

# SHANGO

IFÁ AND THE SPIRIT OF LIGHTNING

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
I. <i>ALQ IRINTÀN SHANGO</i> — Folktales of the Spirit of Lightning	4
A. <i>SHANGO OBA KO SO</i> — The Spirit of Lightning, the Chief is not Dead	
B. <i>OKUNRIN FIFO IJEBU</i> — The Mad Man of Ijebu	
C. <i>SHANGO BABA PIDÁN</i> — The Spirit of Lightning, the Father of Magic	
II. <i>IMQ SHANGO</i> — The Theological Function of the Spirit of Lightning	10
A. <i>SHANGO AYANMO-IPU</i> — The Spirit of Lightning and the Onset of Descent	
B. <i>SHANGO WAKI</i> — The Spirit of Lightning as the Source of Justice	
III. <i>ONA SHANGO</i> — The Roads of the Spirit of Lightning	14
IV. <i>ILÉ ORISHA</i> — The Shrine of the Spirit of Lightning	15
A. <i>ILÉ ORISHA ADURA</i> — Shrine for Prayer and Meditation to the Spirit of Lightning	
B. <i>ILÉ ORISHA ORIKI</i> — Shrine for Invocation to the Spirit of Lightning	
C. <i>ADIMU SHANGO</i> — Offerings to the Spirit of Lightning	
D. <i>EBO SHANGO</i> — Life-Force Offerings to the Spirit of Lightning	
E. <i>IWE SHANGO</i> — Cleansings for the Spirit of Lightning	
V. <i>SHANGO ÌNI</i> — The Spirit of Lightning and the Meaning of Spirit Possession	20
VI. <i>ORIN SHANGO</i> — Songs for the Spirit of Lightning	28

# INTRODUCTION

*Shango* is the name of a Spiritual Force associated with the power of lightning in the West African religious tradition called "Ifá". The word *Shango* is the name of a historical figure who was the fourth *Alafin* (Community Chief) of Oyo. The name has also been given to a complex convergence of Spiritual Forces that are key elements in the *Ifá* concept of courage and justice. Those Spiritual Forces that form the essence of *Shango's* role in the Spiritual Realm are at the foundation of the process of spiritual transformation.

According to *Ifá* cosmology the universe was created from a rock called *Ogigiyer* that rested in *Owu Orun* which means "Ancestral Waters". This rock was heated by the fire at its core until it split into four primal calabashes called "Odu". *Ifá* teaches that the primal fire that existed at the beginning of time continues to burn in different configurations throughout the Universe. One of these configurations is in the form of Lightning which is the *Ifá* symbol for Divine Justice. It is lightning that reaches from the Realm of the Ancestors to Earth as a reminder of the humbling power that exists within Nature itself.

There is no literal translation for the word *Ifá*; it refers to a religious tradition, an understanding of ethics, a process of spiritual transformation and a set of scriptures that are the basis for a complex system of divination.

*Ifá* is found throughout the African diaspora where it spread as an integral part of Yoruba culture. The Yoruba Nation is located in the Southwestern region of Nigeria. Prior to colonization, the Yoruba Nation was a federation of city-states that was originally centered in the city of *Ilé Ife*. According to *Ifá* myth, the Yorubas migrated to *Ilé Ife* from the east under the leadership of a warrior chief named *Oduduwa*. It is difficult to date the time of the Yoruba move into West Africa because of limited archae-

ological research on the subject. Estimates range from between sixteen hundred to twenty-five hundred years ago. It is likely that migration took place over a number of generations. As the population grew, each new city-state that became a part of the Yoruba federation was governed by a chief called "Oba". The position of Oba is a form of hereditary monarchy and each Oba goes through an initiation that makes them a spiritual descendant of *Oduduwa*.

Traditional Yoruba political institutions are very much integrated with traditional Yoruba religious institutions. Both structures survived British rule in Nigeria, and continue to function alongside the current civil government.

Within the discipline of *Ifá*, there is a body of wisdom called "awo", which attempts to preserve the rituals that create direct communication with Forces in Nature. Awo is a Yoruba word that is usually translated to mean "secret". Unfortunately, there is no real English equivalent to the word awo, because the word carries strong cultural and esoteric associations in traditional Yoruba culture. Awo refers to the hidden principles that explain the Mystery of Creation and Evolution. Awo is the esoteric understanding of the invisible forces that sustain dynamics and form within Nature. The essence of these invisible forces are not considered secret because they are devious, they are secret because they remain elusive, awesome in their power to transform and not readily apparent. As such they can only be grasped through direct interaction and participation. Anything which can be known by the intellect alone ceases to be awo.

