

ORÍ

Oracle of Cuban Santería



Ócha'ni Lele

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Cuban Santería**



Ócha'ni Lele



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*For my god-sister, Carrie Mikel, and for my godfather, John Pilato.
Both deserve more than just a book dedicated in their names.*



Contents

Acknowledgments	vi
Introduction: Beyond the Middle Passage	1
Chapter One: Understanding the Orisha Obí	9
Chapter Two: The Principles of Casting Obí	32
Chapter Three: Interpreting the Oracle	55
Chapter Four: Interpreting the Oracle: Apere Ti, Obí	80
Chapter Five: Closing the Session with Obí	121
Mail-Order Sources for Religious Supplies	151
Glossary	155
Suggested Reading	178
Index	182



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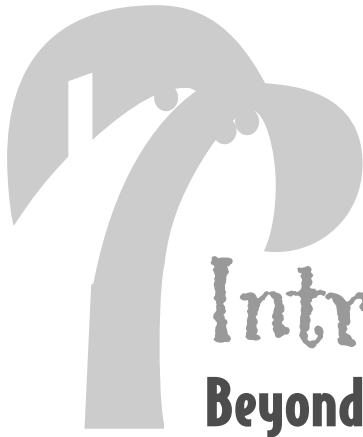
WHEN A WORK OF THIS SCOPE is being written, no one author can claim credit for all its contents. The words are mine; the work is mine; the interpretations are mine. This book represents countless hours of writing, rewriting, worry, and sweat. Yet Santería is an oral faith, and its true secrets are not to be found in the myriad volumes already on the market; its mysteries are found in the hearts and souls of those who practice this religion.

For this book, I am in great debt to my godfather, Eshu'leri Bolafun (John Pilato), for his patience and thorough instruction. He teaches not with the mouth but with his heart, and his love for this religion is reflected in all that he does. To Naomi Alejandro, Christine Jaffe, Michael Cabrera, Akin Babatunde, Ogúndei (Evaristo Pérez), and many others, I am in debt for my own vast knowledge of ebó.

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Introduction

Beyond the Middle Passage

*When my head is on my shoulders,
my feet in salty waters, and my thoughts extend
beyond the horizon, there is no doubt in my mind
that I stand facing the ocean.*

—A proverb from the diloggún, babá Eji Ogbe

STANDING ON THE ATLANTIC SHORE and gazing at the ocean's endless surf, I know peace and fear. There are no other words to describe the feelings that Olokun, the bitter sea, evokes. I stand at the crest of land and sea, where waves roll relentlessly against the coastline, hungrily sucking sand to sea before churning it once more against the shore. I am still as she laps at my feet. The tide is receding slowly, yet the waves are ceaseless and the sand moves constantly. My footing dissolves; I shift my weight back and to the side to keep my balance. Blocking the morning sun with cupped palms, my eyes follow the path of bubbling sunlight over the water and into the horizon; it ends in the blue ocean and the bluer sky, into a gentle, sloping curve that slips from view. I am lost in this moment, lost with the sand amid foaming waves. Eternity lives here, in the ocean, and it is to this place that I come, again and again, to rest, to meditate, to cleanse, to recharge. I yearn to mingle with the natural forces as they, too, merge and mingle with each other.

Today I have not come alone; my godmother, Jackye, and her friend Josephine have brought me. Both are *santeras*, priestesses of an Afro-Cuban faith known as Santería, a religion that survived more than four hundred years of slavery and persecution by white and Hispanic slave lords. It is a spirituality that nourished the souls of those oppressed for no reason other than the silky blackness of their skins. Torn from their homelands, sold and bought like chattel, raped, abused, beaten, and packed into the filthy cargo bays of slave-trading ships, the followers of the *orishas* (spirits) came to the New World with no more than the *aché*, the power, of the orishas within their heads. Those who had time swallowed the sacred shells of their gods, taking their physical forms on earth into their bodies; thus were they able to hide their spirits from their captors. Inevitably, these relics passed through their bodies; once again they swallowed them and held them secretly in their bellies. For months priests and priestesses suffered in darkness, bound in iron chains as seamen guided the marine prisons over the ocean. Some mortally mangled themselves to escape these bonds, finding release and peace only as they flung themselves over the ship's bow, consigning their lives into the ocean's icy grip, Olokun's womb. The rest suffered agonizing pain and torment, praying to her for strength, for release, for safe passage.

