

Translations by Ulli Beier & Bakare Gbadamosi of narratives whose recitation forms part of the complex system of divination (seed &/or nut castings, praise names for each figure formed, sacrificing, interplay of diviner & client, etc.) named for the god Ifa. The real understanding, William R. Bascom tells us, comes from such stories & myths--in which the god sometimes takes on the trickster role. But the diviner can only employ his knowledge of the narratives within the divination context.

STORIES FROM THE IFA ORACLE

Yoruba

The Sun

Agbeji Agbenahara Ogbodoso says:

The bush fowl wakes up and is not happy to see that the beans have grown up.

Then he pronounces the oracle for the owner of the forest. They told him to sacrifice, because of the iroko tree, which stands in the backyard of his house, lest it might fall and kill him.

He refused.

The iroko fell, but did not touch the ground.

Then the owner of the forest said: I want to call the wood carvers. But when they cut the tree, Orishala appeared and turned the tree into oje, the white metal.

Orishala, the great god, called his slave You-dont-hear-what-i-say and ordered him to go and give the oje to the blacksmith of heaven. He said he wanted the oje to be fashioned into a decorated pot. The remainder he wanted to be made into a boat.

When You-dont-hear-what-i-say brought the things back from heaven Orishala placed something inside the pot.

Then he covered the pot with a cloth of brass.

Then he asked his slave to put the pot into the boat.

One day he ordered his slave to drive the boat to the world and to return the same day.

Thus You-dont-hear-what-i-say became the boatman of the sun.

He is the one who rows the sun to the world and back to heaven.

The home town of the sun is Iwonran.

And Orishala gave the sun the order to beat down on the people from high up in heaven.

The Moon

Moon, giver of light, son of Ajalorun, spirit of heaven.

He shows the thin part of his body to the earth.

He shows his fat side to the heaven above.

Elaporo, the rainbow, pronounces the oracle of moon:

Ajalorun begot the moon.

Elaporo told moon to sacrifice

to obtain rest of mind in heaven or on earth.

He refused the sacrifice.

Then Olodumare, the almighty, called moon to send him on a message:

I am your maker. And after I created you, I handed you to Ajalorun so he might beget you.

The moon was in a hurry to know what Olodumare's message was. Then he asked: What is it you want me to do?

Then Olodumare replied:

I want you to live fifteen days on earth and fifteen days in heaven.

And he said: I will use this period of time to create man and trees.

And Olodumare prayed for the moon. And he gave him the order.

It is from that day that moon has no rest of mind.

Ifa laughed at the moon: you did not sacrifice. Therefore you will have no rest. Fifteen days in the world, fifteen days in heaven.

The Creation of Land

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

Orunmila told him to prepare a hen that had five toes,
and five chameleons,
and five hundred chains.

Oduduwa prepared them all.

Orunmila made the sacrifice for Oduduwa. Then Orunmila sprinkled the wood powder on the sacrifice, and he told him to go with it to the world.

When Oduduwa left Orunmila he went to Olodumare. Then Olodumare gave Oduduwa some sand wrapped up in cloth.

When Oduduwa led the other Orishas to the world, they met only water. There was no place to step.

All the other Orishas returned to heaven, except only Oduduwa.

Oduduwa tied the chain of Orunmila in heaven.

Then Oduduwa climbed down the chain.

Then he put the sand on the water and it stayed.

Then he placed the chameleon on the sand to see whether it would hold.

The chameleon walked carefully to test the ground.

And the ground was solid.
That is why the chameleon still steps carefully today.
Then Oduduwa placed the hen on the sand.
It scratched and spread the sand about.
Oduduwa was surprised.
Oduduwa tested the ground with one foot.

When he saw that it was firm, he left the chain and came down. Then he untied the chain in heaven. And he put it down at Idio at Ile Ife. That place is still known as the house of Oduduwa today.

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

Then Ogun came and worshipped Oduduwa. Then Orishala came and worshipped Oduduwa. One by one all the Orishas appeared on earth.

It is said that Orishala was the elder brother of Oduduwa. But due to Oduduwa's bravery, he became the leader of all.

Orishala Who Made Man and Animals

Give me, I will not give you.

The peg does not enter the ground easily.

He pronounces the oracle for Orishala on the day that he came into the world with Oduduwa.

On that day they went to Olodumare to obtain the calabash of good character.

Then Olodumare gave it to them.

On their way to the world, Orishala was thirsty.

They met a woman carrying palm wine. Orishala drank until he could not control his senses.

Oduduwa a man of good sense took the calabash of good character back to Olodumare.

Olodumare told him: I give you this calabash to use.

When Orishala's eyes opened he returned to Olodumare with annoyance.

He said to Olodumare: Why has the calabash of good character disappeared?

Olodumare said: Is that all?

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

Orishala said that in his lifetime he would no more drink palm wine.

Since then everybody greets Orishala:

One who creates the son and the mother

One who creates the nose and the eyes.

The Origin of the Oro Cult

Pakunde (close the door) the secret of Asehin.

Pakunde pronounces the oracle for Asehin Bokin.

Asehin the son of a sieve! He drank bad water from the day he stepped onto his father's throne.

