

# **Ewe Orisha**

A treatise on the role of plants in the Yoruba Religion

Oduwafun  
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This work is dedicated to the memory of Baba Alafia Oluo Shango Dei Otura Meji Renard Simmons, my Baba Tobi in Ocha, the first African- American Oriate; Ibaiye, Baiye Tonu.

## Introduction

In this treatise the importance of plants (ewe~ Yoruba, vititi finda~ bi-kongo, yerba-Spanish) in the Yoruba Religion is discussed. Much that will be said here will be based on Lydia Cabrera's book *El Monte*. There is much in this work about African Religion and philosophy and about the feelings and knowledge of the Black African peoples in the diaspora and especially in Cuba.

Persistent in the minds of black Cubans, with astonishing tenacity is the belief in the spirituality of the Mountain (el Monte (Sp), woods, bushes, forest, wilderness). In the rain forests of Cuba, as in the rain forests of Africa there resides the same ancestral divinities, the powerful spirits which even today as in the days before are feared and venerated and whose hostility and benevolence depends the success and failures of mankind.

The blacks that venture into the forest feel a presence of spirit and the forces of nature which penetrates deep into their hearts. A direct contact is established with supernatural forces. They are in its domain when in the forest. These spirits are invisible and sometimes visible and the presence of God is felt:

“And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said here *am I*. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from thy feet for the place whereon thy standest *is* holy ground.” Exodus (3:4-5) as so with the Jews, Christians, and Muslims, so this is how the blacks feel when entering El Monte. “The forest (woods) is sacred” for in it resides, living, the divinities. “The Saints are more in the Monte than in the heavens.”

“Generated from life, we are sons of the Monte because life began there. The Saints were born in the Monte and our religion was also born in the Monte”, so says an old yerbero (Sp.- a santero priest who studies and uses herbs). Everything one finds in the Monte, the fundamental of the cosmos. All that one asks from the Monte, the Monte gives all. “We are sons of the Monte” for them the Monte is the equivalent of the Earth and the concept of universal mother, the fountain of life. Earth and El Monte are the same.

There are the Orishas: Elegua, Ogun, Ochoisi, Oko, Aye, Chango, Obatala and the Eggun: the dead, the ancestors, Iku, Ibbayes. It is full of the dead, the defunct. The dead go to the “manigua” (woods, Cuban Sp).

In the Monte all is supernatural. It is the domain of the spirits. Certain spirits attach themselves to certain trees, certain bushes. Certain spirits, good and evil attached themselves to certain herbs. It is important to know the law and the rules established in the Monte. In Cuba these laws were taught to the criolles by the old Africans. In order to receive help from the Monte you have to know how to enter the Monte. The Igbo (Yoruba-monte, bush, forest) is like a temple. The whites go to Church to ask for what they don't have, to ask Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary or whatever celestial saint. You must go to god to attend to your needs, because without the help of God what can man do? The creed of Black Africans, as spoken in *Olodumare God in Yoruba Belief*: “In All Things Religious”. Now the blacks go to the Monte as the whites go to church, because

the Monte is full of the Santos and the dead, to ask them for all the things we lack, for our health, and our affairs. And as one enters a Church with respect, one must enter the Monte with respect.

The Monte encircles essentially all that the blacks need for their magic in order to conserve their health and well being. All that is necessary to defend themselves from whatever adverse forces. Notwithstanding in order to take a plant or stick or stone it is precisely necessary to pay respect by giving rum, tobacco, money, prayers, and on certain occasions the blood of a rooster in order to have the right to take what you want. Within the Monte each bush, leaf, tree, herb has its owner and own attributes. It is necessary to have courtesy. If you do not greet or pay the Monte it will become angry.

“No hay Santo sin Ewe”, there is no Orisha (God, spirit) without plants. Trees and plants are endowed with a soul, intelligence, and will, as is all that is born, grows, and lives under the sun. “Wasn’t Jesus born in the monte on a heap of herbs and in order to go heaven to become god didn’t he die in the monte, Mount Calvary? Always walking and putting himself in the mountain. He was a ‘yerbero’”. Each plant has a virtue of an Orisha, a supernatural force. The medicines are living in the monte.

The root planted in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century is maintained firm and vigorous. The blacks in Cuba have not stopped being less African. They have not been able to renounce nor to forget the secrets taught to them by their elders. In Cuba, like Haiti, some parts of Venezuela, Brazil, and many parts of the Diaspora, the blacks have maintained their African traditions and customs.