Of the hundreds of blacks crammed into cramped quarters, only a few survived each crossing: the determined, the strong, the devoted. Those who died were tossed overboard by the ship's crew without care or concern, left to sink to the cold, salty depths. Yet the same qualities that enabled those few to endure also enabled the orishas to survive. Priests of the white Christ tried in vain to convert the African souls. Although they had neither the morals nor the strength to destroy the sin of slavery, they assuaged their own festering guilt by baptizing blacks "in the name of Jesus." But while the slave masters could coerce the bodies of their servants, they could not conquer their Yoruba spirit. The holy saints, say some, looked down in pity and despair at what their own people were doing; and the orishas, in their infinite wisdom, carried the



followers through the hardships of slavery. In secret, in hiding, disguising their gods behind the willing masks of the saints, priestesses and priests of the orishas continued to nourish the spirits, and the orishas, in return, sustained their followers through the centuries, helping them to evolve, to grow in a prison that was not of their making, in a world that they did not want.

History is a fragile cloth, its threads easily broken, its patterns dulled by the past that created it. Nature is cruel, destroying what she has wrought with her own hands. Time, even time devours his own children. The cries of our ancestors, however, still echo in the angry, crashing waves. We can hear them, and remember, if we listen. We must listen.

It has been more than four centuries since the first slaves were brought to the New World, and although slavery has been abolished, their descendants are still oppressed by a society that disapproves of not only their skin color, but also their native spirituality. I stand with my elders at the ocean's edge, the end of the Middle Passage. My godmother, Jackye, is a priestess of Obatalá, mother and father to the earth, the great ruler of the heights sent forth by Olódumare to create upon the watery void. Josephine, an elder, a Puerto Rican santera, is a priestess of Yemayá, the orisha brought forth from Olokun's depths as Obatalá chained her from land. Unable to resist the supreme deity's sanctions, yet too vast to be restrained by Obatalá's chains, Yemayá was born from Olokun's prison; she became the owner of the ocean's waves and of all the fresh water upon the earth. We had come to honor this mighty goddess, the world's queen. Josephine and Jackye had brought an array of offerings: watermelons, pork rinds, and dark molasses—delicacies of the orisha.

Unknown to them, I had brought my hopes and my fears. I am white and entering an African religion; and although my godmother herself is white, I could not help but wonder if I really belonged in such a faith. Before the sea I suddenly became frightened. I could imagine the souls of the ancestors out there, embraced

in Olokun's icy grip. I could imagine their pain, their terror, as they were flung carelessly into a watery abyss. I was in awe of them, of the ocean's vast depths, of its strengths and powers. Shaking, I stepped back from the water.

"Bonito," Josephine questioned, using her pet name for me, "what is wrong? Why do you shake?"

Quietly, so Jackye could not hear, I told the elder my thoughts, my fears. She laughed. "I am not black either, Bonito; I am Spanish. Let me tell you a story about how the orishas came to this place and how they came to be worshiped by all peoples," she said as we both sat down on the hot sand.

Many centuries ago, so my own godmother told me, the orishas lived only in Africa, the cradle of civilization and the mother of all our races. Yet came the Spanish, the whites, to the holy continent, and with them they brought the evils of a modern world. Many of our priests and priestesses in old Oyó became corrupt when they saw the wealth that these men brought, and they were told that they could exchange the symbols of their orishas, the diloggún, for the wealth of gold. "We can wash our spirits anew," they rationalized, "and have the wealth that these strange men bring, for surely this is the will of our gods." In ignorance, they went to the ships and lay down their sacred implements for the precious metals that the traders carried; yet instead of receiving gold coins as they had been promised, they were given iron shackles and taken prisoner over the sea. No one heard from them again. Then the slave lords returned once more, and this time they offered the village chiefs gold in exchange for the strongest and healthiest of their people. These, too, were forced into submission and taken away over the bitter seas. Finally, having weakened the tribes through their own greed and sin, the traders returned once more and uprooted what they could of the empires, using their weapons of war to force into submission those who were unable to run. Thus did the evil of slavery begin with greed and lies, and thus did it continue over the centuries.

