

Obi



Ebora ki iko ebe fun obi.

“The gods never ignore what’s asked for with a kola nut.”

-Yoruba proverb

O Obi era tão belo que ficou abusado; que nem Deus lhe podia dizer que não.

“Kola nut was so handsome that he got full of himself; such that even God couldn’t tell him no.”

-Iyá Marinete Martins de Souza

Something I could feel but could not see, something precious and yet fearful that was always present there, kept apart from the hustle and bustle that dominated the rest of the house, in a room with a door almost always closed but always left unlocked and to which the people in the house showed a reverence, lowering their voices when walking near or placing their hand upon the door and making a silent prayer, waiting still within, inside it was as unrelenting as Rio de Janeiro’s summer heat was outside, as welcoming as it was obstinate. It was around eleven at night and Niluaiyê, an older daughter of the house, beckoned me to pass through the door now ajar and enter the Quarto de Xangô, the inner sanctuary of mighty Xangô, heroic god of thunder and lightning who was “o dono da casa,” lord of the house. I was being called to enter this room,

also called “Igbo Orisha,” the Orisha’s Forest, to “feed my head” for the first time. It was to be a ritual to help reinforce “what God gave you of Himself at your birth—your head” so that I could really begin my study of Candomblé, the Yoruba spiritual tradition as it has continued in Brazil since its arrival with enslaved Africans during the colonial period. It was an ancient legacy I was about give my head over to, dipping into a cultural and spiritual otherworld of distant African landscapes, palaces, and sacred forests, within a chorus of ancient, elder voices, while just a block away the smoggy 20th century roared by night and day, above through a noisy freeway overpass and underground in a heaving, overcrowded metro.

I’d been washed in a cool, sweet herbal bath and stood in spotless white clothes. It was 1987, sometime in December or January, full summer in Rio and, while it had cooled a bit from the torturous heat of the afternoon that had nearly caused me to collapse hauling heavy bags of produce home from the market bumping against my sweaty legs as I struggled on, following in Iyá Marinete’s indefatigable pace, the night still felt hot, muggy and oppressive. Only now, at nearly midnight, had a breeze begun to move gently through the house, moving slowly, easily like the long, thin bleached muslin skirts of the women preparing the ritual. They moved lazily, tired after a long day of work and with that ease which fills the hands of someone finishing a task they’ve done a thousand times before.

Feeling uncertain, odd in my white clothes which were a size too small and beginning to feel itchy from the aromatic herb bath I’d been given, my thoughts unclear if I really understood what was about to happen next, I could only accept the sense that I was on the verge of something sacred, something that would change my life inalterably.

Down the hall the women chatted quietly, giggling every now and then and, I can only assume, making a bit of fun of the cluelessness of the young foreigner who “looks Brazilian but isn’t,” who “speaks but doesn’t understand” their Portuguese, and who was more than a little bit nervous about the ritual he was about to undergo. As I sat wiping and re-wiping the sweat from my palms, no longer hearing the TV in the other room that squawked on and on, all of us were equally unconscious of the bold contrast between the women’s clothing, identical to the colonial clothes worn by plantation slaves during the 1700 and 1800’s, and the modernity of the electric lights and television. It all wilted together, seamlessly whole in the tropical night. I could hear the metro rumbling underground, horns and shouts in the streets, yet still a quiet seemed to overwhelm the house. Sandaled feet made hushed steps on cooling tile.

Xangô’s room was clean, thankfully cooler than the rest of the house, and bare of much furniture or any decoration, it now felt mysteriously un-

mysterious. There was an old trunk, a shelf full of folded linens, and on the floor, against a wall, was spread a mat of woven reeds covered with a clean white sheet. Niluaiyê had just finished sweeping and straightening things up. Through another, inner door leading into what appeared to be a closet of some sort I could see the amber flickering of lit candles, odd shapes in the shadows. The something I'd sensed before stood still further within, a force immobile, yet letting seep an enchantment as subtle and ungraspable as the breeze coming so thankfully in the night. This feeling emanated from the shrine kept by this community of poor and working class Brazilians with the contributions of a few wealthy patrons; it moved forth in the enthusiastic dancing and food I'd seen put forth in the big public rituals and was defined and delineated by the respect and rules followed by the intimate members of the house, learned slowly over the course of years, passively through absorption. I could hear footsteps, sandals being kicked off just outside the door. The cool, moist smell of stucco, tile, or brick seemed to hold this power and let its mystery linger like a scent...something sweet, spicy, and subtle. Sandalwood, vetivert, traces of detergent, mold or ammonia, I couldn't place it and only in my impatient boredom had I noticed it. At the time I could only peep around nervously, following my nose and leaning against the cool white wall. I watched a line of ants labor up the plaster. I wondered at the bare wires connected to the single burning bulb that illuminated the room with a powerful blaze; how could one bulb produce so much light?

The women came into the room, Iyá Marinete, the head of the house (who had inherited her charge from her father, Pai Jerônimo de Souza, the charismatic macumbeiro sorcerer turned orthodox Orisha priest who had founded the community decades before), now had me sit on the mat three times, allowing me to remain seated only on the third. She picked up a small white vase filled with water and a plate with some herbs, a pairing knife, and two of the obi nuts she had searched through the market to find earlier that day. Dragging me along through that heat, she told me of many things I didn't understand while I feigned comprehension of her colloquial Portuguese to make things easier. But the kola nuts fascinated me. Obi is what the people of Candomblé called kola nuts, this much I'd been able to figure out. In the market shops they looked kind of like giant peas or green beans removed from their pod. She'd picked through a whole bin of them, hunting for just the right ones, stopping randomly at stalls in the market that sold ritual supplies for the spiritual traditions common to the area, whose roots go back to West Africa brought over during the colonial slave trade: Umbanda, Candomblé, Caboclo, Cabula, Malê, Macumba. These names had caught my fascination just like the odd equipment, saint statues, and exotic looking seeds, herbs, pods, snake skins, animal horns, drums and bells displayed in the market. Precociously, I wanted to know all their mysteries; know the

purposes and the secrets of each magical ingredient sold like pharmaceuticals or precious stones by the shirtless men in the sweltering hubbub of the market.

I'd heard of kola nuts before. I knew that Coca-Cola got its caffeine from some kind of kola nut. My only previous reference to an actual kola nut was the TV commercial I thrilled to watch as a kid, promoting the "Un-Cola"—7-Up—featuring Jeffrey Holder's redolent Jamaican voice, "Theese are cola nuts. They grow here. They're used to make cola flavored soft drinks. Theese on the other hand are un-cola nuts..." While sitting in an obviously tropical setting...a macaw screeching in the background, palm trees popping up at his sides, and with a ceiling fan slowly turning overhead...in his large hands he held two kola nuts, the first and last time I'd ever see an image of them in my North American childhood.¹ Now I was eager to what Iyá Marinete was up to with these ones. Wondering what magical power they might hold, I imagined that they would be eaten ritually or offered up to some ancient spirit, or ground into some powerful charm. While much of the tradition of Candomblé with which I was to become intimately familiar with over the upcoming years would seem "natural" to me, arising out of a generic human urge towards devotion, evolution and spirit, some aspects of the tradition would remain forever exotic to me, as foreign, mysterious and compelling as Jeffrey Holder's nutty laugh at the end of the commercial. The kola nut provides a good example; while being a standard product of tropical West Africa and Jamaica its raw, unprocessed presence in my North American, twentieth and twenty-first century life would remain extraordinary, importing something from beyond the everyday and commonplace, like an fantastically plumed bird sitting on a perch.

Considering the care with which Iyá Marinete had selected them I knew that the kola nuts were important. Having made her choice of three or four fresher, plumper looking nuts Marinete made the kind of eyes at me that one would give when picking out fine sausage or particularly delicious pastries. I tried to ask her what they were for but she ignored my question, she just told me that one had to avoid picking ones with injuries or rot on them, and then handed the nuts to the unsmiling, splendidly mustachioed man behind the counter. I'd have to wait to get my answers.

