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# Expository Study Guide

WINTER 2019

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**ORISA LIFESTYLE:  
EXPOSITORY STUDY GUIDE**

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EXPOSITORY STUDY GUIDE**

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Obafemi Origunwa, MA

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Orisa Lifestyle Academy  
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## **Dedication**

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This Expository Study Guide is dedicated to the Yoruba scholars who will further the cause of high quality research methodology for many generations to come. My intention is to point you in the direction of academic excellence as a pathway to religious and spiritual development.

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## **The Holy Odu**

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Ifa is the matrix of all Yoruba indigenous knowledge systems. The Ifa literary corpus, called the Holy Odu, consists of 256 parts subdivided into verses called *ese*, whose exact number is beyond calculation. Each *ese* contains historical, medicinal, behavioral, scientific, spiritual and social directives for helping to bring about the Good Condition.

As a member of the Orisa Lifestyle Academy, you now have access to four Expository Study Guides every year. Each Study Guide is replete with analysis, lesson outlines, activities and verse by verse exposition of selected Holy Odu.

Discussions are short expositions of life challenges, based on actual cases taught in Ifa temples. They allow students to apply conceptual material to real-world situations. In all, each study guide is about 30 pages and functions as a template for bringing the Holy Odu to life.

In this edition, our lessons will touch upon Ori, the supreme divinity, whose influence is greater than that of any Orisa.

## **Unit I: Ori, the Supreme Being**

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This unit is on Ori. It consists of twelve lessons, which correspond to a four month study schedule.

LESSON 1: Sango  
LESSON 2: Oya  
LESSON 3: Obatala  
LESSON 4: Esu

## LESSON 1

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### The Holy Odu OgundaMeji

#### Selected Text:

1. *Orunmila said, "One always bends down when entering the doorway."<sup>i</sup>*
2. *Ifa asked the question, "Who among you could follow your devotee on a distant journey over the seas?"<sup>ii</sup>*
3. *Sango<sup>iii</sup> answered that he could follow his devotee on a distant journey over the seas*
4. *The question was asked of him, "What will you do if after travelling for a long distance*
5. *Walking and walking,*
6. *You arrive at Koso<sup>iv</sup>*
7. *The home of your forefathers?*
8. *If they prepare gbegiri<sup>v</sup> soup,*
9. *And they prepare amala<sup>vi</sup>*
10. *If they offer you orogbo<sup>vii</sup>*
11. *And a rooster?"*
12. *Sango answered, "After eating to my satisfaction, I will return to my home."*
13. *Sango was told that he could not follow his devotee on a distant journey over the seas.*

# Sango's Challenge

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## Lesson 1: Sango

### INTRODUCTION

Even though the Orisa are all endowed with great, universal powers that are recognized and venerated the world over, Olodumare created an entity that has an even more powerful influence upon human destiny. That entity is called Ori, which represents one's personal divinity. In praise of Ori's influence on human success, Yoruba elders will sometimes say, "*Ori-inu eni nii ba nii s'aye eni*", or "One's ori-inu makes his life for him."

Additionally, the position of maximum spiritual elevation and perfection is called Ori Apere. It is the pinnacle of human existence and represents the total optimization of human character, ability and purpose. As such, it is safe to say that Ori Apere is attainment of the highest spiritual maturity. For this reason, it – more than any other theological principle – is synonymous with destiny itself.

The Holy Odu IreteOfun teaches us that Ori Apere is total and complete fulfillment. So, when you are aligned with Ori Apere you actually transcend the mysteries of Òrìsà<sup>1</sup>. Personal Priesthood is the discipline by which you optimize the power of Ori in your day to day life.

### Lesson Outline

- A. The inquiry: Lines 1-2
- B. The response: Line 3
- C. The challenge: Lines 4-11
- D. The failure: Lines 12-13

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<sup>1</sup> Origunwa, Obafemi. The Fundamentals of Orisa Lifestyle. Pg 123  
**Expository Study Guide** **Winter 2019**

Obafemi Origunwa, MA  
**Verse by Verse Exposition**

**THE INQUIRY**

Orunmila said,  
“One always bends down when entering the doorway.”  
Ifa asked the question,  
“Who among you could follow your devotee on a distant journey over the seas?”

The structure and function of Orunmila’s riddle: Because the traditional Yoruba doorway tends to be low, and thus requires most adults to have to bend down to enter, Orunmila begins his lesson by stating the obvious. However, implicit in Orunmila’s statement is a deeper lesson that says, one must demonstrate humility in order to benefit. That is, if you are outside – unprotected and without provisions – but wish to come inside – to be protected and nurtured – you must humble yourself first. Orunmila then uses his statement of the obvious as a foundation for testing the wisdom of his students, the Orisa. His question, whose answer seems just as obvious as Orunmila’s initial statement, is playful and cunning in its simplicity.

**THE RESPONSE**

Sango answered that he could follow his devotee on a distant journey over the seas.

Sango, who is known for his boldness and strong leadership, is quick to declare himself capable of the task at hand. This is the case, in spite of the fact that the journey might even include a trip over the seas. Symbolically, this represents entrance into completely unknown territory, which might require a variety of skills and resources that have never been needed before. Still, Sango remains confident.

## **THE CHALLENGE**

The question was asked of him,  
“What will you do if after travelling for a long distance  
Walking and walking,  
You arrive at Koso  
The home of your forefathers?  
If they prepare gbegiri soup,  
And they prepare amala  
If they offer you orogbo  
And a rooster?”  
Sango answered,  
“After eating to my satisfaction, I will return to my home.”

