

Mushrooms in Yoruba Mythology and Medicinal Practices ¹

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The Yoruba people of south western Nigeria (Oso, 1975) are rich in culture and have a lot of myths, which explain the origin and behavior of many things in their environment and daily life. The Yoruba name for God is *Olodumare* (*Olorun*, i.e., the owner of Heaven). It is the belief of the Yoruba that in matters pertaining to omniscience and wisdom, *Olodumare* has a deputy on earth known as *Orunmila*. Traditionally, the Yoruba believe that *Olodumare* has endowed *Orunmila* with special wisdom and foreknowledge to the end that he may be His accredited representative on earth in matters relating to man's destiny. Oral traditions emphasize the part played by *Orunmila* in guiding the destinies both of the divinities and of men. One reason given for his intimate knowledge of matters affecting a man's destiny is that he is present when that man is created and his destiny sealed. Therefore he knows all the secrets of the man's being. Thus he can predict what is coming to pass or prescribe remedies against any eventuality. He is in a position to plead with *Olodumare* on behalf of man so that unhappy issues may be averted or rectified. Hence the Yoruba usually consult *Orunmila* to find out about the future or what the outcome of an enterprise may be, or when in trouble, what they could do to get out of it. Also, when the Yoruba are urgently in need of certain things they consult *Orunmila* to find out what they could do in order to get them.

Ifa, the god of divination, is one of *Orunmila's* messengers, the messenger of light, through whom *Orunmila* communicates with men and they with him. *Ifa* is consulted through the diviner known as *Babalawo* (the priest of Ha), who understands the lan-

guage of *Ifa* and by virtue of this he's also a traditional doctor.

The Yoruba have recognized mushrooms for many years, inasmuch as such fungi have always played an important role in their everyday life. They have descriptive Yoruba names for the different species of mushrooms (Oso, 1975) as well as mythical stories and beliefs which explain the origin of some of them. These myths and beliefs sometimes play a role in determining which of the mushrooms are edible and which of them may be used for medicinal purposes by the Yoruba native doctors. During the course of this research many Yoruba people, mainly the traditional doctors and the elderly people, were interviewed to determine their knowledge of the fungi, particularly in relation to their origin and medicinal uses. This paper gives an account of the mythical origin and uses in Yoruba traditional medicine of a few of them.

TERMITOMYCES MICROCARPUS (Berk. & Br.) Heim

Known in Yoruba as *Ota-Oran*, *T. microcarpus* is a fungus with small fruit bodies that grow in groups spreading over a large area of soil. It grows in contact with termite nests under the soil.

A Yoruba myth has it that many years ago there lived a woman whose name was *Oran*. She had no issue, and being much worried by this, she went to *Orunmila* to find out what she should do to have children. *Orunmila* examined her destiny and told her that she would have children, but not until she had made a sacrifice to appease the gods. For this sacrifice she was to provide sixteen chameleons, sixteen fowls, and a large quantity of maize grains, the number of which would determine the number of children she would have. *Oran* brought all these materials to *Orunmila*, who made the sacrifice and then gave *Oran* a certain medicinal preparation

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which he instructed her to start eating once daily. He further instructed her to provide a large piece of white cloth which she would be using to cover the offspring when she started getting them. Soon *Oran* started to have issue and within a short time the offspring became numerable. These offspring are the mushrooms, *T. microcarpus*, which have since been known as *Glu-Oran* (Yor. *Olu* = mushroom, i.e., *Oran's* mushrooms).

The Yoruba have a certain belief that this mushroom is capable of changing its form to assume the stature of the first person to see it when just emerging from the soil, i.e., if the first person to see it is stout the mushroom will develop a stout stipe and vice-versa. This characteristic can be related to the nature of the chameleon which was among the materials for the sacrifice in the myth above. The mushroom grows in large numbers covering a large area of soil, a growth habit which can be related to the large number of maize grains in the materials for the sacrifice. When growing in groups, the mushrooms present an appearance similar to that of a white mantle on the soil, an appearance which can also be related to the large piece of white cloth which *Oran* had provided for covering the offspring.