The first slaves were bought to the United States in 1619. The slave masters were Protestants, not Catholics as in the rest of the Americas. In the US the slaves were approximately 15% of the population. In Cuba they were 60%. These two facts lead to the reality that slavery in the US was the harshest of all the slave systems in the new world. Families were split, persons tortured. All groups of slaves were divided and tortured. The Protestants denied the slaves any religion, even their own Christianity. The first Black Baptist Churches started in 1774 and only started to grow at the turn of the nineteenth century. After the Stono Slave Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739, the whites in the US fearing similar rebellions passed the Negro Act which denied Blacks the right to assemble, read, and to make money and gave whites the right to kill rebellious slaves. At this time whites also denied the use of African drums in the slave communities fearing that the slaves could communicate with the drums and fearing that the slaves would gain spiritual and physical prowess from the drums. In all other parts of the diaspora: Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, Puerto Rico, the Caribbean West Indies, and the Dominican Republic, the African drum has survived, but in the United States the African drum has no presence, no existence in popular Afro-American music.

Also the Catholics, because of the clash with the Protestants during the Reformation which was taking place in Europe, treated the slaves as new converts to Catholicism with a soul and a humane spirit. On the other hand Protestants treated the slaves as nothing but inhumane property. As a result the slaves in the US were denied their African heritage

and memories of past African heritage were erased from the minds of the slaves. A new race of people was created called the American Negro, with no memory of their past or their ancestry. Malcolm X once said that the two most important studies in college were, economics and history. Economics to understand the system which suppresses us and history to know who we are, where we came from, and what has happened to us. Max Roach the famous Jazz percussionist who has worked with Charlie Bird Parker, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Coleman Hawkins, and Bud Powell, once said that Blacks in the United States are the only people in the world who do not have a country of origin, and who do not have an original language or second language. Italians come from Italy and speak Italian, Chinese come from a known place in China and speak Cantonese or Mandarin or some other dialect. American Blacks come from somewhere in Africa (but where?) and their ancestors speak what language? The Spanish poet, philosopher George Santayana once said “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

In Cuba, due to the large numbers of slaves compared to the whites, the slaves lived together undivided and unbroken, the slave masters allowed the formation of cabildos, social houses, where the slaves could come together and maintain their original traditions from Africa. And the blacks in Cuba have continued to faithfully maintain their old magical practices and keep returning to the monte directing themselves to the primitive natural divinities which their ancestors adored and bequeathed to them. These spirits are living, lodged in stones, seashells or in the trunks or roots of trees. The black Cubans continued to speak, many fluently, their original African tongues: Yoruba, Ewe, Fon, Efo, or Bantu bi-Kongo. Felipe Garcia Villamil, an elder from Matanzas, Cuba, who is a Santero, Palero, Oriate, Emikeke Olu Anya Bioyo once said, “I am half Cuban, half African,” and then with a machete oriented vertically in front of him said, “the division is this way” and then with the machete oriented horizontally in front of him said, “not this way”. The Yoruba Religion, Santeria, originates from Nigeria, but in Nigeria it is subdued by Christianity, and Islam and for most of the populace it is ignored. In Cuba it almost a national religion, with almost everyone embracing it and practicing it. During the Cuban revolution in the 1950’s the revolutionaries in the mountains of Cuba used drums and the practice of Congo Palo Religion and being so inspired, attacked the Batista government forces and defeated them. Similarly in Haiti during 1791-1804, the slaves employing African drums, Vodou, and Palo, violently and brutally fought the white French slave masters, expelled them and won their independence.

### **The Owner of the Monte, Oluigbo; the Owner of the Forest; his origins**

Osain is the Yoruba Lucumi divinity who is the owner of the monte. Loko is the Vodun equivalent in Haiti, and Gurunfinda Andudu Yamaca Butanseke is in Congo Palo. All vegetation, all plants, every living thing that is green belongs to Osain. He knows *all* the secrets of the herbs and plants.

In Cuba and Haiti Osanyin is syncretized with the Roman Catholic saints, San Silvestre, St. Joseph. He is also associated with San Roman non-Nato because Osain has no mother or father. He appeared, and was not born. He comes from the earth. Just like the herbs,

here is the son of no one. San Roman non Nato (of no birth) was cut from his mother's stomach after her death, hence the name. "All the Saints are yerberos, osainistas, but the incontestable owner of the herbs, the medicine, the botanica, is Osain."

Osain has a single foot, the right, a single arm the left, and a single eye, a really big ear through which he hears, absolutely nothing. The other ear is very small and which is so sensitive, it hears everything, even the most distant and most silent. It hears the running of an ant or the sound of a distant butterfly. He has a big melon head with one huge ear, the other very small, one eye, and one leg on which he hobbles along.

There are several myths which talk about the creation of Osain:

One says he was created in heaven and thrown from the cosmos to the earth and landed deep in the rainforest. Living there for many years he learned the secrets of all the plants.