Next, a scene is set, wherein Sango has accompanied his devotee for a very long distance. You might imagine as well that Sango and his devotee already had some experiences and on occasional adventure along the way. Symbolically then, the idea of “Walking and walking” means that they have exerted themselves and depleted their resources. A very simple question is asked. It brings Sango’s favorite offerings into focus, as well as the opportunity to enjoy them in the comforts of his home kingdom, Koso.

Koso is Sango’s power base. His authority is maximized in that place. Upon arrival in Koso – presumably weary and depleted – Sango knows he will be offered all of his favorite foods. Especially after he has exerted himself, it is certain that Sango would not miss the opportunity to stop, refresh and recharge.

## **THE FAILURE**

**Sango was told that he could not follow his devotee  
on a distant journey over the seas.**

Sango is governed by the laws and codes of his source. It is precisely that which empowers him that compromises Sango’s ability to focus exclusively on the journey of his devotee. Consequently, Sango cannot complete the mission.

**Obafemi Origunwa, MA**  
**HISTORICAL TEACHINGS**

Koso is a subsidiary division of **Oyo Ile** (Old Oyo Kingdom). Old Oyo was the capital of a vast empire, ruled by the **Alaafin**. Anyone who occupies the Alaafin's throne must descend from **Oranyan**, who is the founder of Oyo Kingdom. Oranyan himself was the youngest son of **Oduduwa**, who is the founder of Yoruba palace culture. The Alaafin literally means 'Lord of the Palace' and Sango is the paramount palace divinity.

In order to govern its vast empire, Oyo developed a uniquely complex palace organization. Beneath the Alaafin were three eunuch chiefs: Otun Iwefa, Ona Iwefa and Osi Iwefa, who administered religious, judicial and political activities, respectively. More specifically, the Otun Iwefa managed the Sango priests. The Ona Iwefa settled disputes between vassal kingdoms. The Osi Iwefa represented the Alaafin in public.

The Otun was the most influential of the three Iwefa. On one hand, he commanded the Ilari, who were the Alaafin's messengers. The Otun also commanded the Ajele, who were the Alaafin's resident overlords. They were sent out from the capital into the vassal kingdoms. Likewise, devotees from those same kingdoms came to the capital for Sango initiations and instruction by the Mogba priest at the royal shrine of Koso. Between the duties of the Ajele and the Ilari, the Otun maintained general order and compliance with Oyo rule, based largely on the Alaafin's imperial administration and Sango's spiritual authority.

**QUESTIONS**

1. What is the significance of Sango volunteering first?
2. Why are attributes, such as bravery, courage and boldness important to us as people?
3. What is the importance of Sango walking and walking, then reaching the land of his forefathers?
4. What is the meaning of Sango being offered all of his favorite foods upon arrival at Koso?
5. Why is it impossible for Sango to refuse to take refuge at Koso?

6. Why is it important for us to recognize Sango's conflict of interests?

### **PRACTICAL POINTS**

1. Humility and patience will enable you to recognize the obvious.
2. Strength without wisdom is a great weakness.
3. That which makes one strong also creates liabilities.
4. You must acknowledge the limits of power and act accordingly.

### **RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION**

1. Why is it sometimes easier to act without contemplation and planning?
2. Does the presence or possession of power cloud one's judgment?
3. How do you reconcile the difference between what you feel capable of and what the situation calls for?
4. What difference does it make in our lives and relationships that we sometimes over-commit, based upon our perceived capabilities?

### **HEART OF THE LESSON**

Every day, we are challenged to rise to the occasion and fulfill our responsibilities. We must take care of ourselves, meet deadlines at work, tend to our children and comply with the laws of the land. Strength and courage are defining characteristics of personal leadership and self-efficacy. These are the kinds of attributes for which Sango is known.

At the same time, however, there are very real limits to power. And when you overlook those limits and focus too heavily upon the ways in which you think you can demonstrate your power, you will exceed your capacity and ultimately fail. This is precisely the kind of hubris that Orunmila sought to reveal and the Orisa did not hesitate to help Sango to see the error of his ways.

### **DEVOTIONAL OUTLINE**

**Obafemi Origunwa, MA**

1. What does Sango's example mean to you?
2. What is the wisest action for you to take in your life as a result of this message?
3. How can you carry out this action consistently?
4. Why is it important to you?

### **AGE-GROUP EMPHASES**

**Children:** Encourage children by telling them that Sango shows us the importance of practicing patience and strength together. Explain that Sango wants them to learn from his example and to pray to him for strength and patience.

**Youth:** Ask the teenagers to think deeply about the importance of loyalty and to recall how challenging it is to be loyal to more than one person, group or cause at a time. Tell them to call upon Sango and associate only with people lead lives of divine purpose.

**Adults:** Emphasize to the adults that learning and growth never end. Explain to them that Sango represents the need to balance ambition with wisdom. Tell them to reassess and intensify their commitments to that which is truly empowering. Show them how to venerate Sango and learn to embody his attributes.

**Elders:** Ask the elders to recall moments in their lives and in the lives of others when ambition preceded calculation. Invite them to revisit the lessons learned from such experiences. Request that they make prayers and offer insights into ways that the adults, youth and children might embody the best of Sango's wisdom, for the betterment of the family as a whole.

