

AWO TRAINING PART XI

In the process of washing, anointing, invoking, feeding and reading the mechanics of reading may not be as self-evident as one might expect. The serious student of *Ifa* outside of Africa is confronted with conflicting points of view on the process of divination in the Diaspora. As always if you have access to elders follow their instruction.

At various stages of an *Ifa* ritual I like to throw four cowries to determine if the section of the ritual is completed to the satisfaction of spirit. For example if I am making an *Esu* I will have *Ose tura* marked on the *Ifa* tray. When I have finished making the *ewe* to wash the *Esu* I will throw four cowries to the *Odu* marked on the tray and say, *ire ewe Esu*. In the context of this type of divination there are only two relevant answers yes or no. In this context I read two mouths and four mouths up as yes, everything else is a no. The maybe throws are not relevant. I want a clear yes answer from Spirit before I am confident I can move on to the next phase of the ritual. Sometimes when there is a no answer I will read the one leg of *Ifa* created by the four cowries to give me an indication of why there is a no. For example; I might ask is the *ewe* complete? I could get *etawa* as follows:

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In the context of this question as it relates to the ritual in progress I am reading the *etawa* as a no. The configuration of the throw is *Otura*. When interpreting *Odu* through the use of four cowries you may make the single leg of *Ifa* a *meji*. This means I am reading a no answer in *Otura Meji*. This *Odu* is related to mystic vision and the ase of *Obatala*. I know that spinach and *efun* are sacred to *Obatala*. I might then ask the *Odu Ose Tura* if *Esu* wants either spinach or *efun* to complete the *ewe*.

In the sequence wash it, anoint it, invoke it, feed it and read it there is frequently two times when divination with 16 cowries, *opele* or *ikin* is performed. The first divination is right after invocation to determine the *Odu* a particular sacred object is born in. This part of the process is very different in the Diaspora then it is in traditional Yoruba *Ifa*. The point of discussing the differences is to help clear up the confusion; it is not to make a judgment that one system is better than another. When I first started studying with Chief Adebolu Fatunmise, I spent many months with explaining to him what was meant in the Lucumi system when they used certain words that have an entirely different meaning in traditional Yoruba *Ifa*. For example the work *omiero* is commonly used in the Diaspora to mean a mixture of herbs. In most Yoruba dialects *omiero* means snail blood which is an ingredient in many spiritual herbal mixtures. The herbal mixture is usually referred to as either *ewe* or *osanyin*.

Sorting out these differences can be frustrating and confusing, but I recommend some understanding of these linguistic differences to anyone who wants to engage in serious study with traditional Yoruba elders. Now for the really confusing part; in my experience working with traditional *Ifa* elders in Nigeria, the first divination after invocation is called the *ita*. Linguistically the *ita* is a reference to the *Odu* that gives birth to a specific pot. So to stay with our earlier example we are making an *Esu*, we have *Ose tura* marked on the tray because we know *Esu* is born in *Ose tura*. We did not divine to get this *odu* we simply marked it on the tray. Now after the invocation of *Esu* we get a secondary *Odu*, let's say the secondary *Odu* is *Ika Meji*. The *Odu Ika Meji* speaks of making ethical use of the power of the word. How then do we interpret the *Odu*? In traditional Yoruba *Ifa* as I understand it, the *ita* is story about the relationship between the incarnating *Odu* of a Spirit (*Ose tura* in our example of *Esu* and *Ika Meji*). This means the *Esu* born from *Ose tura* in *Ika Meji* comes with an enhancement of the power of the word for the person who is receiving the *Esu*. At the *ita* (used in the context of birthing a Spirit) there is no orientation because Spirit is beyond the polarity between *ire* and *ibi*. The polarity between *ire* and *ibi* is information for the diviner to determine if a client will receive the message being given by divination or if the person is in resistance to the information being given by divination. This information is not relevant to the birth of Spirit. There is no need for orientation. If a traditional

Yoruba *Ifa* elder does not ask for orientation it does not mean they don't know what they are doing, it would in fact suggest they have a deeper understanding of the purpose of divination than those who would unfairly criticize their methodology. For as long as the person has the particular *Esu* in our example, their relationship to that *Esu* becomes the life long revelation of the *awo* or mystery of the relationship between *Ose Tura* and *Ika Meji*.