The primal inspiration for awo is the communication between transcendent Spiritual Forces and human consciousness. This communication is believed to be facilitated by the Spirit of *Eṣu*, who is the Divine Messenger. Working in close association with *Eṣu* is *Ògún*, who is the Spirit of Iron. *Ògún* has the power to clear away those obstacles that stand in the way of spiritual growth. According to *Ifá*, the work done by *Ògún* is guided by *Ochosi*, who as the Spirit of the Tracker has the ability to locate the shortest path to our spiritual goals. The essential goal that *Ochosi* is called upon to guide us towards is the task of building "iwa-pẹ̀lẹ̀",

which means "good character". This guidance takes the form of a spiritual quest which is called "iwakiri".

*Shango* is described by *Ifá* as one of many Spiritual Forces in Nature which are called "Orisha". The word *Orisha* means "Select Head". In a cultural context, *Orisha* is a reference to the various Forces in Nature that guide consciousness. According to *Ifá*, everything in Nature has some form of consciousness called "Orí". The *Orí* of all animals, plants and humans is believed to be guided by a specific Force in Nature (*Orisha*) which defines the quality of a particular form of consciousness. There are a large number of *Orisha* and each *Orisha* has its own awo.

The unique function of *Shango* within the realm of *Orisha* Awo (Mysteries of Nature) is to provide the inspiration and passion for spiritual transformation. Without this motivation, life on Earth would turn in on itself in a self-destructive battle for survival of the fittest. While elements of this destructive impulse are evident throughout history, they are balanced by clear instances of growth and renewal. It is this growth and renewal which is expressed through the awo (Mystery) of *Shango*.

*Ifá* teaches that all Forces in Nature come into Being through the manifestation of energy patterns called *Odu*. *Ifá* has identified and labeled 256 different *Odu* which can be thought of as different expressions of consciousness, based on the *Ifá* belief that everything which has existence has consciousness. There are *Odu* which *Ifá* describes as having the consciousness of fire. This consciousness transcends the physical manifestation of heat in the form of combustion. Heat has a mental and physical aspect which can potentially transform both the body (*ara*) and the inner spirit (*ẹ̀mí*).

## I.

## ALỌ IRINTÀN SHANGO

### FOLKTALES OF THE SPIRIT OF LIGHTNING

#### A. SHANGO, OBA KO SO — The Spirit of Lightning, the Chief is not Dead

*Shango* (The Spirit of Lightning) was the fourth *Alafin* (Regional Chief) of *Oyo*. It was a time when the Yoruba Nation was plagued by war and internal conflict. In an effort to bring stability to the Nation, *Shango* united the kingdom of *Oyo*. When the days of battle and strife came to an end, *Shango* sat in his palace and suffered from boredom. In an effort to recreate the excitement of his youth, he ordered his brothers, *Timi* and *Gbonkaa* to fight a duel.

*Timi* and *Gbonkaa* came to the compound of the *Alafin* (Regional Chief) and played their *batá* (sacred drums) until *Timi* fell asleep and *Gbonkaa* declared himself the winner. *Shango* was not satisfied and ordered them to return to fight again.

*Timi* and *Gbonkaa* came to the compound of the *Alafin* (Regional Chief) on the following day and said incantations over their *ogun* (medicine) until *Timi* fell asleep. *Shango* was still not satisfied and ordered them to return to fight to the death.

*Timi* and *Gbonkaa* came to the compound of the *Alafin* (Regional Chief) on the following day prepared for battle. *Timi* strung his bow and began hurling arrows at *Gbonkaa*. None of the arrows hit their target because *Gbonkaa* was wearing the *ogun* (medicine) of protection. *Gbonkaa* repeated the incantations that put *Timi* asleep, then stood over his body and cut off his head.

When the people of *Oyo* saw *Timi* dead at the palace they became angry at *Shango* and drove him from the compound.

Overcome with grief, *Shango* left the city of *Oyo* and hung himself. The first person to find his body was his wife *Oya* who said, "*Oba ko so*", which means, "The Chief is not dead".

**Commentary:** The Myth of *Shango* is based upon a historical figure who created a federation of city-states along the Eastern rim of the Yoruba Nation. The region had been plagued by internal wars which made it vulnerable to slave traders from the regions North of the rain forest.

This Myth has several variations which put a slightly different emphasis on the role of *Shango* in relationship to the brothers *Timi* and *Gbonkaa*. In some versions, *Timi* and *Gbonkaa* are involved in political intrigue. *Shango* becomes angry at their actions and unleashes his aggression in an excessive way, causing the deaths of many innocent people in the city of *Oyo*. The more common version of the myth has *Shango* pitting the two brothers against each other for his own amusement and out of jealousy for their popularity among the people of *Oyo*.

In both versions, *Shango* is accused of committing an offense which makes him unworthy to serve as the *Alafin*. Yoruba culture is based on hereditary Patriarchal chieftaincies. The conduct of a political chief is monitored by a council of male and female elders called *Ogboni*. If the council of elders believes that the chief has flagrantly abused the power of his position they can insist that the chief be removed from office. In pre-colonial times the chief could not simply step down from his position. If he was removed from office he was expected to commit suicide. This was usually done by ingesting poison, which the chief would drink as part of a rite of passage that would prepare him for entry into the realm of the ancestors.

