
On Ritual Performance: A Practitioner's View
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On Ritual Performance

A Practitioner's View

Kolawole Ositola

My concern is to establish the facts and the value of our traditional heritage, that is, what our forefather believes in and its potentiality.¹ As the holy oracle has said rightly, the whole life span of a person is a journey. And to make the journey successful—realistic—a person must be well inducted into life, into the world, so that his journey will be progressive. The responsibility of induction starts with the parents of a newly born baby who must know its mission on earth. Thus we perform *Ikosewaiye* to know the mission or destiny of the child who stepped into the world. This we do by divining and interpreting the meaning of what *Ifa* says in the *Odu* [a set of personal divination texts] that comes with the newly born baby.² We inform the parents and give them a sense of how to train the child, how to induct or prepare him or her for a progressive, successful life.

Ikosewaiye [*kose w'aiye* translates as “step into the world”] provides us with some facts about the newly born baby. As you may have heard, there are some people who just come to the world to tease their parents, like *abiku* [children “born to die,” *bi oku*]. When we learn more about them, we know how to perform rituals to change some of their ugly intentions. If we fail to do this, then the mother will be going around without giving birth to a single child [who survives] and without knowing how to conquer this obstacle. When we do *Ikosewaiye*, we know the obstacles and the progress. We know how to prepare the parents for the progress, how to cancel the obstacles, how to make life more meaningful and realistic for the child.

We introduce the newly born baby into the world (plate 1). He is stepping into the world. His feet will touch the floor or the earth and at the same time will touch the *Iken Ifa* [palm nuts used in divining]—the mediator that will find out more about the child's mission or destiny on earth.

As soon as somebody comes to the world, he has started a journey. And we want him to go through the journey successfully. From where does this young man or woman come? When we know his mission and his destiny, we know more about him. We will continue the unfinished job of *Ikosewaiye*. Does he come for a new project? Is he at all a new man? We have the belief that life is a continuous exercise, or a continuous journey. You go, return, you go, return. Nobody can just stay adamant at a place.

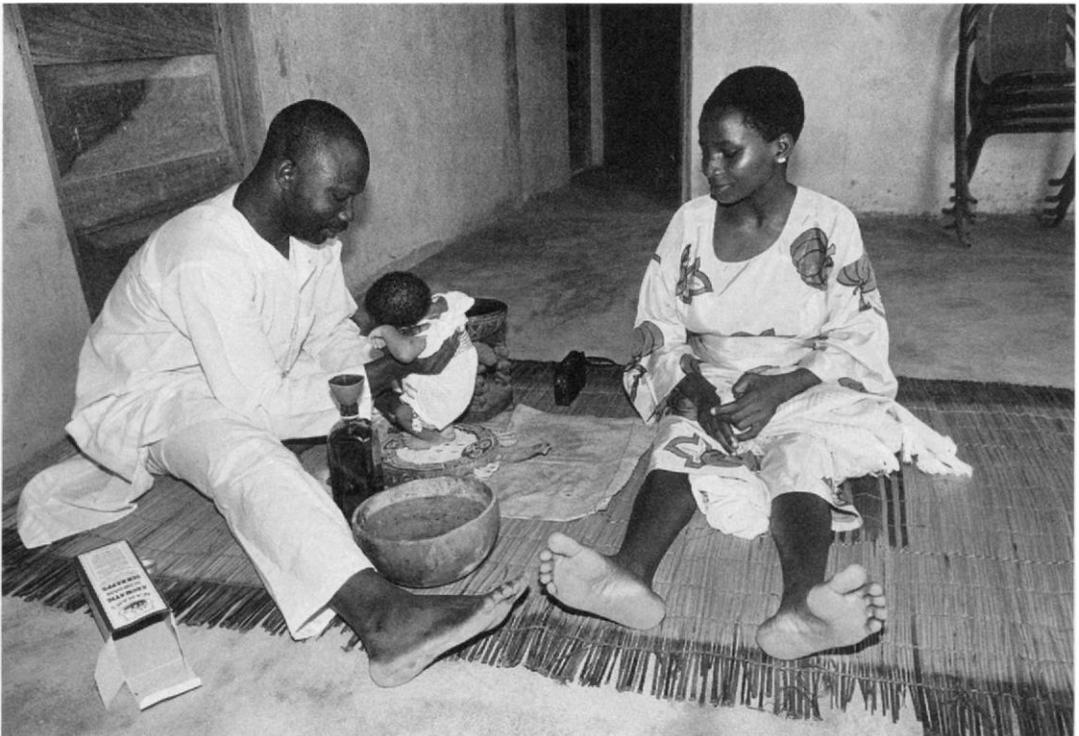
You have to come to the earth and go back. That is why we ask where this man comes from. Is he one of our former ancestors from the mother's side, or the father's side? This we call *Imori Omo* [*mo ori omo*, meaning "know the head of the child"]. This enables us to know if the child is one of the parents' ancestors coming to begin another journey on earth. Or, is it a new person entirely who comes to participate in the journey of life?