And wait I would. And work. And yearn. Having started my friendship and study with Marinete in 1984, I was to spend the next thirty odd years of my life in and around the tradition of Candomblé, visiting Iyá Marinete many times, undergoing initiation as an olorixá, a priest, in the Candomblé de Ketu tradition, and changing the whole course of my college education, and consequentially my professional life, in order to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively learn the tradition. Only by gaining skills such as a workable fluency

in Portuguese and a grammatical knowledge of Yoruba, not to mention coming to understand and respect the sometimes incomprehensible manners and customs of this community, could I come slowly to learn many of the secrets contained in these funny nuts. I would find, through my years of study and practice of Candomblé, that Obi seeds held the tradition's most profound secrets, some of its most holy, deepest teachings which would, and only could be, revealed to me through years of slow, inductive study; mysteries I would find to not be secrets at all, but rather, seeds. Seeds that when planted in even what seems the *worst* of soil, (such as the tumult that was myself during most of those years), somehow manage to sprout and have a life of their own. Secrets, growing in their own form, in accordance with their own unique genetic code, nothing so much arcane or mysterious as resembling the invisible growth of trees. The miracle of fruit, shade, and rich forest air, the seamless transference of generations which I'd discover myself as a life that sprouts, unfurls, does its work, and which will then also fall to fade into mulch amongst a million trees that have grown, flowered, fallen, decayed to nothing before me, alongside me. While the Forest remains despite any comings or goings, growing since the beginning of time, all things passing in and out of its shade, however, its secret enclosure is complete openness. It was only my own, difficult personal growth that was a mystery and it was my own slow growth into maturity that has really allowed me to understand Candomblé and its kola nuts.

Such openness as a Forest, would and still does, elude me. Despite my study of Candomblé and its arcana, I was (and remain) as clueless as any. While I became very knowledgeable, early on, in the mechanics and technological aspects of Obi and other parts of Candomblé ritual, and while I could name and decipher Obi's signs without too much intellectual effort, still, the deeper, harder lessons of Obi would take years to break through the surface, to come out from the underbrush. Humility, the willingness to go through the mud not just for myself, but for others, and true hospitality, the willingness to give when I felt like I had nothing to give, these would take a longer, more difficult study to be revealed not just to me, but in me, through me. Such lessons and the vision they give are as easily lost and as difficult to find as the sense of a forest as oneself and of oneself as a forest. Coming to know life's trouble not just as trees, rocks and brambles blocking one's way, but as life itself...only with time, only going through it do we begin to comprehend, appreciating the slow growing of trees under sky and from the earth.

More pragmatically, I also came to find that by understanding what are considered "the basics" of Candomblé ritual, necessarily taught in the use of kola nuts, all the "essentials" of the tradition are shared almost off-handedly, without too much preoccupation, just like a recipe shared by cooks who cook everyday. In

these exotic seeds I would become acquainted with the immanent, casual everyday reality of the Spirit in our lives. I discovered that the theology of Candomblé is a household theology—mystic yet always pragmatic—simple, yet provoking a delicate, sensitive and intensely dynamic, balance between multiple actors and agendas; community, individuals, the world, the Spirit; a big sister feeding each of her siblings according to their needs while still getting laundry done before putting beans to soak and having the dishes done all before her mother gets home.

Walking beside Marinete that day in the market I felt like the Sorcerer's Apprentice...all ears and big eyes. I could only sigh when she stopped and bought two kilos of all too mundane yellow onions for the house. More to lug home...such a high price to win the mysteries!

Now, hours that felt like days after our trip to the market, starting the ritual somewhat clumsily and with some amount of nervousness herself, Marinete sprinkled drops of water from the small white vase on the floor and mumbled a prayer. The other women made occasional rote responses and clapped their hands seemingly half-heartedly, obviously in conformance with ritual protocol. I could tell that they were no longer speaking Portuguese but were speaking old African words; the liturgy of Candomblé was in the Yoruba language and its creole dialects as they survive in Brazil, used much like Latin in the Catholic Church or Hebrew in Jewish tradition. At some point Iyá Marinete grabbed one of the obi, using the pairing knife she split it open by parting its lobes, pulled out the little nib of a sprout, tossed the lobes about a couple of times on the plate. After a few more hurried throws, Iyá Marinete finally pronounced some mysterious words to which the other women made happy exclamations, clapping their hands all the while. She then stuck a piece of the obi in my mouth saying, "Chew it, but don't swallow." She watched me carefully.

Suddenly, the most horribly bitter taste hit my tongue and my mouth went dry of saliva. "Ackh!" It tasted sour, bitter and flat, like banana peels but with a vengeance. I was disappointed; I thought obi was going to be my friend. The women looked bemused, noticing my attempt to keep a pleasant face and stop myself from gagging. "He likes it!" one said. They began to laugh. Marinete hushed them, placed my right hand over my heart, and began to sing the praise songs to bless my God given head, opening the way for a less troubled future. The room became serious, solemn, and the women responded softly in chorus to the song.

Ori gbo obi lororu...

This head will receive obi tonight...

Gbaragada
Ori gbo obi nla okan
Gbaragada.

Spread open wide
Head receives obi opened from the heart
Spread open wide.²

This was my first experience of the inside of the Candomblé religion and, as I would see over and over again, it began and ended not only with opening up of the ritual kola nut and all its secrets, but with the opening of the heart. Over a long, and sometimes arduous, course of time with this quotidian, daily repetition of well-worn habit and procedure, the heart's limit is split to encompass what it thought it couldn't, so that gently with time and patience, a particular wisdom and generosity unique to the Orixá are insured in another generation's coming up through time and space, even if far away from the forests of ancient Africa. I would learn that while Obi is used left and right, in pretty much every significant ritual of Candomblé, they are imported, at cost, from the west coast of Africa, the distant source, the original and ultimate home of the mysterious and exotic Orixá that are Candomblé's everyday. And while Obi's taste was bitter like nothing I'd tasted before, like many of Candomblé's difficult lessons, its effect was invigorating, clarifying, and now lingers sweetly on my tongue. Even as the sweet wisdom of the Forest still waits, for each of us and all of us, its silence filled with bird song and the rhythms of leaves played by the wind, the often bitter roar of our lives on this planet arises from it and disappears within it.

Obi in Candomblé Liturgy

The botanical called Obi in Candomblé, (pronounced Oh-BEE in English), is named in the scientific taxonomy of Western science as *Cola acuminata*, Sterculiaceae and *Cola nitida*, Sterculiaceae. Different varieties have different purposes and uses. There are ones that look much whiter than others, these are called Obi Ifinrin, “Ivory Obi,” and are used primarily for Oshalá, called Obatala. Redder toned ones are used for other Orisha, ancestors, and a myriad of spiritual purposes. There are also Obi Gbanja, that only have two lobes and which are most common in Brazil; the four lobed Obi are imported from West Africa as that they don’t seem to grow in Brazil. In the past, Obi was chewed socially in the communities that practiced Candomblé as a refreshment, primarily for their stimulating effect, and, like most social drugs, Obi also has a much larger dimension than just its use as a pick-me-up. It has, as I hope to show here, a sacramental presence among the people providing a communion with what is holy in life, uniting gods and people.



Yet with Obi we can not only commune—blending ourselves with the living force that creates and sustains our life and in a unique awareness of it, both enriching our individual lives, that of our community, and entering into what feels like a deep harmony with this force, this Spirit, and thus the whole world it creates—we also remain split apart, individual, making our choices and speaking back to the Spirit. This spiritual force contained within and mediated by Obi is called, by the Yoruba people of West Africa and their descendants in

Brazil, Òrìṣà (spelled Orixá in Portuguese and pronounced Oh-ree-SHAH in English) and this communion with Òrìṣà was preserved in the culture and collective yearning of the old Africans carried to Brazil in the trans-Atlantic slave trade of the 18th and 19th centuries and is kept still in the contemporary life of Candomblé communities within their rituals in cities such as Salvador and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Through the study of this odd little seed that had Iyá Marinete on a veritable search and destroy mission that blistering afternoon so many years ago, and by understanding its place in Brazilian Candomblé liturgy, we can come not only value the heroic efforts of a people to preserve their culture against colonial cultural genocide but also to a fuller understanding of how *communion* is achieved and of how it heals, sustains, and liberates. By tracing its sprouting growth through history, across cultures and generations, from one mind implanted in its local concerns and preoccupations to another founded in yet another matrix of seemingly foreign thoughts and stories, we can know, like an herbalist does through practice, intuition, and *results*, the innate qualities for healing this sacred plant contains; we can become wiser of the Spirit with a knowing that is natural, integral, and transformative.