Most of the versions of the *Shango* Myth have him take his own life by hanging from a tree. In some versions of the Myth it is an *iroko* tree and in others the tree is the *ayan* tree. Both trees are sacred to the ancestors and are used as communal shrines in places where these trees are located near a town. This portion of the Myth suggests that *Shango* realizes his mistake before he comes

under censor by *Ogbòni* and attempts to avoid the shame and guilt of censor by the elders by taking his own life.

The appearance of *Oya* at the moment of the hanging ensures that *Shango's* spirit will become transformed as he passes into the realm of the ancestors. This Myth is the *Ifá* expression of the dynamics of death and resurrection. Because of the belief in reincarnation the resurrection is not the physical reappearance of *Shango* in physical form. It is the elevation of the *emi*, or soul of *Shango* to a place where it returns to source and becomes merged with the power of lightning.

This identification may seem confusing to those who are used to the Western concept of linear time. The Myth of *Shango* is rooted in the *Ifá* concept of circular time. According to *Ifá*, the process of spiritual transformation is both preparation for future cycles of reincarnation and a return to the primal source of consciousness. By realizing his mistake *Shango* prepares for his own personal consciousness. The presence of *Oya* serves to open those passage ways that allows this identification to take place.

### 5. OKUNRIN FIFO IJEBU — The Mad Man of Ijebu

The *Olori* of *Enpe* went to the diviners on the day that his village was being plagued by a leopard. The leopard was killing the children and none of the hunters has been successful in their efforts to capture the animal. Divination was cast and *Orisha* said that the *Olori* should be kind to a stranger.

Later that same day the *Okunrin fifo Ijebu* (The Mad Man of *Ijebu*) approached the village of *Enpe*. He was called the *Okunrin fifo* because he had been raised in the forest and was not familiar with the ways of the world. His madness was born of *iwa-mimo* (innocence).

It was the *Olori* who offered the *Okunrin fifo Ijebu* yam soup as he sat down to rest near the entrance of the village. After finishing his meal, the *Okunrin fifo Ijebu* thanked the *Olori* and started to continue on his journey. As he stood up, he noticed that the people of the village were in mourning. *Okunrin fifo Ijebu* had never seen such sadness and grief.

"Why is it that no one is singing or dancing?" He asked.

The *Olori* looked at *Okunrin fifo Ijebu* and did not think for a minute that he was the person who would save his village. "We have been plagued by a leopard who is attacking our children", he said and looked down the road in hopes of seeing another stranger.

"Because you have been so kind to me I will save the people of *Enpe* from this terrible menace". *Okunrin fifo Ijebu* slapped his hands as if the matter has been settled.

"Are you an *ode* (Hunter)?" The *Olori* asked.

Not knowing what an *ode* was, *Okunrin fifo Ijebu* said "Yes".

"But you have no weapons". The *Olori* was unconvinced.

Because he had been raised in poverty *Okunrin fifo Ijebu* was used to making due. He picked up a pestle that was next to the mortar used for pounding yam. "Now I am ready to hunt this leopard who has caused so much unhappiness"

The *Olori* shook his head and prayed to the *Orisha*, asking them to send a proper *ode* (hunter) to the village of *Enpe*.

As the *Okunrin fifo Ijebu* made his way into the forest he heard the people of *Enpe* cry out that the leopard was coming. Quickly he climbed a tree and waited for the leopard to pass. The leopard walked directly underneath *Okunrin fifo Ijebu*, who fell from the tree when he saw the vicious teeth of the wild beast. Before he hit the ground, he let go of the pestle which landed directly on top of the leopard's head. The animal was killed with a single blow.

Immediately the people of *Enpe* started dancing and singing. They were praising *Okunrin fifo Ijebu*. It was on that occasion that they decided to give him a proper name, and from that day on he became known as *Shango* (The Spirit of Lightning).

**Commentary:** *Shango* is one of the central figures in *Orisha* stories that concerns spiritual transformation. *Ifá* is a religion that is based on the principle of developing personal power. From a psychological point of view, personal power increases through the process of overcoming fear. This story is an example of those psychological forces that are called into play each time we confront a fear.

The Mad Man of *Ijebu* is characterized as innocent or naive. Innocence and naivete are the norm for anyone who begins a spiritual quest. In European mystical traditions the role of the Mad Man is generally described as the "Fool." This characterization is not meant to demean the central figure in the story. Instead it points to a fundamental truth that occurs whenever a fear is confronted through direct action.

As very young children, we are not afraid of crossing the street. It is only when a child starts to relate to others that a fear develops. The source of the fear is the reaction of adults who see a child attempt to cross the street alone. Many busy streets deserve caution, but as a young child there is no basis for evaluation.

In the story, *Shango* is willing to hunt the leopard because he has no idea how vicious the animal can be. Each time a new fear is confronted, the same lack of information is a factor. The only way to confront fear is through courage, and the only way to access courage is to act in spite of the fear. The alternative is to continue holding the fear.