In another, (Cuba), Osain knew all the secrets of the herbs and as such all the Orishas would come to him make their magic potions. One day, Oya, the spirit of the wind, came to him to make a potion and she brought him some rum and tobacco so that he would acquire the herbs. He agreed and went into the bushes and told her not to follow him. He then started walking and drinking and smoking. As he walked he started getting intoxicated and he started thinking of Oya and how beautiful she was and how he would like to have her. He then collected the herbs and brought them to Oya. He asked Oya to take a drink and she reluctantly agreed and took just one swallow. Osain interpreted this as a sign of commitment and forced himself on her. She started to scream and walking nearby was her husband Shango, the god of thunder and lightning. He ran to her aid and saw what was happening. He then called upon lightning to strike Osain in the left foot, and it was severed from his body. He then called upon another bolt to strike his right arm and his eye. They were gone. Osain fearing more harm retreated into the woods and he was left permanently disfigured.

In another version (Cuba): Osain was mad at Orula, the Yoruba god of divination. Orula was not involved at all, not caring much about anything. Osain was working bad magic against Orula and Orula didn't know what was going on. Orula then consulted with Shango to find out what was going on. Shango divined and came up with a magic formula for Orula to do to find out who his enemy was. Take twelve pieces of cotton and twelve thunder stones (Yoruba-edunn arra). Light them and then you will know who your enemy is. As Orula was invoking the work which Shango said, Osain was in the forest looking for herbs to do Orula harm. Just as Orula started invoking, two rays of lightning fell from the sky and hit Osain and thus he lost his leg, arm, and eye. The Lightning started two fires which caused Osain to become held captive. Orula heard the screams and ran toward the fires and saw whom his enemy was.

Another version from Nigeria, in the holy Ifa ordun Okanran Turupon, the ordun in which Osain was born:

"It is through learning Ifa that one understands Ifa. It is through missing one's way that one becomes acquainted with the roads. One wanders here and there along a road he has never used before. Ifa was divined for Osanyin on the day Olodumare covered up a

calabash and invited Orumila to come and uncover it through Ifa consultation/oracle. Osanyin insisted on accompanying Orunmila, even though he was advised to stay behind because there would be trouble. Osanyin was adamant, however. Before they got there, Olodumare touched his wife's blood with a roll of cotton wool, enclosed it in a calabash, and place it on the mat on which Orunmila was to sit while consulting Ifa. Orunmila consulted Ifa and saw "Okanran Turupon." After the divination, Orunmila knew what was inside the white calabash and Olodumare praised him. Orunmila then asked Olodumare to make sacrifice with a dog and she-goat. Olodumare heard and agreed to sacrifice. Osanyin nervously joined Orunmila in collecting materials for the sacrifice. As he went out with them and was struggling to kill the dog, the knife he was holding dropped from his hand onto his leg and made a very big wound. Orunmila asked them to carry Osanyin to Orunmila's home. Orunmila healed him, but Osanyin could never use the leg for arduous jobs. Orunmila pitied him and gave him twenty Ifa leaves for each type of illness, to provide him with a source of income. Thus Osanyin became an herbalist."

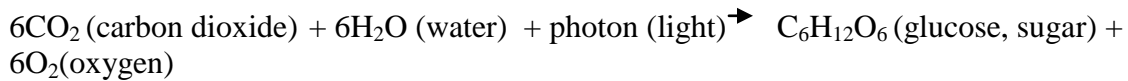
### **The Power of Osain**

Since Osanyin is the owner of all vegetation and green plants (it is estimated that there are about 400,000 species of plants in the world), of all the gifts, secrets and powers that Olofi, Olodumare, God has given to man, the *gift of Osain is the most profound*. Why is this so? What are the uses of Osain? As you shall see Osain has several important uses.

- 1) Osain as the captor of energy from the sun. The major source of energy to the planet earth comes from the sun. A small amount comes from the interior engine of the earth which results in volcanic eruptions and earthquakes; the majority of the energy manifesting itself on earth comes from the star called our sun. This energy reaches the earth and some is absorbed by the atmosphere warming it and creating the winds (Oya) and thunder and lightning (Shango). Some of it is absorbed by the land and the oceans warming the planet and creating our climate and ocean currents. The plants through the process known as photosynthesis capture the remainder. It is this process that is responsible for life and the progress of civilization itself. The energy which is necessary for almost all life processes (there are certain living organisms which live deep in the dark regions of the oceans which get their energy from a process other than photosynthesis called chemosynthesis), comes from plant photosynthesis.

All human and animal food comes from plant photosynthesis. The green leaves (chlorophyll) capture the sun's energy (light). This energy is then stored in the plant first as glucose, a sugar, and then the glucose can be transformed into other organic molecules (fats, starches, other sugars) which then can be consumed by living creatures. Thus plants are basis of all food. The energy which animals ultimately use in performing their daily tasks comes to them via plants from the sun.

