

BASIC OBI ABATA DIVINATION



BY BABA OSUNDIYA

BASIC OBI ABATA DIVINATION

BY BABA OSUNDIYA

Presented by the Awo Study Center - An online resource for students of Ifa'Orisa

www.homestead.com/awostudycenter/enter.html

“He who gives a person Obi gives a person life.”

– A common Yoruba prayer

INTRODUCTION

Divination plays a crucial role in the ancient Yoruba traditional religion of Ifa’Orisa. It is through casting the Oracle that non-initiates and priests alike can determine the wishes of their Ori, the Ancestors and the Orisa. One may also determine whether the prayers and offerings presented to the divine forces are both heard and accepted. Finally, casting the Oracle allows the devotee to have a direct communication with the forces they serve, opening a way for a one-on-one dialog with divinity.

It is the birthright of everyone to have direct communication with one’s Ori and one’s Ancestors. Everyone has Ancestors by virtue of birth and all things in existence have an Ori, even the Orisa themselves. While it is a generally accepted belief in the various branches of the Orisa tradition that one should receive Orisa before consulting them with the Oracle, one need not ritually receive the Ase of the Ancestors or Ori before engaging in such a consultation. Their Ase already runs strong through your veins and resonates deep within the cells of your body.

However, one must be trained on how to properly cast the Oracle in order to perform even the most basic divination. This training involves far more than mechanics and touches upon issues ranging from applied logic during the cast process to the limitations of both the person casting the Oracle and the Oracle itself.

It is not the intention of this basic module to provide such detailed training. This module has been presented to provide the student with the basic mechanics necessary to determine simple yes/no answers to basic questions, mainly to determine the necessity of making an offering to one’s Ori and Ancestors and subsequently to determine whether the offering has been accepted.

IMPORTANT NOTE: One should never divine for another person without being both properly trained and duly granted permission to do so by one’s Elders in the religion. Divining for others is often a case of having someone’s life in your hands and one *must* be properly prepared on many levels to accept this enormous responsibility. The information presented in this module is entirely inadequate to negate or replace the need for appropriate training by one’s Elders and should only be used to consult with one’s Ori and one’s Ancestors on your own behalf.

Students should consult their elders in the religion for more detailed training. Additionally, the student may also find more detailed information in both [Awo: Ifa and the Theology of Orisa Divination](#) by Awo Fa’lokun Fatunmbi and [Awo Obi: Obi Divination in Theory and Practice](#) by Baba Osundiya.

Serious students are strongly encouraged to take their study further using available resources and to understand that this module represents the first step of a long journey. ❖

AN IMPORTANT NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In the Diaspora the word “obi” can mean many different things to many different people. In order to eliminate some confusion while studying this material it is important to make a few notes regarding vocabulary, especially the various meanings of the word “obi” itself.

THE KOLA NUT

The word “obi”, as it is used within this module, refers to the fresh kola nut native to Africa, specifically the Obi Abata. **Obi abata**, also known as the kola nut, falls under the scientific classification *cola acuminata* or *cola nitida*. It ranges from white to dark red in color.

It is said that Obi came to Aiye (Earth) with two sisters – Obi Abata and Obi Gbanja.

Obi Abata, the type of Obi used in divination, is made up of three to six lobes that are split open and used as both an Oracle and as offerings to the Ancestors and Orisa. It is the Obi Abata that is a staple ingredient in most sacred Ifa’Orisa rituals and celebrations. Though other configurations of the Obi may be used in various ways, it is the four lobed Obi, also known as Iya Obi (The Mother Obi), that will be the focus of this study module.

Obi Gbanja is the kola nut that only possesses two lobes. Obi Gbanja is not used in Obi divination, although it is consumed by people for secular reasons, mainly due to its high concentration of caffeine and use as a stimulant. One should note that it is often the Obi Gbanja that is found in stores that offer kola nuts for sale. One should be careful to verify that one is buying Obi Abata and not Obi Gbanja when selecting kola nuts for ritual or divinatory purposes.

THE COCONUT

Often in the Diaspora, especially in the Lukumi tradition, fresh coconut that has been broken into four pieces for use in divination is often called Obi. The actual Yoruba word for coconut is “agbon,” so we see that calling the coconut Obi actually refers to its ritual use rather than its actual botanical nature.

