

IFA...An Introduction

Ifa is the great oracle of the Yoruba people. Its pronouncements wind as a snake. Catching...holding the questions which are offered for comment. Swallowing them whole. Laying bare their essence. Ifa has found its way into the New World riding on the backs of transported Afrikans. This article will primarily concern itself with the root, or Afrikan, practice of the oracle. A general overview will be attempted. Particular attention will be paid to the sections of Ifa which concern themselves with magic and technology. My understandings of Ifa are gleaned from a much simplified use of and devotion to the oracle. Conversations and books have been instrumental, especially the excellent work of Judith Gleason.

The cultural processes which allow for the spread of information on a global scale often act to secularize the information which is transmitted. Flights of the soul toward deity are catalogued as folk tales and torn apart like car engines in order to inspect their content. Without the context of a system of roads on which to travel, a car engine becomes a curious artifact bereft of meaning. By the same token, for Ifa to travel the byways of the Soul its odu (configurations of throws which act as "roads") must be read with the eyes of inspiration. A plethora of interesting facts are brought to birth if one dissects the odu. A world peopled with the Mysteries is the result of a more inclusive apprehension. Initiation knows no cultural boundaries. The bringing of ones level of Initiation into the Courts of Ifa is rewarded in kind.

Ifa is a form of geomancy. Its prophesy looks to the earth for form. There are no written texts containing the pronouncements of Ifa. It is an oral tradition and the vastness of its content makes it virtually impossible for one person to commit to memory its body. Bits surface here and there among its students and initiates. The whole of Ifa

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can only be uttered by the totality of its community of practitioners.

Ifa is based upon lots. It is interesting to note that the word "sorcerer" is derived from the Vulgar Latin "sortiarius" meaning caster of lots. The lots used in Ifa divination are palm nuts from the oil palm. The nuts take various forms upon casting and each of these forms relate to a more or less fixed recitation or story. The recitation or story recommends to the querent a course of action which includes certain sacrifices and predicts outcomes.

Sixteen of the palm nuts are shaken in the hands of the diviner and deposited in the left hand. The right hand is used to quickly grab the nuts leaving a remainder of one or two nuts. Two marks are made on a tray covered with wood dust (in place of the earth) if one nut remains. One mark is made on the tray if two nuts remain. Four throws complete a sign. Signs are read in pairs necessitating eight throws.

The number of throws can be reduced from eight to one through the use of an opele, a chain on which eight objects, each with two distinct sides, are strung. Eight seed pods, metal replicas of seed pods, cowrie shells or (with thanks to a Chicago friend of the Saints) seeds painted on one side can be used. The design is four objects, long space, and four more objects. The opele is held at the center and thrown down with the two ends facing the diviner. Each series of four objects is read as a sign. The two ends constitute a pair of signs. Sixteen loose cowrie shells can also be thrown and the number of shells landing upright (mouth up) counted. The number obtained corresponds to one of the sixteen major signs of Ifa. The throwing of the loose shells is prevalent in the New World.

Four single marks, four double marks, or any combination of double or single make a sign. Therefore, there are sixteen

(4X4) possible combinations. Signs are read in pairs so there are a possible 256 (16X16) ways that the paired signs can express themselves.

In Ifa, there are sixteen major double signs. These are signs in which the two rows of four throws are identical. At this point it seems advisable to rely on Ms. Gleason and her teacher Awotunde Aworinde of Oshogbo, Nigeria. The following is a schema developed by her based upon the knowledge received from Awotunde. The English descriptions of the signs are her understandings of the thrusts of the various signs. There are other traditional variations of this sequence.

The Sixteen Major Double Signs:

	4	3	2	1
	ODI MEJI CONTAINMENT	IWORI MEJI IMPETUS	OYEKU MEJI DEATH	EJI OGBE LIFE
	I I II II II II I I	II II I I I I II II	II II II II II II II II	I I I I I I I I
9	8	7	6	5
OGUNDA MEJI MALE AGGRESSIVENESS TECHNE	OKONRON MEJI RAPIDITY PROLIFERATION	OBARA MEJI PLENITUDE EXCESS	OWORIN MEJI DISEASE	IROSUN MEJI DECEPTION ANXIETY
I I I I I I II II	II II II II II II I I	I I II II II II II II	II II II II I I I I	I I I I II II II II
14	13	12	11	10
IRETE MEJI EARTH-FATE	OTURA MEJI WORD-CHANCE	OTURUPON MEJI SACRIFICE	IKA MEJI BLIGHTING	OSA MEJI MAGIC ♀ AGGRESSIVENESS
I I I I II II I I	I I II II I I I I	II II II II I I II II	II II I I II II II II	II II I I I I I I
			16	15
			OFUN MEJI PURIFICATION- TRANSCENDENCE	OSE MEJI VIOLATION- PUTREFACTION
			II II I I II II I I	I I II II I I II II

Up to this point I have hoped to provide a skeletal explanation of the technique of Ifa. Now the time has come to hang living flesh on these bare bones. This flesh is softer, more subjective than the hard facts which constitute the bones. Personal relationships...understandings...necessarily find voice.

Ifa is the Holy City, The City of Lights, The City of Camps. It is the city founded and sustained by the Orisha (Divinities). The system of divination known as Ifa is a means back to a primary balance epitomized by this city. Working in accord with the Orisha is, to paraphrase Aleister Crowley, having the force of the universe behind one's decisions and actions. Ifa has the power to bring this balance into focus.

The geomantic signs of Ifa are known as odu. A close friend upon hearing of my intention to write this paper advised a thorough as possible examination of the question, "What is an odu?" There are a number of answers which point toward a deepening of one's reverence toward Ifa. I will use a scatter shot method; the method ascribed to Ifa itself by Ms.Gleason, in pursuing the question.

