

Awo Training XIII

In the last lesson I spoke of the formation of the family as a foundation for networking and problem solving. *Awo* also has the task of providing for the ritual needs of the community. The family as training school is structured around the idea that every human *ori* (consciousness) goes through significant rites of passage that reflect age specific development. Traditionally every person in an *Ifa* community passes through a naming ceremony, a puberty rite, a relationship commitment ceremony, a rebirthing ceremony (initiation), an elder confirmation ceremony and a funeral. At these times the entire community comes together to celebrate the elevation of consciousness of a single person or a small group of people. This celebration includes ritual enactment of the important lessons to be learned, admonitions from the elders and divination.

The naming ceremony involves the presentation and blessing of basic foods to the newborn baby. Divination is done to make sure the baby comes to term physically and divination is done to mark the baby's destiny. This divination is performed in front of the entire extended family so that everyone in the community can help track the child's development. The baby is given a public name that reflects the destiny described in the *Odu* and a secret name that is used as medicine by the parents. Both the public name and the secret name frequently are selected from the various names listed in the verses of the *Odu*. In many regions of Nigeria it is traditional to give an *Ori* pot at the time of the naming ceremony. Among other things the *Odu* pot includes a piece of calabash with the child's *Odu* marked on it as a written record of the child's destiny.

The puberty rite for men is a test of courage. The test of courage is the ritual of receiving tribal marks. Tribal marks were originally used to identify friend and foe in battle. In traditional Yoruba culture tribal marks are part of the male rite of passage. This ritual marks the separation of the child from the direct influence of the parents and begins the process of individuation. This process is not necessarily easily accommodated to Western culture, but it is possible to design male rites of passage that involve a real test of courage. The issue confronting young men as they reach this age is their uncertainty about whether or not they have what it takes to defend their family and loved ones. If the community does not provide this rite the need to resolve this conflict is so strong young men will initiate each other in the form of gang violence.

The puberty rite for women is focused on a woman's first menstruation and the information need to responsibly enter childbearing status in the community.

Traditional *Ifa* commitment rituals are usually very simple. The key element is the divination. In my experience when a couple comes together it is not the job of the diviner to tell them whether or not the relationship will work. The couple needs to take responsibility for making the relationship work. They come to divination to seek the guidance of Spirit to sustain a healthy relationship. If the diviner is asked to make this decision the divination robs the couple of the necessary opportunity to take responsibility for their decision. To function fully as *Awo* in the United States I believe it is important to apply for Church Status through an application for a 501 3C tax exemption. This allows elders to legally perform weddings.

Rebirthing ceremonies or initiations in traditional *Ifa* culture are associated with trade skills. Diviners receive *Ifa*, woodcarvers receive *Sango*, blacksmiths receive *Ogun*, hunters receive *Osoosi*, market women receive *Oya*, textile makers receive *Osun*, and herbalists receive *Osanyin*. In the Diaspora rebirthing rituals tend to be more related to the perception of character types. In either case initiation is a commitment to a life of spiritual discipline.

Elder commitment ceremonies are chieftaincy titles. In traditional Yoruba culture there are two types of chieftaincy titles those that traditional support and sustain a specific *egbe* (society) and those that are conferred to show recognition of achievement.

Funeral ritual in traditional *Ifa* culture is similar to initiation. It is an elaborate process that involves some form of reanimation of the person who has passed. In order to effectively perform funeral rites at some point our communities need to join hands and buy cemeteries and have members of our community become fully licensed at morticians so that we can perform the traditional rites without obstruction.

In my experience anyone who has not had communal support for these rites of passage has huge holes in the development of their consciousness. This is a serious problem for those who want to form communities based on traditional *Ifa*. The question is real simple, how can an elder guide someone through a rite they themselves have not been through? Ultimately it may not be possible and the foundation and the traditional still needs to be established. My recommendation is simple. The book Homecoming by John Bradshaw takes the reader

through the developmental issues that reflect the training we all should have receive from a fully functional spiritual responsible extended family. Any one who actually reads this book and does the exercises in the book will experience real transformation and will start to have a insight into the purpose for each of the rites of passage listed in this article. I have always said, and I continue to say there is no right way to perform a ritual only effective ways to perform a ritual. If *Awo* has no understanding of the point of a given rite of passage being effective is virtually impossible.

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Awo Falokun