

DISCOVERING Òsun's Joy

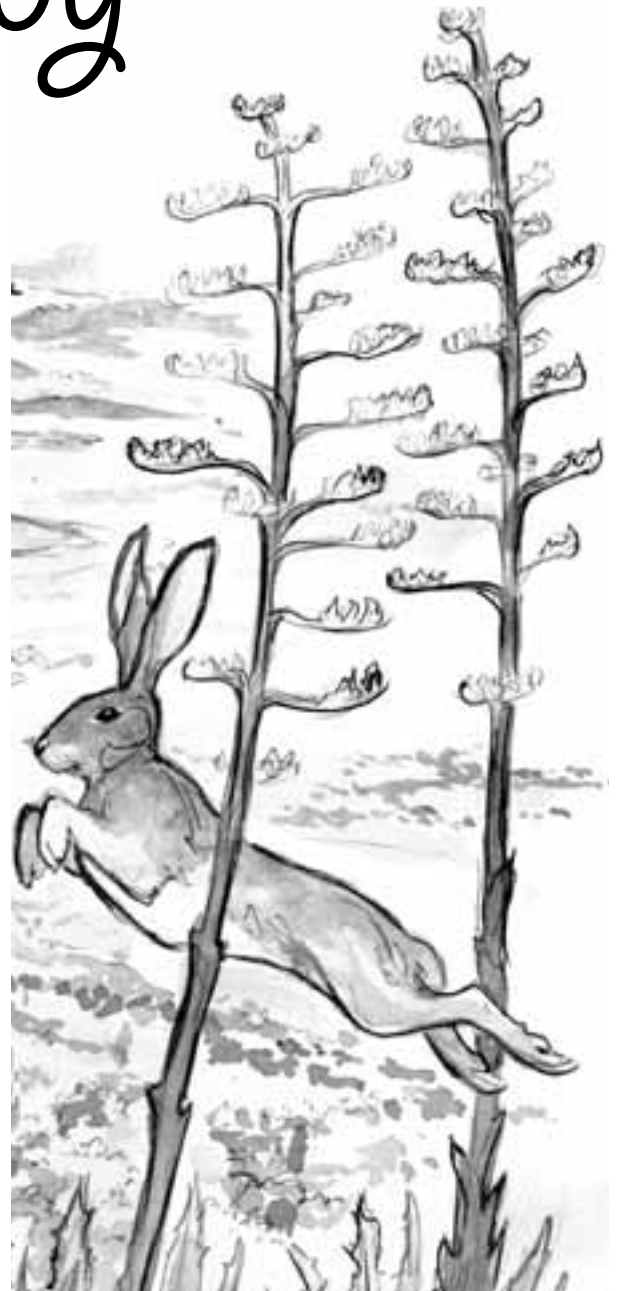
Hail the great Mother Òsun. She waits at home to assist barren women to bear children. Òsun has plenty of cool water to heal diseases.¹

You hike early in the morning or an hour before dusk here, the only time of day when you are likely to see the native wildlife. Bring a good pair of hiking boots, a pair of jeans and a long sleeve shirt, and a broad-brimmed hat.

My journey into the discovery of Òsun's joy began when my husband and I decided to move from the city and build our dream home in the wilderness of southern Arizona. We bought two hundred acres of Sonoran desert, in a remote area of the Mule Mountains nestled between Bisbee and Tombstone.

The Sonoran desert is no ideal country retreat; patience is needed to see the beauty of this seemingly barren place. Luck is needed, too: I remember vividly a midnight journey into the desert with flashlights and cameras to see the "Queen of the Night" cactus — whose beautiful, fragrant white blossom appears for only one night in the plant's lifespan.¹

I remember the first Christmas Day we experienced in the desert. We set out to hike to the crest of one of the ridges behind our home, figuring that if we had the stamina to continue, the route might turn out to be the shortest overland route from our property to the town of Bisbee. The hike was quite illuminating: on the one hand, we enjoyed the beautiful flowering *ocotillo* and *agave* and the endless expanse of azure sky — but on the other, we couldn't enjoy the scenery too much as we had to be constantly alert to where we put our feet. Sharp-edged ankle-twisting rocks were strewn across the landscape, a few of them draped with large rattlesnakes sunning themselves. We used our walking sticks both to keep our balance and to tamp the ground ahead of where we walked so as to warn the rattlesnakes of our approach. I imagined them thinking "Here come those noisy two-leggeds again! Let's get out of here." We were more than happy to see them retreat.



Old-timers have told us there used to be pine forests and grasslands here, but centuries of overgrazing have left it barren and defensive of its remaining treasures. Ascending out of a shallow valley, we stopped at an outcropping of *agave*. The devastated remains of its spiny leaves combined with tell-tale tracks to show that the pig-like javelinas has been there before us. As we reached the top of the ridge we realized that many more ridges just like it towered between where we stood and Bisbee. Our view was expansive: the distant Huachuca Mountains to the west, the Chiricahua Mountains to the east and the sweeping valleys between. To the south we could see all the way into Mexico.