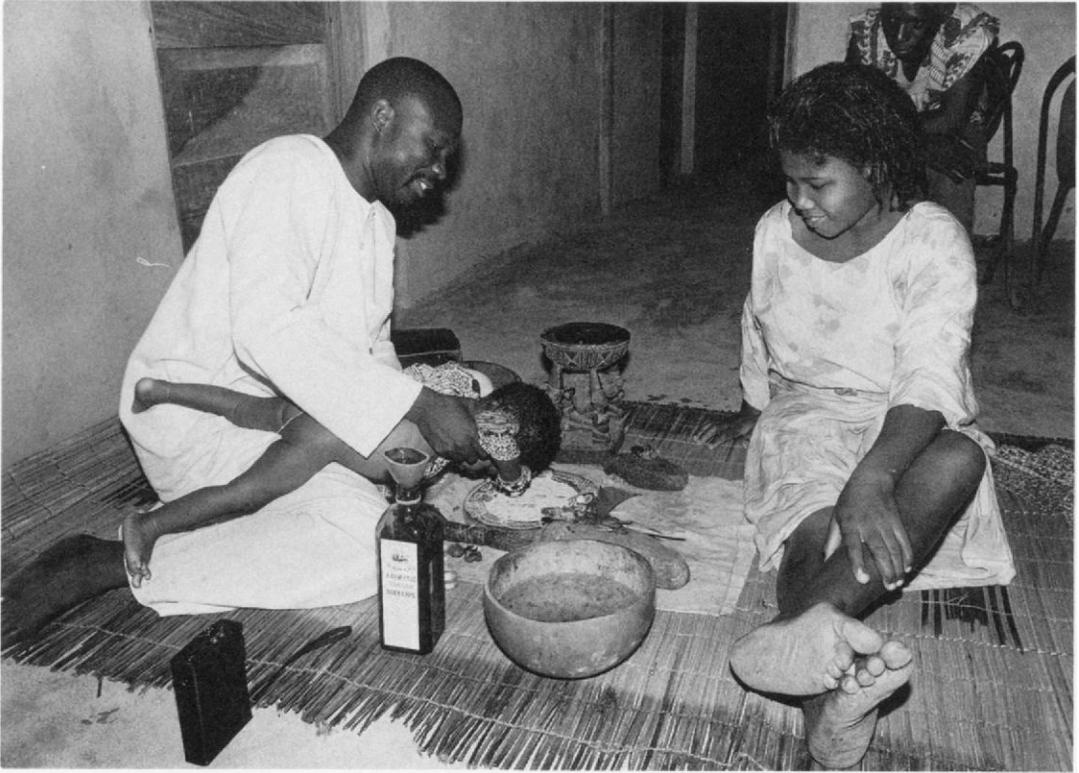
In this way, we know his mission, and this is progress. But we are still inducting the newly born baby into the world. And if he is newly initiated, then we can know how to train and educate him and establish his feet firmly on earth. Those who have gone through this induction, we believe, will be able to live undisrupted.

Some people may have obstacles in their lives. They may have been engaged in a certain business—maybe they should have been hunters or diviners, but instead they become lawyers or whatever else. Then they may not be able to continue their journeys successfully because they have been misled. Nobody has brought them up properly. Nobody has given them a proper initiation into life. This is, I am sorry to say, one of our concerns: by losing this important heritage, many people are living disturbed lives. And we pray that things are put right.

As the journey continues, as you have properly inducted your children, then you can know how to train them, how to educate them, and how to establish them. After establishing a person on earth, you know who this head is and who this ancestor is. In *Imori*, we first of all inform the spirits of the ancestors to come and direct us. We use kola nuts as a medium of communication between those on earth and the people above. We communicate with the ancestors. A certain place in front of the diviner's house is arranged for communication between the living and the dead.