So in presenting the liturgy and theology of Candomblé here, using the rituals and stories of Obi as a focus, I want to emphasize the organic, growing, and palpable aspects of the tradition even as I delve into what for me, and many coming to Orixá from both within and without the African and Brazilian cultural contexts of the tradition, are often arcane and obscure factoids buried in dusty old books and seemingly dustier, old minds. Both of these sources protectively frustrated my newcomer's enthusiasm for years, taunting it to a deeper level of commitment and understanding. I hope to share with you here some of this labor as easily and as humanely as Obi was first shared with me in Marinete's house so many years ago. I also hope to share not only Obi as a sacrament, as a holy joining with the Divine, but also as a magical agent, as a tool; kola nuts are an herb, a medicine, and a way of making things better for ourselves in the world and, hopefully, making *ourselves* better for the world.

Candomblé: a World in a Seed—a Seed in the World

The worship of Orixá in Candomblé is the maintenance, recreation, and, if need be, the creation of, a dynamic and mutually beneficial balance between at least three inseparable elements of being: the individual self (called *emi*), the community (*egbê*), and what can be called the Spirit (*eledá*, Orixá). Our practice (Candomblé or *Esin Orixá*) seeks to foster “*alafia*,” (growth/well-being/peace), through the balancing of each of these elements in relation to each other, based in the assumption that neither of the three remains long without the other and that

the balance between them is dynamic, vital, and moves in a growing rhythm of continuous expansion. This expansion can be seen to also include phases of contraction, dissipation, friction, fracturing and entropy. Because of this dynamism the individual or community often finds itself bewildered or in pain and so seeks to find a new, more comfortable or sustainable balance with each other, the world around them, and the Spirit. The rituals, habits, and stories of Candomblé constitute a way to relieve pain and give certainty of continuity. They seek to develop a sense well-being to the individual and community, by shifting the flow of energy, *axé*, (sacred power seen materially in authority, resources, attention, care, affection, beauty, truth, etc.) between Spirit, community, and the individual, much like blood flows through the limbs of the body or sap rises through the trunk, branches, and leaves of a tree. Like all living beings this expansion of life begins with a “seed” and in the culture of Orixá this seed is called *Obi* and is considered to be a holy manifestation of Orixá in its own right, being named among the long lists of orixás, such as the famous *Ogum*, *Oxum*, *Oxalá*, etc.

Making offerings of water, food, and fire/light to the Spirit is a primary ritual in Orixá tradition. These common things are offered to the Spirit and shared between members of the community, and their implicit message is one of sustenance. In the offering of water the most basic of human needs is evoked and the Spirit’s presence is also made concrete: without water (Spirit) there is no life, it begins here, with water. By giving light, we are given illumination, shown a way forward. In the rituals of offering food we can feel that what is offered to the Spirit will reciprocally be given back to us by the Spirit; there is oneness in the gesture, an inherent give-and-take, such as a mother feeding her child. The ritual process is mirror-like, every ritual movement is reflected in immediacy; the mirror’s two sides in perfect balance, the world of the senses reflects the Spirit. In the feeding of others we find ourselves sustained and full. The feeding of the Orixá exemplifies, *embodies* this principle. At the Candomblé its all about getting fat. Everyone eats: community, individual and spirits alike.

The simplest gesture of hospitality in traditional Yoruba culture to an arriving elders or guests to one’s home, or at any large celebration, is the offering of water and *obi* to give refreshment after the heat of their journey. This commonplace aspect of kola nuts is lost to us raised in the Americas, where kola nuts are rarely found and almost never chewed, let alone as a common social grace to welcome visitors or make folks feel at home, something homey like coffee or tea, or a Coke. Yet kola nuts have been consumed in West Africa since time immemorial for the refreshing burst of caffeine they give. In Yoruba culture we find *Obi* used primarily for refreshment, and thus it is present in gestures of hospitality and consideration, both in explicit ritual contexts as well as in being

just plain sociable. We start our devotions by welcoming Orixá as an honored guest come home to us. We then also see Obi used as a “sacrament,” as a medium to engage us in a deeper awareness of, and participation with, the Sacred. Part and parcel with this “communion” is the act of divination, the discerning of the mood and wish of the Spirit in relation to us in the moment of communion. Obi also has a medicinal aspect, it is used to invigorate and to heal, to change what is untenable. In the context of Candomblé ritual we see all these aspects of Obi made active.

In making just about any offerings to Orixá we always include water and Obi, this is not only to recognize the primordial necessity of the Spirit to our being alive (in the form of water), but to also seek to bring the ease, grace and invigorating perkiness of Obi to the relationship. We open a small piece of the Forest and open ourselves up to the Spirit, to hear the birdsongs and the wind. We are hoping to make ourselves refreshed, stimulated, and ever more conscious of life. While the Obi is small it contains all that is essential to our tradition. Again: Obi contains in seed form all that is our tradition. First and foremost in this teaching is, as in so many other spiritual traditions worldwide, the precious holiness of *hospitality*:

Olodumare, Holder-of-all-the-forms-of-becoming, created Obi pure and sweet, just and benevolent from the inside and out. His heart was purity, without flaw or mark; stainless Obi emanated a nobility and grace that raised one’s spirits just to behold him. Everyone loved Obi who, in his brilliant white clothes walked shining, was singular among his peers. Obi was wise and intelligent; his counsel was sought out by all and his words always seemed to come to pass, truth was his. Obi was always in the place of honor, sitting high.

*As time went by however all the attention of the world and the clamor to be near him began to go to Obi’s head. One day Obi decided to throw a party and invite all his friends. Obi sent out his servant Exú to invite everyone that loved him. Exú obeyed and invited everyone that loved Obi. Because **everyone** loved Obi the whole world showed up to Obi’s party. Seeing the great, unending crowd outside his door Obi was both flattered and concerned. “How will I feed all these people?”*

In a panic, Obi decided to send away all the unwashed, the poor and badly dressed, the ill-behaved, and all the impure and sick. “They will only make things worse. This is my party so everything should be beautiful and blessed. This rabble does not belong here anyways.” Obi turned them out, denying that he had invited them. Unknown to Obi the creator of all things, Olodumare, was hidden among the throng of the impure, ill, the tormented and nasty. When Obi had turned his back on them to go into the party Olodumare called out to Obi. Hearing Olodumare’s beloved voice Obi

realized who it was and finding him among the crowd of the refused, he threw himself down upon the ground begging forgiveness and pleaded for Olodumare to come inside.

“Obi”, said Olodumare, “I cannot reject you, as you have rejected me. I cannot tell you no, as you have done to me. You are pure and honest, because of that I gave you this beautiful body, mind, and heart. So pure you shall always remain but to break away your arrogance and cleanse you of your vanity forevermore will you fall to the ground and in your tumbling about you shall cleanse all the sick and troubled of their suffering; with your wisdom, purity, and grace you shall heal those who are ignorant and seeking relief from their strife. Your taste will no longer be sweet however, your bitterness will remind us of what you have forgotten. You will be split open and in your splitting all that is evil in life will be pushed away, just as you have pushed me away. This is your curse and your salvation.”

So, till today, Obi (kola nut), which grows high on the branch of the tree, hidden in a husky pod which then falls to the ground, is in ritual split open and tossed to the ground whenever people need to hear the voice of Olodumare to heal their trouble and gain peace and purity in this life. Fearless, humble, and unending hospitality is the blessing Obi shares with any and everyone, regardless of who they are.³

Let us look inside the words. In Yoruba the word “obi,” with a shift of tone, can also mean “gave birth.” The root syllable, bí means “to give birth, to reproduce” and with the shift of tone (bi) it means, “to question, to interrogate” also even, “to push or jostle.” We can see, in the ritual use of Obi as an offering and for divination, all of these meanings come through. In the stories told of Obi we find two elements, unbalance due to pride and arrogance and the new birth of peace/well-being (alafia) through the sacrifice of being hung up on one’s ego. Obi brings a new level of balance and understanding between the individual and the larger self, the Spirit, and from this new accord life force is generated...and Ikú (Death), and all Death’s warriors, (namely, Illness, Fight, Loss, Imprisonment, Paralysis, Curses, etc.,) are all averted.