Deciding that Bisbee was not a realistic goal, we began our descent. Soon we came across a relic: an abandoned, rusted-out iron bucket with a handle looped through the center so it could be handed up and down mineshafts. I asked my husband to carry it back to our house, thinking it would be a great focus for working with Ògún, the Òrìsà of iron.³ But why Ògún, here in the desert of the American Southwest? I was to discover, to my surprise, that not only was Ògún present in this place, so far from His ancestral home, but that here, in one of the driest places on earth, I would find the Yorùbá Òrìsà of fresh, flowing rivers: my Lady of Joy, Òsun.

WELCOME TO — AFRICA?

As soon as we saw this land it spoke to us of Africa. We decided to name our property “Zamani Refuge” and dedicated the land to the exploration of African religion and culture. We hoped that, over time (“Zamani” is a Swahili word meaning “the time before time”), the land would teach us what — and, as it turned out, Who — it so obviously wanted us to know.

At this time, I knew nothing about African religion or culture except what



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I had been taught as a child. My years as a minister in a New Age church had only reinforced the negative ideas I had been brought up with. I had been taught that Africa was a place of primitive superstitions to which the European (and Muslim) invaders had brought the many benefits of civilization. Even as a child I had questioned these ideas, but until I came to the Sonoran desert, I had never had the time to explore further and discover for myself if they were true.

In the year 2000 I began seeking answers to the questions that haunted me. I soon discovered the verdant tapestry of Africa’s many cultures, and later that year I was initiated into the traditional Yorùbá religion of Ifá. The following year I was accepted as a priestess of Òsun, the Òrìsà of beauty, love, desire, and joy. Discovering that I was a daughter of Òsun was an unexpected blessing: parts of myself that I had denigrated and repressed turned out to be expressions of this jubilant, sassy, and proud female Being.

DAUGHTER OF ÒSUN

The hints had been there; throughout my years working as a Hollywood costumer I had often displayed a renegade urge to sew things with threads that didn’t match, to let seams unravel, to attempt what the Japanese call *wabi sabi*, the manifestation of perfection through imperfection. That desire to create through improvisation, patching and quilting, making things fit as they are, instead of engineering pieces to fit a mechanical pattern, turned out to be part of my way to Òsun’s Joy.

It was through discovering Òsun that I also found my way back to the heritage of my many divergent ancestors. Òsun’s touch is in the sewing skills my grandmothers nurtured

in me as a young girl; while through my mother's line I find that I am welcomed home, dancing, cooking, and singing, all the way back to Africa. Since the moment I first felt Her touch, Òsun's healing energy has flowed through me. My sorrows — of a youth spent in a segregated community and an adult as a second-class citizen — are being healed: breathed slowly, gently, but persistently through, the aching, twisting, unconscious bonds of self-hatred finally allowed to unwind, uncurl, and release their pain.

There are other signs that I have found my spiritual home: after decades of struggling with divination methods ranging from the *I Ching* to the Tarot, I found that performing divination with the *Obi* or cowrie shells, which is a central facet of Yorùbá religion, comes easily. I now have a way to speak with Spirit daily; the *Obi* allows me to question the Mothers of all of my lineages, whether indigenous Americans, Celts, or Africans. As I grew in my understanding of this tradition I brought my discoveries to bear on the stewardship of our land. I named our valley "Yorùbá Basin" and the trail that unfolds into it "Yorùbá Basin Trail." The trail stands as a memorial to the unnamed and unhonored people who lived and died here before me: from the African-American soldiers to the indigenous Americans against whom they fought, to the European-descended settlers who came to make this place their home as well. In me, European, African and Native American bloodlines meet and, hopefully, are at peace. This peace comes from centering daily in *iwa* — a Yorùbá concept of a balanced expression of our essential nature. In *iwa* difference is respected and patience (*suuru*) is encouraged as we encounter difference in ourselves and others.⁴

THE GIFT OF THE RIVER

I named the river that runs through our property Òsun. Called "washes," these watercourses flow only during the monsoon season of winter and early spring. When the rains come, they are torrential, violent, and short-lived. The gift of water comes almost too fast for the land to accept, and often creates flash floods and dangerous rapids. But the contrast between the desolation of the dry months and the verdant greenness that follows the monsoons overwhelms my senses and fills my heart with a wild, untamed joy.