*Shango's* willingness to face an unknown challenge is successful, even if the means appear accidental. Once *Shango* has actually slaughtered the leopard, he has first-hand information regarding the real life dangers that are involved. It is this knowledge that enables *Shango* to become an accomplished warrior. In stories about *Shango's* later life, his skill in battle elevates him to the position of being the mythical prototype for the source of courage as it exists as a Force in Nature. In simple terms *Shango* becomes the personification of courage, and this story is the foundation of his quest to discover the *awo*, or Mystery, of courageous action.

### C. SHANGO BABA PIDÁN — The Spirit of Lightning, Father of Magic

*Shango* (Spirit of Lightning) was living among his enemies and wanted to be free. It was his wish that he be greeted properly by those he encountered.

*Shango* made offerings to the *Orisha* so that he would be greeted properly. He then took a doubleheaded as in each hand and

placed oil in his mouth. As he approached his enemies *Shango* set fire to the oil in his mouth and breathed flames.

The sight of *Shango* breathing fire caused his enemies to prostrate in front of him. From that day on *Shango* was greeted with respect.

**Commentary:** The tradition of *Shango* worship in Africa is associated with an African spiritual practice called "*pidán*." There is no direct translation for *pidán*, but it is a form of magic that is used in ceremonies to demonstrate *Shango's* strength and courage. Initiates of *Shango* who practice the art of *pidán* will walk on broken glass, eat fire, place spikes through their cheeks and other similar displays of spiritual power. Usually each family of initiates has one form of *pidán* that they specialize in and the secrets of *pidán* are passed down as part of the mystery of initiation.

The spiritual message represented by *pidán* as well as the message of this story is that *Shango's* power is a warrior's supernuman. As the Guardian of Divine Justice *Shango* represents the utility of human attempts at changing the inner structure of Natural Law.



Jakuta — The Spirit of the Stone Thrower

## II.

## ÌMỌ SHANGO

### THE THEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF THE SPIRIT OF LIGHTNING

#### A. SHANGO ÀYÀNMỌ-ÌPIN — The Spirit of Lightning and the Concept of Destiny

The Ifá concept of *àyánmọ-ìpín* which means "Destiny" is based on the belief that each person chooses their individual destiny before being born into the world. These choices materialize as those components that form human potential. Within the scope of each person's potential there exists parameters of choice that can enhance or inhibit the fullest expression of individual destiny. Ifá calls these possibilities "*ọ̀nà pín*", which means "road of destiny". Each decision that is made in the course of one lifetime can effect the range of possibilities that exists in the future, by either limiting or expanding the options for growth.

It is within the context of choice, or what is known in Western philosophical tradition as "free will" that Ifá recognizes a collection of Spiritual Forces called "*Ibora*". In Yoruba, the word *Ibora* means "Warrior". Traditionally the *Ibora* include *Eṣu*, *Ọ̀gún* and *Ochosi*. *Eṣu* is the cornerstone that links the *Ibora* as they relate to the issue of spiritual growth. According to Ifá each moment of existence includes a wide range of possible actions, reactions and interpretations. Those moments which require decisive action are described in Ifá scripture as "*ọ̀nà'pade*", which means "junction in the road". Whenever a person who is trying to build character through the use of Ifá spiritual discipline reaches *ọ̀nà'pade*, it is custom-

ary to consult *Eṣu* regarding the question of which path will bring blessings from *Orisha*.

Ifá teaches that blessings come to those who make choices that are consistent with their highest destiny. Within Yoruba culture it is understood that an individual's highest destiny is based on those choices that build "*ìwa-pẹ̀lẹ̀*", which means "good character". Those who develop good character are often described as weaving white cloth, which means creating purity and spiritual elevation in the world. The collective impact of those who weave white cloth is entering into a state of mystical union with the Chief, or the Source of White Cloth who is called *Obatala*. This is true for everyone, even those who worship other *Orisha*. Ifá scripture clearly suggests what all of the *Orisha* exist as an extension of the power of consciousness that is created by the *aṣẹ* (power) of *Obatala*.

This means that all *Orisha*, including *Shango*, exist in primal relationship to *Obatala*. This relationship is frequently ignored in *Orisha* worship as it is practiced in the West, but remains an important metaphysical principle in the *Orisha* worship of Africa. The relationship between *Shango* and *Obatala* suggests that transformation and elevation of the human spirit can occur in *Ikole Ọ̀run* (The Realm of the Ancestors) during those periods of transition between cycles of *anunwa* (reincarnation).

Ifá says that good character is destiny. This statement is based on the belief that all life evolves from a common Source, remains forever linked to a common Source and returns to a common Source. In Ifá Source is called *Ọ̀lọrun*. To say that good character is destiny is to say that everyone has an obligation to develop good character on the journey towards *Ọ̀lọrun*. Ifá teaches that those who develop good character receive the blessings of abundance, long life and children. When *Shango* is invoked to initiate spiritual transformation, that which is transformed is always that which stands in the way of the development of good character. To ask *Shango* to do anything else is to ask *Shango* to oppose his inner essence and this simply is not possible.