Another important aspect I see in the symbolism of the obi, the “birth giver,” is that it is a seed. It is what it names. By giving the Orixá this invigorating seed we are asking for something to be planted into ourselves, in our lives; we are asking for our being to grow into some new form or in a new direction. When making the offering to the Orixá the sprouting nib in the obi is first taken out and, with water of course, flicked or thrown onto the Orixá’s shrine. In the gesture we are allowing the Orixá to toss us some of the potential to grow out of our familiar, perhaps tired and worn, surroundings and into a fuller life; we are calling on Obi to “jostle or push” (bi) us and the relationship into new soil, to shake us up a bit. For this growth to happen, however, there has to be a splitting, a cracking...something has to be broken, an old wholeness has

to be broken apart; that which has held itself closed must open for growth to occur. Obi is ritually split (là in Yoruba) with care and due reverence and we are thus taken care of, made rich (ola, thus also là) as well as, perhaps even more importantly, saved (again, là) from death, illness, danger, imprisonment, or futility.

It seems that the division, the willingness to surrender, the separating into parts allows for a new formation to occur. Obi's punishment, to fall, to be split open and apart, to become soiled and pushed about, allows for Obi's ignorance, and the arrogance and vanity to which it leads, to become transformed, now becoming generous and revivifying to himself and to others. In the story Obi became overwhelmed when he saw the crowd of need and ugliness outside his door, he did not think he could hold them in his house, that he could bear their presence; he didn't think he could feed them all. So he split his community apart, admitting the pure and desirable and rejecting the impure and unbearable... unfortunately for Obi the Source-of-All-Things, Olodumare, God, was among the second group, not the first. Now, "for eternity," we learn from Obi's fall and read from its signs the way out of any predicament that confronts us.

In our tradition this process is sacrifice, ebò. For growth to occur the little self (the ego identified self) has to suffer this little splitting up. (Indeed, this is clearly reflected in Obi's fall in the story.) This is why, when we offer the Obi to the Orixá, we split the obi open, tear from it its little sprout, and then throw the pieces and read the signs they mark in their falling to the ground; having offered the kola nut to the Spirit our being becomes unified with the Spirit, also with the obi nut itself, thus its fall is our fall, and the patterns it makes as it hits Mother Earth reflect the pattern of our being as it is unfolding the myriad possibilities of the Spirit. This is the logic of the old Africans in discovering the art of divination (bi = to question, to interrogate) from **Obi**. Another telling of Obi's story told in Brazil reveals the importance of humility, of staying true to one's roots and those that have helped you come up as well as valuing the forbearing of quick, haughty decisions. We have explicit connection made between Obi's growth and our own.

Obi was very poor. One day, Exu visited him in his house and saw how he lived in absolute pennilessness. Exu felt sorry for him and said:

"Look Obi, I'm going to be seeing Orumilá [the spirit of divine wisdom] and I'll ask him how I can help you.

Obi felt much better and said to Exu:

"I will thank you for the rest of my life. You'll see."

This said, Exu left. Two days later he came back with an ebó [offering] for Obi to make. Obi made the offering and became rich, but never looked up Exu to say thanks.

One day Exu went to his house and clapped his hands [to announce his presence]. Obi opened the door and quickly started saying:

“Look, I don’t want you here. What do you want? I’m busy taking care of important people. I don’t have time for you, don’t have time to deal with beggars.” slamming the door and going back in.

Exu got a hold of himself and went to tell what happened to Orumilá. What did Orumilá do? He dressed himself in very dirty, torn clothes and went to Obi’s house. Seeing the filthy man at his door Obi said:

“Look, if you came to ask for a handout, I don’t give handouts. And you, dirty like this and smelly, how do you even dare to knock on my door, knowing that I’m a rich man?”

“Obi, in the name of Orumilá, help me out here.” Said Orumilá.

“Orumilá! Whatever! Orumilá I am because of my wealth and I don’t need nobody.” responded Obi.

So, Orumilá transformed himself back into a handsome man and said:

“Do you recognize me Obi?”

Obi was startled and threw himself at Orumilá’s feet, screaming:

“Oba mi, oba mi!” [“My sovereign, my sovereign!”]

Orumilá said to him:

“From today on, because of your ingratitude and pride, in our religion there will be no sacrifice nor offering to our gods in which you will not be included. You will be split into four parts, roll in the mud and be placed upon the heads of the vilest beings of the aiyê [material world]. Not to mention that whenever Exu eats you will be part of his banquet. Still more, you will have to tell if he is satisfied. Soon you will see, Obi, that pride doesn’t matter, but humility does.” - Mãe Beata de Yemonjá⁴

Obi, aside from being a cordial stimulant and social grace in West Africa, is also a great source of wisdom and healing; learning to read its signs and speak its language is thus a fundamental part of its use. Obi is perhaps the oldest form of divination used by the Yoruba people and definitely the most indigenous. Other forms of divination are used, such as the sixteen cowry shell system known as Merindinlogun (called Dilogum in Brazil) and the Ifá system, which uses palm nuts or a divining chain traditionally made from seed pods, but the basic odù, or signs, used in all three of these techniques, and the ancient wisdom they hold, seem to have originated in Obi divination and were then adapted and elaborated later as new technologies of augury were developed or imported.

Unlike the cowry shell or Ifá divination, Obi divination is almost always part of a larger offering being made at the time. Giving, it seems, is Obi’s gift to us. So when we seek answers through Obi it is always situational; the Obi is usually a part of a larger gift of food or gifts being made and its throwing is a

way to see if the offering has been accepted and if the problem that led to the offering being made in the first place has been successfully resolved. Also, unlike Dilogun or Ifá divination, Obi can be used by anyone, regardless of initiation status or commitment to the formal traditions of Orixá. Both of these principles are emphasized in the stories which make up the oral tradition of Obi.

Obi can, however, be offered by itself, accompanied, of course, by water, and fire. This is the one of the simplest ways to worship and regain connection with Orixá.

Offering Obi to Orixá

Every time I've seen Obi offered by someone it was done a little different; each person has their own traditions and style, learned from their elders and done in her own unique way. Reviewing published books and my own notes I've kept over the years I have found many variations, even by the same practitioner. I offer the following as examples.

The Candomblé priest Ominarê, a babalorixá in the Gantois lineage, presents it like this:

Make sure you have a quartinha [water pot] with fresh water, a clean white plate, and a lit candle. Also, before you begin, make sure you have more than one obi, just in case it splits poorly or the Orixá rejects it. Split the obi, using a small knife if needed to part the lobes, then to the half in one's right hand say, "Owo otun mofi ha mo," and to the other half in one's left hand say, "Owo osi mofi ha mo aye." Pull out the little sprout, wet this and flick it towards the offering or Orixá saying, "Ode boreman emi boje meji keba obi _____ a unlo." (Putting in the name of the Orixá.) Put the lobes back together in your left and with your right dip into the quartinha and wet the obi, tapping it briskly, saying, "Obi nlawo." Anyone present responds, "Apaniya." Do this three times and then toss the obi to the plate.⁵

Author and priest in the Opo Afonjá lineage, José Beniste, describes the following:

1. *With a small water pot, pour three drops on the ground, calling upon the desired Orisa. We'll use Òsun as an example, say three times:*

<i>Òşun mo pè</i>	<i>Òşun I call you</i>
<i>Òpara mo pè</i>	<i>Òpara I call you</i>

Without stopping close the left hand completely, with the right touch the drops of water on the ground and slap that left hand, repeating the gesture [three times] saying:

Pèlé towo

Pèlé towo mó(n)

Omo àìkú bàbá wa

Ko jú oy mi ko tutu

2. With the Obi on a white plate wet it in the water of the water pot then open it into four lobes. Put these lobes in the right hand and, elevating the right hand quickly to the right say:

Owó òtún mo si haiyé

Repeat this gesture with the left hand, raising it quickly to the left saying:

Owó òsì mo si hai o

Finally, with both hands to the front and held high say:

Ode po re mo olóre méjì keba

Throw onto the plate saying:

Obi òrìsà nlo owó

3. Names of the throws and their meanings:

Àlàáfîà – Great

Étàwa – Regular

Éjì Aláketu – Confirmation

Òkànràn – Negative

Òyèkú - Terrible

It should be remembered that neither Exú or Xangô take obi. Xangô takes orogbo (False Kola). One can offer Exú either orogbo or an onion (alubosa).⁶

Actually, many different seeds and fruits are used in offerings by the Yoruba, and many are also used to perform divination, to gain insight and answers from the Spirit. I've seen coconuts, (which are used almost exclusively in the Cuban "sister" tradition of Lukumi), pears, onions, orogbo, cowries and also coins used. Remember, among the Ketu in Brazil, apples are never used to throw in divination. This because of Oshun, the "lady of divination, prefers it so." In Candomblé de Ketu there are also some particularities and exceptions in offering kola nuts to the Orixás; for example, Xangô is only given orogbo ("False Kola," *Garcinia kola*.) Nevertheless, the kola nut is the standard and preferred cordiality used in almost all rituals, and its messages are considered oracular.