1. *Ositola touches a baby's feet to the floor during an Ikosewaiye on 26 October 1986 at Imodi in Ogun State, Nigeria. (Photo by M. T. Drewal)*





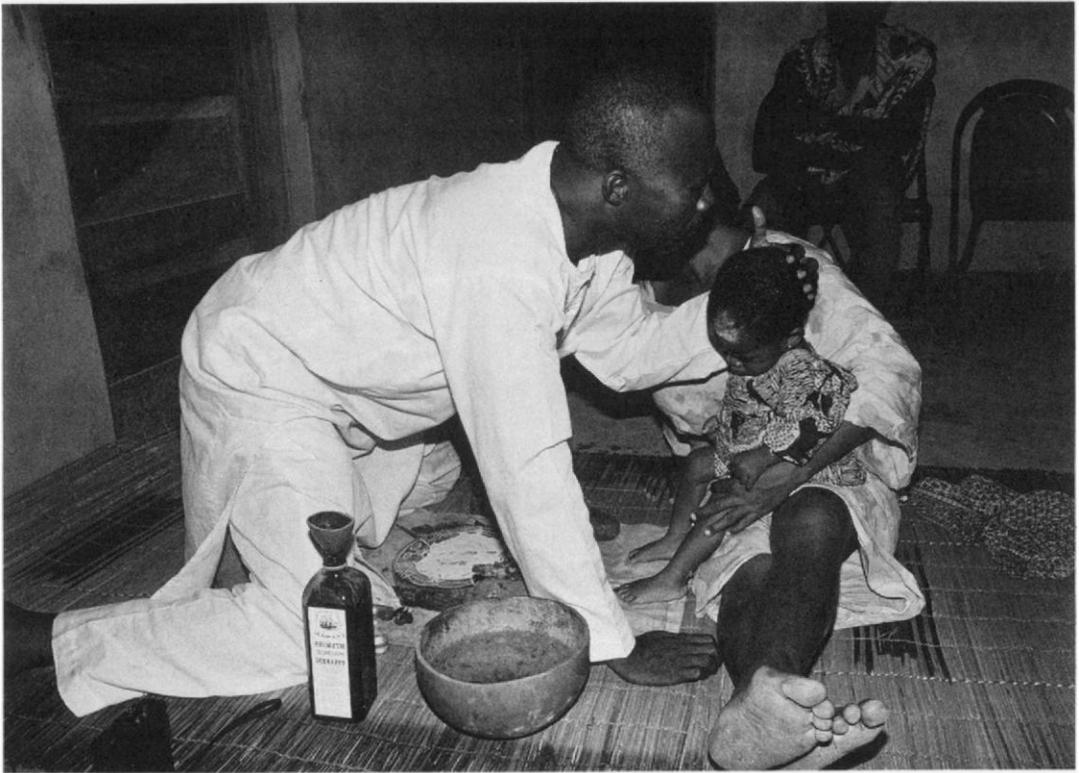
2. In an Imori Omo on 27 October 1986, Ositola touches a child's head to the divination tray on the floor to associate its head with the world. (Photo by M. T. Drewal)

And then we introduce the child into the world by touching his head to the earth (plate 2). We wake the head up for the ceremony (plate 3). Ifa is the mediator between life and life above, as I can put it. When we find out more about the child, we will know which of the rituals will be more purposeful for helping him or her live a better life. In this way we continue to educate and establish the young boy or girl.

And the journey continues. You know it is the parents who hold the responsibility to continue preparing, educating, or establishing their children for a successful life. There are other ceremonies they are bound to do for the boy or for the girl. And this includes *Isefa* [*se Ifa* means "make Ifa"]—the preliminary stage one undergoes before reaching an age of understanding, when he will then be properly established in the world. *Isefa* is just a ritual of associating a new person with a guide or a witness.

Orunmila [the deity of divination, himself a diviner] is a very wise, educated man. He had the knowledge of creation. Then we have to associate the child with *Ileri Ipin* [one in charge of his own personal, spiritual inner head], somebody who will be his witness and guideline, whom he will be following so that he can be progressive, so he doesn't get disturbed. With this we perform *Isefa* and *Imugegelifa* [empower the Ifa], a more elaborate ceremony preparing for the proper establishment of the person into the world. Then we perform *Itefa* [*te Ifa* means "establish one's Ifa"], which I will talk more about.