In the West there is a tendency to characterize *Shango* as arrogant and disrespectful of women. The tendency towards arro-



gance is reflected in those *Shango* initiates who have failed to bring *Shango's* passions into alignment with the good character values of *Obatala*.

It makes no sense to describe the qualities of an *Orisha* based on the shortcomings of those who worship a particular Spirit.

The tendency of disrespect towards women appears to be the result of the influence of Catholic theological principles on the worship of *Orisha* in the West. In Africa, *Ifá* teaches that all things come into Being as a result of the polarity between male and female *asé* (power). There is absolutely no theological basis within *Ifá* for the belief that one gender is superior to another.

#### B. SHANGO WAKIRI — The Spirit of Lightning as the Source of Justice

*Ifá* cosmology is based on the belief that the Primal Source of Creation is a form of Spiritual Essence called *Orí*. There is no literal translation for *Orí*, although it is used in prayer to mean "may it be so".

*Ifá* teaches that the visible universe is generated by two dynamic forces. One is the force of "*ináto*", which means "expansion", and the other is the force of "*isokí*", which means "contraction". The first initial manifestation of these forces is through "*imò*", which means "light", and through "*aimoyé*", which means "darkness". In *Ifá* myth expansion and light are frequently identified with Male Spirits called "*Orisha'ko*". Contraction and darkness are frequently identified with Female Spirits called "*Orisha'bo*". Neither manifestation of *asé* is considered superior to the other and both are viewed as essential elements in the overall balance of Nature.

*Shango* as a manifestation of the Spirit of Lightning is an aspect of the Spirit of Fire which clearly manifests as one of the primal forces of expansion. As a symbol of personal transformation, fire is an expression of the passion and commitment that motivates a personal change of inner self.

Most change that leads to the development of good character (*Ìwa-pèlẹ̀*) involves work through personal fears. The most

common manifestation of fear is the fear of change. It is one of the functions of the Spirit of *Shango* to motivate individuals during those times when they are incapacitated by fear. The only antidote to fear is courage, so *Shango* is invoked as a source of courage. When this occurs through personal decision, personal will and personal determination it is possible to guide personal destiny on a direct path of growth.

If personal choice is used to avoid fear, transformation can only occur through a direct confrontation with the world. For example, if a person refuses to admit that they are an egotist, they will live in a world of illusion until the illusion is shattered. When such a illusion is shattered by some confrontation in the family or community, such a confrontation is described by *Ifá* as *Shango's* intervention.

The use of Lightning as a symbol for *Shango's* power does not mean that everyone who perpetrates injustice will be struck by lightning. It does mean that at some point in their life, the eternal power of the fire of transformation will force them to examine the choices that have been made with regard to the development of good character.



Pidán — Priest of Shango dancing through fire

### III.

## ÒNA SHANGO

### THE ROADS OF THE SPIRIT OF LIGHTNING

The representation of *Orisha* that represents the Spirit of Lightning has several regional variations throughout Yoruba culture. In the far northern regions of Nigeria the Spirit of Lightning is called "*Jakuta*," which means "Stone Thrower." In *Ilé Ifé* the Spirit of Lightning is called "*Oranmiyan*," who is described as the historical father of *Shango* in *Shango's* incarnation as the fourth *Alafin* (Chief) of Oyo. *Ifá* scripture describes *Agayu* as *Shango's* father in *Shango's* incarnation as the source of lightning. *Agayu* as a Force in Nature is the Spirit of Fire at the center of the Earth. As a historical figure *Agayu* is one of the descendants of *Shango* as the fourth *Alafin*.

*Awo Shango* (the Mysteries of the Spirit of Lightning) as it applies to *igbodu* (initiation) is primarily based on the following roads of *Shango*:

1. *Obalube* — The Chief Who Strikes with a Knife
2. *Afonja* — The Chief Who Carries Fire on His Head
3. *Olufina* — The Creator Puts Fire on the Road

### IV.

## ILÉ ORISHA

### THE SHRINE OF THE SPIRIT OF LIGHTNING

#### A. ILÉ ORISHA ADURA — Shrine for Prayer and Meditation to the Spirit of Lightning

Those who are interested in honoring *Shango* who have no access to either *Ifá* or *Orisha* elders can set up a shrine that may be used for meditation and prayer. The shrine can be used as a focal point for meditation that can lead to a deeper awareness, appreciation and understanding of *Shango's* role and function within Nature. Such a shrine should be set up in a clean place and make use of red and white cloth as a setting for other symbolic altar pieces. Images associated with *Shango* include a doubleheaded ax, images of horses, picture of lightning and various forms of volcanic rock. Those who are uninitiated may use this shrine to meditate on questions of courage, justice and spiritual transformation.