THE NEW WORLD OBI “SUBSTITUTE”

Due to the relative difficulty some people have had in locating fresh kola nut, a “substitute” Obi was created¹. This consists of four pieces of coconut shells often cut into either square or circular shapes with a cowrie shell attached in one of two ways. The coconut shells have been sanded on the back to remove the coconut’s “hair” and the cowrie shells have had their top broken away, exposing the inside of the shell and making it more flat. A single cowrie is glued to concave side of each piece of coconut shell. Two

¹ Oluwo Carlos C. Collazo is credited for creating this new world Obi substitute.

cowrie shells are glued with the underside of the shell facing up, while the other two shells are glued with the broken top section facing up.

This substitute has become popular with many Orisa devotees because it is a permanent tool that doesn't require the devotee to continually purchase fresh Obi Abata. While the usefulness of this substitute Obi is readily acknowledged, one is encouraged to divine with the fresh Obi Abata whenever possible.

THE FOUR COWRIES

Often, amongst new world Orisa devotees, four cowries are also called Obi. Again this refers to their ritual use, rather than their actual physical identification. The Yoruba word for four cowries is either "erin" or "owo merin".

As mentioned above, the use of the word "obi" in this module refers to the four lobed Obi Abata only.

The purpose of this study module is to teach basic divination using the fresh Obi Abata, but it is also important to understand the other objects variously called "obi" by new world Orisa devotees. The above section has been presented to ease confusion that often occurs in dialogs between traditions, not to suggest that alternative uses of the word "obi" are incorrect. ❖

ANATOMY OF THE OBI

As mentioned above, the fresh Obi Abata ranges in color from white to dark red.

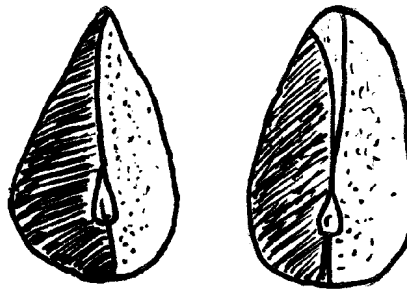
The four lobed Obi, also known as the Iya Obi, is used because it has two lobes that are identified as male and two lobes that are identified as female. The number four represents stability and the equal distribution of male and female segments illustrates the perfect balance found within the Iya Obi. Ifa'Orisa is a path that places great importance on balance and wholeness (representing the unification of the male and female energies within the self). It should be of little surprise that the four lobed Obi Abata is central to traditional practices of this path.

The distinct male and female lobes are visible once the fresh kola nut has been split open. (See subsequent section for proper methods of splitting open the kola nut).

The male Obi segments, also known as Ako Obi or just simply Ako, can be recognized by the single line that runs down the center of the wedge shaped lobe. The line terminates at a single point at the base of the segment.

The female Obi segments, also known as Abo Obi or just simply Abo, can be recognized by the single line that runs down the center of the wedge shaped lobe, but rather than terminating in a single point like the male segment, splits into a “Y” shape.

The following diagram has been presented for further clarification:



Male (*left*) and Female (*right*) Obi
Abata segments

In addition to the male and female nature of the segment, each lobe has a “head” that may point up or down, left or right (or any combination thereof) during the divination. This is used during more intermediate levels of Obi divination and will not be discussed here. ❖

ANATOMY OF THE ORACLE

The previous chapter was devoted to familiarizing the student with the physical anatomy of the Obi Abata. This segment will focus on familiarizing the student with the way that physical anatomy translates into Oracular anatomy.

The traditional religion of Ifa'Orisa recognizes, at its core, two primary forces – masculine and feminine. These two forces do not represent gender alone, but also refer to the metaphysical nature of energy itself.

For the sake of simplicity the student should understand that male energy is seen as being open, expanding and light, while the feminine energy is seen as being closed, contracting and dark. Words such as “dark” and “light” or “expanding” and “contracting” do not carry any position or negative connotation when used in this context. Masculine energy is not to be understood as positive, nor is feminine energy to be understood as negative. The above classifications, admittedly oversimplified for the purpose of this text, refer to the movement and nature of the energy itself, not its relative value or moral position.

When performing the most basic divination with Obi Abata there are only two factors that are considered. These factors are whether a segment of the Obi is open or closed. The Obi communicates through a series of five possible combinations of open and closed segments. These combinations represent the five basic positions of Obi divination that will be covered in a subsequent section.

