



The Creation of the Universe, Ife, and Human Beings

In the beginning, the universe consisted only of the sky above and the water and wild marshland below. Olorun, the god who possessed the most power and the greatest knowledge, ruled the sky, while the goddess Olokun ruled the endless waters and wild marshes. Olokun was content with her kingdom even though it contained neither vegetation nor animals nor human beings.

However, the young god, Obatala, was not satisfied. As he looked down from the sky, he said to himself, “The world below needs something of interest! Everything is water soaked and not one living thing enlivens the area! I must talk with Olorun and see what can be done to improve the situation.”

Obatala said to Olorun, “Poor Olokun rules nothing but marshland, mist, and water! What she needs in her kingdom are mountains and valleys, forests and fields. All kinds of creatures and plants could live on that solid land.”

Olorun replied, “Of course, solid land would be far better than this endless expanse of water. But who can create it? And how?”

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

“It is always my pleasure to give you whatever you wish, Obatala,” Olorun replied. “You know that I love you as my son.”

So Obatala went to the house of Orunmila, the oldest son of Olorun, who had the gift of prophecy. Orunmila understood the secrets of existence, including fate and the future.

Obatala said to Orunmila, “Your father has given me permission to create solid land where now nothing exists except endless water and wild marshland. With your superior knowledge, you can teach me how to begin my project. I want to populate the earth with living beings who will be able to raise crops and build villages.”

Orunmila replied, “First, Obatala, you must acquire a chain of gold long enough to reach from the sky above to the waters below. Then you must fill a snail’s shell with sand. Finally, you must place that shell, a white hen, a black cat, and a palm nut in a bag and carry them with you as you climb down the chain to the wild marshland. That is how I advise you to begin your project.”

“Thank you, Orunmila,” Obatala replied. “I will find the goldsmith and begin at once.”

The goldsmith said, “I will make you a chain of the length you need if you will bring me the gold I need to fashion it. I do not think you will find enough gold in the sky. But ask each of the gods for whatever gold he or she possesses, and you may succeed. I wish you well!”

Obatala approached the gods one by one. To each god he said, “I plan to create solid land where now there is nothing but water and wild marshland. Then I will create all sorts of plants and creatures to live on that land. Before I can begin, I need the goldsmith to make me a chain that will stretch from the sky above to the waters below. Will you contribute whatever gold you possess?”

The gods were sympathetic to Obatala’s cause. They gave him their gold: necklaces, bracelets, rings, and even gold dust.

The goldsmith examined the gold Obatala had collected and said, “Can you not find more gold? This will not be enough!”

“It is the best I can do,” Obatala replied. “I have asked every god in the sky, and each has given me whatever he or she owned. Make as long a chain as you can, with a hook on one end.”

When the chain was ready, Orunmila accompanied Obatala while he hooked one end of the chain to the edge of the sky and lowered the rest of it toward the waters far below. Orunmila gave Obatala the sand-filled snail’s shell, the white hen, the black cat, and the palm nut. One by one, Obatala put them into a bag which he slung over his shoulder. Then he said farewell to Orunmila and began to climb down the golden chain.

Obatala climbed lower and lower and lower. When he was only half-way down, he saw that he was leaving the world of light and entering the world of twilight.

Again he climbed lower and lower and lower. As he reached the end of the chain, he could feel the mist rising cool and wet upon him and hear the splashing of the waves as they crashed upon the sea. But he could see that he was still far above the ocean.

“I cannot jump from here,” he thought. “The distance is so great that I will drown!”

Then, from the sky far above, Orunmila called out, “Obatala! Use the sand in your snail shell!”

Obatala reached into the bag at this side, withdrew the snail’s shell, and poured the sand on the waters below him.

No sooner had he finished when Orunmila called out, “Obatala! Free the white hen!”

Obatala reached into the bag at his side, withdrew the white hen, and dropped it on the waters where he had poured the sand.

The hen fluttered down, landed upon the sandy waters, and immediately began to scatter the sand by scratching at it. Wherever the sand fell, it formed dry land. The larger piles of sand became hills, while the smaller piles became valleys.