#### B. ILÉ ORISHA ORIKI — Shrine for Invocation to the Spirit of Lightning

Within the traditional African religion of *Ifá* shrines that are used for invocation are set up by those who have been through *Igbodu* (initiation). The traditional shrine for *Shango* includes a pot that was consecrated during the initiation process. In addition the shrine might include *Ose Shango* (the dance wand for the Spirit of Lightning), *Bata* drums (double headed drums either full size or in miniature), *Ade Kawo* (cone shaped crown) and a black horse tail fan.

The following invocation is a sample of the *Oriki* (invocation) which may be used at a consecrated shrine:

### ORIKI SHANGO

*Ìbà sẹ̀ Oba ko so.*

I respect the Chief who never dies.

*Etala mo juba gadagba mo juba.*

I salute you thirteen times.

*Ìbà sẹ̀ Kawo Kabiyesilẹ̀.*

I respect the Mighty Chief.

*Etala mo juba gadagba mo juba.*

I salute you thirteen times.

*Ìbà sẹ̀ Shango baba mi.*

I respect the Spirit of Lightning who is my Father.

*Etala mo juba gadagba mo juba.*

I salute you thirteen times.

*Ìbà sẹ̀ Oluoyo.*

I respect the Chief of Oyo.

*Etala mo juba gadagba mo juba.*

I salute you thirteen times.

*Be o soro a s'gi deniyan*

When he becomes angry he turns a tree into a person.

*Etala mo juba gadagba mo juba.*

I salute you thirteen times.

*Aṣẹ.*

May it be so.

### C. ADIMU SHANGO — Offerings to the Spirit of Lightning

In all forms of *Ifá* and *Orisha* worship it is traditional to make an offering whenever guidance or assistance is requested from Spiritual Forces. *Adimu* is a term that is generally used to refer to food and drink that is presented to the Spirit of a particular shrine. The idea behind the process of making an offering is that would be unfair to ask for something for nothing. Those who have an unconsecrated shrine to *Shango* can make the offering in their own

words. Those who have a consecrated shrine to *Shango* may use the *Oriki* for *Shango* when making a presentation of *adimu*. This is usually done when a prayer requesting assistance from either *Orisha* is made. The answer to the prayer can then come through divination.

The *Adimu* for *Shango* is as follows:

1. Rum
2. Cigars
3. Apples
4. Tobacco leaf

### D. EBO SHANGO — Life Force Offerings to the Spirit of Lightning

There is a wide range of ritual procedure in Africa involving the worship of *Orisha*. Many of the differences in ceremonial process reflect regional differences in emphasis rather than essence. The term "life force offering" is used in reference to the fact that many *Orisha* rituals require a preparation of a feast or communal meal. Whenever this occurs the blood from the animal that is used for the meal is given to *Orisha* as an offering. This offering is considered a reaffirmation between *Ikole Orun* (The Realm of the Ancestors) and *Okole Aye* (Earth). This covenant is an agreement between Spirit and humans that Spirit will provide food for the nourishment of people on earth. In return the worshipers of *Ifá* and *Orisha* agree to respect the spirit of the animal who provided the food and agree to elevate the spirit of that animal so it will return to provide food for future generations.

Whenever a life force offering is made to any of the *Orisha*, an invocation is generally made to *Ògún* as part of the process. This is a grossly misunderstood aspect of *Ifá* and *Orisha* worship which has suffered from negative stereotypes in the press and the media. It is part of *awo Ogun* (Mystery of the Spirit of Iron) to learn the inner secrets of making life force offerings. When an *Orisha* initiate is making a life force offering it should include an invocation for the *Odu Ogunda*. If the initiate is using the *Lucumi*

system of *Merindinlogun*, the invocation would be to *Ogunda Meji*. In *Ifá* the invocation for life force offerings is to *Ogunda-Irètẹ*.

The *ebo* for *Shango* is as follows:

1. Rooster
2. Ram

### E. *IWE SHANGO* — Cleansing for the Spirit of Lightning

*Ifá* and *Orisha* makes extensive use of a wide range of cleansing rituals that are designed to clear away the negative effects of illness, sorrow, grief, anger and contamination by negative spiritual influences. These cleansings make use of various natural elements associated with specific *Orisha* to restore balance to the inner spirit of the person who is being cleansed.

In the West it is common to make use of apples for cleansings involving *Shango*. Apples may be used to wash away the negative effects of fear, sorrow and anger associated with injustice. Those who are uninitiated may say a prayer in their own language asking for *Shango's* assistance in washing away the negative emotions. The apple should be moved from the front of the feet up the front of the body over the top of the head and down the back. Do not move the apple from back to front once it has passed over the body.

Those who are initiated in *Orisha* may use the following prayer.

### *OFO'SE SHANGO*

*Ìbà sẹ Oba ko so, Baba Shango*

I respect the Chief who does not die, the Father of Lightning.

*Aiya ki if'odo.*

The mortar does not know fear.

*Aiya ki if'olo.*

The grindstone does not know fear.

*Shango ba mi o.*

Spirit of lightning save me.

