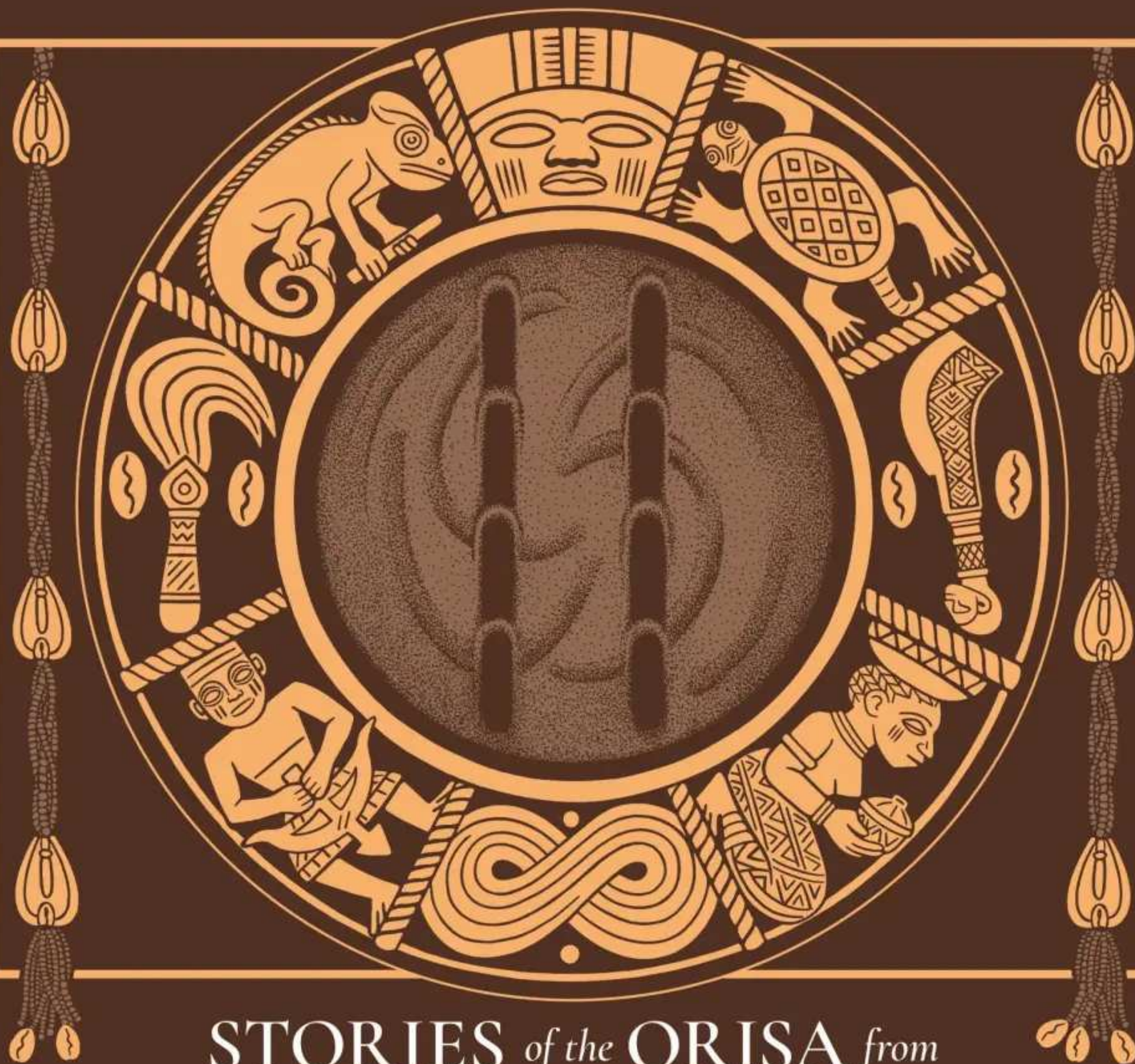


✧ YORUBA ✧ MYTHOLOGY



STORIES *of the* ORISHA *from*
WEST AFRICA *and the* DIASPORA

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INTRODUCTION

Yorùbá [YOH-roo-BAH] mythology is sacred to a growing religious community of more than one hundred million practitioners, who can be found on every continent, and an inspiration to millions more, both on the African continent and in the diaspora. This community is composed of devotees of the *òrìṣà* [oh-ree-shah] (divinities) of the Yoruba people of West Africa found primarily in Nigeria, Bénin Republic, and Togo, but there are now even more practitioners across the Americas than in West Africa—a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade—with a growing number in Europe and Asia as well. In addition to the large portion of the global population with religious ties to the *orìṣa*, no African society can claim to have had a greater influence on art and culture around the world than the Yoruba. Yoruba art is some of the most prized and studied on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Many famous salsa singers and musicians, such as Celia Cruz and Tito Puente, were initiates of *orìṣa* traditions and sang about the *orìṣa* in their songs. The *orìṣa* also appear prominently in Brazilian popular music and culture, such as the works of former minister of culture and singer-songwriter Gilberto Gil, author Jorge Amado, and more recently the country’s biggest megastar Anitta. Beyoncé’s 2017 Grammy performance overtly invoked the *orìṣa* *Ọṣun* [aw-SHOOHN] (riverine divinity of beauty, fertility, and femininity), and the various allusions to the *orìṣa* in her album *Lemonade* marked the growing interest in and engagement with Yoruba religion in popular culture in the United States.

While some of the greatest scholars of African and Afro-diasporic art have studied the material culture of the Yoruba, the Yoruba also boast impressive verbal arts, with mythology and storytelling being perhaps the most widespread and globally influential. Yoruba mythology commanded the attention and respect of the earliest scholars of Afro-diasporic cultures, such as Nina Rodrigues and Arthur Ramos