Obatala let go of the golden chain and jumped to the earth. He named the place where he landed **Ife**. He walked with pleasure upon the solid land that he had created. The earth now extended farther in all directions than his eyes could see. It was still completely devoid of life, but it was a beginning.

Obatala dug a hole in the dry land and buried his palm nut in the soil. Immediately a palm tree emerged and grew to its full height. The mature tree dropped its nuts upon the land, and they also quickly grew to maturity. Obatala built himself a house of bark and thatched the roof with palm leaves. He then settled down in Ife with his black cat for company.



Olorun wished to know how Obatala was progressing with his plan, so he sent his servant, the chameleon, down the golden chain to find out.

When the lizard arrived, Obatala said to him, “Tell Olorun, ruler of the sky, that I am pleased with the land I have created and the vegetation I have planted. But it is always twilight here. I miss the brightness of the sky!”

When the chameleon gave Obatala’s message to Olorun, the ruler of the sky smiled and said, “For you, Obatala, I will create the sun!” Once Olorun tossed the sun into the sky, it shed light and warmth upon Ife as it moved across the sky on its daily journey.

Days passed. Months passed. Obatala continued to live on the earth that he had created with only his black cat for company. Then one day he said to himself, “I love my cat, but its companionship does not satisfy me. I would be happier if creatures more like myself could life in Ife with me. Let me see what I can do.”

Obatala began to dig in the soil. He found that the particles held together in his hand, for the substance he dug up was clay. He laughed as he shaped little figures just like himself. One by one he finished them and set them aside to dry. Obatala worked on and on so enthusiastically that he was not aware of how tired and thirsty he was.

Finally, his fatigue overcame him. “What I need is some wine to drink!” he thought. Obatala placed his last clay figure upon the ground and went off to make palm wine from the juice of the palm tree. Obatala drank bowl after bowl of the fermented palm juice, for he was very thirsty. He did not realize it, but the wine made him drunk.

Obatala returned to his task of making clay figures, but his fingers were clumsy now. The figures he created were no longer perfect. Some had arms that were too short, some had legs of uneven length, and some had backs that were curved. Obatala was too drunk to notice the difference. He continued to fashion one figure after another. In time, he was satisfied with the number of clay figures that he had created.

Obatala then called out to the ruler of the sky, “Hear me, Olorun, you who are like a father to me. I have created figures out of clay, but only you can breathe life into them and make them into living people. I ask you to do this for me so that I can have human companions in Ife.”

So it came to pass that Olorun breathed life into the figures Obatala had created, and they became active, thinking human beings. When they noticed Obatala’s house, they fashioned houses for themselves and placed them nearby. Thus they created the first Yoruba village in Ife where there had been only one solitary house.

When the effects of the palm wine wore off, Obatala realized that the creatures he had fashioned while he was drunk were imperfect. With a sad heart he announced, “I promise that I will never drink palm wine again! Moreover, I will devote myself to protecting all the people who have suffered from my drunkenness.” And Obatala became the protector of all those who are born deformed.



The people prospered and the Yoruba village of Ife grew into a city. Iron did not yet exist, so Obatala gave his people a copper knife and a wooden hoe to use as tools. The Yoruba cleared the land and began to raise grain and yams.

Obatala eventually tired of ruling his city of Ife, so he climbed up the golden chain and returned to his home in the sky. Thereafter, he divided his time between his home in the sky and his home in the Yoruba city.

The gods never tired of hearing Obatala describe the city that he had created on earth. Many of them were so fascinated with what they heard about Ife that they decided to leave their sky homes and live among the human beings on earth. As they prepared to leave, the ruler of the sky counseled them. “Remember,” Olorun said, “that you will have obligations to the humans among whom you live in Ife. You must listen to their prayers and protect them. I will give each of you a specific task to fulfill while you are living there.”

Not every god, however, was pleased with Obatala’s success on Ife. Obatala had not consulted the goddess Olokun, ruler of the sea, when he had created solid earth and a Yoruba city in her kingdom. As the ruler of the sea watched one of the great sky gods usurp her power and rule a large part of her kingdom, she became angrier and angrier. Finally she conceived a plan that would avenge Obatala’s insult to her honor.