You see, as in the early oracle, it is compulsory and essential to allow somebody to go through an *Itefa* ceremony if we don't want him to be disturbed—one. Two, we don't want his family to be disturbed, because if somebody is not well established or prepared to lead a progressive life, he



3. *Ositola sprays gin to wake up the child's inner head. (Photo by M. T. Drewal)*

will be a burden to himself, to the parents and the household, and to the society at large, because he will misbehave.

It is not only now that we are careless. Since ancient times, people have misbehaved carelessly. Once Orunmila took his three children for granted. He was married to a woman called Bamigberun. He had three male children. Being careless, he didn't educate them; he didn't establish them well. And he was a wise man! But he took things for granted. He allowed them to lead their lives without being properly brought up or established. They were disturbed. They didn't know which way to go. Instead of being a management consultant, one became a lawyer. And this disturbed the whole family and the community. You see, a misbehaved man can just do whatever he likes. But he will not be happy. Yet they are complaining, as everybody is complaining, "the country is too hard, the country too hard!" When they are not brought up properly, they lay the blame on their leaders. And it is accurate. Well, the leaders to me are the parents, who should have brought the children up for a progressive and successful life.

These three children decided to take Orunmila, their father, and throw him in the bush before they were redressed. Then Orunmila returned to ask Ifa what had happened that his children misbehaved. And Ifa asked him, "Why have you not educated or prepared your children very well? You better go and do it now." Since then it has become very important to establish, or to reborn, or whatever you may call it—I am not good in English, don't mind my vocabulary—give rebirth to a child. Itefa is a rebirth to a progressive life. And if not done, it can cause disturbance to the whole society at large.

It is essential to educate the youths to the ways of life as illustrated in the holy oracle. That is the information we reveal to any participant at the beginning of an Itefa ceremony. What I mean by participants is the observ-

ers, the initiates, and the *Babalawos* [Diviners] as well. The Diviners usually remember this. And if this information is presented concurrently—I think I am correct?—then nobody can forget this heritage. And everybody will be ready to prepare themselves to gain the sense of thought and reflection, as we Babalawos and those who are able to come near us do. That is to say, the whole Itefa journey serves as a guideline for one's life, for the initiate, and for the preparation of one's soul for a smooth and progressive life.

Let me take the way to the holy land, the *Igbodu* [forest of the deity Odu], as an example. We make every participant believe that we are going for a purpose; we are going to be progressive; we shall be successful. In one's life as it happens in the Itefa, there are obstacles. There are difficulties. There are all sorts of ups and downs, as always illustrated in Itefa rituals. One of the Babalawos informs the others of the necessity of performing the Itefa rituals. He reveals how Orunmila gave birth to the three children. And all the participants are listening and have ample time so that they might reflect for themselves.

We tell the Iken Ifa [palm nuts used in divining] to go along with him and give him a rebirth. One of the difficulties of life is that we have to go up and down the hills. And when his head gets cool, when everything is reflective, we go to the holy land (plate 4). And we inform the spirits of the ancestors to lead us right and protect the Babalawos' houses for them until they return from the holy land. They are enthusiastic. They are ready to go on the journey willingly because they know they are going for a progressive purpose. That is the meaning of the dancing. They know they are going on a successful journey. A woman carries the emblem of Odu [deity/wife of Orunmila, who taught him how to perform Itefa]. Some parents mount their children on their backs because they are still a bit young. That is a sort of parent preparation or establishment. It is the duty of the parents to prepare their children. And when the child needs assistance, the parent must render it willingly, with enthusiasm.

The holy land is known as *Igbodu*. It is a prepared place where we go. A child performs this ritual at an age of understanding, around four, five, or six, when he has not yet been misled by other people's culture, by Islamic or Biblical culture.

You know, on everybody's way they must expect difficulties and obstacles. And we must be ready. We inculcate into the senses of the initiate that he must always be prepared at all costs. We don't just go through a smooth path. We know there must be difficulties, but we must not succumb to them. We must try to cross them, whatever they are. Life is a challenge. As rightly put in one *Odu Ifa*, which the diviners recite on the way to *Igbodu*, the deities themselves overcome difficulties. I am sure everybody has experienced such difficulties, but with determination and preparedness, and by taking every obstacle as a challenge, it is not a misfortune. A challenge builds you up.

And if you have endurance, whenever you meet obstacles, maybe oil glut—they are selling oil at about 10 *Naira* per barrel [approximately \$2.50]—then don't say, "Oh! Nigeria is dying." It is a challenge, and you have to prepare to overcome it. And the participants will overcome it now. They will arrive at the gate of the holy land.