In the course of a long afternoon class on singing the "sassanya," praise songs to "the leaves," or herbs used in ritual, Jorge Alabê (an elder of the Casa Branca lineage, described, very simply, giving Obi to Orixá as follows:

When you throw a [two lobed] Obi there are only three signs: Both down--that's bad, make sure everything was done right...talk with the Orixá, see if something that will be need to be done in the future. The person is probably owing an obligation, needs to have their head done, or isn't being upfront about what's going on. One up and one down—Omoiyã, this is good. Oxossi says that everything is perfect. You can say, "Alâfia." Go ahead, split up the Obi and finish the offering. [If it is] Both pieces up—this is good, very good. Xangô is giving his word that everything is certain. Continue, split the Obi up, tell the person making the offering to chew it but don't swallow, and leave the rest on the plate.

After gaining a favorable sign in response from the Obi the elder giving it to the Orixá will either arrange the pieces of Obi upon the rest of the foods being offered or lay them on top of the plate, placing this at the foot of the Orixá's shrine. Some divide a piece of the Obi and give pieces to those around to chew. Thus, everyone shares in Obi's revivifying blessing.

Odù Obi: The Generative, Encompassing Wisdom of Obi

While the stories of Obi recount hard lessons in learning generosity and humility Obi has a much more worldly fame. Obi is better known, and has always been more sought after, for wise counsel and divinatory predictions. Most of us, like Obi before falling, are concerned only with our own good fortune. Like a nut, we're hard to crack. We care mostly about 1) our self and 2) what is good in life and how we can obtain or keep it for our self. We don't want to look long at others much, nor spend much time with what is bad, ugly, sad or painful. When we look to the Spirit, when we come to pray and make offerings or drum, dance and party for Orixá, it's usually to make things better for ourselves or those we love or to celebrate our good fortune. Rarely are we concerned with wisdom, hospitality, humility, or even much beyond our own life in our particular corner of the world. Eagerly, in the moment of truth when Obi is thrown, we wait to see if we shall be given a negative or positive response to our questions; will our needs and desires be fulfilled? Obi's speech comes in five different signs, called *odu*. Each *odu* reveals a different message from the Orixá through Obi's continuing work of redemption, *"You will be split into four parts, roll in the mud and be placed upon the heads of the vilest beings of the world...Soon you will see, Obi, that pride doesn't matter, but humility does."* While some *odu* give us our craved for "yes" and some give a disappointing "no" to our petitions and pleas, each and all of Obi's responses, in the depth of Obi's hard-earned wisdom, also reveal a particular pathway to regain wholeness, balance, and to become humble and generous, just like Obi.

While most of us in that moment when the split nut falls and hits the plate are thinking of our trouble and of ourselves we also stand at an opportunity to see how it is precisely our trouble that makes us who we are and that there is a greater Wholeness to which we also belong where, while there may be trouble, there is always solution. Such Wholeness is called "Odu" and represents the life-generating womb of the Spirit that gives birth to all possibilities. In Yoruba the word "odù" can mean a letter, sigil or sign of divination, a large tub or basin for mixing medicine, and, with a shift of tone, adjectively, a "bigness" or capaciousness. So one gets the sense of a great container that is full of possibilities for being and healing and it is in this sense that the Odu, which speaks in each of Obi's possible positions that result when it lands after being tossed in offering to the Orixá, comes to fulfill our needs. Each *odu* reveals the heart of the matter at hand and the potential for its moving forward to a greater of evolution, to humility and its generosity.

In Candomblé de Ketu either a two or four lobed kola nut can be used for divination. Kola nuts, however, can grow with anywhere from two to about 6 lobes, but it is almost always only kolas with two or four lobes which are used. When a two-lobed kola is used there are three possible answers:

Two lobes open - "Alafia! All good."

One open, one closed - "Omuiyan! Oxossi says, "All is well.""

Two lobes closed - "Something isn't right. Orixá says, "No.""

When a four lobed kola nut is thrown down there are five possible ways the lobes can fall. Here, in 'short hand' are the five odu that Obi holds for us:

Four lobes open - **Alâfia** - All good

Three open, one closed - **Etáua** - Good, needs confirmation or support

Two open, one closed - **Eji-Alaquêtu** - Good, balanced

One open, three closed - **Ocanran** - Bad, something is wrong

Four lobes closed - **Eji-Okô** - Shadowy, could be bad, needs investigation

Let's look a little deeper into the five possible patterns which can reveal themselves from Obi's redemptive fall and rolling about.

Alâfia - Àlááfíà - Alafia - All four pieces fall open.

Here the answer is, "Yes, yes, yes, and yes!" Blessings extend in all directions, to the four quarters of the world. Alafia's sign indicates a wide open road. "Yes, yes, yes, and yes!" And like most times we hear things put this way, this answer is beautiful...but...perhaps too good to be true. The glass is here full to brimming over and we might lose some of the blessings poured for us; it is full, maybe too full. Unbalanced, Alafia's good-fortune may not be lasting or it may open the person being to whom it comes to the envy and jealousy of hostile, opposing eyes in their situation. Or, like in Obi's stories, we may become blinded by our own good fortune and miss out the greater blessing of being human. Because of this, we are wise to *throw a second time* to gain an idea of where this sign is headed; with all four pieces open something has to give, at some point, in some way or another. *"Go back to throwing to see which Odu is pulling. All that may be done will be positive."*

If, on the second throw, Oyeku falls things are indeed dubious. Keep talking, find out if an ancestor or Exú needs something, and don't be satisfied until you get a strong and positive sign, Eji-Alaketu, Etawa, or Alafia again. If Okanran falls, the blessings of Alafia will eventually lead to misfortune or loss, or some impediment has come or will come between the Orixá and the one

offering the Obi; more work needs to be done. The consultant needs now to be aware of how their good fortune could lead to arrogance in themselves or trouble from others. Okanran following Alafia signals that while the Orixá is happy and giving blessings, it is *we ourselves* that are blocking these from coming to fullness or that we will somehow squander the blessings we are receiving; we must change our behavior. Sacrifice is called for to open a different path. If, however, on the second throw Etawa falls the Orixá is satisfied, all is well. If, on the second throw, Alafia falls a second time or if Eji-Alaketu comes, we say “Alafia!” and wallow in the blessing that Oxalá and all the Orixás bring.

Here with Alafia we hear the voices of the “white” Orixás, such as Oxalá, and also of Ifá.

Etáua - Èta-ìwà - Etawa - Three pieces fall open, while one falls closed.

Etawa is a favorable sign but not very strong, one piece is shut and there is still something impeding a full blessing, one element is not in alignment, one voice still needs to be heard. The answer is, “Yes, but...” With Etawa a second throw is needed to keep the conversation going and hear what’s needing to be heard.

If, on the second throw, Alafia or Eji-Alaketu falls one pronounces “Alafia!” and the matter is closed, things are fine, just not as robust as they could be, the person being read will have a little work to do soon to gain a fuller blessing. Should Oyeku or Okanran fall, the conversation continues. One asks the Orixá if something is lacking or if there is something that still needs to be done. Persist until a strong odu speaks, bringing iré, good fortune. However, if on both the second and third throw Etawa falls, you can say “Alafia” and conclude that all is well. Exú is giving his blessings, in triplicate. By falling in a threefold manner Etawa gains its full strength, becoming one of the strongest and most favorable of signs.

Here in Etawa we can hear Ogum, Iansã, Oxalá, and, in its threefold falling, Exú in his more easygoing, generative moods. *“Three times in a row affirms what was asked: on the first throw say: Ètàwa lógba, on the second say: Ìbá meta’wa bokan, on the third nothing is said. [Accept, “Alafia!”] After Etawa, if Okanran falls, it’s “no” for everything. It could be a broken taboo. Check it out.”*⁷

The blessings Etawa brings may be humble and come only through steady, hard work, but they are usually longer-lasting and good for heart, soul, and body. Here Obi’s lessons are learned: keep close that one part that is closed, dark, or lost, that part that is refused or refuses. Keep your dark side with your bright, shiny, happy parts, only this way does happiness and well-being become strong and stand long.

