

The Bag of Wisdom: Osun and the Origins of the Ifa Divination

Wande Abimbola

By “Ifa divination” we mean Ifa and related systems of divination based on the stories and symbols of the Odu such as dida owo (divination with the sacred divining chain called opele) and etite-ale (divination with the sacred palm nuts), eerindinlogun (divination with the sixteen cowries), agbigba (divination with a divining chain slightly different from opele), and obi (divination with kola nuts). The purpose of this essay is to examine the intimate connection of Osun with Ifa divination both in her own right as a person, and through the instrumentality of Osetuura, her son. We will start with the popular view of the involvement of Osun in Ifa divination which states that she got to know about Ifa through Òrunmilà, her husband. In the later pages of this essay, I will make the claim that Osun has much more to do with the origins of Ifa divination than the babalawo (Ifa priests) are ready to admit. I will, indeed, put forward the hypothesis that the entire divination system of Ifa started from Osun from whom it got to Òrunmilà and not the other way round. I will base my claims on verses of Ifa which give us hints to that effect. We will then examine the possibility that eerindinlogun is older than dida owo and etite-ale which are probably later developments of Ifa divinations.

Let us begin with the popular view that Osun was introduced to Ifa divination by Òrunmilà. Several verses of Ifa tell us about this. For example, a verse of Ogbe’Sa states that Òrunmilà created the sixteen-cowry divination system and gave it to Osun as a reward for saving his life. In this particular verse, it was after Òrunmilà had created the sixteen cowrie system for Osun that both of them became married. But as will be seen later from another verse of Ifa, even though they were husband and wife, they did not live together in one place because it was not the custom for couples to live together at that time.

Let me now take some time to tell the story of Osun and Òrunmilà as contained in Ogbe’Sa, especially because it relates to the importance of eerindinlogun in the Ifa divination system. The story goes as follows. It happened at a time that Olódùmarè summoned all the four hundred-and-one Òrìsà to Orun. But to their greatest surprise, the Òrìsà encountered a group of wicked “cannibals” in heaven (probably witches known to the Yoruba as aje) who started to kill and eat up the Orisa one by one. But since Òrunmilà had performed sacrifice before he left earth, he was miraculously saved by Osun who successfully hid Òrunmilà from the cannibals, and substituted goat meat for the flesh of Òrunmilà which the cannibals had planned to eat on that particular day.

When both Osun and Òrunmilà returned to the earth, they became much closer than ever before. It was probably at this time that Òrunmilà and Osun became husband and wife. Òrunmilà then decided to reward Osun for saving his life, and that was how he put together the sixteen-cowry system of divination and taught Osun how to use it. Let me now quote a short portion of this verse of Ogbe’Sa. It goes as follows:

This was how Òrunmilà and Osun became close.
Òrunmilà said that the good turn which she did for him
Was an exceptional one.
He wondered what he should do in return.
This was the most important reason why Òrunmilà
Created the sixteen cowries.
He then handed them to Osun.
Of all the Orisa who use sixteen cowries,
There is none who had it before Osun.
It was Ifa who gave it to Osun.
And asked her to cast it
And use it as another form of divination.
This was what Ifa used to reward Osun.
That is why the relationship between Ifa and Osun
Is such that nobody else can know
What is between the two of them.
Òrunmilà then got married to Osun.
Of the several forms of divination,
Eerindinlogun is next in rank to Ifa.

According to this particular story in Ogbe’Sa, even though Òrunmilà was the one who created eerindinlogun, this system of divination later received its own ase from Olodumare. It happened as follows:

Every sixteen years

Olodumare, Olofin of Orun, used to

Subject diviners of earth to a test

To find out whether they were telling lies to the inhabitants of the earth Or whether they were telling the truth.

This test involved

Calling on Òrunmilà and other diviners of the earth.

Olodumare would say that he wanted to see all of them.

When they arrived,

Olodumare would ask them to divine for him.

So, Olodumare asked Òrunmilà to divine for him.

When Òrunmilà finished divining,

Olodumare asked, “Who is next?”

Òrunmilà said that the next person was his partner

Who was a woman.