Many of the orishas came with their priests, secreted either in their hair or in their bellies. Some who could sailed through their elements:



Obatalá in the sky, Shangó in the storm, Aganyú in the volcano. Others were already there, in Cuba: Orúnmila and Elegguá, who are everywhere and know everything, and Ogún, who rests deep in the earth wherever there is iron. Yet one orisha could not leave. Oshún, who lived in the sweet river waters of Africa, tried in vain to follow her people over the ocean. Yet she could not, for when the river meets the seas, the fresh waters become salty, and therein she could not travel. So she went to her sister Yemayá and called her, begging, "Sister, where do my people go? Why can I not follow?" And tears slowly slid down her face, tears of sadness and anger.

"Sister," said Yemayá, "our people are being stolen away to a place called Cuba, and those of us who are able are going with them in spirit to watch over them, to protect them as best we can. Some of us are already there, for our realms extend to theirs. Others are carried in the bodies of the priests and priestesses, for their faith in us is great. Yet you, Sister, cannot go. Your followers have traded their diloggún for iron out of greed for gold, and your river ends at the sea. I am sorry."

Yet Oshún knew that her sister Yemayá was very powerful, being the mother of all the orishas. And she knew that if she truly asked, her sister would find a way to carry her across the seas. "Sister, I am sad; I am angry. Yet I forgive those who have brought this evil. I forgive those who have acted in greed. I want to be with them, to protect them, to make their lives sweet. How can I go to Cuba?"

Yemayá thought for a moment, then smiled. "You are fresh water nourished by my rain. You will travel with me to Cuba through the sky, in the rain with your lover, Shangó, and with the blessings of our elder Obatalá."

Again Oshún shed tears, this time of joy, and she asked, "Sister, what do the people in Cuba look like? Are they like us with dark skin and curly hair?"

"No, Sister, they are lighter. Some are brown and others are white. They do not look like us."

"I have another wish, my sister. I want to look not only like our people but also like theirs. I want to show all those the beauty of the orishas and the evil that they have wrought on our people. I want to

show them all that life can be sweet, that there can be harmony, that there can be love. I want to show all who will adore us the gifts of Oshún."

*Yemayá smiled as she straightened Oshún's hair and lightened her skin; she became the most beautiful of mulattoes, yet retained her African features. She was voluptuous, stunning. "This is only illusion, my sister. Those who look upon your beauty will see those things that they find most beautiful—through you they will learn that no matter the hardships, the bitterness in life, it can be sweet if they honor you and what you represent: love for all peoples and love for the orishas." With those words, Yemayá took Oshún into herself, into the rain, and together they traveled to Cuba to watch over the Yoruba race. Yemayá was their mother and helped them to adapt, to survive, to grow, while Oshún taught that despite the bitterness in their lives, there could be sweetness. Thus did all the orishas finally come here to the New World—and thus have they been worshiped by all.**

Josephine gently nudged me. "The orishas are black; we worship the black gods of black peoples, and still they love us as we love and honor them. Yet their love does not come without a price. There are those who would call our practices barbaric, pagan, primitive. Much of our religion is outlawed, and even now there are those fighting the wars of persecution and spiritual enslavement in courts of 'justice.' Have you not heard of the *iyawós* [initiates] going to jail, arrested on the throne during what is the greatest moment of their lives? To honor the gods that we love, we must sneak, at times, in shadows or risk imprisonment for our beliefs. We must suffer still at the hands of Catholics and Christians who taunt us with their holy books, saying ours are the ways of Satan. We watch as our brothers, sisters, and elders come from Cuba and