The Babalawo performs *Ijuba* [homage]. You don't just enter a community, or enter a dialog, or enter anyplace just like that and say, "Welcome, good morning" and that is all. You have to pay homage and ask for permission. You know, as we are on earth, there are some invisible spirits such as ancestors, deities, and other spirits that may even be disturbing. A



4. *The journey to Igboḍu at the beginning of Itefa on the night of 2 November 1986. A diviner in the lead carries the Osun staff, followed by a woman carrying the shrine of the deity Oḍu on top of her head. The children and their mothers follow with their ritual loads. (Photo by M. T. Drewal)*

homage is chanted by one of the Babalawos. The gate is very beautiful, decorated with *apako* [leaves of the *Cleistophilis Patens* (Anonaceae), see plate 8]. It is a holy land. We are going to the ancient world. You see, we prepare it in the same manner as it was prepared in the ancient life. We are going to the holy land of Igboḍu—a prepared place, which is absolutely a Babalawo's concern.

Even if you were allowed to see inside the Igboḍu, you would see only the impotent part of it. The knowledge is the potentiality, the knowledge you must sustain, the knowledge you must learn—not the materials. If the materials are exposed to everybody, they may just bastardize it, as when school children do *Orisa* [the deities'] dancing as theatre, trying to bastardize all the traditions by taking it just for the fun of it. But when you are unable to see it, then it will give you a sense of reasoning. It will become a challenge to you so that you will want to go through the ceremony in order to be prepared to know more about what we do there. So we don't just allow people to see it.

If you were to see it, you would know it is a strange place. It is not common. It is not the gate to Mecca or to the barracks, but to the holy land Igboḍu. I have my own Igboḍu. You can prepare your own Igboḍu at your place as well.

And I am sure every participant passes through obstacles. As I have told you, life itself is a challenge. You must be prepared. You must learn about the difficulties in life because—as put exactly in one Oḍu Ifa—if you want to live a successful, progressive life, you have to overcome difficulties. Let me give a literary meaning to it. You know, it is the heights that great men reach and keep which cannot be obtained by sudden flight. The young initiate has to carry the *Opa Osun* [an iron staff, symbol of Orunmila] on his head, walking on his knees, while his comrades sleep. But we encourage him to carry on, not to get tired (plate 5). He should go through the journey. It is a sense of challenge.

In one ritual, the *Ibo Osun* [sacrifice at the Osun staff], we give a sacrifice to the spirits of disturbance, the *Ajoguns* [e.g., Death, Illness, Infirmity, Loss, Litigation, Debt, Disaster, Conflict]. We offer the sacrifice to please these spirits so that they will not disturb us (plate 6). It is not just the mere killing of cocks or animals, but it is to please the spirits so that they will not disturb us. Or, it is to make them help us to progress in our lives. When you please the spirit, it is just like entertaining a guest. Then the guest will be pleased to stay with you and give you assistance before he goes. But if you don't aim to please, then you may be disturbed and you may not get the full assistance of your guest.

In [doing] this, we don't even forget the nonbelievers. We know they don't believe, but we try to protect them from the disturbances of evil spirits. So we use the cock to clear disturbances from everybody's life, whether the initiate's or the observer's. So everybody gets a sense of be-

