Clyde W. Ford

Obatala

United States (1999)

TAGS: African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions Gods

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General information	
Title of the work	Obatala
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Nigeria, Cameroon
Original Language	Unknown, but presumably Yoruba language
First Edition Date	1999
First Edition Details	Clyde W. Ford, *The Hero with an African Face: Mythic Wisdom of Traditional Africa*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999, 227 pp.
ISBN	0553105442
Full Date of the Recording of the Story for the Databasey	1999 (date of publication)
More Details of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Nigeria, the Yoruba region
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	Daniel A. Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@yahoo.com

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Creators

Clyde W. Ford (Author)

Clyde W. Ford is African-American native of New York City. He is the author of three other books: *Where Healing Waters Meet: Touching Mind and Emotion Through the Body* (1989); *Compassionate Touch: The Body's Role in Healing and Recovery* (1993) and *We CAN All Get Along: 50 Steps You Can Take to Help End Racism* (1993). As a prominent guest speaker on American TV, he has taken part in more than 150 TV shows. He has written numerous articles in journals and newspapers. For more on Ford see here (accessed: July 3, 2018).

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Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating

Date and place of collection: Unknown. However, Clyde Ford states in the Preface to his book that "the myths in this book come from numerous sources, principally from the published transcriptions and translations of missionaries, ethnographers, and anthropologists" (p. xiii).

Cultural Background*: Yoruba, Nigeria.

The coast of Nigeria is the South West of the country and it is located in the south on the Gulf of Guinea in the Atlantic Ocean. The main ethnic group of this area is the Yoruba and their mythology holds that they descended from a hero called Odua or Oduduwa. Due to lack of dry land and given that they live around the coast in creeks, lagoons, and salt marshes, their main activities are fishing and trade in salt. The Yoruba pantheon being one of the largest in the world accommodates many Gods. They also hold that most of their deities originally lived below the water around them. Also, the Yoruba people constantly offer sacrifices, pray and organize different festivals dedicated to their land and individual deities. Concerning the rites of passage, water is sprinkled on infants to make it cry as a sign of welcome to the land of the living. Again, kingship is important to the Yoruba and they always sit together to eat their popular meal *fufu* (pounded yam). Lastly, their literary and creative tradition includes tongue twisters, praise poems, hundreds of prose narratives, riddles, and thousands of proverbs.

Source: everyculture.com (accessed: June 19, 2019)

Summary

The full text of this myth is found in: *The Hero with an African Face: Mythic Wisdom of Traditional Africa* by Clyde W. Ford, in the United States and Canada by Bantam Books, 1999, pp. 148–155). This is only a brief summary of the story. The full text of the myth and others can be read in the book cited above.

In the beginning, a single god-head called *Orisa-nla* goes downhill

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when it is smashed into pieces with a rolling stone pushed down by his servant, Atunda. The pieces of the almighty god become different gods or goddesses called *orishas*. They live above in a heaven land ruled by *Olurun* who has many gifted sons. Below the heaven land, lies a vast expanse of water and a large swamp. However, immediately above this vast expanse of water and swamp, there is another realm of an *orisha*, called *Olokun*. One of the sons of *Olurun*, *Obatala* noted for his strength asks and obtains permission from Olurun to bring Olukon to live at the same level as them by raising the water level. Olurun grants him permission to do so. So, Oludumare, the eldest *orisha*, who possesses the keys to all the wisdom and knowledge of the future, shows him how to use magic and raise the water level. He fabricates a golden chain with which to descend to the lower realm. Unfortunately, the chain is not long enough to reach, so Oludumare instructs him to remove a white hen and sand from the snail shell he is carrying and cause the hen to scatter the sand across the surface. The hen scatters the sand in all directions forming flat land, hills and valleys. Obatala then settles on the newly created dry land which he names Ife*. He cultivates the land, and later receives light from his father, Olurun to light up the darkness. He lives happily on the earth only with a black cat and soon becomes tired of living alone. So, he starts to mould humans out of clay. He gets tired and drinks some palm wine but a drop overmuch. In his drunken state, he creates malformed humans, and only later on realises his mistake after he had asked Olurun to breathe life into them. He vows never to drink again. However, as the village grows larger, he decides to return to the heavenly realm. Back in the heavenly home, he is treated to a lavish feast. He tells the others about the earth and gives them permission to visit if only they would love humans and respect his dominion over the earth.

Assured of the safety of humans, he prepares to visit an old friend King Shango. Oludumare warns him not to protest or retaliate if he is attacked or mistreated by anyone on his way. He is able to resist three provocations from his brother Eshu, the trickster-*orisha* and to allow himself to be imprisoned unjustly. Eventually, Shango learns of his imprisonment in his land, releases him and apologises to him. This is how Obatala learns to be tolerant and forgiving and as such be a better deity over his people.

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* Ife is today the name of a Nigerian town.

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Analysis	Yoruba mythology, like most world mythologies, has a rich hierarchical pantheon of gods and goddesses, each playing a different role. The myth about Obatala recalls some creation myths where mythical figures operate between the celestial and terrestrial worlds. The fact that earth is empty becomes a motivating factor for the different divinities to dispatch messengers to earth to populate the world with humans and animals. Mistakes made by the messengers equally introduced handicapped people (Cripples in the case of the Yoruba) and evil into the world.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions Gods
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Family Humanity Magic Nature Religious beliefs Transformation
Further Reading	The myth of Obatala has been the subject of a play by the Nigerian playwright Obotunde Ijimere, entitled: *Imprisonment of Obatala*, published by Heinemann African Writers Series (Paperback), see here and here (accessed: August 22, 2018). Idowu, Bolaji E., *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, London: Longmans, 1962. Wyndham, John, *Myths of Ífè*, London: Erskine Macdonald, 1921 (accessed: September 13, 2021).

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