The photosynthesis equation (the Osain equation):



All fuels which man uses to heat his homes or drive and run his machines come from photosynthesis. The glucose created above, contains the stored energy that can be changed to a multiplex of hydrocarbons (compounds containing HxCy) and carbohydrates (compounds containing carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen) yielding wood, coal, oil, and gasoline. Fossil fuels: oil, coal, natural gas are nothing but decayed plants, heated and pressurized for millions of years. The energy which is contained in them is the energy trapped from the sun by green plants in photosynthesis. So that *all* the energy burning in our cars from gasoline is energy which was created by the sun and captured from sunlight by green plants. So all of these physical, chemical processes take place under the aegis of Osanyin.

- 2) Osain as the giver of oxygen (life). The photosynthesis equation represents not only the trapper of the energy from the sun, but also the maintainer of oxygen in the world. The union of carbon dioxide and water yields glucose, the storer of the energy, and oxygen. The oxygen which is needed by all life forms is continually being created by the green trees and vegetation in the world. Twenty percent of the oxygen produced by the world is produced by the Amazon rainforest. When one enters the Igbo, the Yoruba place for ceremonies, a place filled with fresh green ewe, plants that will be used in these ceremonies, one feels invigorated, refreshed, inspired, strong, a feeling that all wrongs will be righted, that bad will go away and good will come. This is partly because the plants are creating fresh oxygen, and dispelling it into the air giving life and strength to the environment.

Looking at the Osain photosynthesis equation. On the right side there is  $\text{O}_2$  and  $\text{C}_6\text{H}_{12}\text{O}_6$ .  $\text{O}_2$  is oxygen, air which is an attribute of Oya. Oya is the goddess of the winds and air and since she is the goddess of air, she is the goddess of life, for all living things depend upon air to breath to have life. As she is the goddess of life she is likewise the goddess of death, because when one stops breathing, one dies. She is the owner of the cemetery, the gates to and the entrance to the cemetery. She presides over funerals and is the only Orisha that can dwell with the eggun, the spirits of the dead. Oya is also called Yansa, Iya mesan which means the mother of nine because Oya gave birth to nine children (Odu OsaMeji). The last of these children was Eggungun, who represents the spirits of the dead. So Oya has a close connection with death. When people are dying too much and too often, Oya is invoked, prayed to and played to, in order to stop the dying. Oya controls death. Oya is represented by  $\text{O}_2$ . As air comes from the plants, so Oya is connected to Osain. Oya in a negative light is the hurricane and the tornado, air gone wild. Oya in Yoruba means it tears, it rips. Osa, (Yoruba) means he/she/it runs.  $\text{C}_6\text{H}_{12}\text{O}_6$  is glucose and in it is stored, as chemical potential energy, the energy that was captured from light. In glucose is the energy that can be put to use for cellular functions or to burn gasoline. Shango is the representation of physical energy. He is associated with fire, his color is red, he is one

of the gods of war, and he represents male sexuality. He is the bravest warrior of the pantheon. Wherever he goes there is war, arguments, and discussions. Energy! Energy! The energy contained in  $C_6H_{12}O_6$  is a representation of Shango. It should be noted that in the second apataki for the disfigurement of Osain (Cuba) which talked of origin of Osain, there was Oya, Shango and Osain.

- 3) Osain as the cleaner of our air and atmosphere. The photosynthesis equation generates not only oxygen, but also depletes the air of carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide, a dangerous gas which if inhaled too much results in suffocation, is one of the major byproducts of burning and respiration. It is also the major greenhouse gas associate with global warming and climate change. Plants are called the ‘Lungs of our Planet’ because they take in carbon dioxide and exude oxygen. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (~early 1800’s) the concentration of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere has increased 30% and the average surface temperature of the earth has increased by one degree. Carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas which traps the heat radiated by the earth and reradiates it back to the planet causing the temperature to rise. Plants take about 12% of the  $CO_2$  and convert it  $O_2$  as such they are cleaning the atmosphere of unwanted pollution. Prior to the industrial revolution, the rainforests and plants were enough to offset the carbon dioxide produced by natural processes of animal and plant respiration. However with the recent onset of anthropogenic addition of  $CO_2$ , and the destruction of the forests and rainforest regions throughout the world, the situation is looking bleak, with the concentrations of  $CO_2$  steadily increasing. Green plants remove the pollutant carbon dioxide from the air, and give oxygen.
- 4) Plants are the natural food for mankind. In today’s modern era, humans are hooked on fast foods, meats, and all other garbage. Eating plants, vegetables, fruits are the best source of nutrition. Eating plants, vegetables, cooked and uncooked is the best choice; Salads, fruits, and nuts. Digestion is easier (meats, especially beef is very hard to digest), and diseases such cancer and diabetes are diminished, disappear and longevity and strength are achieved.
- 5) The medicinal value of plants. It estimated that the number of plant species on earth is 400,000. Currently, 121 prescription drugs sold worldwide come from plant-derived sources. While 25% of Western pharmaceuticals are derived from rainforest ingredients, less than 1% of these tropical trees and plants have been investigated by scientists. Aspirin, acetylsalicylic acid, is derived from the bark of the willow tree, opium from opium poppies led to the creation of morphines and codeine, and quinine from the bark of the South American cinchona tree. 3000 plants have been identified as cancer fight drugs. Twenty five percent of the active ingredients found in cancer fight drugs come from plants. More than 100 pharmaceutical companies are engaged in plant research to find new cures for infections and diseases. Most of this research is carried out by examining the practices of traditional shamans in the forest areas.