in Brazil and Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera in Cuba. Some hypothesize that the *orìṣa* *Èṣù* [ay-shoo] (divinity of communication, intersections, and transitions)—or another related divinity from West Africa—is behind the American trope of musicians meeting the “devil” at a crossroads at midnight to exchange their souls for musical talent. Tomi Adeyemi’s successful young adult book *Children of Blood and Bone* drew inspiration directly from the global Yoruba mythological tradition, and its more than 150-week run on *The New York Times* bestsellers list clearly indicated the wide popular appeal of the *orìṣa* and Yoruba stories.

One of our goals in writing this book is to introduce one of the world’s greatest mythological traditions to a wider audience. Those familiar with Yoruba mythology frequently compare it to Greek mythology, noting the strong similarities between *Ẹṣàngó* [shah-n-GOH] (royal *orìṣa* of lightning) and Zeus, or between Hermes and *Eṣu*, and just





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as Europeans have long drawn on Greek mythology for inspiration and insights in fields as diverse as philosophy, psychology, politics, art, and more, Yoruba mythology has inspired and continues to inspire African and non-African intellectuals, devotees, and artists on the continent and in the diaspora.

What sets Yoruba mythology apart from Greek mythology (and other great traditions such as Egyptian or Norse mythology, for that matter) is that it is a dynamic, evolving tradition that continues to inform the ritual lives of millions and is constantly expanding and evolving as an embodied and performed tradition rather than one primarily reduced to writing. In this sense, Hindu mythology may be a closer analog, and orisha practitioners have increasingly drawn parallels between the two pantheons—for example, we have heard numerous descriptions of Lakshmi as the South Asian manifestation of Oṣun. One of the impressive features of Yoruba mythology is that it has become central to the identity of many populations who do not necessarily have Yoruba ancestry, while religion, ethnicity, and mythology still tend to be more closely linked within Hinduism.