## LESSON 2

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### The Holy Odu OgundaMeji

#### Selected Text:

14. *Orunmila said, "One always bends down when entering the doorway."*
15. *Ifa asked the question, "Who among you could follow your devotee on a distant journey over the seas?"*
16. *Oya<sup>viii</sup> answered that she could follow her devotee on a distant journey over the seas*
17. *The question was asked of her, "What will you do if after travelling for a long distance*
18. *Walking and walking,*
19. *You arrive at Ira<sup>ix</sup>*
20. *The home of your forefathers?*
21. *If they kill a big animal,*
22. *And they prepare egbo<sup>x</sup>*
23. *Oya answered, "After eating to my satisfaction, I will return to my home."*
24. *Oya was told that she could not follow her devotee on a distant journey over the seas.*

## Oya's Challenge

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### Lesson 2: Oya

#### INTRODUCTION

Oya, the bride of Sango, is the Orisa of storms. She is restless, impatient and quick to anger. Oya is praised as **lya nsan**, meaning Mother of Nine. It is not coincidental that "nine" is pronounced *esan*, which means "It spins or turns." So, Iya nsan could also be read, Spinning Mother (i.e., a tornado or storm). Likewise, however, Oya favors justice, honesty and loyalty. Oya's wrath is typically directed towards those who have broken trust somehow. In this regard, *esan* suggests turning things with purpose. Thus, *fi ire sanre* and *fi ibi sanbi* mean to retaliate or pay someone back in their own coin. And so, the word *san* represents the principle of reciprocity, which is revealed in names like *Ilesanmi* (the earth avenges me).

Oya's symbols include: A pair of buffalo horns, An axe, known as *edun ara Oya*, Horse tail switch, *Bumu Oya* (a pot filled with water), *Kele Oya* (Oya's beads), *Pakata* (a calabash with cover), *Laba Oya* (a coarse cloth).

The Holy Odu OkanranMeji teaches us that Oya is the bride of Sango, who is more fierce than her husband. At the time of war, she rides into battle before her husband. So, because Oya's loyalty and commitment are matched only by her bravery, it is easy to understand why she was the first to avenge Sango when he failed to prove that he could accompany his devotee on a long journey, even across the seas.

#### Lesson Outline

- A. The inquiry: Lines 14-15
- B. The response: Line 16
- C. The challenge: Lines 17-22
- D. The failure: Lines 23-24

# Verse by Verse Exposition

## THE INQUIRY

Orunmila said,  
“One always bends down when entering the doorway.”  
Ifa asked the question,  
“Who among you could follow your devotee on a distant journey over the seas?”

The structure and function of Orunmila’s riddle: As before, Orunmila repeats his lesson that states the obvious and poses what seems to be a simple question. His question, whose answer seems just as obvious as Orunmila’s initial statement, is playful and cunning in its simplicity. It’s a perfect stage for testing the wisdom of his students, the Orisa. Additionally, now that Sango has failed, the other divinities will be eager to prove that they can do what the brave king could not.

## THE RESPONSE

Oya answered that she could follow her devotee on a distant journey over the seas.

Oya, is known on one hand, for loyalty to Sango. On the other hand, she is also fearless. So, it comes as no surprise that she is first to continue where Sango left off. The Holy Odu OgundaMasa tells us how Oya’s self confidence even caused her to challenge Sango’s authority. When a sacrificial ram was offered to Sango for uprooting the Obiri tree – from where the witches orchestrated total chaos in the town – Oya claimed rights to the head. The dispute was so severe that Sango had to concede the head to broker peace in his home. Symbolically then, Oya’s willingness to respond to Orunmila’s riddle represents her interest in not only vindicating Sango, but also in demonstrating her ability to supersede him in the face of unprecedented challenges.

**Obafemi Origunwa, MA**  
**THE CHALLENGE**

The question was asked of her,  
“What will you do if after travelling for a long distance  
Walking and walking,  
You arrive at Ira  
The home of your forefathers?  
If they kill a big animal,  
And they prepare egbo?”  
Oya answered,  
“After eating to my satisfaction, I will return to my home.”

Here, a scene is tragically familiar, wherein Oya has accompanied her devotee for a very long distance, just as Sango would have done. Once more, you might expect that Oya and her devotee would have met with some adventures along the way, which is implied in the statement, “Walking and walking.” It means that they have exerted themselves and depleted their resources. The same simple question that was asked of Sango is now asked of Oya. And like Sango, Oya must weigh the value of her favorite offerings, as well as the opportunity to enjoy them in the comforts of her home kingdom, Ira.

Ira is where Oya became deified. She is the most important Orisa there. Upon arrival in Oya knows he will be able to indulge in the best that the palace has to offer. Given the fact that she has become weary from travelling, it is certain that Oya would not miss the opportunity to stop, refresh and recharge.

**THE FAILURE**

**Oya was told that she could not follow her devotee  
on a distant journey over the seas.**

Nothing can change the fact that Oya is empowered by her sacrificial offerings. Not only that, in the same ways that she is loyal to Sango, Oya is equally committed to her descendants in the kingdom of Ira. Consequently, she must not neglect the opportunity to face them. And so, Oya’s obligations to her source also limit her ability to focus exclusively on the journey of his devotee. Ultimately, Oya cannot complete the mission.

## HISTORICAL TEACHINGS

Oya was defied by her people at Ira, where she is revered, both for her protection and for her loyalty to Sango. The founder of Ira was Laage, who happened to be the first Onira (King of Ira). Laage was a hunter who came from Oyo to hunt in the surroundings of Fere. In the Holy Odu, Oturupon Wonnifa, Ifa teaches us that the Onira was told to venerate Oya for triumph. A shrine was built for her at Igbo-Oya (Oya's grove), where people from far and near worshipped her every year. History tells us that Laage also disappeared into the ground just like Oya. The site where he entered the ground is at a place in Obada's compound, Ira<sup>2</sup>.