## The Spiritual Aspects of Osain

The Ceremony of the birth of a new Orisha: In Ocha and Ifa the birth of a new Orisha depends on the following factors:

- 1) Ewe
  - 2) Korin, (Yr. song), Oriki, prayer (Yr.)
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- 1) Ewe, plants: The Orisha live in plants. The domain of the mountain (el Monte), the forest (Igbo), the woods, the bushes, is the domain of the spirits, the Orishas. The 'igbo' can be the rainforest of Central America, Central Africa, a park, or a garden. The igbo can be a strip of grass, or a single tree. Anywhere there is green there is Orisha and spirits.

Each plant, tree, shrub, or leaf has attributes that refer to specific spirits. Some plants belong to the Orisha; some belong to the spiritual or eggun realm. Of the thousands of plants in the "igbo", it is the job of the osainista, to recognize the plants and to know which plant refer to which spirit. The osainista, on the pharmaceutical level, must know which plant will cure which sickness or disease and how to administer it. In terms of food, which plant is poisonous and which is safe to eat. The osainista should know all of these facts for the hundreds of herbs in his region.

In the ceremony for the creation of an Orisha, everything stops, nothing happens until then proper herbs arrive. "Si no hay yerba, no hay Santo". If there is no yerbs, there is no Orisha.

The Osain is the part of the ceremony where the herbs are prepared, special chants are sung in order to prepare the "omiero", which is the sacred juice which washes all evil away, and gives birth to Orisha. The herbs are prayed on, water is poured on herbs, and then special songs are sung. After the omiero is prepared all is ready for the Santo. I witnessed a similar ceremony among the Hausa in Northern Nigeria for a wedding ceremony. The Hausa are mostly Muslims, but the Maguzawa are the so called pagan Hausa who never converted to Islam, and who regard themselves as the original Hausa having retained their traditional beliefs. In the Maguzawa village, Marmora, Kano State, in preparation for the wedding ceremony late at night, herbs were brought into the compound, and a group of women then proceeded to pour water on the herbs and to crush them while chanting 'waka' (songs; Hausa). The resulting brew was then used to wash the new bride, bridegroom, the house where they would reside, and then sprinkled throughout the entire village. This was to ensure that wedding would be clean and all negativity would go and that good spirits would come. In that way the marriage would last long time.

Among the Hausa plants play an important role in their cultural traditions. Dr. Edward Powe, the erudite Black Linguist, once told me how a Hausa man pointed to a leaf in a certain tree and asked an associate to give fourteen stories pertaining to that tree and leaf. He told the associate, "Ba ka iya bame sha' hudu almara da wannan itace, Kai, ba Bahause ba. (If you cannot tell me fourteen stories relating to that leaf over there, then you are not a true Hausa man). "

## 2) Song, Oriki, prayer

The second element necessary to generate Orisha is song, Oriki, prayer; all of these three being synonymous. God lives in each of us. Every human being contains within himself the center of the universe. It is through the voice, through singing, oriki, and prayer that the spirit of God comes from the heavens and passes through the human body and expresses itself to the world.

The Bible says of the voice, Saint John (1:1): *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

Genesis (1:3) *And God said, Let there be light :and there was light.*

Genesis (1:6) *And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.*

I heard this about the voice from a young rapper. He said:

Rap is based on the voice. The voice is the most powerful force in the universe. With voice you can curse and cause fights and wars. You can lie and create deceit. With the voice you can also make *peace* and you can make *love*.

An old friend of mine from Harlem USA, told me that when he was a child on Sunday's he and his friends would go from storefront church to storefront church and listen outside to see which church they would go to that day. They would listen to the music and the singing to hear which was best. He said," If there ain't no good singing in the church, then there ain't no ashe (power-Yoruba) in that church."

Max Roach , the most famous Jazz percussionist in the world said, the first instrument is the voice, the second instrument is the drum.