*K'aiya mi ma ja mo.*

Let me no longer experience fear.

*K'ẹru ma ba me mo o.*

Let me never know fear.

*A juba o.*

I give thanks

Ass

May it be so

This prayer is spoken directly on to the apples followed by the word "to" (pronounced tow), which means "enough." The word *to* is used at the end of prayers that come under the heading of "ofo'se," which means "words of power." Prayers of *ofo'se* are used to transfer power from the head of the initiate to the object that the prayer is spoken on.

## V.

## ORISHA 'GUN

### THE SPIRIT OF LIGHTNING AND THE MEANING OF SPIRIT POSSESSION

Those who practice the religion of *Ifá* in Africa are generally members of a society that worships a single *Orisha*. These societies are usually referred to by the term "ẹgbẹ", which means "heart" as in the expression, "the heart of the matter". Those who worship *Shango* would be members of *Ẹgbẹ Shango*.

Each *Ẹgbẹ Orisha* preserves the oral history, myth and wisdom associated with *Awo Orisha* (The Mystery of a particular Force in Nature). Part of the wisdom that is preserved concerns the discipline used to access altered states of consciousness. Western literature on *Orisha* tends to refer to these states as "possession". This term is inadequate to describe the various forms of trance that are used to assist the *Orisha* worshiper in their understanding of the Mysteries of Being.

*Ifá* teaches that it is possible to access both *Orisha* (Forces in Nature) and *Egun* (ancestors) through the disciplined use of dreams. The word "ala" is used in Yoruba to mean "dream". *Ala* is the last part of the word *Obatala* (The Spirit of the Chief of White Cloth) and it suggests that the dream state is closely associated with the source of consciousness itself. The word "alala" is the word for "dreamer". Because dreamer has a positive connotation in *Ifá*, the word *alala* is a reference to those who are able to make effective use of dreams. *Alala* appears to be a contraction of *ala* and *ala*. In Yoruba, words are often repeated for emphasis or to establish relative relationships. To use the word *ala* twice suggests

that the reference to dreamer is an expression of the belief that dreams can access the true source of inner thoughts.

*Ifá* teaches that it is possible to develop an ongoing relationship with *Orisha* that makes a person sensitive to the influence of *Orisha* on a daily basis that effects their immediate environment. In English this is usually referred to as a highly developed intuition. The Yoruba word for intuition is "ogbon inu", which translates literally to mean "the stomach of the earth". *Ifá* metaphysics is based on the idea that those Forces in Nature that sustain life on earth establish certain guidelines for living in harmony with Creation. The development of a sensitivity to these forces is part of the discipline of *Orisha* worship and this sensitivity is called "ogbon inu".

There are a number of words that are used to describe those altered states that are commonly referred to as possession. In conjunction with *Orisha*, the word "jogun" meaning either "I possess" or "I have" is used to describe a close spiritual connection with Spirit. The phrase "*Orisha gun*" is used to describe those who have assumed the characteristics of a particular *Orisha*.

The more common term for possession is "ini". This word reveals the *Ifá* perspective on those trance states representing a deep connection with the *ase* (power) of *Orisha*. The word *ini* appears to be a contraction of "i", which is a personal pronoun and "ni", which is the verb "to be". To use the phrase "I am" as a reference to possession suggests that what is frequently thought of as an intrusion from outside forces is more accurately understood as a process of unlocking the *awo* (mystery) of the inner self. *Ifá* teaches that every person comes to Earth with a spark of divinity at the foundation of their *ori* (inner spirit). Part of the discipline of *Orisha* worship is to access this spark of divinity. This is generally accomplished through initiation, which is designed to guide the initiate towards access to the inner self, which in turn forms a transcendent link to that *Orisha* which is closest to the consciousness of the initiate.

Those who have been through initiation for *Shango* can enhance their access to *ini* at the same time that offerings are made to their shrine on a five day cycle. This is done by saying *Oriki* in

front of the initiate's *Orisha* shrine. When the *Oriki* is spoken a candle is lit near the *Orisha* pot and a glass of water is placed near the candle. After the *Oriki* has been completed, the initiate breathes into the glass of water and says the word "to", which means "enough". The word *to* is used at the end of *Oriki* as a seal or lock to attach the invocation to whatever it is spoken on to.

Using the index finger, the ring finger and the little finger on the left hand, the initiate dips the fingers in the water and runs the water from between the forehead across the top of the head and down the back of the neck. When the fingers are between the eyebrows say, "*iwaju*", which is the name of the power center at the forehead. When the fingers are on the top of the head say, "*ori*", which is the name of the power center at the crown of the skull. When the fingers are on the back of the neck say, "*ipako*", which is the name of the power center at the base of the skull.

A sample of the type of *Oriki* that is used for this process is as follows:

#### *ORIKI SHANGO*

*Kawo Kaiyesiię,*

Hail to the Chief.

*Etala mo juba gadagba mo juba.*

I greet you thirteen times.

*Shango pęę o.*

Spirit of Lightning I am greeting you.

