The Shine in the Eyes of the Naked

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Isàn sà méjì ni nsù lù ra wọn pèlèngé pèlèngé
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adìfà fún Òwú
ntì kolè òrun bọ wàle ayé
wọn lọ se bọ
Òwú rù bọ
Njè Òwú gbọ, Òwú ye
èrọ wa wọ ọmọ Òwú lọdè

Two strong ones scatter helter-skelter
bang each other to and fro, to and fro
These were the words told to Cotton
when coming from the spirit world
They said to perform sacrifice
Cotton performed it
So, Cotton has ripened, it has sprouted
look at all of Cotton’s children outside

In the luminal phase of Òwú’s creation it was determined
upon divination that Òwú would have three strong
hindrances on her maiden voyage to earth. The three
obstacles included Rain, Fire, and the Earthworm. How
would Òwú be able to overcome these nemeses? She was
told to perform a ritual with three particular ingredients.
Òwú understood the gravity of the threat and the
importance of the voyage, so she performed the ritual.

Upon reaching earth, sure as the divination warned, Òwú
encountered her first obstacle. Rain said that more trees
were not necessary on earth as it was already a dense bush.
Rain already had a difficult enough task irrigating the
existing trees. It would simply be more work. Rain vowed to
drown Òwú. However, since it had sacrificed an earthen pot
spotted with holes, all of Rain’s malevolent efforts simply
seeped away.

Òwú continued to grow till it began to sprout bulbs. They
were bright green and shiny. These bulbs themselves then
blossomed into a flower akin to the yellow rose. All these
colorful changes attracted the attention of Fire. Fire was
always drawn to shiny dancing objects like himself, like the
wife he once lost to mist, and now Fire had eyes for Òwú.
This, of course, was Fire’s downfall — it must consume
whatever it is attracted to. Fire spread its way towards
Òwú in the form of an ember, perhaps once a piece of dry
white pine. However, since Òwú had sacrificed snails, and
everyone knows a snail’s life is cool and wet, Fire could not
get close enough to touch Òwú. Every time it would come
close, Fire would sizzle in protest. Fire soon realized it could
not conquer Òwú. It had to retreat to survive.

Soon the yellow flowers reached maturity, then gradually
withered; soon a bright white ball of wool opened like a
full moon. It seemed like Òwú was firmly established on
earth. She wondered what other difficulty she was going
to encounter. It wasn’t until she felt a persistent tickle --
you could even say a tingle in her root -- that she began to
suspect something was awry. Òwú saw the large Earthworm
trying to burrow its way into her roots. It tried to gnaw at
one root unsuccessfully then moved to another and so on.
This was the annoying tingle! Òwú noticed the Earthworm
would try to burrow briefly on one spot then move to
another. As if coming across a wall, the Earthworm would
suddenly turn away, try another root, then turn away again.
However, since Òwú had used ash as sacrifice, apparently
every time the Earthworm would begin to penetrate a root
it would crash into a ball of unappetizing ash.

Òwú continued to thrive. When it reached maturity, it
developed a three-pointed leaf, almost like fingers, almost
like counting the three obstacles it overcame. With these
fingers she also warned all threatening characters: She
conquered three powerful enemies, she blossomed, and still
she shines.

In early 2002 I was invited to read some poems at a
conference on African art and culture organized by African
Art History professor David Doris at the University of
South Florida in Tampa, Florida. I heard that a Babaláwo
by the name of Koláwolé Òṣhítọlá was going to be a special
guest at the conference. I had been on the heels of this
Babaláwo already for a few years. I first came across his
ideas and practices through books and articles written
by Henry Drewal and Margaret Thompson. They spent
considerable time doing research in the Ijebú area of
Nigeria, and Òṣhítọlá was one of their principle sources
of information. His hermeneutics so intrigued and
subsequently influenced my practice as a Babaláwo that I
considered him a teacher without ever having met him!

As often happens in these types of conferences, I was
regrettably told there was no budget for a poet. The best
David Doris could do was comp me into the conference. I

FEATURED THEME

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was so enthralled with the opportunity to meet Oshitóla, I decided to drive to Tampa from Miami (about a four to five hour trip) and read my poems anyways.

There were some guest drummers from the Tampa area as well as from Miami. I decided to do the poetry reading in a less formal environment. I asked some of the drummers to accompany me and we took the performance outside; and there in the audience was Oshitóla. I decided in his honor to read some poems greatly inspired by the Ifá corpus. A particular poem actually had a call and response style very common in traditional Ifá chanting: a style I was hoping would reverberate and intrigue Oshitóla. After the reading, I was introduced to Baba Oshitóla as a poet and Babaláwo. Much later in the day one of the drummers would approach Baba for divination regarding one of his sons. Baba, much to my thrill, asked for my ṣepele (divining chain) to do the divination.

The next day I was able to have a one on one with him. I asked him for some information on my own Ifá verse (all Babaláwo have an Ifá verse that “gave birth” to them at their initiation). The verses that he taught me would subsequently alter not only my vocation, but delineated for me the next seven years of my life. He also taught me the verse and story that is the subject of this writing.

I invited him to Miami for an informal conference with another Babaláwo [myself] at my house. The following weekend I flew Baba from Tampa to Miami along with David Doris from the conference. David also had stayed with Baba Oshitóla while researching his dissertation in Nigeria. They were guests in my house for several days. A rich exchange took place. So much conversation (despite Baba’s usual reticence), so many bridges were erected in my mind. I connected many spiritual practices done here in the Diaspora with the very ancient ones done in his family for seven generations; and I learned the origins and reasons for performing them. I felt in a way poised to be unified with the past, and the great memory of my spiritual discipline before the trauma of slavery and exile. I felt I had found the person who was going to direct me across the vast expanse of cultural memory and spiritual development. I felt I had met the head of what was to be my spiritual family.