In Erindilogun and Ifa the odun Obbara Meji (Cuba) (6-6) says of the voice:

"Orula went to then plaza to get food to give to the children of Obatala, but he was missing food to give to Baba, Obatala, so he bought the tongue of a cow and seasoned it very well. All of the invited guests arrived filled with delight and Baba arrived and asked for his meal. Orula answered that it was prepared and presented to Obatala the cow's tongue. Baba said thank-you and then asked Orula to give him that which is the best in the world, and Orula presented him with the tongue again. Orula said that with the tongue all good comes for with one can give 'ache '(blessings) and Obatala agreed. A little later Obatala asked Orula to make him another meal, one that contained the worst bad in the world. Orula went to the plaza and brought another cow tongue and cooked it just the same. When the time for the meal arrived and all were seated at the table Obatala asked for his meal. Orula presented him with the same tongue. Obatala was annoyed and even angered saying he had presented him with this same tongue which was best in the world. Orula quietly answered that he knew what he was doing. With a bad tongue (mouth) one

could disgrace a person and cause wars between nations. With a good tongue one could save humanity.”

In Hausa combat games: wasan Dambe (boxing), wasan Kokawa (wrestling), wasan Shanci (Magazuwa wristlet fighting), and wasan Shadi (Fulani ritual flogging) the voice is used in summing up strength and courage. The games begin with *take-take* which is a vocal invocation accompanied by drums whose purpose is to announce to the village that something special and wonderful is about to happen and that one should take care, come and watch. The contestants assemble into their perspective groups and the invocation of *take* makes reference to the different groups present. “A taho a mutu” (Come and die!), “A taho a daku” (Come and be struck down!). These are serious games because someone is going to get hurt before it is over. In Shanci, young boys ages 12-21, fight with sharp metal bracelets around their wrist and the fight is not over until someone is cut and blood flows. Deep gashes and large scars over the face, neck, and body are commonplace. Bravery is on sale here. Outsiders frown upon the scars on the young men as brutal, savage and primitive, but the local village young women look upon them with admiration and affection, as a sign of strength and bravery.

When one recognizes his *take* and takes up the call to fight, the person then recites a *kirari*, which is a spontaneous invocation whereby the fighter recites his history and his past deeds. In the *kirari* the person summons all his ancestors and all his spiritual protectors to help him fight. A Shanci warrior from Datsa, Nigeria, says one does not know what to say until the drums are playing. Another from Marmora says one does not learn *kirari*, but when the moment comes one will know what to say. The warrior trembles and is in a hypnotic, semi-possessed state. All those present, while listening to the *kirari*, feel the severity of the moment. Someone may die, or become seriously hurt. One feels the spirit of his ancestors and his protectors emerging from the ground, the air, and the heavens. In Yoruba parlance his Egguns comes. One senses the arrival of bravery and courage. It is the voice that is pulling the spirit. In karate it is called Chi.

In the folklore of the Mandinka people from Mali, Senegambia, Guinea, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Cote D’Ivoire, Upper Volta, Mauretania, and Sierra Leone there is the saga of Sundiata, the founder of the Mali Empire in the early thirteenth century. The history is transmitted *orally* by African griots (djeli in the Mande language meaning blood). Hear the djeli Mamoudou Kouyate from the village of Djeliba Koro in Guinea as told to D.T Niane :

*Griots know the history of kings and kingdoms and that is why they are the best counselors of kings. Every king wants to have a singer to perpetuate his memory, for it is the griot who rescues the memory of kings from oblivion, as men have short memories.*

*Kings have prescribed destinies just like men, and seers who probe the future know it. They have knowledge of the future, whereas we griots are depositories of the knowledge of the past. But whoever knows the history of a country can read its future.*

*Other peoples use writing to record the past, but this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not, feel the past any more, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice. ...The prophets did not write and their words are all the more vivid as a result. What paltry learning is that which is congealed in dumb books!*

*I, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyate, am the result of a long tradition. For generations we have passed on the history of kings from father to son. The narrative was passed on without alteration and I deliver it without alteration, for I received it free from all untruth.*

*Listen now to the story of Sundiata, the Na'Kamma, the man with a mission to accomplish.*

Sundiata was born a cripple and crawled on all fours until he was seven years old. He was ugly with a big head and big eyes; he was lazy and taciturn. His mother was descended from a buffalo and had a hump in her back and was so ugly. He was hated by everyone and avoided by children of his age; he was exiled from the kingdom at the age of ten. But Sundiata in 1235 founded the Mali Empire which was famous for trading, its abundance of gold, minerals, and for its center of learning in Timbuktu, Mali. While Europe was in darkness during the medieval period, the universities in Timbuktu, which were free, flourished in the learning of Islamic studies, mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography, and history. There was so much gold in the Mali empire (it had half the world's gold at the time) that in 1324 when Hajji Mansa Musa, Kankan Moussa, the grand-nephew of Sundiata, made his hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca, he was accompanied by nearly a hundred camels and thousands of peoples and he gave away so much gold that it took the economy of North Africa twelve years to recover from the inflation that resulted.