* This *patakís* (legend) is not native to Africa; no one in Nigeria who practices native Yoruba religion is familiar with it. It is a story designed to illustrate the universal principles of the orishas, and how the religion of the Lucumí came to be practiced by those peoples beyond the original Yoruba tribes.

are stripped of their holy orishas by customs officials who hope to rid our 'evil' from the earth. Although it is not slavery, although the hardship does not match that of our ancestors, we still suffer. Yet we all work hard for the day when we may once again come out into the open, when blacks may reclaim in pride and without prejudice the orishas of their ancestors, and we may work with them side by side, healing the wounds of the past. We suffer for their love, yet Oshún makes our suffering sweet. She is truly the most beautiful of the orishas. But I ramble, and it is time to make our offerings to Yemayá, our mother."

Josephine motioned for Jackye bring the basket with the ocean's offerings. Standing between us, Josephine began to chant, to pray in the ancient tongue known as Lucumí. Jackye and I held her hands, for she was becoming unsteady, dizzy, as she communed with the natural forces of her mother orisha. The litany became interspersed with Spanish. I could pick out bits of prayers for my godmother, for me, wishes for both our physical and our spiritual health. She called on the strength of the ancestors and said blessings for their elevation and for our protection. It was time to make an offering. We threw whole melons into the ocean; I swung Josephine's hard and watched as it landed only a few feet away, rolling and bobbing in foamy waves. Josephine threw handfuls of pork rinds to her mother, while Jackye let molasses pour freely into the churning foam. Children came running along the shoreline, puzzled, as grown-ups were throwing food into the water. "Little Elegguás," Josephine said, tilting her head toward them in acknowledgment.

Helping Josephine back to our chairs on the beach, I strained to listen over the crashing waves. They rumbled and thundered, stirred up by the invocations and prayers Josephine had intoned, as my own godmother began her string of prayers with fresh water to Elegguá, opener of roads and messenger to the orishas, to the sea, to Yemayá. In her hands were rounded slices of coconut meat, and as she prayed she threw slivers into the waters. Clapping her hands, she let the pieces fall, chanting to herself once more as she

poured the last of her molasses into the cresting waves; again, she picked up the pieces of coconut and threw them to the ground with a swift flick of her wrists. “*Ejife,*” she yelled over the roaring waves. “The world is in balance.” Yemayá was pleased with her offerings. Slowly, Jackye knelt down to the sand to retrieve the coconut for one last question; an errant wave crashed onto the beach, spraying her with its mist. By instinct, she turned her head as cold water ran over her back. Turning again to retrieve the four pieces, Jackye’s hand touched only sand.

Yemayá had accepted her offerings; Yemayá would say no more!



Understanding the Orisha Obí

AMONG THE YORUBA, there is a basic system of divination known as Obí. It is an oracle cut anew for each use from the seeds of the kola tree (*Cola acuminata*), a tropical species prolific on the continent of Africa. The Yoruba believe that each seed is sacred, symbolic of the earth, cosmos, and Olódumare. A perfect ripe seed yields four lobes when split. Two of the lobes are called *obí*, and it is from these portions that the oracle is named. These lobes are feminine in shape, being rounded and bulbous at one end; the other two lobes are phallic, oblong. These are considered the masculine portions and are known as *akó*. Unbroken, one seed is a creative synthesis, a fusion of the masculine and feminine halves of nature, a perfect union holding the potential for new creation. As the orisha devotee rips open the flesh, his own world is symbolically torn asunder, and only under the direction of his patron orisha will this world be rebuilt. After a solemn prayer and a heartfelt invocation to the spirits, a random toss of these four pieces is directed by unseen hands. Thus is the orisha's will revealed.