Oya is also associated with the Niger River, which is known as Odo Oya (Oya's River). According to Ifa, Odo Oya was formed when the king of Nupe (Northern neighbors of the Yoruba) had consulted Ifa in the time of war. He wanted to know how to avert disaster. Ifa told the king to acquire a black cloth and instruct a virgin girl to tear it in two. He elected his daughter for the task: **O-ya** (She tore it). When she dropped two pieces onto the ground, the black cloth turned into water, which spread out and began to flow around the circumference of the kingdom, forming an island and making the kingdom impervious to attack.<sup>3</sup>

## QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of Oya trying what Sango had failed to accomplish?
2. How are attributes, such as bravery, courage and boldness different when they are expressed by a female orisa?
3. What is the importance of Oya walking and walking, then reaching the land of her forefathers?
4. What is the meaning of Oya being offered all of her favorite foods upon arrival at Ira?
5. Why is it impossible for Oya to refuse to take refuge at Ira?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://oloolutof.wordpress.com/author/oloolutof/>

<sup>3</sup> Gleason, Judith. Oya, In Praise of an African Goddess. Pg 47

**Obafemi Origunwa, MA**

6. Why is it important for us to recognize Oya's conflict of interests?

### **PRACTICAL POINTS**

1. It is wise to learn from the mistakes of others.
2. It is better for people to think you are incapable than to act and demonstrate that you are.
3. That which makes one strong also creates liabilities.
4. You must acknowledge the limits of power and act accordingly.

### **RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION**

1. What do you think prevented Oya from denying that she would stop at Ira?
2. How does knowledge that Oya cannot accompany her devotee on a long journey without stopping affect your attitude toward Orisa devotion?
3. In today's world, many people follow false teachings and practice spiritual materialism. What causes people to choose false teachings over the truth?
4. How has your understanding and experience of spiritual truth changed since you started to practice Orisa Lifestyle?

### **HEART OF THE LESSON**

When you are really invested in something, you will naturally try to protect it. If it's your family, your work or your religion, you will not quietly stand by and watch your investment of time, money and effort slip away. Even if everything seems to indicate your failure, you will search relentlessly for the opportunity to protect your investment.

Yet and still, however, in spite of your commitment, there are laws that limit your ability to respond fully. Any attempts to exceed those limitations will prove futile. At times, you must accept that some things are beyond your influence. This is exactly the kind of humility that Orunmila sought to teach. Oya's cohort did not hesitate to help Oya to recognize this fact.

## **DEVOTIONAL OUTLINE**

1. What does Oya's example mean to you, personally?
2. What is the wisest action for you to take in your life as a result of this message?
3. How can you carry out this action consistently?
4. Why is it important to you?

## **AGE-GROUP EMPHASES**

**Children:** This lesson is good for showing the children the realities of compassion and protection. Encourage children by telling them that Oya wants them to learn from her example and to pray to her for loyalty and commitment.

**Youth:** Ask the teenagers to imagine as many comparisons and contrasts between the challenges of Sango and Oya.

**Adults:** Adults can be very protective of their investments. This lesson can help them to intensify their efforts if necessary, or accept the limitations of their abilities to protect.

**Elders:** Ask the elders to recall moments in their lives and in the lives of others when they were very loyal to and protective of their investments. Invite them to revisit the lessons learned from such experiences. Request that they make prayers and offer insights into ways that the adults, youth and children might embody the best of Oya's wisdom, for the betterment of the family as a whole.

## Lesson 3

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### Holy Odu OgundaMeji

25. Orunmila said that, on entering a room, one stoops down at the doorway
26. Ifa, the question is, "Who among the orisa can accompany his devotee on a distant journey across the seas without ever turning back?"
27. Oosaala said that he could accompany his devotee on a distant journey over the seas without turning back
28. He was asked, "What will you do after walking a long distance,
29. Walking and walking
30. You arrive at Ifon,
31. The home of your fathers
32. And they kill one hen, pregnant with eggs
33. And they take two hundred snails
34. Seasoned with vegetables and melon?
35. Oosaala said, After eating to my satisfaction, I will return home
36. Oosaala was told that he could not accompany his devotee on a distant journey over the seas without turning back

# Obatala's Challenge

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## Lesson 3: Obatala

### INTRODUCTION

Obatala is the original Orisa, after whom all others are named. He is venerable, patient and wise. Obatala is praised as **Orisanla**, meaning the Great Orisa. Olodumare, the Supreme Being, chose Obatala as his second in command. More specifically, Olodumare gave Obatala **Igba Iwa**, the Calabash of Existence, and sent him out into the universe in order to create. Thus, Obatala was integral to the formation of the earth and everything contained herein. Obatala is hailed as the **Alagbawi** (the mediator) because he approves human destinies and petitions Olodumare to bless our existence.

Obatala's symbols include: Opa Osooro (Staff of Salvation), Ajija (double gong), Awe (clay pot) and Eekan (straw mat). He is associated with Ala (white cloth), Efun (chalk), Ori (shea butter), Iyan (pounded yam), Igbin (snails) and Omi (fresh water, drawn at dawn).

The Holy Odu EjiOgbe describes Obatala's role as the earthly ambassador of Olodumare, who entrusted to him the Igba Iwa. Whenever there was confusion or distress in the world, Obatala would use the Igba Iwa to restore balance and harmony<sup>4</sup>. Juxtaposed against Sango and Oya's inability to solve Orunmila's riddle, it is easy to understand why Obatala decided that it was now time for him to prove that he could accompany his devotee on a long journey, even across the seas.