Eji-Alaquêtu - Èjì-Ifè - Eji-Alaketu - *Two pieces fall open, two closed.*

This is the most balanced and thus, considered by many, the most favorable response. "Yes, most certainly." Here we see the "blessing of two hands." Because of two pieces being closed and two open, we are shown the benefit of having left and right, negative and positive, masculine and feminine forces evenly balanced; also implied is that what is done by one's own hands is more secure than something proffered by another. With this sign, say many elders, one does not need to throw again; the answer is firm and positive. With Eji-Alaketu there is no further debt to be settled. Negative and positive forces are evenly balanced, in cooperation, both sides satisfied with their lot, things are "Even Steven." Eji-Alaketu is greeted with the raising of one's hands and the salutation, "Alafia!"

Some, however, only read Eji-Alaketu as a figure of confirmation; if Eji-Alaketu appears in the first throw, "Great! But not strong enough." Keep throwing until another sign appears, such as Etawa or Alafia. If Eji-Alaketu comes behind Alafia or Etawa it confirms and strengthens their blessings, no further throwing needed. We hear Ori, Oxossi, Water Mothers, especially Oxum, and Oxalá in this sign. *"It's a fall of confirmation and confirms a previous throw. It belongs to Òsun [Oxum]. When it comes, [as the first throw] make the salutation to Òdí: Òdí kun odara o dofo odejo and go back to throwing to see if something needs to be done."*⁸

Ocanran - Òkànràn - Okanran - *All but one piece fall closed.*

With this sign the game is over. Okanran's first message is "No. Case closed." Many throw out the obi with water in the street when Okanran makes an initial appearance or if it comes three times in a row. Others will simply sprinkle water upon the offering and/or the Orixá's shrine and beg the Orixá to be patient and give a better sign. Some read Okanran as a signal from the Orixá that something is lacking in the offering and that this needs to be remedied, missing pieces need to be added to get the sign to "fill up" and reflect a complete offering/union with the Orixá. When Okanran falls it is a sign that something is not right. Check the offering, check the intentions of the person or persons making the offering. Make a prayer of supplication. Then throw again to see if the Orixá has been made happy.

Okanran shows us one piece standing alone against the other three, which have turned away. It is a sign of battles, loss, shocks, and sudden upsets. Here the world appears to be against you; the Fates themselves turn away, veiling their faces. This sign is the pit, the abyss, the hole that out of which it seems impossible to climb. Okanran promises only sorrow. Exú, Ogum, and Xangô have a bone to pick with the person being read. We can also hear Obaluaiye in

this sign, especially when it follows Etawa. With Okanran many don't risk throwing again; the situation is bad enough, we need to wait and clean house, re-checking our actions for mistakes possibly made, before trying to take it anywhere further. Really, we don't even want to know what's next. The person making the offering needs to look inwards, to open up her eyes and ears, and assume responsibility for the situation, even if it isn't the their fault. Times are tough.

Some elders hear Okanran saying that there is something still owed or needing to be given to the Orixá. Perhaps the person has promised something in a moment of desperation and has now forgotten their words or perhaps the Orixá is asking for the person to make a greater commitment, to make a greater gift or to become initiated. In Okanran the road still awaits the traveler.

Okanran is best greeted with the gesture of pulling of one's ears and pointing to the eyes, showing all around to take heed and beware. *"When [Okanran] comes out ask if something else [in the offering just made] is needed and make the salutation to the odù: Okanran ki nkora, ko mafun ja, ko ma fikan, ko ma si kan."*⁹

Yet Okanran is also the creativity and vitality released when things get knocked open, the heat that comes when one thing rubs against another, or when things fall apart. We so often become fearful when we hear "no." Yet not getting our way is often the best, if not yet understood, blessing we can receive. Fear not. Just take a moment to *look inside and see what single light shines and what are the pieces you need to move to unblock its fuller illumination.* Don't be afraid to be alone in the crowd, be with yourself, soon you will find Olodumare in the rabble. Open your eyes and ears!

Eji-Okô - Òyèkú - Oyeku - All four pieces fall closed.

The answer is, "No. It's not at all what you think." Some olorixá would sprinkle water on this obi and throw it out into the street or into the bushes, and pick a new obi and start over. *"A bad sign, completely negative." "Darkness, obscurity, lost in the crowd, death, silence."* Others might continue, taking advantage of Oyeku's shadows to ascertain the true nature of what has been up to now obscure and covered over. When Oyeku arrives we know only that we don't know. We must first find out *who* we are talking to and then find out what what they are trying to tell us. We can start by asking if an ancestor has "jumped" in front of the conversation, bringing a warning or making a claim or some demand. If then, on the second throw, Oyeku follows, or any other letter but Okanran, one turns from the Orixá and continues the conversation, investigating which ancestor is speaking and what his message is. Once that matter is resolved one turns back to the Orixá with a new obi or one could continue with the same

one. If, however, after the initial throw Okanran were to follow, the seed would be tossed out with water splashed after it; Exú is speaking of danger. If, after choosing a new obi, should the new session open with Oyeku, or again Okanran, the conversation would then turn to what omen the Orixá holds for the consultant and what should be done. Usually, depending on the situation, Oyeku appears to state that something in the ritual procedure has been left out or done wrong. One could also seek recourse by going to the Merindinlogun (shells) for a fuller reading of the problem, especially if no brighter letter appears in the first couple of throws or if with the adoption of a new kola still trouble persists.

Just as with Alafia, which is full to capacity and will thus soon shift to being less or something other, Oyeku portends a situation that has gone so dark that a shift will soon bring light. Oyeku is most often full of shadows, uncertainties, disappointments, and dispersion. All four pieces are closed off, turning their backs leaving only a “cold shoulder,” absence and silence, darkness. It is “full twilight,” when light departs from the situation leaving only a decreasing ability to make sense of things in the pervading gloom. Egum, (the dead), the Uessá (the ancestors of Candomblé de Ketu,) and Iya-mi (our “witch” mothers) speak in this sign, sometimes Oyá Igbalé. Exú speaks when it is followed by Okanran. We can also hear Oduduwa, Olocum, Onilé, and Obaluaiyê in this sign. In Oyeku their messages are often difficult to understand or accept.

Oyeku is a spooky, tricky sign to deal with, full of obscure and double meanings. Any conversation that starts with this sign will be difficult, full of uncertainty, danger or intrigue. At its worst, Oyeku speaks of imminent death, at its best it bestows the blessings of the ancestors and the fertility of the womb, it is the Christian “Dark Night of the Soul,” full of spiritual potential, deeper vision, and new life. Regardless of whatever irê or ibi (good fortune or bad times) it may bring, the person being read is in a poor place to deal with the situation and re-orientation is needed. There is difficulty in communication and integrity is lost or is in danger. Darkness scatters prior certainty; true understanding or complete blindness will follow.

From **Odu Oyeku Meji**:

Even if you move from your position, (Bí o bá yè)

I will not move from mine. (Èmi ò yè)

The foundation stones of the house (yangi ilé) do not fail the house (yelé).

And the crown of the head must not fail the person in the market (won gbodo ye ero oja).

So I will not move away

And you will not move away.

*Twilight is just appearing in the heavens, (Òyè sese nlá bọ̀ lókẹ̀)
But some people thought day had already dawned.
This was the teaching of Ifa from Eji Oyè
("Two who don't move" or "Double twilight" or "Two from Oye province")
Who would dawn on earth like daylight.
So, if it were money that moved me,
I would certainly say so.
But Ifa will assign (ye) me my own good-fortune.¹⁰*

In this piece of an itan (divination verse) from the Odu Oyeku Meji in Ifa we gain some important insights into the mysterious ways of Oyeku. Throughout this verse there is a running pun on the syllable "ye" which is one of the root syllables of Oyeku. The various meanings the syllable can hold, depending upon accent and context, are: to move, to fail, twilight, to benefit, and to assign or affix. We see that the people in the verse first fail to notice that it's twilight not dawn; it is their misperception of reality that leads them to err, just as one could do by "moving" for money rather than remaining firm like a foundation stone (yangi) of one's home or with the fixed determination of one's innate will-to-thrive that does not abandon one in the "market" of life. We are counseled to keep our position by allowing our view (thinking we see dawn when it is twilight) to be moved so that our good-fortune will be unmoving for us. We must see the darkness and let it illumine us. Obi's story shows us a way: when Obi's fortune is lost due to his error, an error based in misperception and fear, Obi's well-being is regained through humility and a willingness to let self be cracked open, split apart and pushed about. Again, fear not. There is wealth in the darkness.