Olokun waited until Obatala had returned to his home in the sky. Then she summoned the great waves of her vast ocean and sent them surging across the land that Obatala had created. One after another, the waves flooded the earth until water once again flowed as far as the eye could see, and only marshland existed amidst the waves of the ocean. Whole groves of palm trees became uprooted and floated away. Yams rotted and washed like dead fish upon the surface of the sea. People drowned in their fields, in their groves, and in their homes.

Those who still remained alive fled into the hills and cried out to Obatala for help, but he could not hear them over the roaring of the waves so far below him. So they sought the god, Eshu, who was living among them. They knew that he could carry messages to Obatala and to Olorun. “Please return to the kingdom of the sky,” they pleaded, “and tell the great gods of the disastrous flood that is destroying us!”

Eshu replied, “You must send a sacrifice along with your message if you want one of the great sky gods to listen to you.”

The people sacrificed a goat to Obatala and said, “We send this goat as food for Obatala.”

“That is not enough,” Eshu replied. “I too deserve a gift for the service I am performing for you.”

When the people had sacrificed accordingly, Eshu climbed the golden chain and told Obatala about how Olokun had flooded Ife and the rest of the earth.

Obatala did not know how to deal with Olokun, so he asked Orunmila for advice. Orunmila replied, “You rest here in the sky while I go down to Ife. I can make the waters withdraw and the land come forth once again.”

So it came to pass that Orunmila climbed down the golden chain to the waters that covered Ife and the earth. Using his special knowledge, he caused the power of the waves to wane and the waters to retreat. Once the waves had subsided, he dried up the marshland and put an end to Olokun’s attempt to recover the area that she had lost to Obatala.

The people who had survived greeted Orunmila as their hero and pleaded with him to stay and protect them. Orunmila had no desire to remain in Ife, but he agreed to stay long enough to teach the gods and humans who lived there how to tell the future so that they could begin to control the forces they could not see. When he had done so, Orunmila returned to his home in the sky but, like Obatala, he often climbed down the golden chain to see how life was progressing in Ife.



The ruler of the sea made one final attempt to remain the equal of the ruler of the sky. Olokun was an excellent weaver of cloth, and she possessed equal skill in dyeing the fabrics she had woven. So the ruler of the sea sent a message to Olorun, ruler of the sky, challenging him to a weaving contest.

Olorun said to himself, “Olokun is a far better weaver than I am. However, I cannot give her the satisfaction of knowing that she is superior to me in anything. If I do, she will exert her powers in other ways as well, and that will disrupt the order that now exists throughout the universe. Somehow I must appear to accept her challenge and yet avoid participating in her contest. Now, how can I do this?”

Olorun thought and thought. Suddenly his eyes sparkled. With a smile, he summoned his messenger, the chameleon, to his side. “Go before Olokun, ruler of the sea,” he ordered, “with this message: ‘The ruler of the sky greets the ruler of the sea. He asked you to display samples of the cloth that you have woven to his messenger. Let the chameleon judge your skill. If your cloth is as beautiful as you say it is, then the ruler of the sky will complete with you in the contest you have suggested.’”

The chameleon climbed down the golden chain and gave the goddess Olorun’s message.

Olokun was happy to obey Olorun’s request. She put on a bright green skirt and, to her amazement, the chameleon turned a beautiful shade of bright green. She next put on a bright orange skirt and, to her amazement, the chameleon turned a beautiful shade of bright orange. She then put on a bright red skirt and, to her amazement, the chameleon turned a beautiful shade of bright red. One by one, the goddess Olokun put on skirts of various bright colors, and each time the chameleon turned into the particular color that she was wearing. Finally Olokun gave up.



The goddess said to herself, “If someone as ordinary as Olorun’s messenger can duplicate the bright colors of my finest fabrics, how can I hope to compete against the greatest of the gods?”

She said to the chameleon, “Tell your master that the ruler of the sea sends her greetings to the ruler of the sky. Tell him that I acknowledge his superiority in weaving and in all other pursuits as well. Olorun is indeed the greatest of the gods!”

So it came to pass that peace returned between the ruler of the sky and the ruler of the sea, and that peace restored order in the universe.