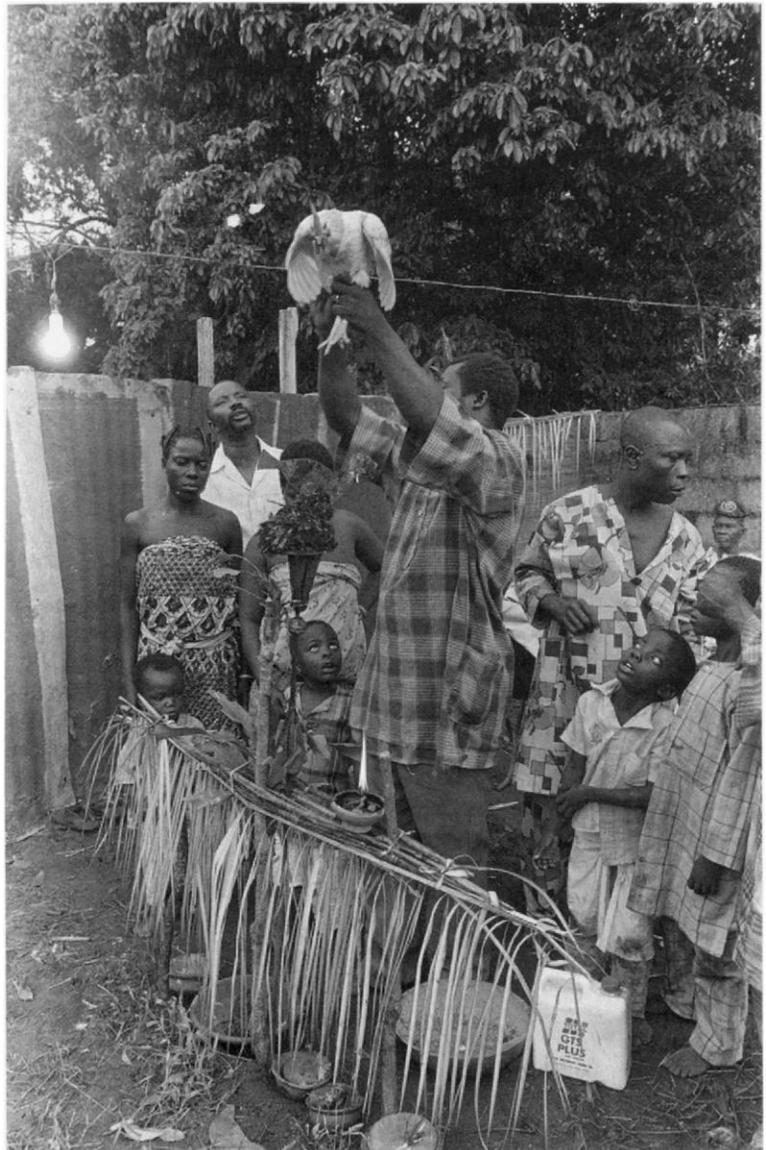


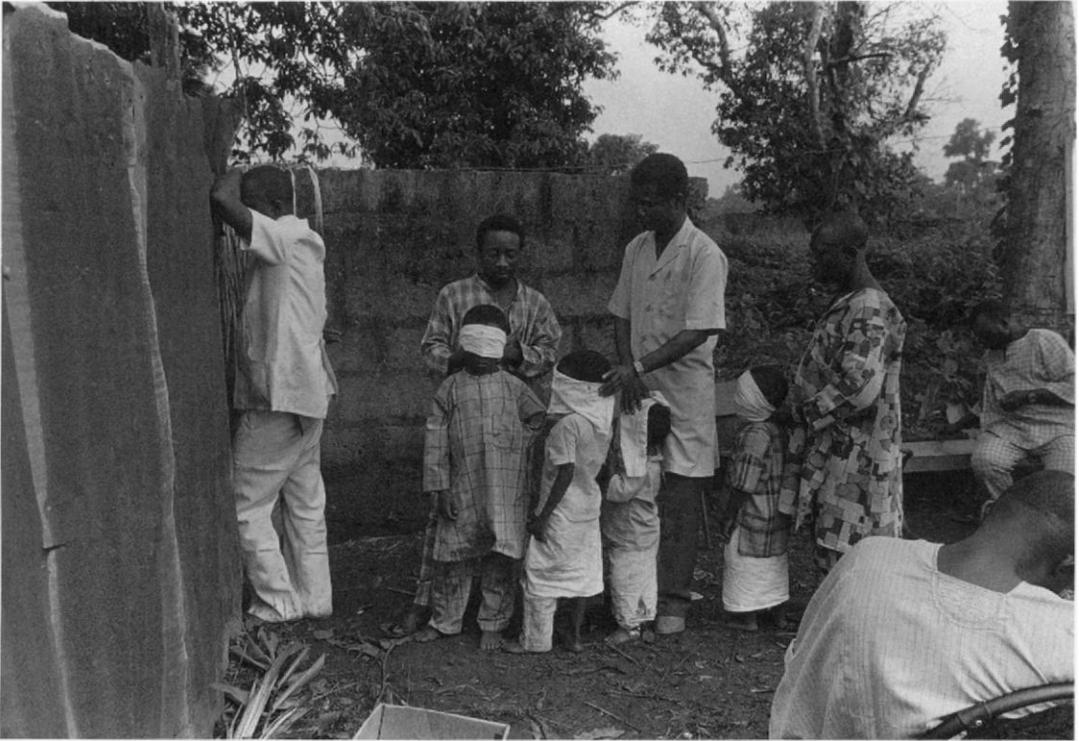
5. The child walks on his knees down the path to Ig-bodu, carrying the Osun staff on top of his head. This is only one of the ritual hardships he is expected to endure. One of the diviners assists and encourages him. (Photo by M. T. Drewal)

longing to the ceremony. We don't abandon or eliminate or take people for granted. All the participants are included: the initiates, the observers, and even the Babalawos themselves.