Before one can begin to study the combinations, one must first understand what constitutes “open” and “closed” at this most basic level of study.

A segment that falls on the casting surface with either the male or female portion facing up is an *open segment*. This means that the lobe falls on its back, which reveals the male or female portion of the segment. Seen another way, the ridge or the wedge of the segment falls facing up. At this basic level of study consideration is not given to whether an open segment is male or female, although it does become important in the more intermediate levels of Obi divination. For now it is sufficient to know that a segment that falls in the aforementioned fashion constitutes an open segment.

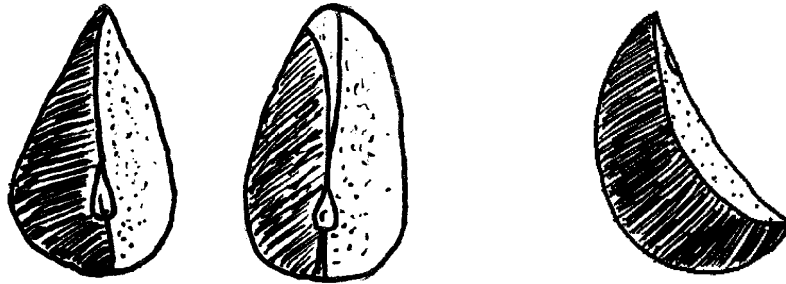
When performing the most basic level of Obi divination, each open segment is represented and recorded using the symbol “O”.

A *closed segment* is one that falls on its side, which will then show both the back (or physical outside of the Obi Abata) and part of the male or female segment. Because the split Obi lobes are wedge shaped, the closed segment cannot actually land with the male or female segment completely face down, rather it lands on its side so that one sees both a part of the male or female segment and the back side of the lobe itself.

When performing the most basic level of Obi divination, each closed segment is represented and recorded using the symbol “X”.

While it may seem a bit confusing in writing, it is much more obvious when you begin actually casting the Obi itself.

The following diagrams have been presented for clarification:



- **Open** Obi Abata segments
- Represented during divination by the symbol “O”
- **Closed** Obi Abata segment
- Represented during divination by the symbol “X”

THE OTHER “OBI”

As mentioned in the previous section, within the Diaspora several other divinatory tools are also known as “Obi”. While the purpose of this module is to teach divination using the fresh Obi Abata, there may be people that do not have access to the fresh kola nuts. In order to increase the accessibility of this information, we present the following information.

The Coconut – The coconut “Obi” has no distinct male or female open segments. The concave segments of white coconut meat are read as open while the convex segments with the dark rind showing are read as closed.

The New World Obi “Substitute” – This substitute “Obi” is simply a representation of the components present within the fresh Obi Abata. The concave side of the new world “Obi” segments has both a male and female option, both of which are read as open segments. The convex side of the new world “Obi” segments, which is actually the outside of the coconut shell, is read as the closed segments.

The Four Cowries – Similar to the coconut, the four cowries do not possess male or female open segments, only open and closed ones. The physical bottom of the cowrie, the side showing the “teeth” and the single slit, is read as the open segment. The physical top of the cowrie that is removed and shows the inside of the shell is read as the closed segment. ❖

SELECTING OBI ABATA FOR DIVINATION

When selecting an Obi Abata for use in ritual or divination it is important that one selects only a whole fresh undamaged kola nut. Kola nuts that are beginning to lose their freshness will begin to naturally separate and the nut will appear as if the lobes are breaking open. These should not be used for divination or offerings for the Orisa.

Some individuals prefer to select the lighter colored Obi when casting to their Ori and the darker colored ones when casting to their Ancestors. This is not a rule of any kind and has only been presented for those interested in this consideration. ❖

PREPARING OBI ABATA FOR DIVINATION

Once the proper kola nut has been selected it should then be washed and placed in a white bowl filled with spring water². The bowl should then be taken to the area where the Obi Abata will be cast.

Before performing the divination, the individual should dip the middle finger of their right hand into the water and offer the water to their Ori by touching their forehead, the crown (top) of their head, the back of their neck where their skull joins the neck itself and their navel area. The special water should then be offered to the Ancestors by dipping the finger once again in the water and either sprinkling the water on the Ancestor shrine itself or on the big toes of each foot. The process is repeated one final time and the water is sprinkled onto the area where the Obi Abata will be cast – the ground, a wooden Opon Ifa or a mat or piece of white fabric used specifically for this purpose.