Odu means oracular utterance and connotes a large calabash (gourd). The gourd is composed of stem and vessel. It is the joining of wand (stem) and cup (vessel). Giver and receiver (both instruments are active after their own fashion) locked in sexual embrace. Odu as calabash or gourd mirrors the oracular techniques of sexual magick.

A closed calabash is perceived in Yoruba philosophy as being a symbol of the meeting of Earth and Heaven. Here the calabash (odu) displays an obvious Hermetic aspect. It is a microcosm of the world at large. The odu are microcosms which mirror macrocosmic occurrences and situations. It is the holy wisdom of Ifa to present the proper odu or microcosm for consideration.

The calabash is, by association, emblematic of the head. A personal familiar name for the calabash is "old empty head." The correspondence of the calabash with the head (in particular an "empty" head) particularly suits it for indwelling by the orisha. The sensorium in the head is used by the orisha to "steer" the body. The events assembled within the odu and their treatment is used to "steer" the querent of the oracle.

The gourd is by shape similar to an egg and brings to mind a pregnant belly. Both of these cognates of the calabash are sacred containers of secrets. The female orisha Oddudua of the Yoruba pantheon has been described as the originator of the city of Ifa. It is interesting to note that in Haitian voodoo the head and the stomach have been given as repositories of the Mysteries.

Mr. Grant writes extensively on the Od. He identifies it as the Magickal Light and gives its number as 11, the number of magick. These associations work well within the context of a divinatory system.

Tarot is a primary instrument of divination used in the New World . Tarot (rota) invokes the image of the Wheel (Wheel of Fortune) to communicate its operation. Ifa is also comfortable with the Wheel as a central symbol. "In action, odu are synonymous with ona - the roads of Ifa. (Gleason)." Here the city of Ifa can be seen as the hub of the wheel - and the spokes or roads leading to Ifa are the odu. The odu are roads of the orisha.

There are 16 primary odu. Two of the most powerful for me are #9 ,Ogunda Meji which treats male aggressiveness and #10, Osa Meji which speaks of female aggressiveness. Male aggressiveness expresses itself as technique and female aggressiveness comes to light as magic. Gleason's

informative work forms the basis for the understandings expressed.

Ogunda Meji shakes with the power of Ogun (the Yoruba deity of iron and war). The first few lines of the odu read as follows: Greetings for the sacrifice. / Now let us praise Ogunda Meji: / Pa-pa-pow: Ogun went off spontaneously / made Ifa for Gun / on the day he was going to war against his enemies.

The spirit of Ogun as master of an aggressive martial technology is invoked by the oracle. Ifa delights in word play as demonstrated by the Ogun and Gun parallel.

Here are a few lines from the second half of the odu: Row two: can you see the road Ifa took to this destination? / Fixed farm-plots, O my volatile... / I arrived in oko, / ate and drank there, / leaned back against akoko tree / and thought, / I have come to the place / of getting myself together / Made Ifa for Orunmila / on the day he was traveling out to Oko/ (warning: pull out, avoid arguments). Here Ogun is called forth in his aspect as patron and provider of iron agricultural implements. The way described is more peaceful yet the "fixed" farm plots can be seen as an imposition of technology upon the surface of the earth.

Orisha-Voodoo, as centered in Oyotunji Village S.C. and practiced in the U.S.A., holds that Ogun is the patron orisha of the white races. Ogun is technology without patience. I was told by an initiate in Oyotunji that Ogun would rather walk through a wall or blow it up than walk around it.

Osa Meji calls forth the spirit of female aggression. In this odu, technique is replaced by magic. Here is my favorite section of the odu: Now see the route Ifa took to to be so called? / The one who poisons internally, / Beginning with vagina, goes on to consume intestines, / The one who munches on heart / as if it were mushroom, / Shiny-wings, / The one who keeps midnight meat in her

cupboard, / Insatiable--/ All of this to be said in praise of our elders, distinguished old women. / Inner poisoner, we call father of witches; / From vagina, on to intestines, we call mother of witches; / ... / Shiny-feathers -- witches in person; She who stores nibbles in her closet - simply, Our Mother. On the day they were coming into the world from heaven, / each carried a covered calabash. / What are you going to do with these? / calabash-power: to kill and eat people; / calabash-power: to kill and sell people; / calabash-power: to kill and grow rich / on the wreckage of accomplishment / work of the hands / wings shall despoil -- / Such be our intentions.

The Devouring Mother rises from the matrix of these Words. The odu perscribes the means and methods of working this force in order to create a position of psychic wholeness and balance.

Ifa is literally the City of Camps. Thousands of fires glowing in the night. It is the City of Lights founded by the orisha. It is the beginning and end of all travels. Its spirit gives life to the phrase "All true going is return." The race began in Afrika. History lays heavy upon the land. Our New World understandings are infected, or blessed, however one chooses to see it, with a spirit of newness. The ancient cultures of Afrika named and assembled the parts of their worlds before the first footprints of wo/man marked New World soil. It may be nigh impossible to catch the spirits of Ifa within a net of New World understandings and concepts. Ogun is not given to mystery. Technology seeks to provide an answer to all questions and terms those questions it can not answer as irrelevant. The Pan Afrikan theologian Gabriel M Setiloane of the University of Cape Town views the cult remains of the "Old Religion" in the West as carrying rays of hope in that they share in the "Primal Vision" Common to Afrikan religions. Black Moon has recently received a mss on ritual use of the pentagram and building the astral body from The Institute of Ethno-Medical Doctors & Philosophers of Nigeria. These are examples of the

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types of Initiation which function beyond the confines of culture, providing great power and pleasure.

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