On the inside part, in the holy land, that is where the initiates are properly established in ways of thought that provide more training. This means they are going to a new world. They are going to the rebirth world (plate 7). We close their eyes as a symbol of going to a new world because they are going to be properly established. There they will be given more rigorous and important rituals and ceremonies to perform. By taking them to the inner part of Igboḍu, we show the initiates the replica of Odu—that is, after they have gone through rigorous ceremonies. It is in the inner part of Igboḍu, the prepared holy land, that they can see Odu Ologboje [deity/wife of Orunmila]. There we prepare them.

6. *A diviner sacrifices a cock to the spirits of disturbance at the Osun shrine just outside the grove of Odu (Igboḍu). (Photo by M. T. Drewal)*





7. *The blindfolded children for the first time enter Ig-bodu, a constructed sacred space where they will be given a rebirth. (Photo by M. T. Drewal)*

[Afterward] you will see them very neat in a new world (plate 8). They have gone through a rebirth. You see those dirty people—after they have gone through the ceremonies, undergone the hardships, difficulties, up and down the hills—you will see them now in a joyful and established world. They have now been prepared, and they have their Iken Ifa [their personal set of prepared palm nuts], their guide in their life, which will be leading them. If you see them today you will know that they have been properly established in a progressive life in which they can continue their journey on earth. They have survived difficulties; they have been trained in the inner part of Igbotu; they have seen the emblems; they know more about the ancestors. You have to know about your past. They know their past.

If a person is prepared and established well on earth, he will return home joyfully to continue his journey on earth. The oracle says, if you can sustain the agonies of life, you will progress. The result will be success. You will have the joy of life. You will have something to report. On the return, we sing, “we are coming from the rebirth land joyfully, all in white and with true and open minds.” And everybody will see what we mean by Itefa.

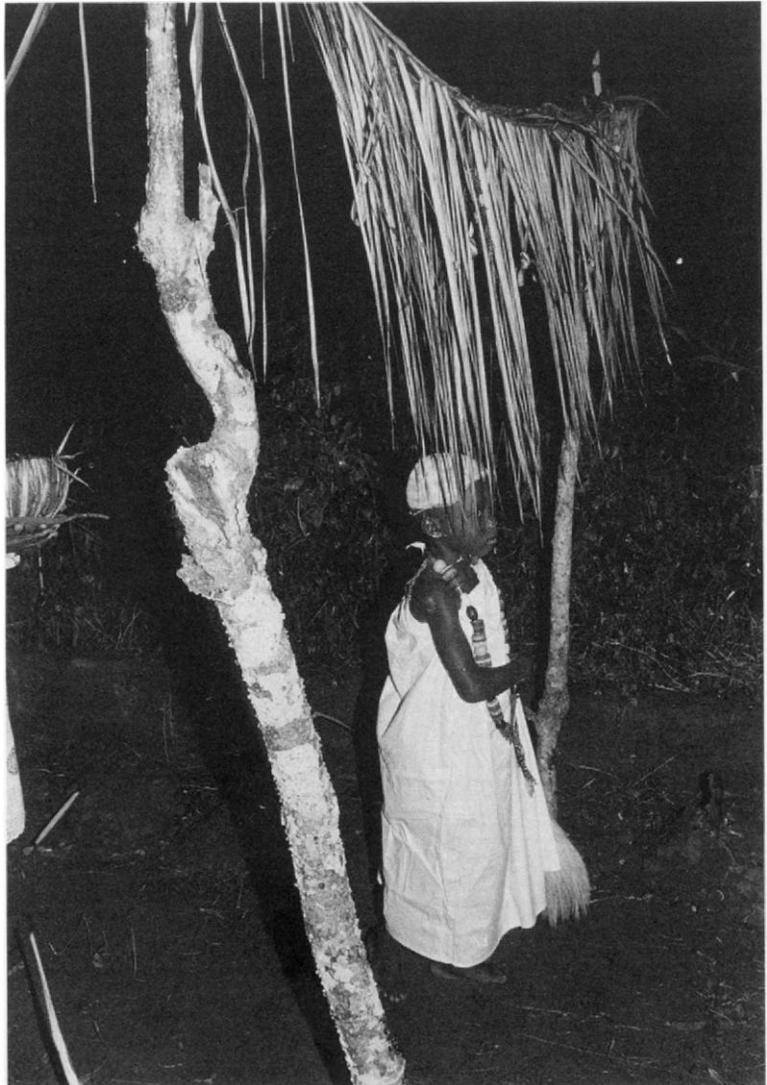
Girls have their own ceremonies, which represent Itefa. We call it *Itude Ifa* [*tu ide Ifa* means “break the Ifa bracelet”]. Women don’t go through Itefa, but they have a similar ceremony, which they do to prepare themselves for a progressive life.