And so in Osain, there is a special group of chants which is reserved only for the herbs and which are sung to consecrate the plants, to pull the spirit of Osain from the ether in the air and to implant it into the omiero so that God can be born.

## **Ewe Osain**

Below follows a discourse of some the ewe growing in the local New York City area. The name in Spanish is given, followed by the scientific Latin botanic name, the English name, the Yoruba name (Lucumi), and then the Orisha that pertains to it. Those that can be found in the supermarket fresh vegetable section are so indicated. To view images of the herbs Google the Latin botanic name:

Alamo, (Ficus religiosa), Bo tree, Sacred Fig, Ofa (L). Shango. Ofa in Yoruba means arrow and the leaf is pointed and looks like an arrow. Many of Shango's herbs have pointed leaves: Alamo (Ficus religiosa), Caisimon (Pothomorphe peltata) Iguedi Ekuua (L), Ceiba (Ceiba pentandra) Silk Cotton Tree, Araba (L), Jobo (Spondias mombin) Abba, Okinkan, Wakika, Kinkao (L), Jagüey (Ficus membranacea) Fiapabba, Afoma, Uendo (L), Palma (Roystonea regia), Quimbombó okra (Hibiscus esculentus) Ila (L), Salvadera (Hura crepitans) Ewe Gunna, Aronica (L), Yagruma (Cecropia peltata) Iggi Oggudgu, Laro (L).

This tree is called the sacred tree because it is the tree that Buddha sat under to reach enlightenment. He is said to have meditated under it for six years. This tree belongs to Shango for certain. It is said that the first time the tambores (drums) were played to Shango, Shango-the orisha who owns the drum, it was under the Alamo tree. Many works can be done for Shango using this herb. When Shango is mad he can be quieted with this herb. When an agbo (ram) is sacrificed to Shango, a leaf of Alamo is placed in his mouth (odun Ifa Otrupon Bara). In the odun Ifa Osa Roso, Shango had closed the roads to Orunmila's house with Alamo, and Orunmila was not able to receive customers, and lost business. His wife, apetebi, told Orunmila that he had forgotten to sacrifice a ram to Shango. After doing this the road was opened up and everything was made clear for him.

Albahaca, (*Ocimum basilicum*), Basil (supermarket), Ororo (L). Azowano Babaluaye, Anya, Ochun, Yemaya, Oya.

Alta Misa, Artemisa, (*Ambrosia artemisiifolia*), Ragweed, Liniddi (L). Osain, Obatala, Babaluaye. This plant is everywhere. The name "alta misa" means high mass.

Anise, (*Pimpinella anisum*), anise (supermarket), Eweise (L) Ochiosi, Azowano Babaluaye, Oshun. Very aromatic, liquorice like.

Berro, (*Nasturtium officinale*), Watercress (supermarket), Oshun, Yemaya. Used to treat gastrointestinal disorders.

Bleo, Bleo Blanco, Bledo, (*Amaranthus viridis*, *Amaranthus Spinous*), Pigweed, a form of Callaloo spinach (West Indian supermarkets), Tete, Tete Tegun (L). Obatala. This plant grows everywhere, all over the world. There is a Yoruba proverb that says "there is nowhere where Tete does not grow".

In Ifa odun Irete-Obara:

*Kos'eniti apa Oba ko ka, kos'eniti Tete ko le te.*

*No one is beyond the king's rule; no one is beyond the impression of Tete.*

In the Regla Ocha, there is Ewe Odundun, Ewe dundun (*Kalanchoe crenata*) or its cousin Ewe abamoda (*Bryophyllum pinnatum*). It is called prodigiosa in Spanish, (prodigious in English meaning overly abundant; marvelous, wonderful), siempre viva, yerba bruja, and the leaf of life. Ewe dundun is regarded as the king of all the herbs and Tete is the second in command, his deputy: Oturupon Di:

*Oni e wijo, e ni Oturupon Di li o jebi. Ola e wijo e ni Ela kose aye rere. O*

*M'odundun se oba ewe. O mu tete se osorun re.*

*Today you complain that Oturupon Di is guilty. Tomorrow you will complain That Ela (Orunmila) is not managing the world well. He made odundun the king of all leaves and tete his deputy.*

Ewe dundun and Tete are some of the chief herbs of Obatala. Tete is one of the variations of Callaloo and can be used to prepare the African and Caribbean stew dish known by the same name. There is a story that relates to Callaloo (Kalalu):

Oba is considered the first and legitimate wife of Shango. Shango however liked Oshun because of her beauty, sexuality, and cooking skills. Oya was Oba's good friend but knew of Oba's interest in pleasing Shango. Oya also wanted Shango. She devised a treason plan. She convinced Oshun to lie and tell Oba that the secret to preparing Shango's favorite stew Amala was to use Tete (Callaloo) and in place of meat to substitute her left ear, in place of palm oil to substitute her blood. That way Shango would always listen to her and have her ear. She and Shango would be bound forever. So Oba immediately went home and cut off her ear and prepared the dish. When she gave it to Shango, Shango ate it and spit it out in disgust. He asked what this was and when he found out he banned Oba from his household. Oba was so embarrassed that she exiled herself to a cave to live a solitary life away from everyone. Oya then became Shango's wife. For this reason the orishas Oya and Oba should never be placed next to each other.