Other Aspects of Interpreting Odu Obi

While the five odu mentioned above form the basic "language" that Obi speaks through, each elder in Candomblé who throws Obi develops their own way of understanding and interpreting the odu, as well as the other configurations and signs that Obi gives. For example, aside from "reading" the segments of the kola nut as open or closed and the five possible odu they render (as described above) there are some other aspects to be noted in Obi's cast.

Abó and Acô

Aside from just noting the odu in which Obi falls we can also count how many open segments are “male” or “female” in a cast and derive further meaning and nuance to the odu that is thrown.

The gender of each segment can be determined by looking at the inside portion of it. With a four lobed kola nut there will be two segments that have a single crease running through the middle of it, these are the male segments, called “acô”; there will also be two segments that have two creases, which create a sort of flat ridge running through it, these are the female pieces, called “abó.”

So, **Alafia** will have two female pieces and two female pieces showing, this reflects a full household, abundance, happiness. **Etawa** can have either 2 females and 1 male, or 2 males 1 female. With Etawa in general there is a sense of incompleteness, and we can also note that there is an imbalance in gender inherent to it. If 2 female pieces fall with 1 male piece, the situation is gentle and lasting, but it will also be lacking in some aspects, dissatisfactions will arise. If 2 male pieces fall with 1 female, the situation is fortuitous but not long lasting, disputes will arise. With **Okanran** the situation is similar, only 1 segment will be open and it will either be acô or abó. If it’s male, the difficulties Okanran predicts will be external barriers, intense and brutal, enemies. If it’s female, the trouble predicted has an internal origin or source, lack of integrity or delusions and illusions predominate. With **Eji-Alaketu** there are more possibilities. There can be 1 male and 1 female, or 2 males, or 2 females. The ideal, following the heteronormative culture of the traditional Yoruba, is 1 and 1, male and female, which is considered to be fertile and free of conflicts, promising longstanding good-fortune. Now Eji-Alaketu with 2 males is considered to be fabulous, glorious, but not long lasting, they will eventually compete and fight; also, with 2 females it is similar, gentle and abundant, yet also prone to conflict or eventual dissatisfaction. **Oyeku**, in contrast to the other odu, has no female or male parts, no gender; it speaks of a vacant house or an empty field, a lack of fertility and life or of awaiting transformation, unfathomed possibility.

Physical Aspects

Many who throw Obi also note the arrangement in which the pieces fall. For example, if one piece is sitting on top of another or if one piece falls off of the plate while being thrown, or if there are a clustering of pieces. Interpreting these configurations is highly individualized and I’ve not seen any consistency from one person to the next in how to interpret these. Nonetheless, most experienced practitioners are keen to make note of these and will often comment upon these while interpreting the odu to those around.

Odds vs. Evens

It can also be noted that throws with even numbers of segments open are less troublesome than throws with odd numbers. Etawa and Okanran are considered to be the least stable, the most dynamic in their manifestation and calling for immediate change, while Alfafia and Oyeku are more stable, indicating a situation where change is imminent yet not active. Eji-Alaketu is considered the most content, stable and fruitful.

It is because of the difficult throws of Okanran and Oyeku, and to some degree Etawa, as well as the subtle of interpretation from the other aspects of Obi's casts, that we defer to elders and trained priests to throw Obi for us as that few of us have the know-how to deal first with the difficulties of interpreting these messages and then to have the skills to remedy the troubles they might reveal. Few seasoned priests will let a "bad sign" from Obi stand. *"What would be the point to the ebó if I just let it stay like that? No one is spending their money on macumba to see nothing happen. It's our job to make sure things come out right; it is our holy vocation...you keep going, push the Obi...beg the Orixá to put things right. Sing a prayer. Make a promise. Do whatever it takes to get your Alâfia."*¹¹

Yet we also know that when the Obi is persistent with difficult throws that it is also time to listen, to accept. Sometimes life just doesn't go our way. We will need guidance and support when it's our turn to hit the ground and get tossed around. Who better than Obi to give us this? Who better than our "familia de santo," our "saint family," to help us get through a let down and get back up?

Obi as Sacramental Medicine

The one who brings kola nut brings life.
-Igbo proverb

Another aspect in which to consider Obi is as a drug, or medicine. Among other properties kola nuts contain large amounts caffeine and are used as a stimulant throughout the world. I heard from a Jamaican woman, while shopping at the local “tropical market” here in Oakland, which is the only place around to buy kola nuts, that in Jamaica kola nut is used as an herbal tea and is called “Busy.” When I asked her if this name related to the Yoruba name Obi she said, “Oh, I don’t know. I think it’s just because it gets you busy.” Nonetheless, I suspect a linguistic relation. In the United States during the 19th and into the 20th century kola nut was used along with cocaine to “flavor” medicinal drinks, the most popular of which was, is, Coca-Cola. Sadly, both cocaine and kola nut have been dropped from the company’s current recipe. While now restricted in its use, it seems that once none could say no to Obi. The “Un-Cola” was just that, un-

Botanical drugs have been used throughout the millennia in almost every culture within the practice of spirituality, especially as a sacrament, for “communion.” Shamans in the Amazon use Ayahuasca, the ancient Greeks used all manner of substances to induce visions and oracles, in West Africa not just Obi but many other seeds and plants, some much more powerful in inducing visions, such as Iboga, were and are still used. Also, didn’t Christ pick up wine and say, “Take, drink this is my blood”? In North American the Native Peoples use peyote and, much more widely, tobacco as sacraments. Let us think deeply a moment on why drugs are so popular in religion. The use of a psychoactive substance by a group allows the group to gain control over its members’ consciousness, change it, to move each members mood or perception in the same direction as all the other members, usually to the same degree, thus creating a “joining” of consciousness. So, often a drug is used as a vital part of a communion; members feel cohesion and a sameness of awareness and perception and this is attributed, even named itself as, the Spirit. Obi, for the Yoruba and those of us in the Diaspora, brings our spirits up. It perks us up. We feel a “rising up” and an alleviation of lethargy, sleepiness, fatigue and depression; we know our ability “overcome” both external circumstances and our own internal defeat. Obi in his splitting (la) apart saves (la) us; his death lets us come together, brightened and lightened, to give birth (bí) to a lively new consciousness, and to live a little.

There are at least three ways that we join in Obi's communion, 1) in the act of splitting and consuming the kola nut itself and feeling its medicinal effect, and 2) in the splitting open of Obi's secrets in divination practice where his wisdom is shared openly among us, elucidating the surest way to safety and abundance, towards a life of balance. We also open ourselves to the Spirit with Obi by 3) offering Obi to our Orisha and ancestors giving ourselves to be split open to the Spirit and become a vehicle for wisdom and divine cordiality to enter into the world in our own actions; we attain oneness through our little sacrificial offering, letting ourselves give up something precious to gain a deeper dimension and find a grander existence in unity and balance.

There was once a famous and wealthy Awo, a seer, named Obi Alawe who had but one son, named Adiatoto. To his son Obi gave his most powerful secret, the art of divination with kola nuts, which he himself had invented, or rather, learned from the trees themselves.

Being a generous man Obi Alawe had taken in many orphans and children from the street, all of whom considered him as a father. When Obi died all of his 'sons' fell into contention about inheritance; each grabbed, stole, and ran off with whatever they could and, even before he was buried, Obi Alawe's property and fortune was reduced to nothing. Adiatoto, in his grief, took nothing and as a result was left penniless. He wandered now as his adopted brothers once suffered before enjoying the grace of his father: alone and hungry, abandoned in the streets.

However, the fights and legal claims of the brothers over the old man's property continued in a fury, each claiming that he alone was the legal heir and that the others had slandered, robbed, and cursed in order to gain what they possessed. Such was the contention that all the brothers ended up in the Oba's court nervously awaiting a final decision. Even before the King their arguments, slander, accusations and insults of each other were loud and unrelenting. The King's crier began to shout, "Atoto!" This in Yoruba means, "Silence!" "Atoto! Atoto!" Over and over he shouted in vein to silence the disrespectful brothers.