Mathematically, four separate pieces of anything yields only five patterns, yet separating the four lobes into two divisions,

masculine and feminine, increases the number of “letters” that can open into a total of ten. And with the numerous ways in which the lobes can fall upon each other, a limitless number of signs is created. By these the initiated can determine the orisha’s desires. The basic patterns that fall in the Kola-nut oracle have names: *odí*, *alafia*, *obita*, *akita*, *yeye*, *ailashara*, *ejire*, *ayé*, *oyekun*, and *iyala*. Respectively, each pattern brings impediments, coolness, blessings, unhappiness, victory, debility, friendship, money, hardship, and health. Beyond these basic patterns, and the patterns within the patterns, the African initiate has the *aché* (power, grace, life, initiation) in his head to divine the full meaning of the mandala that unfolds. The orisha displays his or her letters in Obí before the shrine, but the diviner is allowed to interpret according to his own knowledge and experience. An objective sign (the letter of the oracle) is matched by the subjective knowledge of the priest, and from these two are the spirit’s prognostications determined.

When the Catholic and Christian heresies of slavery brought orisha initiates to the New World in hordes, the religion was forced to undergo evolutionary changes. In the areas that later became known as the United States, slavery was so harsh, so brutal, that the orisha traditions could not survive beyond the first generation. Heartlessly, whites divided the family and social units. Mothers and fathers were ripped from each other and from their children, whole families destroyed as the cruel masters sought to push their slaves into submission. Blacks were regarded as animals and tortured to obey, to work, to produce for a race too lazy to produce on its own. Here, among colonies that were first established for “religious freedom,” the native religions of Africans died. There was no evolution for the spirits or their followers; there was only cruelty and death.

It seems a paradox, but slavery among the Hispanic, Portuguese, and predominantly Catholic countries was kinder. Although they still were treated as beasts of burden, the Africans’ social units were kept intact. Some were even given free, private time to themselves,

and it is among these people that the religion survived. Due to a milder climate, many of the herbs used in the orishas' rituals were no longer available; through divination, however, suitable substitutions were found. Those who toiled in the Spaniards' fields still had the initiation and the aché to divine using obí; however, the oracle's kola nut was no longer in plentiful supply. Through divination, another substitute was sought. Some say that it was Obatalá who sanctioned the change; others say nothing less than a decree from Olófin himself could change the methodology of the religion. No matter to which orisha the new system is credited, the divination system was adapted. Instead of a four-lobed nut, the coconut (which also exists in Africa) became the oracle. The new tool was named Obí divination as well, yet it had for its patron a different obscure orisha of the Yoruba pantheon, Obí, from whom the coconut was created. It is this system of divination and myth that continues to flourish throughout Cuba and the rest of the New World.*

The Myth of Obí, the Sacred Coconut

(This myth originates in Obara Osá, pattern 6–9, in the diloggún.) Of all Obatalá's mortal creations, Obí was perfect, pure. Born with all heaven's blessings, his life was one of charity and servitude. Surrounded by poverty, he would surrender his wealth to support the needy—beggars and vagrants were his friends. In the midst of despair, his was the voice that could soothe. Obí's words were kind, and never uttered in vain. Such was the beauty within the man that it formed his body in its image. The mortal's skin was polished, smooth like onyx; his eyes, dark like pools of ink, reflected all around him. No woman's skin was softer, yet no man's form

* Unlike the native Yoruba form of obí divination, the New World form is named after an actual orisha, Obí. It is believed that the orisha himself is embodied in each single coconut; therefore, when referring to Obí divination in the diaspora the name is capitalized, as the orisha and the coconut are one and the same.

more masculine. Obí's body was solid, chiseled, and toned, yet when he walked its suppleness was sensual and rhythmic, like music. So devoid of vanity and evil was Obí that Olófin favored him, granting him eternal life. The beauty that was within Obí shone greater than that without, and by his *aché* Olófin made it gather. Obí glistened with whiteness and purity. All of the orishas agreed that there was none more radiant, more handsome than he.

Others who were born after the creation of humans knew Obí as the coconut, a fruit that once was a brilliant, glistening white. His skin was smooth like marble, yet iridescent like virgin snow; always, his robes were immaculately clean and pressed, reflecting the dazzling light of both sun and moon. Only the robes of Obatalá were kept cleaner. For Obí to walk during the day was to blind the sight of those about him, and all the orishas marveled at his magnificence.

Although elevated for his humility and reverence, Obí's ego grew slowly over the centuries until he believed there was no one more blessed, more important than he. "If beauty is a gift from Olódumare," Obí mused, "then I am the most gifted. Surely it is because of the good works I did on earth. There is none more deserving than I of beauty and eloquence."