You would find it difficult to accept Ewo [taboos that come with one’s Odu Ifa, often specific foods] when you have knowledge of them too late. Perhaps you have been eating them up until 1981, when you should have been told that you should not have eaten such food at your induction age,

at a very early age, even before you started eating anything. If you have gone through these rituals at an early age, your parents would never have to introduce these Ewo to you [that is, later in life]. But when they come so late, that means things have not been done properly. This is the fault of parents who fail to perform the rituals at an appropriate time. And if you go through these ceremonies as an adult, it is usually for a reason. Maybe you have had some difficulties. We try to educate people that you cannot induct yourself, or establish yourself in life, when you are already being disturbed, when you already have difficulties, when most of your life has been in ruins. You go through it [in adulthood] only when you have some stain on your life.

We are now telling our leaders that the youth who are coming should be prepared well right from the beginning. The parents should take the responsibility to induct or initiate their children into life right from the word

8. *All in white, a newly re-born child returns through the gate to Igbodu properly established for a progressive life. (Photo by M. T. Drewal)*



go, right from birth—within the first seven days, before they even know who the child is. You may be a king, you may be a hunter, but instead of following hunting, they may just throw you in the United States of America to learn filming or videoing. Then afterward you may be a good potato eater, but you may find it difficult to eat potatoes. And your life continues to get stained, stained, and it is a problem for the whole community.

A child at an understanding age will go through *Itefa* to be established well. We can also establish an organization well through a similar process, not necessarily *Itefa*. We can start inducting people into the government, or an establishment, or an organization in a similar way in order for them to know more about the business, to know more about the employer and the employees, and their relationships. They have to gain knowledge of the work, the knowledge of their mission, where they are going, the obstacles and the challenges.

It is not necessary that we continue to offer goats or rams as sacrifices. We can even do something more concrete to our own world, something more concrete that is appropriate to the organization. The sense is that we must have the knowledge of what we are going to do and know what, and what not, to do. What are the appropriate resources? You don't just go and install an Islamic teacher as the Minister of Finance. Well, it is inappropriate. I am sorry. Or, in an organization, you don't just take a fundraiser and make him the managing director when he has not gone through the training of management.

So we can bring ritual into business and government if we really know the essence of the culture and follow it up. You know there is now a gap we are trying to bridge, to close, in order to see that it doesn't extend. Because the more it extends, the more we lose, and the more we will continue to ask the question, "Then how do we start?" But now that we have learned something of our destiny, or mission, and carry on to induct and establish ourselves well and train ourselves with vigorous activities appropriate to our own organization, or way of life, then we can borrow from other cultures if it is related to our own way of life. And things can then get on well. And future generations can also be brought up properly right from the word go.

Notes

1. Transcription of a lecture at the United States Information Service, Lagos, Nigeria, 25 November 1986. The audience was primarily Nigerian—students, professors, businesspersons; there were also some expatriates present.
2. *Ifa* is the name of the system of divination. *Orunmila* is the name of the deity/Orisa in charge of that system. To say "Ifa says" is a way of saying, "the divination texts, in a broad sense, say . . ."

Kolawole Ositola is a seventh-generation *Ifa* priest and diviner practicing in the *Ijebu Yoruba* town of *Imodi*, *Ogun State*, *Nigeria*. One of his current research interests is the traditional *Ijebu Yoruba* religious calendar. *Ositola* has lectured on religion and ritual practice at *Obafemi Awolowo University* and the *United States Information Service, Lagos*. He is also a consultant with *F.A.B. Longe and Associates Management Consultants, Lagos*, advising on the incorporation of traditional values into contemporary Nigerian business practice.