Òsun's waters shape the rocky course of this riverbed filled with tumbled boulders and sheer sand; in places the walls at the side of the wash tower over twelve feet above its floor. Here I am aware of the subtle smell of trees and flowers in bloom, as plants and animals alike are drawn to the water's life-giving presence. In the

Prayer to Òsun

Give birth to the world, River.
 Give birth to the world, Running Stream.
 We beg to be full, we beg to be full,
 we beg to be full.
 Teach the head, teach the head,
 teach the head,
 Embrace the head of mothers, make them
 wise again, wise again, wise again,
 Teach the tradition to those
 who do not know.
 Open your arms to women
 that flee to safety.
 My mother, I pay respect, I pay respect,
 I pay respect.
 We shout to your ear mother.
 Come continually mother,
 be patient and understand us.
 Teach worthiness
 as we honor you on the ground.
 We honor you on the ground,
 we honor you on the ground,
 we honor you on the ground.
 Let our deeds of charity habitually pull you.
 My mother, house of tradition.
 Your symbols possess fullness.
 Queen of the mirror,
 Queen of Dance,
 Queen of Abundance,
 Queen of Joy,
 Queen of Health.
 My wealth arrives, my wealth arrives,
 my wealth arrives.
 Mother arise.
 Arise inside of us.
 Arise inside, arise inside, arise inside.
 Teach us to have understanding.
 Help us to be revered Ancestors.
 We humble ourselves before you.
 You, who give effective treatment
 to children.
 You, who give fertility to people
 and projects.
 You, who are Queen of the river.
 Òsun, come into my house.
 Òsun, come into my house.
 Òsun, come into my house.

This prayer was taken from traditional sources including: *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*, by Baba Ifa Karade, Samuel Weiser, Inc., York Beach, ME, 1994 and John Mason, *Orin Órí*, Yoruba Theological Archministry, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1992.



desert, there is no element more sacred than fresh water, and I find Her touch in every part of this vibrant yet fragile ecosystem. The sensuous, fearsome curve of the scorpion's tail; the delicate vampire-like touch of the kissing bug; the tightly focused, stratified societies of the wasps and bees, all depend on Her touch. Bounding jackrabbits, lumbering Gila Monsters, skittish coyotes, raucous ravens, and slumbering rattlesnakes are all a part of Her unrestrained, uncivilized, untamable dance. Cardinals, hummingbirds, skunks, foxes, ringtail cats and zigzagging bats — eating, mating, sleeping, nesting, birthing, living and dying — they all belong to Òsun.

I am surrounded by Her textures, sounds, smells, and moods as I study the mythology of Africa and absorb the lessons of the desert. Sometimes this river cascades; rushes and abandons all restraint as it races across the land, filled with muddy water the color of my rust-brown skin. At other times I see Her Presence in the yellow wildflowers that bloom for just a week or two beside our rutted dirt roads.

She is capricious, yet steadfast; mysterious yet ever-present. Do you see Her? Can you touch Her? Can you hear Her laughter? If Òsun can come to me, half a world away from where my ancestors first named Her, where can She meet you? Can you smell Her fragrance in the wind: in the honeyed sweetness of spring, in the bronze ripening of summer, in the rich harvest of autumn, in the glittering mystery of winter? I see Her in cakes and candies, in lace and satin, in the flowing eroticism of youth and in the sweet pleasures of long-loving; with a flirtatious glance, bursting with life and topped off with a mischievous giggle, Òsun welcomes all to her Joy.

MOVING ON

In October of 2005 my seven-year sojourn in the desert ended. I know how fortunate I was to have been trained there by the Earth Herself. While living in a land that unexpectedly made itself known to me, I was permitted to absorb the wisdom of an elder Nigerian priest, an African-American *Babaláwo*, and the Órisàs and Ancestors themselves. In gratitude, I am now setting up a temple and building a community in Asheville, North Carolina and preparing to pass along what has been so generously given to me. As a priestess of Òsun, I welcome you to the healing energy, love, and affection of Òsun, to Òsun's Joy.

If Osun can come to me, half a world away from where my ancestors first named Her, where can She meet you?

ENDNOTES

¹ Jacob K. Olupona, "Invocation, Órisà Òsun," in *Òsun across the Waters*, Joseph M. Murphy & Mei-Mei Sanford, editors, Indiana University Press, 2001.

² *A Natural History of the Sonoran Desert*, University of California Press, 1999, p. 197.

³ Órisà — A focus of consciousness, nature spirit, an African archetype of creation.

⁴ Drewal, Henry John, and John III Pemberton, with Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba, Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1989, p. 39.

TO FIND OUT MORE

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Aina Olomo, *The Core of Fire, A Path to Yoruba Spiritual Activism*, Athelia Henrietta Press, Brooklyn, N.Y., 2002. ©



— **YÉYÈ ILJU ÓSUNYEMI** (*Valeria Watson-Doost*) recently moved onto seven wooded acres in Leicester, North Carolina. She and her husband Rainer continue to teach and document indigenous African arts and culture. Her DVD *My Ifá Practice* is available on the *Zamani Refuge* website at www.zamanirefuge.org and www.thesacredgroveonline.com, or to write her at 58 E. Wonder Road, Leicester, N.C. 28748. See her advertisement elsewhere in this issue.