Elegguá, who knows all things, knew the darkness that was growing like a cancer in Obí's heart. Many times he warned Obatalá, yet when Obatalá looked at the elevated mortal, he saw only the perfection in his creation. Elegguá went to Olófin, but Olófin was still blinded by the magic he had woven when elevating Obí to the status of an orisha. His *aché* brought the inner light of the man without; his beauty was enhanced by the whiteness of creation, and even god on earth could not see beyond that. Like many, Olófin mistook physical beauty for spiritual purity. And that purity had been tainted.

Eventually it came to pass that Olófin threw a festival for all the orishas in his own opulent palace. Obí spent many weeks preparing for the party, ordering new robes to be made in the finest white cloths with sparkling white laces and satins. Only the purest

fabrics were used, and they were stitched by those with the cleanest hands. When finished, the white clothing contrasted deeply with his dark skin. The power of his aura magnified the whiteness, and together they glistened and scintillated so it seemed Obí himself was the source of all light, that all else was but a reflection of him. He was pleased. The day of the party arrived, and Obí went, assured that there was no orisha better dressed or more magnificent than he.

Arriving early, Obí watched from a distance as the other orishas came: Yemayá in her dress of foam and shells, dripping with pearls and gemstones from the sea; Oshún in her most gorgeous yellow satins; and Shangó in his flaming red trousers and pressed white shirt. Although all had prepared many days for the festival, the clothing of none could compare to what Obí wore. It seemed that he had gathered all that was cool and white in the world, weaving it into a tapestry that shimmered and glistened in the moon's own pale glow. Passing the front gates of Olófin's palace, casting a brilliance almost unmatched by Olófin's splendid walls, Obí saw that a group of ragged, dirty mendicants had gathered by the palace entrance to beg alms from the mighty ones. Their clothing was filthy, caked with mud and dried leaves; the rags they wore were unfit even for an animal, and Obí cringed as he drew closer to them. Gone were his mortal days when he worked selflessly for others; now he was an orisha, and deserving of respect! The vagrants begged for money, and Obí pretended he was deaf. One reached out to touch him, leaving a tiny stain on his whites, and Obí was enraged. "Leave me alone," he said, seething, through clenched teeth. "You do not belong at Olófin's palace; you belong in the forest with animals!" Such was his rage that the magical clothing he wore flared about his figure wildly, whipping in the air as he shook his fists in fury. Stunned, the vagrants could do nothing but shrink from the orisha's outburst, and in fear they ran.

So loudly had Obí roared these words that Olófin himself crept cautiously to the front door to investigate the commotion. He

watched sadly as the once humble orisha sent away the poor who had gathered outside the palace. When the last vagrant had disappeared from sight, Olófin looked at his son with pity. He remembered the warnings of Elegguá, that his elevated mortal had become shallow and severe, and his only words were, “Come inside. Join the party.” Turning away with sadness in his eyes, Olófin said not another word to Obí that night. He only watched as the orisha mingled among the guests, laughing, eating, and drinking as if he had not a care in the world.

Obí spent the next day analyzing the events. He decided to plan a festival more extravagant than Olófin’s, one that would show himself to be the most gracious of all Olófin’s children. He hand-picked the guest list, inviting only the most important spirits, including Olófin, father of them all. Word was also sent out—beggars and vagrants were forbidden at his door. Weeks of preparation followed as Obí drove his servants to make his mansion the cleanest, whitest, and most elegant of all dwellings. He forced his tailors and seamstresses to weave the most stunning fabrics from the whitest wools and cottons, adding his own aché into the clothing created. On the night of the party, despite his preparations, only a few of those whom Obí had invited appeared. Attending from curiosity rather than sincerity, the guests exchanged furtive glances and whispered conversation. Obí was furious, for beyond Olófin himself there was no one more grand than he. How dare the others not show up! How dare those in attendance display their ingratitude by whispering, by snickering, by questioning his motives. The hours crawled by. Anger turned to rage, and Obí became the most ungracious of hosts. Later that night, as the orishas were beginning to leave, there was a quiet knock at the door. Obí was still hoping for late arrivals and he ran to answer it.