Now let us take another step towards unraveling some confusion. Based on the style of divination done in traditional Yoruba *Ifa* the *Esu* that speaks in *Ika Meji* would be *Esu Oro*, or the Divine Messenger of the Power of the Word. *Ifa* diviners know this, they do not need to take four cowries and ask which of the roads of *Esu* they are working with, the *Odu* of the *ita* carries that information. In *Odu Ifa* as it is taught in traditional Yoruba culture every *Odu* represents a road of *Esu*, there are two hundred and fifty six roads of *Esu*. Because much of this information was lost in the middle crossing diviners in the Diaspora have by necessity chosen to ask which of the roads of *Esu* they are making among the names they remembered. Much was preserved and we honor and praise those ancestors who preserved this information under difficult circumstances. The contemporary student of *Ifa* working in the Diaspora is faced with a dilemma, do we solidified that which was remembered or do we return to source and reclaim that which was lost. For me, personally I find value in returning to source and reclaiming

that, which was lost. It is a personal decision largely based on my temperament. Because I choose to divine in the old way does not mean I don't know what I am doing, it means I am divining differently than many of my contemporaries in this country.

Returning to our example, we can invoke the *Esu Oro* we are making by reading the relevant verses of *Ose Tura*, *Ika Meja* and the traditional *oriki* (invocation) for *Esu Oro*. This is a fairly straightforward process for *Esu*, however for the other *Orisa* the process becomes complex beyond being practical. Here is why. In traditional Yoruba culture most everyone knows that Osun is incarnated in *Ose Meji*. Osun's shrine in Oshogbo has 42 shrines along the Osun River representing the 42 known roads of Osun. What does this mean? It means they have preserved the pots of 42 *Iyalode* meaning the pots of 42 of the elder mothers who have spent time as Chief of *Egbe Osun* in Nigeria. The roads are a pairing of the name of the *Iyalode* with the *Odu* of her *ita* which from a traditional Yoruba perspective means the *Odu* that gave birth to her pot. The association between the *Iyalode* and specific *Odu* is considered an *Egbe* secret. Knowing the *Odu* that gives birth to someone's Osun pot would give someone else the key to access that pot. Consequently this information is kept secret within the *Egbe*. When it is spoken of in public instead of saying my Osun is born in *Osa Ogbe*, a traditional Yoruba Osun devotee would say my Osun is born in the road of *Iyalode Iyagba* or whatever the name was of the Chief Osun

elder. This is a bit complicated but the point is that roads of *Orisa* were originally considered codes for specific *Odu*. If for example an *Osun* is born in an *Odu* for which there is not an established road, the road becomes the name of the diviner in one of the verses. Identifying the diviner and associating it with an aspect of *Osun* would for the initiated clearly identify the *Odu* while it remained secret to the uninitiated. To make this even more confusing the system of codes varies from region to region. In the Diaspora some of the codes were remembered and it is traditional to use coco divination to select from the know roads for a specific *Orisa*. So what is the point? I say all this to say when speaking of roads to traditional Yoruba *Ifa* and *Orisa* elders, if you are speaking from the point of view of how this is determined in the Diaspora you will encounter a great deal of confusion. I also say this to suggest that as *Egbe's* develop in the Diaspora they can use this system to develop their own codes. I have heard far too many people say I went to Africa I receive an *Orisa* they did not give me a road, the elders in Africa do not know what they are doing. This is, I believe, an unfair criticism based on a failure to understand some fundamental procedural differences.

For some reason *Ifa* in the Diaspora has made the name of the initiate secret and the *Odu* becomes the basis for personal identification. This makes no sense to traditional Yoruba *Awo* and if you ask their *Odu* you will be considered rude and out of line.

This brings us to the final divination in the sequence. After feeding a pot the divination that follows is called the *etutu* in traditional Yoruba *Ifa*. The *etutu* is the *Odu* that reveals the good fortune that comes as a result of receiving a particular sacred object.

Let us continue with our example. *Esu Oro* incarnated in *Ose tura* born through an *ita* in *Ika Meji* comes with an *etutu* of *Irete Ogbe*. The *Odu Irete Ogbe* says the person's good fortune is dependant on taking good care of their health. This *Odu* is in force until a year later at the *eku odun* (anniversary) of receiving the pot. At this time an elder of the person who has received the *Esu Oro* will mark *Ose tura* and *Ika Meji* on the tray and ask for an *etutu* for the upcoming year. This means the *awo* or the mystery or the story behind the *Esu Oro* changes. Lets say the second year the *Odu* is *Osa Ogunda*. The *awo* for the first year is the revelation of the mystery of *Ose tura* the ability to have your prayers taken to *Orun*, supported by *Ika Meji* the power of the word, directed towards *Irete Ogbe* the need to maintain good health. In the second year the *awo* is the revelation of the mystery of *Ose tura* the ability to have your prayers taken to *Orun*, supported by *Ika Meji* the power of the word, directed towards *Osa Ogun* the need to avoid conflict that could led to violence.

Many of the letters and e-mails sent to me are from people who are trying to understand their *ita*. This is an important question, but one that is very difficult to answer through the mail because it involves

different perspectives on one of the fundamental components of *Ifa* sacred technology.

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