### Lesson Outline

- A. The inquiry: Lines 27-28
- B. The response: Line 29
- C. The challenge: Lines 30-38
- D. The failure: Lines 39

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<sup>4</sup> Adewuyi, Olayinka Babatunde. Obatala, the Greatest and Oldest Divinity.  
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Obafemi Origunwa, MA  
**Verse by Verse Exposition**

**THE INQUIRY**

Orunmila said,  
“One always bends down when entering the doorway.”  
Ifa asked the question,  
“Who among you could follow your devotee on a distant journey over the seas?”

By now, in its third phase, Orunmila’s riddle has become a bit redundant. Surely, you can easily predict what is to come. Still, as restates the obvious and poses what seems to be such a simple question, you cannot help but wonder if this time, the results will be different. After all, Sango was impatient and Oya was merely seeking to avenge him. But Obatala, with his gentle disposition and venerable personage, is entirely different from either of them. So there is a chance that he will do something that they could not. Once again, the stage is perfectly set for Orunmila to test the wisdom of his students, even Obatala.

**THE RESPONSE**

Obatala answered that he could follow his devotee on a distant journey over the seas.

As one who possesses Igba Iwa, Obatala starts to guide and support the human condition even before birth. He is the one who grants every soul one eternal blessing on the journey towards earthly incarnation. The Holy Odu OgbeOgunda teaches us of a time when death was determined to eliminate all human beings in one fell swoop. It was Obatala who prevented the calamity. Olodumare had given four eggs to Iku (Death) and four to Obatala. Iku entrusted his to Obatala while he went on a sixteen year journey. While he was gone, the eggs hatched and human beings emerged. When Iku returned and demanded his eggs, Obatala explained what had happened. In response, Iku promised to kill all of the humans who had hatched from his eggs. Obatala disagreed and a heated argument ensued. They took their dispute to Olodumare, who determined that Iku could

only take those whose time had come. In this way, Obatala protected the lives of those who Iku wanted to kill indiscriminately. If he was willing to confront death and furthermore negotiate with Olodumare on behalf of humanity, it is not hard to understand why Obatala felt compelled to accept Orunmila's challenge; surely, he could accompany his devotee on a long journey, even across the seas.

## **THE CHALLENGE**

The question was asked of him,  
"What will you do if after travelling for a long distance  
Walking and walking,  
You arrive at Ifon  
The home of your forefathers?  
If they kill one big hen, pregnant with eggs  
If they offer you two hundred snails  
Seasoned with vegetable and melon soup?"  
Oosaala answered saying,  
"After eating to my satisfaction, I will return to my home."

By now, the scene is set for a sense of bewilderment that approaches despair. Without details of what they might possibly experience while "walking and walking," you again are left to contemplate the range of things that might happen. As with Oya and Sango, you can imagine that Obatala and his devotee could meet with some difficulties along the way. You might even add the variable of time into the equation: What if it had been decades since Obatala had been properly fortified? Under conditions like those, Obatala would rightfully have to stop at Ifon to have his power renewed once more.

Ifon is where Obatala is the palace deity. His oriki (praise poetry) repeatedly makes reference to Obatala's importance at Ifon, where the people wear white clothes to honor him. After traveling so extensively, we might imagine Obatala's immaculate white cloth becoming sullied. He would be looking eagerly forward to regaining access to clean, white cloth for himself.

**Obafemi Origunwa, MA**  
**THE FAILURE**

**Obatala was told that he could not follow his devotee  
on a distant journey over the seas.**

Obatala possesses the Igba Iwa, which is the sum total of good destiny and fortune. In this regard, Obatala is associated with the very concept of fulfillment. However, said fulfillment does not exist in a vacuum. The wellspring of Obatala's abundance is at Ifon, where he is venerated as Orisa Olufon, the Orisa Who is Lord of Ifon. The base of Obatala's power becomes amplified there. So, in order for his resources to be renewed, he must return to Ifon, where his influence is at its zenith.

## HISTORICAL TEACHINGS

Olufon, who is the father and progenitor of the **Ifon** kingdom, is regarded as the first child of Obatala. According to tradition, the first Olufon left Ile Ife and consulted Ifa for direction. Ifa directed him to establish a kingdom wherever he saw plenty weaver birds on a tree with mushrooms growing underneath. In Yoruba, the place was described in this way: '*ibi ti **olu** ati eye eega **fon** si*'. Thus, the title 'Olu-Ifon' means 'mushroom spread'. It is now the title bestowed upon the King of Ifon (i.e. the Olufon of Ifon).

When Olufon left Ile Ife, the first settlement he and his entourage established is called **Ifon-Ega**. Later, they moved to **Ifon-Erin**. Then, they moved to a place called **Ifobale**, which is where every Olufon's descendant is buried until the present day. In the time of **Obalufon Alayemore**, and **Olaosa Aladikun** there was a kingship dispute. According to tradition, Obalufon Alayemore, who was the eldest of the two, should have ascended the throne. Instead, however, his younger brother Olaosa Aladikun was chosen to rule. When his elder brother refused to relinquish power, the young prince migrated to another place and established his own kingdom, **Ifon Omina**. The elder maintained rulership over the kingdom **Ifon Orolu**.

A highly significant mythological account describes a time when Obatala left Ifon in order to visit his friend, Sango in Oyo kingdom. **Osalufon** (as Obatala is called in Ifon) went to consult Ifa regarding his interest in visiting Sango. In spite of Ifa's advice against it, Osalufon maintained his intention to go. Ifa went on to explain that he would encounter great suffering on the journey but that he must neither complain nor reject any opportunity to serve.