One may also take a small drink of the water just prior to splitting the Obi Abata for divination. ❖

² Tap water and distilled water should not be used. Tap water often contains harmful chemicals and distilled water has been processed to a point where all life has been removed from the water itself. Neither of these are suitable for divination.

SPLITTING OBI ABATA FOR DIVINATION

The whole Obi Abata must be split into its four lobes before one can divine with it. In traditional Yoruba practice it is believed that the Obi Abata should never be split using a knife or other metal object. By splitting the kola nut in this manner you run the risk of diminishing its accuracy and power as an Oracle.

Therefore the whole Obi Abata is split open using one's hands. Sometimes when the kola nut is particularly fresh the segments may be difficult to separate. To help the process one may apply a small amount of pressure and roll the Obi Abata between their thumb and forefinger, which will slowly loosen the segments and make it easier to finish splitting the Obi Abata open.

When splitting the fresh kola nut it is important to be careful not to damage or break any of the individual segments. All four segments should be undamaged and intact when using the Obi Abata as an Oracle. ❖

PRAYERS TO OPEN BASIC OBI ABATA DIVINATION

Prayers are an important part of any Ifa'Orisa ritual, no matter how simple or complex. The act of prayer helps to open the consciousness of the individual(s) participating in the ceremony, to establish contact with the divine forces being praised and served, and to align the consciousness of the individual(s) with the consciousness of the divine forces.

For the purposes of this basic study module three very simple prayers have been presented for use in opening basic Obi Abata divination involving communication with one's Ancestors or Ori.

The first prayer is an opening invocation that calls on either one's Ori or their Ancestors. The prayer first gets the attention of the divine force(s) and then requests their blessings both in one's life and for the act of divination that is about to commence.

Where one sees "Egun/Ori" written below, one should select one or the other to appropriately call either one's Ancestors (Egun) or their Ori depending on who they are casting Obi to.

Egun/Ori mo pe o,
Ancestors/Ori, I call you,
Egun/Ori mo pe o,
Ancestors/Ori, I call you,
Egun/Ori mo pe o,
Ancestors/Ori, I call you,
Egun/Ori fun mi ni ire,
Ancestors/Ori, bring me good fortune,
Egun/Ori fun mi ni alaafia,
Ancestors/Ori, bring me well being,
Egun/Ori fun mi ni ilera,
Ancestors/Ori, bring stability to my home,
Egun/Ori fun mi ni Iwa Pele,
Ancestors/Ori, bring me gentle character,
Modupe, modupe pupo,
I thank you, I thank you very much,
Ase! Ase! Ase O!
May it be so!

The next prayer is said to invoke the powers of the Obi Abata to help ward off negative things from the world of the individual.

Obi ni ibi iku,
The kola nut averts death,
Obi ni ibi arun,

The kola nut averts sickness,
Obi ni ibi ofo,
The kola nut averts loss,
Ase! Ase! Ase O!
May it be so!

At this time a final prayer is said, an invocation that calls on the divine forces in Heaven to assist one as they cast the Obi Abata.

Akinmoran!
May the divine forces of Heaven assist the diviner on Earth!
Akinmoran!
May the divine forces of Heaven assist the diviner on Earth!
Akinmoran!
May the divine forces of Heaven assist the diviner on Earth!

After this final recitation one may begin casting the Obi to one's Ancestors or their Ori.

The next section will cover the five basic positions used to gain answers to one's questions. ❖

THE FIVE BASIC POSITIONS OF OBI ABATA DIVINATION

The first level of interpreting the Obi rests in learning the five basic positions. This basic level represents the simplest of all levels of Obi divination, but also provides one with a tool that can be used to obtain quick and effective answers to simple yes/no questions.

It should be noted that unlike some of the intermediate and advanced levels of Obi divination, the five basic positions are not intended for detailed divinations, complex questions or to be used to determine the energy that is affecting a given person, place, thing or situation. The ability to interpret the Obi in such a way requires more advanced levels of training. One of the first things a student of divination must learn to respect is the limitation of both the Oracle and the person casting the Oracle. To ignore this basic necessity is a recipe for potentially serious problems.