Although one may not initially think of the Bible and the Qur'an in the context of mythology, Yoruba mythology also functions as a type of sacred literature or scripture, among other roles, for one of the world's largest religious communities. In addition, and as you will see in this book, Yoruba mythology directly and deeply engages with both sacred texts, as each has become an integral part of Yoruba society in both the homeland and diaspora. As the ability to domesticate narratives from the Bible and the Qur'an demonstrates, one of the characteristic features of Yoruba mythology is its fluidity as a result of its primarily oral nature. Without fixed words on a page—and sometimes even when that is the case—Yoruba myths are told and retold in ways that are most effective for the purposes and settings when they are recounted. They constantly adapt to new times and locations, incorporating new material when useful. Remarkably internally diverse, this body of orature and practice differs widely from town to town and region to region in both Yorubaland and the diaspora, and this diversity is typically celebrated by practitioners as a strength, rather than a problem to be solved.

While the Bible, in particular, tends to have a strong linear nature to its sacred narratives, traditional Yoruba culture and mythology take a very different approach to time than that of the modern West. In Yoruba myths, time is more cyclical, despite the events depicted often taking place sometime in the “past.” This past is understood not as a single point along a linear historical timeline—although it may be linked to historical events. Rather, the past is a divine archetype or drama depicting how timeless realities and cosmic forces interact with each other and how they come *into* time, not just how they develop *within* historical time. In this way, events that have happened in the past are happening in many places right now and will come around again countless times. We usually introduce this difference to our students through the distinction between facts and truths. Historical





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facts are fixed, happen once, and pass away, even if their memory and effects endure. Truths, on the other hand—such as how the love of a child may drive a parent to extreme lengths, as exemplified in *Yemayá's* [yay-mah-YAH] sacrifices for *Changó* [chah-n-GOH] in Cuban myths; or how light and dark are complementary; or how pride comes before a fall—constantly recur through a never-ending series of historical facts across time and cultures and are thus not dependent on or bound by time and space in the same way. While this perspective on time is not absent from Christianity or Islam, it is even more central to the way Yoruba mythology is constructed and employed.

When comparisons are made between Abrahamic scriptures and Yoruba religion, they usually take place within the context of the tradition of *Ifá* [ee-FAH], the preeminent Yoruba system of divination and arguably the most widely practiced Indigenous wisdom and religious tradition. When Ifa priests perform divination, they recite sacred verses they have memorized and apply the myths contained within those verses to the specific situations their clients face. Ifa directly applies this conception of time and mythology to immediate and practical problems mediated by a highly trained and skilled class of priests (and in some cases priestesses) who memorize, archive, and analyze this dynamic and ever-expanding oral and ritual corpus. The tutelary orisha and founder of Ifa, *Ọrúnmìlà* [aw-ROOHN-mee-lah], is praised as “the great storyteller of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* [ee-LAY ee-feh]” for his role in using stories to set the world right. Ifa has emerged as the most prominent of the orisha traditions across the globe, and with the growing presence of these traditions, Yoruba mythology, which is central to the practice of Ifa, is increasingly also at the center of this expanding global tradition.

Furthermore, Yoruba mythology also informs the political and cultural identity of approximately fifty million Yoruba people around the world and influences the art and culture of far more. Yoruba mythology plays a prominent role in Brazilian and Cuban popular culture, and is influential in Trinidad, Haïti, Venezuela, Colombia, Puerto Rico, and increasingly in the United States, Mexico, and many other countries. Its context-specific nature makes it inherently polysemic, allowing people to identify new interpretations and ways it speaks to them culturally, religiously, artistically, emotionally, and every other way imaginable. We regularly encourage our students—whether Yoruba, religious, or neither—to apply the mythology to their own lives, and the results are always incredible. It comes as no surprise then that the internet and social media have become perhaps the most active centers for the telling and retelling of Yoruba mythology. Therefore, the greatest challenge of writing this book was not the effort and time it took to collect the myths, but rather having to sift through the thousands of myths and their different variations we have encountered in person, in books, and online. The vibrancy and profundity of Yoruba mythology have drawn the attention of some of the world's greatest folklorists, including William Bascom (former president and leading member of



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the American Folklore Society) and Harold Courlander, who published several collections of Yoruba folklore. We hope this book will demonstrate to you why some of the world's best folklorists found Yoruba mythology uniquely fascinating and compelling.