Adiatoto, who was outside the Oba's palace overheard the crier from within shouting, and thinking he was being called by name, went into the Oba's court. Seeing the shabbily dressed pauper creeping into the back of the court the Oba asked, "You, the quiet one back there, who are you?"

Throwing himself before the king, prostrating with his head to the ground, Adiatoto answered, "Kabiesiye, your royal highness, I am Adiatoto the son of Obi Alawe."

The room again filled with shouting. The Oba asked, "Can you, unlike all these others, give proof of this?"

“While my father was a rich man I have only one thing left to me.” Adiatoto brought out his kola nuts and requested the King to ask him about anything he would care to know. The Oba became curious and began asking several questions, about matters of his household, of state, and of the Spirit. The Oba was left speechless by the wealth and wisdom of Adiatoto’s answers.

“By the skill in your hands, the knowledge in your head, and by the wisdom and humility in your heart, truly, you are the son of Obi Alawe.” The Oba awarded all the contested property of the brothers to Adiatoto and retained him as his personal counselor. Adiatoto, in turn, taught his art to his brothers and anyone else who cared to learn; through generosity and compassion, wisdom and humility, patience and trust, the inheritance of his father Obi Alawe would be eternal. It remains with us today; any and all may use Obi to find their true inheritance in this life.¹²

A part of me, having written up these lessons on Obi, is reluctant to finish, hoping to add just a little bit more. I’m also hesitant to share. I feel like I have only tiny bits to offer, little sections of Obi’s seemingly endless wealth of culture, knowledge and tradition. Like the adoptive brothers in the story above I want to run off with what I can get from Obi’s legacy to keep it all my own, and, like Adiatoto, I also want to share it with all, giving everyone a piece of Obi to pass onward. I sit feeling more than a little pretentious showing the small amount I know here in these words. My offering seems paltry. From that sweaty afternoon in the market, my head full of wonder at Iyá Marinete and her world of mysterious, unending macumba, through a quarter century of study, work, devotion, sometimes wandering off from yet always returning to, repeatedly, this quiet quest, to where I’m sitting here now, over-caffeinated, steadily, attentively typing into my computer, I still only find sections or lobes of a far greater, unbroken knowledge which feels immense, vibrant, giant and evergreen. Beyond me.

While Obi might initially seem to be a mere medium to reveal our fates here below from the Divine above, Obi is actually quite different than that. It is a live, green medicine, growing naturally between heaven and earth. Our conversations with the Holy through the sacrament of Obi is anything but a passive obedience to predestination; are we not, after all, “witchdoctors”? Isn’t it our job to work magic? To find a way out of no way? With Obi we hear, and yet we also speak back. When harsh signs appear, we beg and beseech for a way to regain lost integrity with the Spirit; we push, insist, jostle, and work for a new attainment of our spiritual growth. Our elders are beside us, begging the Orixá for blessings, arguing for our wellbeing; our patient soul doctors, they attend to our ills. And we, like Obi, make an offering of our ego in such moments, to listen

and learn, to accept, or, to take on courage, to fight and struggle in a new hope. We are like Obi ourselves, opening up to the wholeness of life, with its good, bad and ugly, (with Olodumare tucked in among the filthy, unwashed, dirty and diseased and dying), with ever-turning cycles of light and dark opening and closing for us; we come to our truest self, our highest level of attainment by shedding our rough husky exterior—letting our beautiful, revivifying insides show. By letting the world chew us up and spit us out we become the remedy we seek.

We are sitting almost face to face, he on the mat spread out before me and I on a small stool at the end of the mat. He sits with his back against the wall of my apartment living room while I feel as if I'm towering over him even as my legs strain awkwardly to sit on the stool. The song has been sung, the kola nut split open and thrown and it was Okanran that showed up. I've thrown a few times and the signs are all confirming a pretty gruff "No." I sheepishly explain to him that what he is asking for is, according to the message of Obi, "not happening right now." (A relative beginner at "priesting" to people, I am panicking at this juncture, "How am I going to fix this? What do I *do*?") Breaking through a shyness he's presented up to now in all our interactions, he says, "I knew that. I was just hoping to see if I could make it happen. But I know... looking at it now, in my heart, that it's pretty screwed up of me. But what do I *do*?" He goes on to tell me the whole panorama of his troubles, at points tearing up; he reveals his deep exasperation, his anger and hurt for trying. With no idea of what to do or say, I pick up the pieces of Obi and ask his head, Ori, "What way forward?" Now the kola nut really begins to chatter and in the ensuing dialogue a way forward is quite stealthily revealed—more offerings to be made, a plan of action, first steps, a specific attitude in the face of current struggles is prescribed. He smiles. I give him a lobe of kola nut to chew. He stops smiling, yet a look of hope and peace remain in his eyes. Months later I hear through the friend that referred him to see me that he's doing much better, that the troubles which brought him to see me have all rolled into the past. I also hear of his new problems and that he'll probably be coming to see me again. He never does. Yet I'm learning that there is something that rolls forward even as things roll past.

Again, the old stories keep speaking: kola nuts full of supernal wisdom break into sections, the wholeness of their truth is given in fragments. In a sense, it is precisely this breaking apart of things which makes it all whole; Obi fulfills it's purpose through its undoing, just a tiny bit of it gets you wired. We are made up as we are broken down. Today's trouble vanishes as tomorrow's wells up before us. So, please, take this little bit I offer you here and let it awaken you,

jostle your mind, spread you wide open, shake you up a bit. Choking you with a sometimes disappointing, bitter taste perhaps—but don't worry, Obi will inspire. If nothing else, let it "get you busy." Let this spirit give birth to a greater whole, one which in turn too shall be split, tossed about, thrown down to rise up, beautiful, redeemed and redemptive.

Obi komaku

Obi, let there be no dying

Obi komarun

Obi, let there be no sickness

Obi komaseja

Obi, let there be no fighting

Obi komasofu

Obi, let there be no loss

Obi komasofo

Obi, let there be no evil words

Aarin dede wa.

To be seen coming here among us.

Notes

¹ A big thank you to Carrie “Gazela” Miller for reminding me of this commercial from the 70’s. “Why it’s even *PRETTIER* than a cola nut. Nuttier than a cola actually. Ah-ahahahaha!”

² This song is always sung when making an offering of Obi to the Ori (head) during rituals of Ibori. The translation given here is one based on oral interpretations I’ve been given by my elders, these interpretations are born out in gestures made during the ritual, such as touching the sternum (heart) with the obi and placing the hand of the person whose head will receive the Obi upon their sternum. A version of this song is given in by Anro Vogel, Marco Antonio da Silva Mello, and José Flavio Pessoa de Barros in their book *A Galinha-D’Angola*, p. 37.

³ The story I give here is my own telling of Obi’s Fall formulated out of the many tellings I’ve heard of it, but this story is told throughout the Yoruba diaspora. I’ve found versions in material published in Brazil and Cuba. The most significant variation in the story I’ve seen, from one telling to another, is that sometimes it is Olodumare, what is translated as “God,” who is left outside while in other versions it is Orunmila, the prophet of Ifa, Orisha of Wisdom and divination. (See, Mãe Beata’s version later in this text.)

⁴ Mãe Beata’s telling “*O Orgulho de Obi*,” *The Pride of Obi*, can be found in her beautiful book, *O Coroço de Dendê*, p. 101. Translation my own.

⁵ Babalorixá Ominarê, *Candomblé de Ketu (Alaketu)*.

⁶ José Beniste, *O Jogo de Búzios, Um Encontro com o Desconhecido*, p. 192. Translation my own.

⁷ Beniste, p.193.

⁸ Beniste, 193.

⁹ Beniste, 193.

¹⁰ Maulana Karenga, *Odu Ifa, The Ethical Teachings*, p. 28. I include this Itan Odu from Nigerian Ifa tradition as that its language reveals so much of Oyeku’s mysteries.

¹¹ Iyá Marinete, ever tuned to the practicalities of working with living people with human needs and desires, told this (or rather, something like this), to me years ago while I was studying with her.

¹² This story actually comes from the Lukumi tradition of Cuba. I tell it here because it fits well into the larger teachings of Obi. A version of it can be found in Lydia Cabrera’s book, *El Monte*, p. 379.