THE MEANING OF THE FIVE BASIC POSITIONS

The five configurations used with the basic level of divination are detailed below, listing both the configuration and its basic interpretation.

The student is reminded that open segments are represented by the symbol “O” and closed segments are represented by the symbol “X”.

Alaafia – All Open Segments – “OOOO”

Alaafia is a YES answer. This sign generally indicates that all energies are open and everything is flowing well and with ease. Alaafia urges the individual to move forward with focus and a sense of peace and calm. Alaafia, while answering yes, may be tentative at times, suggesting that there are things that one is not seeing that may jeopardize the stability of the answer received. Due to the open nature of Alaafia it can be a fickle sign whose balance is easily disturbed. This answer may be interpreted as a YES and receiving Alaafia does not require a second cast. However, this yes is one that sometimes reminds the individual that a degree of awareness and caution is required due to the potential for positivity to be disrupted, creating a shift in the energy surrounding the situation at hand.

Etawa – Three Open Segments/One Closed Segment – “OOOX”

Etawa received on the first cast yields an answer that is **UNCERTAIN**. Etawa represents a situation that, while possibly acceptable or potential positive, is being influenced by the single closed segment. It is the ever present seed of doubt that creates a state wherein one is unable to believe fully in what is perceived, as the single closed segment hints at elements that remain unseen. It is those unseen forces that prevent Etawa from attaining certainty. The degree to which these forces are influencing the situation can only be determined through another cast of the Obi, a cast that will determine whether the answer is YES or NO. Etawa may also alert the individual to a lack of resources—a condition of having nearly enough energy to go the distance, yet “almost” may prove to be insufficient or, at best, challenging.

When this sign appears, the Obi should be cast again to determine the final answer. If the second cast yields either **ALAAFIA**, **EJIFE** or **ETAWA** the answer is **YES**. However, if **OKANRAN** or **OYEKU** is received the answer is **NO**.

Ejife – Two Open Segments/Two Closed Segments – “OOXX”

Ejife is considered a definite **YES** answer, one that comes with great balance and stability. Having two open segments and two closed segments, the very structure of this position supports its supreme equilibrium. Under this sign the energy manifests with its feet planted firmly on the ground, establishing itself in a very balanced and secure fashion. The body and the spirit, the mind and the emotions are balanced here. Unlike Alaafia, Ejife reflects a picture of life that is more true to form – the interrelating forces of light and dark creating an overall state of balance. It is for this reason that Ejife can generally be considered a more definite and stable **YES** than Alaafia.

Okanran – One Open Segment/Three Closed Segments – “OXXX”

Okanran marks a **NO** answer received through the Oracle. Three closed segments speak of an overwhelming presence of contracting energy that prevents success in this endeavor. Blockages have overcome opportunity and the roads are closing. The sun is setting on the horizon, with only a faint light illuminating one's path. The absence of light in Okanran doesn't signal a malevolent condition, but rather a state wherein the flame of success is being snuffed by the surrounding darkness. While still maintaining a single open segment, the energies of contraction are closing in. When Okanran appears regarding a specific situation, it could indicate the organism is shutting down; a closure is in the wings. Struggle could also be indicated—a final attempt to fight off the impending darkness, but one that results in failure. It may further suggest that one lacks the illumination necessary to accurately navigate the path. One must be careful not to trip over the obstacles that surround them at this time. Lastly, Okanran may indicate a lackadaisical attempt that fails due to its lack of dedication or commitment. This sign reminds one that a single transient effort is seldom the formula for success.

Oyeku – All Closed Segments – “XXXX”

Lastly, Oyeku is a definite **NO** answer. While some diviners regard Oyeku as the harbinger of grave omens, this author disagrees with this shortsighted interpretation. The presence of total darkness, represented by all four segments being closed, may offer either protection or blockage – the proverbial paradox of the womb and the tomb. Oyeku marks a state wherein there are various unseen forces at play. A **NO** received through Oyeku either offers protection from potentially damaging elements that remain unseen or absolute obstruction coming from an undiscovered source. It is difficult to ascertain whether Oyeku brings shelter or stricture due to the lack of light in this symbol. Light – the vehicle of illumination – has been eclipsed behind a veil of darkness. While the author disagrees with perceiving Oyeku only as a sure source of problems, the repeated appearance of this sign *should* be taken to an Orisa priest or a Babalawo for further exploration. It could harbor elusive energies that require illumination from an experienced diviner in order to stay on path or prevent difficulties. By the same token, it may simply require a confirmation that this sign comes to offer its protection, rather than

blockage. A NO answer marked by Oyeku should be seen as absolute. The final verdict has been issued and one is advised to leave the entire line of questioning alone.