The song to Shango that relates of this is:

Amala , Kalalu mala mala (Yam stew with Kalalu, Yam stew)

Amala , Kalalu mala mala

Obinsa fun Shango mala, mala Kalalu (The Women give Shango Yam stew with Kalalu)

As this song is sung, the dance is danced as follows: you cover your left ear with your left hand and you hold out your right palm inside pointing up and you sway from side to side, chanting the chant. This mimics Oba covering her cut off ear and presenting Shango with the igba (bowl) of stew.

Bleo morado, (*Amaranthus cruentus*), purple pigweed, Tete (?) (L). Shango, Aganju, Oya. Looks like bleo blanco but is purple or redish in color.

Canutillo, (*Commelina*), Asiatic dayflower, Ewe Karodo(L). Yemaya , Obatala.

Cucaracha, (*Zebrina pendula*), Wandering Jew, Anai (L). Yemaya. Cucaracha in Spanish means roach, and its leaves look like the backside of a cockroach.

Espinaca, (*Spinacia oleracea*), Spinach (supermarket), Obedo, Ewe tutu, Ede(L). Oshun. Used to make ochinchin, Oshun's favorite dish with shrimp (camarones-Sp) (ede-L). Used to cover Oshun's relics and to refresh Oshun.

Helecho, Lecho de rio, (*Osmunda regalis*), Royal Fern, Imoshun, Imo, Iti ibu (L). Oshun. Grows along streams, lakes and wet meadowlands. Lecho de rio in Spanish means the bottom (bed) of the river.

Lechuga, (*Lactuca sativa*), Lettuce (supermarket), Ilenke (L). Oshun, Yemaya. To decorate and to wash the relics of the Orishas. Oriate can use it to perform ebo estera during Ita ceremony.

Llantén, (*Plantago major*), Common plantain. Obatala, Oduduwa. A major plant for Obatala that is a common weed.

Malanga, (*Xanthosoma sagittifolium*), Elephant Ears, Ewe Ikoko (L), Yemaya. This is a tropical plant, which has been seen growing in New York. It's very important in the ceremony of making ocha, in feeding Yemaya pepeye (duck), and in performing ebo of estera ceremony.

Manto, (*Coleus blumei*), Painted Nettle, Ochare (L). Oya, Aganju, Obatala. A beautiful plant used for decorating and washing Orisha relics.

Pata de gallina, (*Eleusine indica*), Crab grass, Wire grass, Ewe eran (L). Eleggua. The Spanish name translates as "the leg of a chicken" and the three branches of the end of the stem of the plant looks like the foot of a chicken.

Perehil, (*Petroselinum crispum*), Parsely (supermrket), Isako (L), Oshun.

Romerillo, (*Wedelia, Wedelia rugosa tenuis*), Ewe Oluo Agbere (L), Oshun, Obatala. A green plant with pretty little yellow flowers.

Salvia, (*Pluchea odorata*), Sweetscent, Salt-marsh, Fleabane, cattle tongue, Babaluaye, Odduwa.

Salvia, Salvia de Castilla (*Salvia, Salvia officinalis*), Sage, garden sage, Kiriwi(L), Babaluaye, Obatala.

Saúco, Sauco blanco, (*Sambucus canadensis*), American Elderberry, elderberry, sweet elder, Obatala, Oshun.

Seso vegetal, (*Blighia sapida*), Ackee, Akee, (West Indian super market), vegetable brain, Obatala. Seso vegetal in Spanish means vegetable brain. The fruit resembles a brain. Ackee comes from the Ashanti Twi language in Ghana. It is used in Ocha to cure insanity when fresh, ripe, not immature or overripe and the seed is removed. Otherwise it is venomous. "Cura la locura... y is se desea vuelve loco tambien". Cures insanity or can cause insanity. It is good for head rogations.

Verbena, (*Verbena officinalis*), Verbena, Ewe Orukan (L), Yemaya.

Verdologa, (*Portulaca oleracea*), Gbure (L), Purslane, Pigweed, Little Hogweed, Yemaya. For baths, omiero, to refresh the orisha Yemaya, and for luck.

Yerba fina, (*Cynodon dactylon*), Grass, Ewe Gbegi (L). Eleggua. This is the true herb for Eleggua, Eschu. Wherever there is grass, there is Eleggua.

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