

The Creation of the Universe: Yoruba, Nigeria

At the beginning of time, the universe consisted only of the sky, the water, and marshland. Olorun; the most powerful and wisest of the gods, was the creator of the sun and the ruler of the sky. Olokun was the ruler of the waters and the marshes. Even though her kingdom contained no plants, animals, or human beings, Olokun was happy with it. Unfortunately, Obatala, one of Olorun's favorites, was not pleased.

“The world would certainly be more interesting if living things inhabited it,” he said to Olorun. “What can we do so that Olokun's kingdom can be inhabited? What she needs is mountains, forests, and fields.”

“Well,” Olorun answered, “I agree that mountains, forests, and fields would be better than water alone, but how would it be created?”

“With your permission, I will create the solid land.”

Olorun gladly gave Obatala permission to create the solid land. Obatala immediately went to see Orunmila, Olorun's oldest son, a god with the gift of being able to foresee the future.

“Olorun has given me permission to create solid land where now only water and marshland exist,” he said to Orunmila. “Will you teach me how to do this so that I can then populate the world with living things?”

“I will be happy to, Obatala. You must first obtain a golden chain that is long enough to reach from the sky to the water. You must then take a snail's shell, a white hen, a black cat, and a palm nut in a bag. When you have done this, you must carry them down to the marshland by way of the chain.”

Obatala immediately went to find the goldsmith. The goldsmith agreed to make such a chain, but he did not have enough gold on hand to complete the task. So, Obatala went to all of the gods and asked them for the gold that they possessed so that the chain could be made. Because the gods agreed that Obatala's project was a worthy one, they gave him their golden necklaces, bracelets, and rings. Still, according to

the goldsmith, Obatala had not collected enough gold to make a chain of sufficient length to reach from the sky to the water. He returned to the goldsmith anyway, and he asked the smith to fashion a chain as long as possible with what gold they had and to put a hook at the end of it.

When the chain was readied, Obatala and Orunmila hooked one end of it to the edge of the sky, and Orunmila gave Obatala the sand-filled snail shell, the white hen, the black cat, and the palm nut to put into a bag, which he slung over his shoulder. Obatala then began to climb down the golden chain.

When he had climbed down about half the length of the chain, Obatala realized that he was leaving the world of light and entering the world of twilight. Still he continued to climb down. When he reached the end of the chain, he was still far above the ocean, much too high to jump safely.

As he was wondering what to do, he heard Orunmila's voice call out from above. "Obatala," he said, "use the sand in your snail shell."

Obatala did as Orunmila dictated. He pulled the snail shell out of his bag and poured the sand into the water.

"Now free the white hen."

Obatala again obeyed Orunmila's command. The white hen fluttered down to land upon the sandy waters. She immediately began to scratch at the sand, scattering it far and wide. Wherever the grains of sand landed, dry land was created, the largest piles becoming hills.

Seeing the dry land grow high beneath him, Obatala let go of the golden chain and fell the short distance to the earth. The place where he landed he named Ife. He looked around and saw that the ground stretched as far as the horizon in every direction that he could see, but it was still barren.

Now Obatala dug a hole in the ground and buried the palm nut. He had barely shoveled the last handful of dirt over the nut when a palm tree began growing out of the buried nut. The tree quickly reached its full height and grew more palm nuts, which dropped upon the land and grew into mature trees before his eyes. Obatala took the bark from the

trees and built a house. When he went inside his new house, Obatala took the black cat out of the bag, and he settled down with the cat as his companion.

After some time, Olorun wondered how Obatala was doing, so he asked one of his servants, Chameleon, to go down the golden chain to visit Obatala. When the Chameleon saw Obatala, he said, “Olorun, the ruler of the sky, has asked me to find out how you are doing.”

The Chameleon returned to Olorun and told him what Obatala had said. Olorun was so pleased with Obatala’s effort that he said, “I will create the sun.” He then did just that, and every day the sun’s light and warmth poured down upon Obatala and his creations.

A great deal more time passed, and Obatala found that he was still not satisfied. “As much as I love my black cat,” he said, “I think that I need another kind of companionship. Perhaps it will be good for me to populate this world with creatures more like myself.”

Obatala set about to accomplish this task. He began digging in the soil, and he gathered together bits and pieces of clay that stuck together. Taking this clay, Obatala created small figures shaped like himself. This endeavor proved to be very tiring, and soon Obatala decided to take the juice from the palm trees to make palm wine. As tired as he was, he drank more of the wine than he realized, and soon he was drunk.

When Obatala began making the clay figures again, the effects of the wine made him a little clumsy. As a result, the figures that he created were not as well made as those that he had fashioned earlier. Some of the new figures had arms that were too short or legs of uneven length or a curved back, although Obatala’s senses were so dulled from the drink that he did not notice that these figures were not perfect.

After he had created a large number of clay figures, Obatala called up to Olorun: “Olorun, I have created clay figures to populate my world and be companions to me, but they are devoid of life. Of all of the gods, you are the only one who can bestow life. I ask that you do this so that I may spend the rest of my life with companions who are like me.”

Once more Olorun was pleased to do what Obatala asked. The sky god breathed life into the clay figures, which became living human beings. As soon as the figures were endowed with life, they saw Obatala's hut, and they began to build homes for themselves all around it. Thus was the first Yoruba village created. That village was called Ife, and it still exists today.

Obatala was very pleased with his work. Then, as the effects of the palm wine wore off, he saw that some of the people whom he had created were not perfect, and he promised that he would never drink palm wine again and that he would devote himself to protecting those who suffered because of his drunkenness. This is how Obatala became the protector of those who are born deformed.

The people whom Obatala had created needed food, so they began to work the earth. Since iron did not yet exist, Obatala presented his people with a copper knife and a wooden hoe, which they used to raise grain and yams. Ife slowly turned from a village into a city as the people prospered.

Seeing that his work on earth was done and having grown tired of being the ruler of Ife, Obatala climbed back up the golden chain to the sky. From that time afterward, he spent half of his time in the sky and half of his time in Ife.