As predicted, Osalufon quickly was called to service. He met Esu at an intersection just outside of town. He had a pot of palm oil beside him and asked Osalufon to help him hoist it onto his head to carry. Osalufon agreed to help Esu. But in the process, the oil spilled and soiled his white cloth. Osalufon was forced to return home and change. When he

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returned, Esu was there with an even bigger pot of palm oil. Again, and again, they repeated the episode. Each time, the pot got larger and Osalufon got messier until finally, he refused to help Esu. In response, Esu angrily splashed Osalufon with palm oil.<sup>5</sup>

Osalufon continued the journey with his clothes stained with palm oil. He was on the edge of Oyo when he found a beautiful white horse, which he knew belonged to Sango. As a friendly gesture, he decided to bring the horse to the palace and announce his arrival. Unfortunately, the palace guards discovered Osalufon before he arrived at the palace. They accused him of stealing Sango's horse and locked him in the dungeon, where he remained for many days without recognition.

Gradually, Osalufon became upset. Many times, he thought to curse Sango and his kingdom. But then he remembered Ifa's advice to him and crouched silently in his cell. As he sat, brooding, Osalufon's despair became a dark cloud over Oyo kingdom. When matters became unbearable, Sango went to consult Ifa. He was told that someone was being unjustly punished in his dungeons. When Sango arrived and saw Osalufon, his usually immaculate, white garments sullied by palm oil and dungeon filth, he was so embarrassed. Immediately, he threw himself to the ground before Osalufon and commanded that he be released.

When you see the extent to which Obatala was compromised when he left Ifon kingdom, it is easy to understand why he might be eager to return there after a long journey.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Why do you think Obatala said he could complete the mission after seeing Oya and Sango fail?
2. What is the significance of an elderly deity undertaking such a risky challenge?
3. What offerings did Orunmila list would be given to Obatala?

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<sup>5</sup> <https://oloolutof.wordpress.com/author/oloolutof/>

4. What term does the verse use to emphasize the importance of Obatala's homeland, Ifon?
5. How does the idea or the reality of a homeland relate to our contemporary lives?
6. What do you learn from Obatala's failure?

### **PRACTICAL POINTS**

1. It is wise to learn from the mistakes of others.
2. It is better for people to think you are incapable than to act and demonstrate that you are.
3. That which makes one strong also creates liabilities.
4. You must acknowledge the limits of power and act accordingly.

### **RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION**

1. How does the history of Ifon kingdom impact your understanding of Obatala's role in the story?
2. What do you consider the significance of Obatala's relationship to Esu in the story of Obatala and Sango's horse?
3. In school, at work and in the society at large, many people will pursue goals and practice values that are inconsistent with their wellbeing. What causes people to choose what is not good for themselves, in spite of the evidence?
4. In your experience, what is the power of choice in Orisa Lifestyle?

### **HEART OF THE LESSON**

When you are really invested in something, you will naturally try to protect it. If it's your family, your work or your religion, you will not quietly stand by and watch your investment of time, money and effort slip away. Even if everything seems to indicate your failure, you will search relentlessly for the opportunity to protect your investment.

Yet and still, however, in spite of your commitment, there are laws that limit your ability to respond fully. Any attempts to exceed those limitations will prove futile. At times, you

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must accept that some things are beyond your influence. This is exactly the kind of humility that Orunmila sought to teach. Obatala's cohort did not hesitate to help him to recognize this fact.

### **DEVOTIONAL OUTLINE**

1. What does Obatala's example mean to you, personally?
2. What is the wisest action for you to take in your life as a result of this message?
3. How can you carry out this action consistently?
4. Why is it important to you?

### **AGE-GROUP EMPHASES**

**Children:** This lesson is good for showing the children the importance of lifelong learning. Invite the children to consider that Obatala wants them to be good students of life and to pray to him for patience and reflection.

**Youth:** Ask the teenagers to recall as many instances in their lives wherein adults and elders are actively seeking out opportunities to learn, develop and grow.

**Adults:** Adults can be very reluctant to learn new things. This lesson can help them to intensify their curiosity and focus on taking calculated risks.

**Elders:** Ask the elders to recall moments in their lives and in the lives of others when they were very willing to try what seemed impossible. Invite them to revisit the lessons learned from such experiences. Request that they make prayers and offer insights into ways that the adults, youth and children might continue to learn, take on new challenges and serve as examples for the community at large.

# Esu's Challenge

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## Lesson 4: Esu

### INTRODUCTION

Esu is the most ubiquitous of the Orisa. He can be found anywhere and everywhere. He is impetuous, paradoxical and gluttonous. Esu is praised as **Elegbara**, meaning the Powerful Load Bearer. Olodumare chose Esu as the messenger of the divinities. More specifically, Olodumare gave Esu **Ado Isubi Isure**, the Gourd of Manifestation, and made him the dispenser of divine justice. Thus, Esu was endowed with the power to turn or invert any circumstance from favorable to unfavorable and vice versa. Esu is hailed as the **Latopa** (Wealth that can be compared to light) because he reveals spiritual providence through his wiles and ruses.

Esu's symbols include: Ado Asubi Isure (Gourd of Manifestation), Ere (special beads), Kunmo Esu (club/baton), Obe Esu (curved knife), flute. He is associated with red and black cloth, yangi (laterite stone), carved image with two faces.