Olodumare then answered,

“Is she also a diviner?”

To which Òrunmilà replied, “That is true.”

Olodumare then asked her to divine for him.

When Osun examined Olodumare,

She hit on all those things in his mind.

But she did not say it in full.

She mentioned the gist

But she did not tell the root of the matter like Ifa.

Olodumare asked Òrunmilà,

“What is this one?”

Òrunmilà then explained to Olodumare

How he honored Osun with the sixteen cowries.

Olodumare said, “It is all right.”

He further said that even though she did not go into details,

He, Olodumare gave his assent to it.

He added, “From today on and forever,

Even if what eerindinlogun says may not be detailed,

Anybody who disbelieves it

Would see the consequences instantly.

It must not wait till the following day.”

This is why the predictions of eerindinlogun come to pass quickly

Even though the stories may not be impressive.

That was how eerindinlogun received ase

Directly from Olodumare.

Osetuura and Ifa Divination Sacrifice

We will now turn our attention to myths of Ifa divination which tell us about the importance of Osun in Yoruba religion generally and how Osetuura became the representative of Osun in Yoruba divination and sacrifice. The full story goes as follows:

When the Orisa first came to the earth, they must have arrived in waves—not all the four hundred-and-one Orisa arrived at once. In any case, according to this myth from the Odu Ose Otura, there were only seventeen Orisa in the first party, and Osun was the seventeenth. Olodumare gave instructions to the Orisa about what they should do as soon as they arrived on earth to make the young earth a pleasant place to live. They carried out all the instructions without

involving Osun in any of their activities. The result was that things did not go well for them. .. Rain did not fall. There was illness, bitterness, and restlessness all over the earth. Let us quote a few lines from this Odu at this juncture:

When they arrived on earth,
They created a sacred forest for Oro.
They created a sacred forest for Opa.
They made a small road leading to Ife.
They sent people to make okun beads.
They sent people to make brass objects.
But nobody involved Osun in anything.
Whereas Osun was the person taking care of them
Giving them food and other things.
All the things which the Ori.a were doing, none was successful.
They prayed for rain, but it did not rain.
Bitterness engulfed the earth.
Restlessness took over the streets of the city.
They exclaimed "Did Olodumare tell us a lie?
What is this?
We are doing everything according to his instructions."

The Orisa then decided to send Òrunmìlà to Olodumare to find out what actually happened. When Òrunmìlà got to Olodumare, he stated the problem. He said that they were living on earth in accordance with the instructions of Olodumare, but to their greatest surprise nothing they did on earth was good. Olodumare then asked whether they involved the only woman among them in all they were doing. But Òrunmìlà replied that since she was a woman, they did not involve her. To which Olodumare replied as follows:

Olodumare said that he was a creator
But he would never create any person or thing twice.
He told Òrunmìlà to go back to his colleagues
And that all of them should go and beg Osun.
So that she could agree to be involved in their affairs.
He assured them that their affairs would then be good.

When Òrunmìlà got to the earth, he reported back to his colleagues, and all of them started to beg Osun, but Osun did not yield until Òrunmìlà appealed to her. She said:

Begin to beg your ori and your creator
So that the fetus which was in her womb
Would be delivered as a male child.
She assured them that if it was a male child,
Their matters would from then on be straight.
But if it was born as a female child,
War would begin in earnest.

Òrunmìlà reported back to his colleagues what Osun told him. When Obatala looked at Osun's womb with his awo, he found a baby girl there. He then pointed his ado asure to Osun's womb, and commanded that fetus to change into male with immediate effect. When Osun delivered the baby, it was born as a male child. Obatala was the first person to carry the baby. He petted the baby and coddled it. Then Òrunmìlà, the father, also carried the baby and named him Osetuura. He, Òrunmìlà, carried the baby with him wherever he went. Whenever anybody was to be initiated as an Ifa priest, Osetuura must be involved. Whenever anybody was making a sacrifice, Osetuura, the son of Osun, must be invoked last before the sacrifice was delivered to Esu. If any person was suffering from illness, as soon as Osetuura touched the person that person would be well instantaneously. Ose'Tura today is a minor Odu of Ifa, but he governs all sacrifices and

rituals of Ifa. Osun then became happy since her son was deeply involved in the affairs of the male Orisa. She then made the following pronouncement:

From today on, all women without any exception,
They must not know Oro,
And they must not enter the shrine of Eegun.
Eegun must not come out in their presence.
This must be observed as a taboo.
But all other things you are doing,
You must involve Osun in them.
Their lives then became smooth.
They said, "If someone is pounding yams
Without the knowledge of Osun, .
His/her pounded yam will not be smooth.
If someone is preparing oka food .
Without involving Osun in it,
His/her food will not come out fine.
We will involve Osun in whatever we do.
We will involve Osun in all our deliberations.
Our great mother (Iyee wa),
Who must be present at every important deliberation.
We will involve Osun in all our deliberations.

Agberegede ajuba,
Ajuba agberegede
Divined for Osun Sengesi,
Owner of a hair comb decorated with iyun.
When she was in a secret place,
She spoiled the sacrifice of other divinities.
Who is performing a sacrifice
Without involving the owner of sacrifice?
Osun, whose other name is Ewuji,
We are all on our knees.
We are all begging you.
Let us all kneel and prostrate before women.
We are all borne by women
Before we become recognized as human beings.

The Bag of Wisdom: Did Osun Originate the Ifa Divination System?

Our next story from the Ifa literary corpus about Osun is taken from Okanransode. It was recorded from Babalawo Ifatoogun, a famous Ifa priest from Ilobuu, near Osogbo. The story is about a bag of wisdom which Olodumare threw down from the sky and asked all the Orisa to look for. Olodumare assured the Orisa that anyone who found it would be the wisest of them all. Olodumare showed the bag to the Orisa so that they would be able to recognize it as soon as they saw it. Since Osun and Òrunmilà were a very intimate couple, both of them decided to search for the bag together. I will now quote this interesting story in full.

A wise person tied ide, but it disintegrated.
A sage tied ide, it became loose.
Only a person who leans his back on Ope
Will tie ide which will last for long.
Ifa divination was performed for Òrunmilà

When he and Osun were searching for wisdom.
It was Olodumare who called the four hundred divinities (of the right) And the two hundred divinities (of the left).
Olodumare summoned them to orun.
When they arrived there,
He told them that he wanted to give them deep wisdom and power.
He told the Orisa that anybody who had
What he was planning to give them
Would be the source of wisdom,
And that person would be the wisest person on earth.
He told them that nineteen days hence
He would throw down a bag of wisdom onto the earth.
But whether he would throw it into a forest,
Or into a grassland,
Or into a river,
Or into a town,
Or on a road,
He would not tell them exactly where.
Olodumare showed them the bag of wisdom.
He said, "This is it."
Look at it well
And note its distinctive features.
When they arrived on earth,
Some of them started to perform sacrifice.
Some were making medicine.
Some were planning their own strategies.
They were saying, "This thing, I will be the one to find it."
Òrunmìlà and Osun used to do things together.
They were always going about in company of each other.
Both of them added two cowries to three, And went to divine.
They asked the diviners to check both of them out.
"The thing which all the Orisa are looking for
Could both of them be the persons who would find it?"
The diviners asked Òrunmìlà and Osun to perform sacrifice
With the big garments which they were wearing.
Each should offer a goat,
And a house rat
As well as two hundred-and-one oke full of cowries for each person. Òrunmìlà counseled that they should make the
sacrifice.
But Osun said, "Please, let me rest.
Go make sacrifice with your garment,
Go make sacrifice with other things,
How does that relate to what we are searching for?"
Osun refused to perform sacrifice.
Òrunmìlà, whose other name is Ajana,
Took his own garment, and surrendered it for sacrifice.
He also used a house rat and money for the sacrifice.
They looked for the bag of wisdom,
They did not see it.
All the other Orisa
Did not see it either.
They searched for it up to Egba aja
They went as far as Esa adie
Some went as far as Iko Awusi