Rage then turned to fury, for it was just a ragged beggar. His hair was matted and his clothing torn and filthy, and as Obí stared in horror, he held out his hands to beg for alms. The orisha could only tremble as he saw the bleached white walkway to his palace tracked with dirt and mud from the vagrant’s feet. Fury exploded.

“How dare you, you dirty, filthy man,” Obí thundered. “How dare you come to my house tracking filth, dressed in rags and stinking like a dirty beast! Get away from me and leave this house. I never wish to see you again.” Slamming the door in the beggar’s face, Obí turned to see all the orishas gathered behind him, their expressions blank in disbelief. A few of them trembled in either fear or rage—Obí could not tell, nor did he care. “Have you gone mad?” asked Elegguá, the first to recover. “How can you call our father a filthy, dirty animal?”

Before Obí could calm himself and question Elegguá, there came yet another knock at the door. Tearing it open, Obí was again enraged as the old man stood before him. As he opened his mouth to scream, the figure began to change and melt until the beggar was no more, and Obí could see what the other orishas saw—Olófin himself. Obí had turned away the true lord of the universe.

The mighty one let show all his brilliance and goodness. The room was basked in white light that blanketed the ivory walls of Obí’s mansion; all were blinded in its splendor. The orishas lay down in *foribale* (prostrate salute) before this mighty display of aché, while Obí could only shake and tremble as he sank to his knees to beg forgiveness. Yet no words came, for his tongue loosened and fell from his mouth. Obí was permanently silenced. Rage melted into fear, and fear became desperation as Obí saw his tongue lying useless on the floor. He was humbled by a power greater than his own, and groveled before his father’s feet. Olófin, seeing the same humility that Obí possessed while still human, felt sorry for the orisha. He said, “My son, once you were pure of heart, yet through time your ways toward others became evil. Somewhere, somehow, you lost the virtues of humility and charity for my children on earth. Yet I still find it in my heart to forgive you. For your crimes, your own aché has removed the power of speech, and with the mouth you will never utter another word; yet I shall give you back your speech in a different manner. If you ever want to communicate with another, you must first throw yourself to the floor as in *foribale* to me, and then shall your will be known to others.

“And since you have become all bright and beautiful on the outside, yet within have become dark and hard, a hypocrite, your appearance for an eternity shall be changed, and this is my punishment to you. A thick crust will mask your physical beauty like the one that exists within you now, yet hidden within will be the glow. This skin will be shed and the brightness seen only when you are called to serve another, for in service will you find your salvation. As you have become two-faced, good to the orisha and bad to the poor, so shall you have two faces. One will show your beauty in a glow, which was a gift from me that I can never entirely remove, and one will show your hypocrisy through darkness, an evil brought on yourself. From this day forth, no matter how dirty or vile those who question you, you are bound, Obí, always to speak the truth at their feet in humbleness. You will always be available to serve the other orishas, for they never failed to give alms to my children on earth, the poor and deformed.”

Thus did his own hands and his father's give Obí's punishment, and Obí was bound to a life of servitude and truth forevermore.

Obí had once been human, a pure, modest man whose inner beauty so impressed Olófin that he was made an orisha, immortal. Inward beauty was brought without by Olódumare's blessings; he was stunning, radiant. Yet pride and vanity grew in those first centuries until, by his own actions, Obí fell from grace. No longer would he live in an opulent palace, nestled beyond the mortal realm. His new home was the coconut palm, a tree of modest height, well rooted in this earth. No longer was he dressed in scintillating white cloth. His form was dark and hard; he found himself thickly encrusted with a hairy shell. His beauty, a gift endowed to match his purity, was hidden by this shell, and masked again by a thick, rough skin born of his evil. Obí's musical voice was silenced through the ages: none would hear him speak, or sing, or even sigh. To communicate, the coconut was cursed to throw himself in foribale upon the earth and from this would letters open to make known his will.

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