The Holy OwonrinSogbe describes Esu's role as the Orisa who bears sacrifices, which has prompted a saying; '*ẹni tó bá rúbọ ní Èṣù ńgbẹ*' meaning that 'whoever offers sacrifice is favored by Èṣù.' Each time one consults Ifa – and by extension, any form of Yoruba divination – it is Esu who activates the divine word by carrying the sacrifices and dispensing them to the appropriate forces. When negativity is impending, it is Esu who uses sacrifice to neutralize it. When positivity is coming, it is Esu who uses sacrifice to empower it. At the same time, however, when one fails to sacrifice, it is the same Esu who will turn a blind eye to one's situation, allowing calamity to consume the entire environment.

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Once, Esu wanted to become king of Ijebu Ode. One day, he appeared in the town, and used his shape-shifting abilities to disguise himself as a wealthy traveler. He asked to spend the night in the king's palace. The king welcomed the stranger and fed him hospitably. Before going to sleep, Esu gave the king a wooden box, which he said contained an irreplaceable treasure. He asked the king to have the box safeguarded during the night. When everyone was asleep, Esu set fire to the palace.

As soon as the thatched-roof was aflame, he cried, Fire! Fire! Before the king's servants put out the fire a large section of the palace had burnt down. The mysterious box deposited by the stranger was consumed by the flames. Esu called witnesses before the king to prove that he had deposited a huge fortune with the king, and demanded compensation. He became more and more aggressive and threatening, and as the king was unable to raise such a huge sum of money, the only way in which he could finally satisfy his issue was to seat him with the throne.

In another instance, Esu decided to destroy the palace of a king who had never sacrificed to him. First, he went to one of the king's wives who had been neglected by her husband and said, 'If you can bring me some hair from your husband's beard, I shall make you a charm that will turn you into your husband's favorite wife.' Then he went to the king's eldest son, who was his co-regent, but who had to live in his own palace, unless he would become tempted to seize power from his father. Esu said to him, 'The king is going out to war tonight. He wants you to assemble all your warriors and meet him at the palace tonight.'

Finally, he went to the king and said, 'One of your wives is so jealous of her younger co-wives that she has decided to kill you tonight. You had better watch out!' The king pretended to be asleep during the night. He saw his wife approach with the knife. She really wanted to cut a few hairs from his beard, but he thought she wanted to kill him. He jumped up and seized the knife. They argued violently with each other. The son had just arrived with his soldiers. He heard the screams and ran into his father's room. He saw the knife in his hand and he thought he

wanted to kill his mother. The king saw the son with the warriors and thought he wanted to usurp the throne. There was total confusion and many people died in the massacre. So when Orunmila posed the question, '*Ta lo to Alasun ba r'okun?*', if anyone could accompany his devotee on a long journey, even across the seas, it must surely be Esu.

**Lesson Outline**

- E. The inquiry: Lines 40
- F. The response: Line 41
- G. The challenge: Lines 42-48
- H. The failure: Lines 49-50

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**Verse by Verse Exposition**

**THE INQUIRY**

**Ifa, the question is; “Who among the Orisa could follow his devotee on a distant journey over the seas without ever turning back?”**

Here, we have reached the fourth iteration of Orunmila’s riddle. By now, the outcome is certain, in spite of the fact that the new protagonist is arguably the most formidable of all the deities, who is Esu. And so, your mind will naturally be drawn into thinking about the scope of his powers. Somehow, your hope and belief in a resolution will prompt you to contemplate the many ways in which Esu might turn the situation around and prove his superiority over the others. Sango, Oya and Obatala are no match for Esu! In fact, they all depend upon him to create opportunities when all roads seem closed. Therefore, there is a very real chance that he will accomplish what they could not. Once again, the stage is perfectly set for Orunmila to test the wisdom of his students, particularly that of his trusted companion, Esu.

**THE RESPONSE**

**Elegbara answered that he could accompany his devotee on a distant journey over the seas without ever turning back.**

As the owner of Ado Asubi Isure, Esu has the unique ability to invert any circumstance. He is the one who throws a stone today and hits a bird yesterday. Esu is known as the man who was so short that he was barely as tall as a blade of grass. If not for his enormous tuft of hair, which stood several feet tall, he would not be visible at all. At the same time, he was so huge that he could not fit into his house. He could not even fit on the verandah. It was not until Esu found a walnut shell that he could finally stretch out comfortably. Esu is the embodiment of paradox. Therefore, nothing is beyond his capabilities.

## THE CHALLENGE

He was asked,  
“What will you do if after travelling for a long distance  
Walking and walking,  
You arrive at Ketu  
The home of your fathers?  
And they give you a rooster  
And plenty of palm oil?”  
Elegbara said,  
“Once I eat to my satisfaction, I will return to my home.”

Any possibility for a twist in the plot has now been dashed on the rocks. Sango, Oya, Obatala AND Esu have each taken on the challenge to accompany their devotees on a long journey, even across the seas. Before even embarking upon the journey, however, each of them has admitted their inability to bypass their ancestral homelands and forego their favorite foods.

Ketu is where Esu is the palace deity. His oriki (praise poetry) repeatedly makes reference to Esu’s importance at Ketu, where he is hailed as *Oba nile Ketu* (the king of Ketu). So, as it was with the previous Orisa, it is not difficult to see why, after traveling so extensively, Esu would jump at the opportunity to stop at Ketu and revitalize himself.