*Shango pęę o.*

Spirit of Lightning I am greeting you.

*Shango pęę o.*

Spirit of Lightning I am greeting you.

*Baba aladufę.*

Father who is loved by everyone.

*Shango pę o.*

Spirit of Lightning I am calling you.

*Shango pę o.*

Spirit of Lightning I am calling you.

*Shango pę o.*

Spirit of Lightning I am calling you.

*Ni igba meta.*

I call you three times.

*Shango nuaa jeke awon o'iku.*

Spirit of Lightning protect us from disease and death.

*Ma ja kiki wa Orun.*

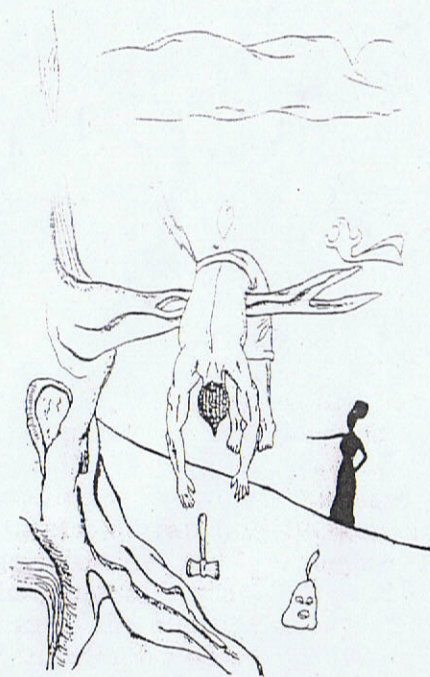
Praise the power of Heaven.

*A duęę.*

I give you thanks.

*Aşę.*

May it be so.



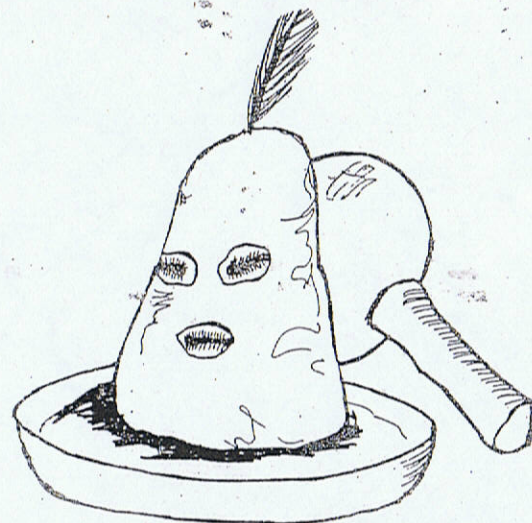
Oba Ko So — The Chief is not Dead

## VI.

# ORIN SHANGO

## SONG FOR THE SPIRIT OF LIGHTNING

1. Call: *Kawo e kawo e kawo e kabiesileo.*  
(Hail, hail, hail to the Chief.)  
Response: Repeat.
- Call: *Kawo e alade kawo e amala kawo e kabiesileo.*  
(Hail to the one who is entitled to wear the crown,  
hail to the one who brings the light hail to the Chief.)  
Response: *Kawo e kawo e kawo e kabiesileo.*  
(Hail, hail, hail to the Chief.)
- Call: *Oba-iude. Oba-iude Oba e. Oba-iude. Oba-iude.*  
*Oba e. Oba e. Oba e Oba yana yana.*  
(Chief Who Strikes With a Knife, Chief Who Strikes  
With a Knife, Chief, Chief Who Strikes with a Knife,  
Chief Who Strikes With a Knife, Chief, Chief, Chief  
of the Fire.)  
Response: Repeat
- Call: *Oba i sere Shango iloro Oba i sere.*  
(Chief of the rattle, Spirit of Lightning is wealthy,  
Chief of the rattle.)  
Response: *Alado iloro.*



**ESU - ELEGBA**  
**Ifa and the Divine Messenger**

The Divine Messenger is generally known in Yoruba culture by the name *Esu*. Among those who practice Yoruba religion in the West, the Divine Messenger is commonly known by the name *Elegba*.

*Esu* is considered one of many Spiritual Forces in Nature which are called "*Orisha*". The word *Orisha* means "Select Head". In a cultural context, *Orisha* is a reference to the various forces in Nature that guide consciousness, according to *Ifa* everything in Nature has some form of consciousness called "*Ori*". The *Ori* of all animals, plants and humans is believed to be guided by a specific Force in Nature (*Orisha*), which defines the quality of a particular form of consciousness. There are a large number of *Orisha* and each *Orisha* has its own *awo*.

The unique function of *Esu* within the realm of *Orisha Awo* (Mysteries of Nature) is to translate the language of humans into the language of Nature, and to translate the language of Nature into the language of humans. The way in which this is done is the essence of the *awo* of *Esu*.

This booklet is the first in a series of booklets on the *Orisha*. Write to us and let us know which of the *Orisha* you would like to know more about the series.