Traditional Yorùbá philosophy is very conscious of the threats life entails. In our above myth we see how the personified character of cotton, Òwù, has been advised of the dangers she will encounter upon arriving in the material world. A word is in order regarding the sequence of events that precedes the creation of living beings according to Yorùbá tradition. It is said before the material manifestation of a living organism (plants, animals, human) has occurred, while in their luminal phase, when the spiritual aspect of that creature is first created. It is said this creature advances before the creator, kneels, and chooses a destiny; how its life will unfold, to whom it will be born, what vocations or accomplishments it will have, what deities it will worship, what taboos it must observe, and, lastly, when it will return to the spiritual realm. I may add some thinkers add or subtract to this list of choices a being makes. The being fills a calabash with these choices and proceeds to the head of all Babaláwo in the spirit world to find how it can accomplish these choices. This Babaláwo gives the prescription, both ritually and behaviorally, that must be followed. The degree of success or suffering of vicissitudes experienced in the material world depend on the being’s decision to act or not according to the injunctions. Some thinkers say animals and plants were once the same as humans in the spiritual realm, but because they failed in their ritual and behavioral injunctions and obligations, they were then born as we see them. Also some animals and plants, other traditional thinkers would say, choose to be born as we commonly see them. For example, the lion chose to be the king of the savannah, the crocodile the owner of the river, etc., and the only way for this to occur would be by these beings manifesting in their current particular form.

This myth and the respective Ifá verse have many themes that are cornerstone to ancient and modern Yorùbá thought. Struggle, persistence, victory, and the supremacy of beauty are central to this myth. It has been said by religious accolades who frequent diviners that so much of the spiritual message obtained from divination is essentially pessimistic. Frequently, narratives are wrought with violence, chaos, and danger both spiritual and material. While I would agree there are certainly narratives and verses that unmatch truly terrible episodes, the vast majority of traditional Ifá verses are not pessimistic in their outcome. More to the point, Ifá verses tend to mirror material and spiritual realities which could convincingly be argued are in a constant lock between polar opposites of being and nonbeing, birth and death, growth and decay, light and dark. Traditional Yorùbá thought is very conscious of balance and what Buddhists and Taoists regard as duality or the dual nature of reality, i.e. the necessity of darkness for there to be light, female for there to exist male, etc... In addition it can be said that the purpose of divination is to situate a person, community (family, city, nation) in the continuum of this balance or effectively its imbalance. Once this has been diagnosed, the proper relief can be identified—be it ritually, behaviorally, psychologically, or physically.

Although I have only heard from David sporadically in the last several years, I have spoken to Baba in Nigeria at least once weekly for the last several years. I have been his guest in Nigeria several times for extended periods. Even as I write these words, I receive a call from Baba asking to deliver an important message to another Babaláwo. Spirit does work that way.

Knowledge, be it ritual, philosophical, vocational, or simple common sense is a cornerstone of traditional Yorùbá culture. He who knows more is often the most valued member of the community. Frequently the most experienced is the most elder. In gerontological cultures like the Yorùbá, great importance and reverence is given to elder members of the community. Highly placed chiefs, advisors, and diviners were frequently those with tufts of cotton on
their heads. They had the marks of Òbátlá and Òrùnmílá, the wise and senior orisha, to whom without coincidence the cotton tree is assigned ownership. Without a doubt Baba belongs in this category of elder.

It was at that point in my spiritual development that I was searching for the guidance and knowledge. I was increasingly dissatisfied with the enclave of Ifá priests here in Miami—their perpetual provincial squabbles, petty intrigues, and frequent behavior that was candidly rogue, a behavior not becoming of an elder priest (which Babaláwo are supposed to be) of an ancient religion, culture, and tradition. I attributed this lack of good character, or iwa pelé, to a lack of learning and apprenticeship of the thorough, profound, and broad philosophical teaching found in traditional Ifá. This, of course, is no fault of their own; after all, this is what we inherited from the vestiges of slavery and exile and the amnesia of hard history. We inherited a broken language (Yorùbá spoken in the Diaspora) which can therefore only articulate a broken philosophy.

We see the journey Ówú walked before arriving on Earth, and we can argue that it was her choice to be a thing of beauty. The fruit that shines across a river straight to the eyes of the naked. We can even say she chose a destiny of service to mankind. It was not till the bright bulbs of cotton impressed the creative thought of man to make cloth. We also see that a thing of beauty is frequently the object of enmity, and how overcoming difficulties can result in a thing of beauty.

One aside though-- it is ironic that so much of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the vile institution of southern American slavery, was inspired and fueled by this same object of beauty. And it is ironic that were it not for Ówú (and other crops like sugarcane, coffee, etc.) it can be argued that the African legacy and the Diaspora that was subsequently born would not have been planted in the new Americas. The next logical question then would be-- was it also Ówú’s destiny to spread African peoples, culture, and religion throughout the world by being born a simple tree?

There is a central image that stands out in my memory of those few days in Tampa. I keep remembering and actually have a picture of me and Baba Òshítólá in which he is wearing a large piece of thick white cloth wrapped like a toga (a traditional way for Babaláwo and elders to wear cloth) tied on his left shoulder and holding his iríkere, or beaded fly whisk (another of the Babaláwo’s important paraphernalia). I think of the irony of cotton—a Yorùbá Babaláwo in the U.S. teaching about his own tradition to scholars and artists who arguably would not even be who we are were it not for people akin to him brought to these shores for the sake of Ówú’s.