This concludes a study of the five basic positions of Obi Abata divination. ❖

CONCLUDING THE OBI ABATA DIVINATION

After divining with the fresh Obi Abata it is often customary to leave either the whole nut or a portion of the whole nut with one's Ori and/or one's Ancestors as an offering.

One may cast the Obi Abata to determine if either one's Ori or one's Ancestors require the Obi as an offering. If so, a further cast can be made to determine whether the whole Obi Abata or just a portion of it should be left with the divine force(s) consulted during the divination process.

If the whole Obi Abata is requested, it should either be given to one's Ori through an Ibori ceremony or left for the Ancestors at their shrine.

If only a portion of the Obi Abata is requested, one may cast about eating the remaining lobes themselves or sharing them among loved ones. This is a common scenario that enables the person casting the Obi to enjoy the blessings and good fortune the Obi Abata brings.

Finally, one may be asked to leave the Obi Abata at a place – the crossroads, at a river, the edge of the woods, a base of the tree, etc. These factors are only determined through further casting of the Oracle.

The ability to give the Obi Abata as an offering after the divination process has closed is one of the many advantages of divining with the true Obi, rather than its new world counterparts. The Obi Abata is very powerful and contains great Ase, which accounts for its presence in virtually every Ifa'Orisa ritual and celebration. ❖

APPENDIX 1: ADDITIONAL OBI RESOURCES

The following resources are presented for those interested in learning more about Obi divination.

BOOKS:

Awo Obi: Obi Divination in Theory and Practice – Baba Osundiya

Awo: *Ifa* and the Theology of *Orisa* Divination – Awo Fa'lokun Fatunmbi

WEB RESOURCES:

Awo Obi website – www.homestead.com/awo_obi/home.html

Awo Study Center website – www.homestead.com/awostudycenter/enter.html

TO ORDER FRESH OBI ABATA:

Ile Orunmila African Imports

515 West 21st Street

P. O. Box 2265

San Bernardino, CA 92405

Tel. (909) 886-6029

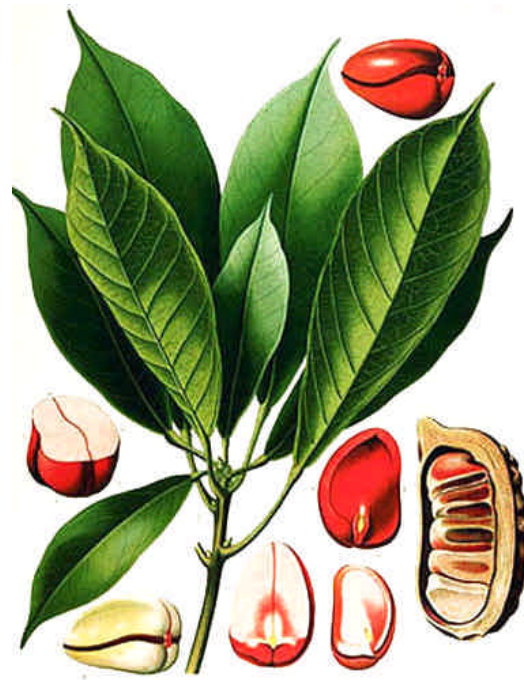
Fax (909) 475-5850

APPENDIX 2: SCIENTIFIC ILLUSTRATIONS OF OBI ABATA

These following diagrams are from Hermann A. Köhler's work Medizinal Pflanzen, published in 1887.



Cola acuminata - Flowers



Cola acuminata - Fruit

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fatunmbi, Awo Fa'lokun. 1992. *Awo: Ifa and the Theology of Orisa Divination*. Bronx: Original Publications

Ogunade, Apena Taiyewo. 1994. *Three Yoruba Divination Systems and Ebo*. New York: Oluweri Publications

Osundiya, Baba. 2000. *Awo Obi: Obi Divination in Theory and Practice*. Cincinnati: Awosina Publications