As a result, we were delighted when Black Dog & Leventhal approached us about this book, because we have believed it has been desperately needed for some time. Despite Yoruba mythology expanding rapidly across the world, there are very few collections in print that are widely accessible to the public. The few that exist—such as Courlander's *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes*—are out of print and had limited circulation. Many other books with large numbers of Yoruba myths have been published only in Nigeria or by academic presses outside Nigeria and are more constrained because they focus exclusively on Ifa verses, stories of the orisha, or general Yoruba folklore. In addition, it is very difficult to find collections of Yoruba myths that bring stories of the diaspora and homeland together, although Reginaldo Prandi's *Mitologia dos Orixás* does so brilliantly. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first anthology of its type in terms of the number of myths, their geographic spread, and the different types of myths included. It is the book we wished we could have read when we wore the spines off collections of Greek and Norse mythology but could not find comparable works on the mythology of our own ancestors. We hope it can serve as a first point of entry for those with an interest in Yoruba or African culture, religion, and storytelling.

So far, we have used various English terms such as *myth*, *narrative*, or simply *story* as approximate translations for the Yoruba word *ìtàn* [ee-tahn], which can carry all the previous meanings in addition to “history,” among others. The root of this word—the verb *ìtàn* [tahn]—means “to light a fire” or “to shine” or “to spread.” We find it fascinating that this is precisely what Yoruba itan have done: spread across the globe and shed light on the nature of our world as well as ourselves. We have chosen to translate itan primarily as “myth” here because that English word seems best to carry the implications of sacrality and a different sense of time, but itan may simultaneously also fall into other categories such as folklore or history, just of a different type than one might encounter in modern history textbooks. In this vein, it is tempting, as many scholars have done in the past, to analyze Yoruba myths through euhemerism, or the theory that myths begin with “real” historical facts that have over time been wrapped up in increasingly fantastical exaggerations and creative innovations. While many of the myths in this book are undoubtedly linked to historical events and some of the orisha are known to have been historical people, the details of the myths are primarily designed to merge potentially historical people and events with supra-historical, cosmic forces or principles and even the natural world. For example, the myths about *orí* [oh-REE] (literally “head” or each person's destiny, spiritual self, or type of guardian angel) deal simultaneously with the physical or outer





OLOKUN CHALLENGES ORIŞANLA

at all. She simply went home to get some more. Soon, Olokun returned carrying even more impressive clothes, so Agẹmọ snatched those away as well. Undeterred, Olokun returned home to bring more clothes, but Agẹmọ stole those too! The cycle was repeated several times before Olokun realized what had happened and saw Agẹmọ with the most expensive, multicolored, and beautiful cloth in the world.

At this point, Agẹmọ had even more cloth than Olokun, and she realized that it would be futile to plead her case before Oduduwa anymore. She exclaimed, “Oriṣanla, you are truly the ruler of the land! If I cannot defeat the apprentice, how could I possibly defeat the master?” Olokun gracefully conceded, and from that time on, no one has disputed the seniority and authority of Oriṣanla over the land, and whenever Agẹmọ wants to change his color or appearance, he has many clothes of all different colors and designs that he can put on at will!

Alternatively, some say Agẹmọ has always been able to change his appearance at will, and this is how he won the contest for Oriṣanla. As that version of the story goes, when Olokun was on her way to the palace, Agẹmọ stepped out in front of her to see what she was wearing. As usual, she had on a brightly colored outfit of very rare fabric that was beautifully and uniquely tailored just for her. However, as soon as she showed it to Agẹmọ, he changed his skin to reflect the same colors and patterns. Shocked, Olokun went home to change into another outfit that would put Agẹmọ and Oriṣanla to shame.