He never heard a baby cry.

Since he became king, none of his wives had delivered. Then they consulted Ifa. They told him to sacrifice to his father. Then he made a sacrifice but the father refused it. Then the mother told him that the father who begat him was not a human being.

She told him: When I went to the farm to fetch firewood there was a certain animal that resembled a human being, and he forced me to sleep with him. Then I used a trick. I split open a tree with an axe and asked the animal to put his penis into the cleft. When he put his penis into the cleft, I pulled out the axe, his penis got caught and he died. Those who know the animal say that they saw Iro (Gorilla) who died near the tree. He is the animal who made me pregnant with you.

Asehin heard this and went to the place. He found the bones of an animal. He placed them in a coffin. He killed a ram. When they carried the dead body to the town, they sang:

*Close the doors, Iro is coming,
The son is bringing his father.
All you landlords, close your doors.
Oro is coming!*

The son carries his father home.

Then they wove ropes of palm fiber. They swung it through the air. Then the people in the town said: this is a dead person speaking.

They call it Oro till today.

The Origin of the Egungun Masquerade

Obara Osa ran away to the roof.

He pronounced the oracle for the masquerade.

The masquerade came from heaven to the world.

When the world became spoilt, the Orishas did not know how to put things straight.

Obara Osa said that all the Orishas must prepare different kinds of cloth and make them into a shroud.

He told them to bring some animals like goats, rams, and plenty of food, also gin and palm wine, and prepare them for the strangers who were coming from heaven. Because they were the ones who would put everything right that was wrong.

When they arrived, there were twenty of them.

Oduduwa started to tell them about the world.

They received it into their hands.

They inspected it and made corrections in it.

Then the bad spirits that did not allow people to have peace of mind were driven away.

And the witches were killed.

Those who correct the world are called Egun.

But Oduduwa drove Egun away, who made the correction of the world. He was afraid they would claim all the land from him. That is why there is no Egun at Ile Ife.

The Eguns ran away to Oje and established a town there.

So from there they began to spread into different parts of the country.

The Bird Who Brought Fire from Heaven

One who knows how to swim goes to the river and squats.

One who does not know how to swim also goes to the river and squats.

They are the ones who pronounced the oracle for Adaba, the red eyed turtle dove.

The son of Ajalaiye was annoyed and went to put fire into the house of Olodumare.

From there he caught fire in his tail and he carried it into the world.

When he returned into his father's house, the house caught fire, and the whole town burned down.

There is a proverb:

*Anyone who puts fire on his tail
Will not take it anywhere else
Except into his father's house.*

What Agbe, Aluko and Akoko Say in the Morning

Eshu's stone has a big head.

It pronounces the oracle for Onikoti who is the mother of Agbe, Aluko and Akoko the Cock.

He told Onikoti to sacrifice, lest her children would have to go and live in the forest. But she refused.

One day the mother went to the farm. She left a bottle of palm wine in the house.

Then the palm oil fell down.

Then Agbe went there to put his head in the oil.

Then Akoko went there to put his head in the oil.

Then Aluko went there and bathed in the oil.

The three children ran away: Agbe ran away to the forest, Aluko ran away to the savannah, and Akoko ran away to the rubbish heap.

When the mother returned she met nobody. Then she started to call her children. The cock was not so far from the house. When he saw that the mother was not so much annoyed he started to call his brothers.

He called Agbe: Come, our mother is not annoyed.
Agbe replied: I am going to the far forest.
Then the cock called Aluko: Come, our mother is not annoyed.
Aluko replied: I am going to the far Savannah.
That is why the three of them shout at the same time in the morning.

The Rock

Orunmila is the one who prostrated to Ifa.
I prostrate to Akodaiye – the one who first came to the world.
I prostrate to Awolose – the secret one.
I prostrate to Asedaiye – the maker of the world.
I prostrate to the elders at Iworin.
I prostrate to Tewure who pronounces the oracle for the rock.

On the day on which the hill told Tewure that he wanted to be higher than the ground, Tewure told him to prepare ten fingernails, ten palm leaves, ten leaves of the silk cotton tree, and one cow.

*Because the nail grows above the finger
the hill will be higher than the ground.
Because the palmleaves are higher than the palm tree
the hill will be higher than the ground.
Because the silk cotton tree is higher than the town
the hill will be higher than the ground.*

Oduduwa

Orisha-whose-elbows-are-joined-together pronounced the oracle for Oduduwa.
On the day he wanted to marry Iyewa Okikiroro and to marry Alamatan the last born also.

The two women were the senior and the junior wife, and their husband was not at home. They fought together before the arrival of the husband.

The senior wife killed the junior wife.

Their husband was a weaver. He was annoyed and threw the senior wife out. He threatened to kill her. The senior wife ran away. The husband pursued her and killed her. Her dead body changed into a river. It is the river known as Opa at Ife.

The husband was annoyed because he had no more wife.

He planned not to have another wife in his life.

He went into a room and took a knife.

He cut off his penis and used the knife on his body.

From that day on he began to produce children.

From that day on Oduduwa praised himself and said:

The vagina gently produces a child.