## THE FAILURE

**Esu was told that he could not follow his devotee  
on a distant journey over the seas.**

Esu is the exclusive owner of the Ado Asure Isubi. As a result, he is uniquely empowered to invert reality and act with impunity. In addition, Esu is a consummate trickster, who delights in making mayhem, even when carrying out the most sacred missions. No Orisa would dare defy him, for fear of suffering grave consequences. That is, all the Ajogun – sickness, death, loss, litigation, witches, wizards, etc – are his henchmen. Failure to comply with his whims is guaranteed to invite the worst type of

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trouble. At the same time, however, Esu is an Orisa. He is the most trusted companion of Orunmila himself. All blessings are extolled onto humanity and the divinities alike, according to Esu's great empathy (i.e., his oriki tell us that, when we cry tears of water, Esu cries tears of blood!). Therefore, he is associated with paradoxical reality, whereby two things that would apparently seem to contradict one another go together perfectly. That being said, Esu is not beyond the power of his source. The driving force behind his abilities is at Ketu, where he is venerated as Oba nile Ketu (the king of Ketu).

## HISTORICAL TEACHINGS

The kingdom of Ketu was founded by **Shopasan**, who was the grandson of Oduduwa. The tradition teaches that a single group left Ile Ife and split into three: The first group, led by Shopasan, went west and founded **Ketu** kingdom; the second went northwest, and then south and founded the kingdom of Shabe; the third group went north and founded Oyo kingdom. When Shopasan died, his nephew, **Owe** ascended the throne.

During the reign of **Ede**, the seventh king, there was another migration. Like the original, the group split into three; one founded the **Idofa** village; the second settled in **Ibarapa**; the third party, which was led by **Alalumon**, went on to found present-day Ketu kingdom. The journey is reenacted whenever a new **Alaketu** – king – is installed. A highly significant mythological account relates how, on the first night that the entourage arrived at Ketu, Alalumon borrowed fire from an old woman named **Ya Panka**.

The name Ketu is an abbreviation of the proverb, which says, *Ketu ike? Ke fo ilu?* “Who can straighten the back of a hunch back? Who can break our city?” The story is as follows: The main gate is said to stand upon the place where the migrants first entered the site of the new capital. A hunchbacked weaver was already living on the spot when the immigrants from Ife arrived. He was used as a sacrifice, because, just as it is impossible to straighten the back of a hunch back, it is impossible to break the city.

## QUESTIONS

7. Given the way the other three Orisa had failed, how did you think differently about the fact that Esu was attempting to meet the challenge?
8. What, to you, is the significance of Esu undertaking such a risky challenge? How is it similar or different from the others?
9. What offerings did Orunmila list would be given to Esu?

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10. What is the name of Esu's land and what does the name mean?
11. What do you consider the most important value of having a homeland?
12. What do you learn from Esu's failure?

### **PRACTICAL POINTS**

5. Repetition helps emphasize key lessons.
6. Diversity helps to create multiple perspectives.
7. When you examine a single lesson from various perspectives, it's easier to remember.
8. The more you remember, the easier it is to apply the lessons.

### **RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION**

5. How does the history of Ketu kingdom impact your understanding of Esu's role in the story?
6. What do you consider the significance of Esu's relationship to the kings in the stories?
7. Hubris means excessive pride or self-confidence. What do you think is the significance of the Orisa demonstrating hubris?
8. Talk to three people about the progression of the story – but only up to this point, especially if you know how it ends – and listen to their first impressions. How do their perceptions differ from and align with yours?

### **HEART OF THE LESSON**

The format and structure of the story lends itself to a particular kind of learning opportunity. That is, the patterns, repetition and changing content work together to allow you to anticipate certain events, as well as remember some of your own thoughts that you may have had earlier in the story.

So, going forward, take your time to observe the actual sequence of events. Consider them a filing system to learning about the Orisa, where they're from and what they like.

## **DEVOTIONAL OUTLINE**

5. What does Esu's example mean to you, personally?
6. What are some paradoxical situations in your life today?
7. What are some ways you define the paradox?
8. How does this perspective influence the way you experience the situation going forward?

## **AGE-GROUP EMPHASES**

**Children:** This lesson is good for showing the children the importance of cunning. Invite them to consider that Esu wants them to be creative thinkers and eloquent speakers. Tell them that Esu would like them to pray to him for innovativeness and courage.

**Youth:** Ask the teenagers to recall as many instances in their lives wherein they see opportunities that others do not. Write a list. Continue to revisit it weekly and track the opportunities.

**Adults:** Adults, as they mature, learn to recognize paradoxes more and more. This lesson can help them to be more mentally flexible and look for opportunities to involve others in the available options.

**Elders:** Ask the elders to recall moments in their lives and in the lives of others when they had to accept certain paradoxes. Invite them to revisit the lessons learned from such experiences. Request that they make prayers and offer insights into ways that the adults, youth and children might continue to learn, take on new challenges and serve as examples for the community at large.

## Notes

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## References

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**Abimbola, Wande.**

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<sup>i</sup> The doorway to many traditional Yoruba homes is low. In order to enter, one must

<sup>ii</sup> A long journey, far away.

<sup>iii</sup> Sango is the orisa who governs thunder and lightening. He is regarded as the boldest of the orisa.

<sup>iv</sup> Koso is a city in Old Oyo Kingdom, where Sango ruled as Oba, king.

<sup>v</sup> Gbegiri is a black-eyed pea soup.

<sup>vi</sup> Amala is a dough-like food made of yam flour. It is used to eat soup, much like Ethiopian injera bread.

<sup>vii</sup> Orogbo is a bitter kola nut, sacred to Sango.

<sup>viii</sup> Oya is the wife of Sango. She is regarded as being as fierce as her husband and is known to lead him into battle.

<sup>ix</sup> Ira is Oya's homeland, believed to be in Nupe territory, to the north of Yorubaland.

<sup>x</sup> Egbo is a food made of cooked and mashed maize.