Others searched for it in Idoromu Awuse
While some looked for it in Iwonran
From where the day breaks
But they did not see it.
One day a house rat went to the garment
Which Osun hung up in her house.
The rat ate up its chest pocket underneath.
The next day, they got themselves ready
And started to search for the bag of wisdom once again
Then, Osun found it.
She exclaimed, "Han-in! This is the bag of wisdom!"
She threw it into the chest pocket of her garment.
She started to go in a hurry.
As she was crossing dead woods
And scaling climbing stems,
Suddenly the bag of wisdom dropped down
From where the rat had eaten her garment's pocket.
Osun was calling on Òrunmìlà,
Saying, "Òrunmìlà, whose other name is Ajana,
Come quickly, come quickly.
I have seen the bag of wisdom."
As Òrunmìlà was going,
He saw the bag of wisdom on the ground.
He then put it inside the pocket of his own garment.
When they arrived home,
Òrunmìlà said, "Osun let me see the bag."
Osun said that she would never show it to a man.
But if a man must see it,
He would give her two hundred rats,
Two hundred fishes,
Two hundred birds,
Two hundred animals,
And plenty of money.
Òrunmìlà begged her for long,
But she did not yield.
He then returned to his own house.
When Osun tried to take out the bag from her pocket,
So that she could look at it once again,
As she put her hands inside the pockets,
Her hands entered into a hole,
And came out on the bottom part of the pocket.
So, Osun went to meet Òrunmìlà in his own house.
She started to beg him.
She started to please Òrunmìlà (with good things).
That was how Osun went to Òrunmìlà's house
To live there with her husband
So that he would teach her a little bit of the wisdom.
In ancient times, when people got married,
It was not compulsory for the wife to go to her husband's home to live with him.
That was how couples started to live together.
When Osun removed the big garment from her body,
She put ase into her mouth,
She said that from then on, no woman

Must wear the agbada dress.
She then went and threw the garment into the bush.
After a lot of pleading from Osun,
Òrunmilà took a little bit of the wisdom .
And gave it to Osun.
That is the eerindinlogun
Which Osun is casting.
The bag of wisdom of that day is Odu Ifa,
Medicines and all other profound wisdom of the Yoruba people.

In the Ifa verse quoted above, Osun was the first person to find the bag of wisdom, but when the bag slipped through the broken pocket of her big garment, Òrunmilà accidentally stumbled on it and kept it. One can speculate as to the morality of Òrunmilà keeping for himself what should belong to his wife. But we must remember that before she discovered that she had lost the bag, Osun herself had boasted that she would take so many hundred of things as well as plenty of money from anybody who would see the bag of wisdom.

One can further speculate that this myth is telling us that Osun was perhaps the first person to make use of Ifa — the bag of wisdom— before it was passed on to her husband, and not the other way round. Let us now turn our attention to two other matters which confirm our suspicion.

The first one relates to iyerosun, the sacred yellow powder of divination on which Ifa priests print the marks of Ifa inside a divining board. Why is this powder yellowish like the color which is sacred to Osun? Did Òrunmilà use this powder as a mark of honor to his wife? We may never know for certain the answer to these questions; but given the intimate connection between Osun and Ifa, especially in respect to the origin of Ifa as a bag of wisdom first found by Osun, it may not be far-fetched to say that the yellow powder has something to do with Osun.

The second issue which I would like to mention here is the simple fact that when one takes a look at the Odu of eerindinlogun and those of Ifa, it would seem that the Odu of Ifa are based on those of eerindinlogun, and not the other way round. Eerindinlogun is based on sixteen single signs of Ifa such as Odi, Irosun, Owonrin, etc.; except Eji Ogbe which is coupled as in the case of Ifa. Ifa, however, does not make use of single signs (even though Ifa literature refers to it). All the signs are coupled either as oju odu (major odu) or as omo odu (minor odu). It stands to reason to say that a single sign such as Odi

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must exist in reality or at least in the mind before it is coupled to become Odi Meji (two odi).

We can go further to speculate that the apparent simplicity of the signs of eerindinlogun and even the short nature of some of its literature are indications of its antiquity upon which the more elaborate signs and wider frame of reference of Ifa were based. Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt at all that eerindinlogun has not been given its rightful place as a part and parcel of the Ifa literary and divinatory system. In one of the verses quoted above, Olodumare, while giving ase to eerindinlogun stated thus,

From today on and forever
Even if what eerindinlogun says may not be detailed,
Anybody who disbelieves it
Would see the consequences instantly.
It must not wait till the following day.

