

Awo Training Lesson VIII

Training for *Awo* can be organized by topics in a way that conforms with the sequence of events that is traditional used to perform specific *Ifa* ritual. The sequence is wash, anoint, invoke, feed and read. This is a shorthand way of describing the elements of ritual used to consecrate sacred objects and to describe the sequence of most initiations. Washing is the use of herbs to clean away the spiritual energy associated with an object prior to consecration. Anointing is the use of sacred materials to hold a prayer on to a sacred object such as palm oil, honey, and *efun* (chalk). Invocation is the use of *oriki* or praise poems to call a Spirit to a ritual space or to a ritual object. Feeding is the use of either food (*adimu*) or blood (*eje*) to thank Spirit for participation in the ritual process. Reading or divination is dialogue with Spirit to determine the good fortune that comes as a result of doing a particular ritual.

Once I noticed that most *Ifa* ritual follows this sequence of events, it became very simply to remember how to perform a specific ritual. It also has served me well as a way of organizing information gathered in the course of study with elders. In this lesson I want to discuss a number of ways to study the use of herbs as they relate to ritual process. The book *Ewe* *The Use of Plants in Yoruba Society* by Pierre Fatumbi Verger, published by Odecrecht Press was originally published in Portuguese and was translated into English in 1995 ISBN 85-7164-514-

0. I do not believe it is still in print, but I do know that it is listed in most University Library card catalogues as a book that is available through the university library exchange system. The book is an extraordinary work of research and is the definite study of *Ifa* herbs in print. Short of extensive study with an elder in Africa it is hard to imagine a more complete resource on the subject. It is seven hundred pages of *Ifa* herbs catalogued by both their Yoruba name and their western scientific botanical name. In addition to identification the study includes the related *odu* and an English and Yoruba recitation of the *oriki* used to unlock the ase of the herb. This is an essential reference book for any serious student of *Ifa* and provides enough information for a complete foundation in the *Ifa* art of *Osanyin* (spiritual herbs) and *Onisegun* (traditional Yoruba medicine).

Pierre Fatumbi Verger was born in France, lived in Brazil and studied *Ifa* in Nigeria. He made a major contribution to the installation of *Ifa* and *Iyaami Osorango* in Brazil. His work has inspired me personally and I am grateful for his meticulous efforts in gathering information that is fundamental to the practice of our faith.

As good as the book is, there is a major problem with the use of Yoruba herbs in the Diaspora that is seldom addressed that needs to be examined in order to elevate the use of herbs in *Ifa* ritual practice outside of Nigeria. Herbs used in a ritual context are most effective when gathered in the generally area where they are being used. Learning the

material in Verger's book gives us a good overview on how *Ifa* makes ritual use of herbs but it does not give us any information about the spiritual nature of the herbs in our immediate home environment. For me the understanding of local herbs requires an understanding of the ritual use of herbs in Native American religious tradition and then translating that understanding into the language of *Ifa*. There is an extensive body of literature describing the use of Native American herbs in most regions of the United States. If there is any confusion about translating Native American Spiritual Forces into the language of *Ifa*, this translation can be facilitated through the use of divination. For example are herbs associated with the Spirit of the Coyote sacred to *Eṣu*?

Another process, which I find effective in dealing with the sanctification of local plants, is the invocation of direct communication with plants. In *Ifa Osanyin* is the Spirit of Plants. *Osanyin* is born in *Okanran Oturupon*. The ritual for invoking the ability to speak with plants involves marking *Okanran Oturupon* on the *Ifa* tray, reciting the *Odu* from *Okanran Oturupon* that refers to the transference of *ase* from *Orunmila* to *Osanyin* (The Sacred *Ifa* Oracle by Afolabi Epega page 412). The sequence is as follows; *Oriki* for the six directions, *Oriki Egun*, *Oriki Ori*, *Oriki Eṣu*, *Oriki Osoosi*, *Oriki Ogun*, *Oriki Osanyin*, followed by the recitation of the *Odu*. At the end of *Odu* say *ire, ase, to* meaning good fortune, may it be so, enough or the prayer is ended. Take your middle finger on your right and left hand then push the *iyerosun* on the tray

from the top down, from the bottom up and from the sides towards the center. Make a lump of *iyerosun* in the center of the tray and ingest a small amount of the powder. This process will give you the ability to speak directly with plants. In the past when I have engaged in this process I have used half a dozen members of the *Ile* to participate in the process and communicate with identical plants. When all or most of the answers match, the information is confirmed with divination. I call this process the sanctification of the herbs within the range of influence of the community. If you use Verger's book to study the types of herbs associated with specific Spirits and if you begin your dialogue with plants based on this information it facilitates the process. Remember the African rain forest did not come with a pharmaceutical instruction manual. The sophisticated use and understanding of herbs evident in traditional Yoruba culture is I believe the result of this same process. It is my prayer that as we begin to identify the sacred use of specific herbs within the sphere of influence of our communities that we begin to share this information as part of the legacy we leave to future generations.

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