When she returned to Agẹmọ wearing an even more intricately embroidered outfit of even more luxurious cloth, Agẹmọ was unfazed and reproduced it once again! Frustrated, Olokun went home, changed again, and returned with another stunning set of clothes. Yet again, Agẹmọ changed his skin to reflect them as well. The two repeated this process over and over until Olokun finally realized it was pointless, and she conceded, recognizing that even Oriṣanla’s apprentice had all the clothing she could produce and then more besides. She then returned to the ocean, leaving the land to Oriṣanla.

ELUSU

Despite some people venerating Olokun as a female oriṣa, others venerate him as male, and in those cases, Olokun has a wife named *Ẹlúṣú* [eh-LOO-SOO] who is the oriṣa of the bar in the harbor in present-day Lagos. Her skin is almost white in color, and she looks mostly like a human except for the fish scales between her breasts and hips. The many fish who used to swim in her waters were her sacred children, and although the relatively calm waters would make it seem like a natural place to go fishing, this greatly angered Ẹlúṣú. If people were brazen enough to try to catch one of her children, she would stir up the waters and drown them along with anyone else in the boat! Therefore, fishermen would only travel through her waters on their way to fish elsewhere. If they saw anyone trying to catch



OXALUFÁ'S IMPRISONMENT

Oxalá was thoroughly confused and looked down at his clothes. His jaw could have hit the floor. They were absolutely covered in dendê stains! “*I am Oxalá,*” he exclaimed, “but I have no idea how these stains got here.” Exu, however, knew exactly how it happened.

Exu was angry with Oxalá for denying him the opportunity to receive a tasty ebó, and so he devised a situation that ensured Oxalá would get drunk and pass out. Then Exu snuck up to Oxalá and carefully smeared dendê all over his clothes. Oxalá was too tired and full of palm wine to even notice, and when he woke up, he just went on his way without looking down. Now Oxalá was in serious trouble and was thrown in prison because nobody recognized him in his stained, dirty clothing.

While Oxalá was languishing in prison, Xangô’s kingdom began facing a series of crises. The rain stopped falling. Plants and crops could not grow. Disease spread. Women became infertile. Every aspect of life stopped working the way it was supposed to. Xangô could not understand why any of this was happening, so he consulted the búzios and discovered that it was because there was an important person who was wrongfully imprisoned in his kingdom!

Xangô immediately went to the prison, found Oxalá, and ordered him released. Then he got to the bottom of what happened and helped his father recover from his long ordeal. Oxalá was given a bath, and his clothes were washed thoroughly to remove all the stains and grime that had accumulated on his body and fabric until he was able to emerge looking as he should, spotless and free from any blemishes.

Yet another account relates the story slightly differently with a greater emphasis on Oxalufã’s suffering. Oxalufã had always been close friends with Xangô, but it had been a long time since they had seen each other. Oxalufã had even given Xangô a horse that was his favorite to ride into battle ahead of Oyó’s famous cavalry. Oxalufã wanted to see Xangô very badly, so he began planning for a journey to Oyó. After making all his preparations, his last step was to consult a babalaô to ensure a smooth journey on the long road ahead. This was especially important because Oxalufã is the oldest of orixá and walks very slowly as he is bent over with age and can only get around with the help of his silver opá. When the babalaô finished consulting Ifá, he looked up with regret in his eyes and said, “Baba, I am very sorry, but you absolutely cannot go on this trip. It is a terrible idea.”

This message stunned Oxalufã, as he had made the trip several times before without incident and his friend Xangô was arguably the most powerful king in the region, so it was difficult to imagine what could possibly go wrong. Oxalufã had already told everyone in his house that he was going on this trip, and the preparations were made, so he did not want to back out now. He told the babalaô that he was going to Oyó one way or the other, but the babalaô insisted that he stay. When it became clear that there was no dissuading Oxalufã, the babalaô said, “Please, at the very least make an ebó with three sets of your brilliantly white clothes and African soap. Also, you will be in grave danger of death