumba,' the rhythm that calls in all 400 orishas. ⁴

This rhythm provided the basis of Latin rumbas. The name was a contraction of a longer, tonal Yoruba phrase that was called out by the babalawo (ceremonial leader) as a prelude to invoking the orishas. Unpronounceable by non-Yoruba speakers in the diaspora, the rhythm became commonly known by the simpler name, rhumba.

We jumped up and danced freely. High energy surged through us, but our movements were more restrained and proper than for Eshu. After all, Obatala is an old man. As usual, we danced for hours.

Over time we would honour many orishas. For Yemoja, the orisha of the ocean who rules motherhood and prosperity, we danced into the surf offering silver coins and blue and white flowers.

For Shango, the orisha of fire, thunder and lightning, we danced outdoors at night beside the leaping flames of a bonfire.

We learned that Oya, orisha of the wind who represents feminine leadership and the truth, loves shiny purple eggplants.

At the end of each ceremony, we honoured Ogun, orisha of iron and war, asking him to keep us safe inside our cars as we traveled home.

To honour Oshun, we gathered by a clear canyon stream. Cold water rushed around my ankles and over my pale, bare feet. Dressed in a pure white skirt and blouse, yellow rose petals filled my cupped

hands. I prayed to Oshun by scattering these petals on the fresh water and watching them float away towards the sea. Oshun rules love, beauty and eroticism. She is the river. She is the flowing fresh water that caressed my feet. Other women and men, also dressed in white, waded beside me.

Golden objects glittered in the sun on the nearby shore. Oshun loves gold. Her favorite colour is yellow, so we honoured her with an altar of yellow cloth laden with yellow fruit, yellow candies, golden necklaces, a gilded bowl of yellow rose petals and a mirror, so she could admire her beautiful self.

Her signature peacock feathers spilled from a brass vase and bobbed in the breeze. Honey is her favorite offering. We took turns drizzling it into the river.

After we ate a potluck feast and danced until midnight, we camped beside the stream. I crawled into my little tent exhausted. As I fell asleep, I felt at one with numinous Nature.

At dawn, I awoke tingling with energy and in awe of the beauty of the ceremony. I felt deep appreciation for Oba's power to create community and his mastery of shamanism as public theatre.

In all these orisha ceremonies, Oba shone like a superstar. He was at home when he was centre stage. He deftly guided group energy, raising it to a fever pitch, then calming it down with ease. Everyone participated. He cajoled would-be observers into joining the dance by playfully threatening to write them a ticket for staying on the sidelines. Everyone bathed in his love.

As much as I, too, was dazzled by Oba's charisma, I was equally attracted to the practice of Ifa. The drumming connected me to my own heartbeat. The dance connected me to my body and my libido. The trance connected me to the supernatural. The ceremonies connected me to the energies of Nature. The entire spiritual technology connected me to life and placed me firmly on the earth.

NOTES:

1, 2, 3, 4: Recordings of these songs and rhythms are featured on the 'Honey in the River Soundtrack,' available for download from itunes, Amazon Music and CD Baby, and also available on Spotify. See the Review in this issue of Sacred Hoop



Above: a carved wooden effigy for fertility and protector of motherhood and children C19th

This article is an extract from the book 'Honey in the River: Shadow, Sex and West African Spirituality' by Marsha Scarbrough.

Marsha Scarbrough is a shamanic practitioner and freelance journalist, who has had over 75 published articles. She spent 17 years scheduling, planning and running the sets of major feature films, and prime time television series for various directors including Clint Eastwood, and Leonard Nimoy.

Along the way, Marsha has travelled with Buddhist teacher Joan Halifax, danced with movement guru Gabrielle Roth, earned a brown belt in karate from martial arts legend Tak Kubota, participated in Native American healing ceremonies and produced workshops for a Nigerian master drummer. She lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA.

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Left: ritual cockerel chalice cover, used in the worship of Obatala, 'The Wise Old Man'