Conclusion

It is customary for researchers to refer to Osun simply as an Orisa of fertility. This is true. In fact, a recent chanter of Osun's literature refers to her as
Iya abobinrin gbato

Mother who helps women to collect semen
Ladekoju, abokunrin gbase
Wearer of a veiled crown, who helps men to collect menstrual flow.

There are many verses of Ifa which relate to Osun as a mother of many children both in the biological and religious sense. The city of Ooro (now simply called Oro) was where Osun had so many children that she did not have any more space to sit down in her own house. Since her children had taken up all available space, Osun was always found standing up.

Ifa also speaks of Osun as a benevolent mother. She has the habit of bestowing wealth, fame, and honor on her adherents. A verse of Irete Oba tells us how Osun rewarded a poor priest of Ifa who had divined for her when she was childless and made it possible for her to have children. The name of the Ifa priest is Ojiyaomegun; he had two apprentices: Ifon, Ifa priest of Ido, and Duuru, Ifa priest of Liki. When Osun eventually had children, she rewarded the three of them with costly clothes, beads, and plenty of money. She brought all the presents personally to her Ifa priests, but Ojiyaomegun had traveled out to a far place. Osun gave the two apprentices a horse each. She also gave them their own share of the rest of the presents. She waited for a long time for Ojiyaomegun. When he did not arrive, she ordered her servants to dig a very deep pit inside which she carefully kept Ojiyaomegun's presents. But she first covered the pit with sand before she dumped the money and the presents there, and then covered it up again with earth. That is why Osun is saluted as

Oore yeye Osun.
Hail the benevolent mother Osun
O wa yanrin, wa yanrin,
She who digs up sand, digs up sand,
Kowo si
And keeps money there (for her own people)

The benevolence of Osun goes beyond bestowing money and riches on people. She nourishes her own just as she nourished the original sixteen Orisa who first arrived on earth with Osun as the seventeenth. She nourishes people with with different kinds of vegetables, such as yanrin and tete (special vegetables of Osun) which are still her favorite foods today. She also likes different kinds of fruit such as pumpkins, bananas, oranges, etc. But she does not like guinea-corn beer. She drinks maize beer instead. Above all, she nourishes with the sweet waters of the sacred Osun River. We must not make the mistake of thinking that Osun is always meek, quiet, and long-suffering. Sometimes she can be a fierce warrior. A verse of Ogunda Iwori (Ogunda araa Do) tells us how Osun Apará (otherwise known as Yemese) delivered the people of Ido³² when their town was conquered and the people were being taken away as slaves. She beheaded their enemies and freed the people of Ido. When her people said that they did not know the way back to Ido, she fell down on the spot, became a river and flowed back to Ido carrying her people along with her. That is why Yemese is celebrated in Ido with the following song:

Yemese ile Ido pagun ra o
Osun Apará pagun ra lonu
O pagun ra

Yemese of Ido annihilated war.
Osun Apará annihilated war today
She annihilated war

Space will not allow us to go into other areas of the contributions of Osun to the religion and culture of the Yoruba people as a loyal wife of Sango, her second husband; as a physician who cures with her own water; as a founder of the Ogboni society to maintain truth and justice in the land; or even as the only Orisa who knows how to deceive the "cannibals" of heaven (see first story, above). All these and more are contained in the stories of Osun as enshrined in the Ifa corpus, a body of knowledge which she probably founded or at least helped to establish together with Òrunmilà. Her role in this regard is often not deeply appreciated.

To understand this ancient Orisa is to know the intelligence, vitality, caring, and nourishing abilities of womankind—long-suffering, cheated, overlooked, and overworked, but always committed to the survival of humanity. In this sense, Osun is the icon not only of women, but of all creation. ..

Omi o!

Ota o!

Edan o!

E kore yeye Osun

O! sacred water

O! sacred stones

O! sacred edan (symbol of Ogboni)

All hail the Benevolent Mother

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