Orunmila had earlier advised *Oran* to make another sacrifice so that her offspring might not form food for human beings, but *Oran* did not heed the advice; all she was after was just to have children. No sooner had she started having them (offspring) than they were discovered to be edible by men, who started collecting and eating them. This, in the Yoruba belief, was how the eating of *T. microcarpus* started.

Medicinal Uses

Termitomyces microcarpus is used medicinally by Yoruba native doctors as an ingredient in the preparation of a charm supposed to bring good luck, particularly to traders. To prepare this charm, 200 fruit bodies of *T. microcarpus* are pulverized by roasting in a pot together with ripe bananas, pawpaw, salt and some other herbal ingredients. The preparation is collected on a piece of white cloth and certain magical verses are recited on it. This is then tied with thread and hung above the door of the trader's shop. It is

strongly believed that this has the power of promoting the sale of articles by drawing the buyers into the shop. The power with which *T. microcarpus* had been endowed in the above myth to grow in large numbers is supposed to be effective here in drawing people in large numbers into the shop.

Termitomyces microcarpus is also used in combination with other ingredients in a propitiation to the gods for increased population in towns and villages by reducing mortality rate. The power of *T. microcarpus* to grow in large numbers is also believed to be the effective force here.

Curatively, the Yoruba traditional doctors employ *T. microcarpus* in a medicinal preparation for the treatment of gonorrhoea. The medicine, which is administered orally, is prepared by pounding a large quantity of the fruit bodies of the fungus with the pulp of the fruit of *Cucurbita pepo* Linn., the leaves of *Cassia alata* Linn. and some other ingredients.

TERMITOMYCES ROBUSTUS (Beeli) Heim.

Another fungus which has featured prominently in Yoruba mythology and medicinal practices is *T. robustus*. It has large fruit bodies which grow in contact with termite nests under the soil (Oso, 1975). Known in Yoruba as *Ewe* (Yor. *we* = expand, i.e., the mushroom with expanding pileus) or *Ogogo* (the meaning will be found in the mythical story below), *T. robustus* is the most popular edible mushroom with the Yoruba.

A Yoruba myth tells us that in the distant past *Ogogo* was a man with ill luck who never succeeded in anything he put his hands to. Extremely worried, he went to *Orunmila* to divine how to find out the cause of his perpetual ill luck and what could be done to improve it. *Orunmila* examined his destiny and told him that a sacrifice would have to be made and his head washed with a specially prepared infusion of leaves. He told *Ogogo* to provide a pigeon, an unused sponge and three and a half pence worth of African black soap. *Orunmila* then found the medicinal leaves with which he prepared the infusion after sacrificing the pigeon. He then led *Ogogo* to a tree, *Anona senegalensis* Pers., in a nearby forest. There, with the sponge, the

soap and the infusion, he washed *Ogogo's* head seven times at seven different spots round the tree. On their way back home *Orunmila* informed *Ogogo* that after nine days they would pay another visit to the tree and if any special sign could be detected around it, it would be taken as an omen that he had been cleansed of his illluck. On visiting the tree on the ninth day they discovered mushrooms shooting out in large numbers from the seven spots where the washing had been done. *Orunmila* then told *Ogogo* to rejoice for that was a sign that his illluck had been removed. He asked *Ogogo* to gather the mushrooms which, on getting home, they cooked and ate. They, and all those who ate out of it, found it very tasty. *Orunmila* then named the mushroom after *Ogogo* as *Olu-Ogogo* (Yor. *Olu* = mushroom; i.e., *Ogogo's* mushroom). News of this highly flavoured mushroom spread through the village and beyond and everybody was anxious to taste it. People rushed to the spot to collect the mushroom periodically and later its growth spread to other areas. This great rush for the mushroom persists today.

And from that moment, *Ogogo's* luck became considerably improved. He was well respected and whatever business he undertook ended in huge success. Soon he was made the village Head and he ruled honourably.

Medicinal Uses

The traditional doctors have since used *T. robustus* in the preparation of charms for good luck. One way in which the charm is made is by roasting the mushroom together with chalk and the wood of *Pterocarpus osun* Craib and divining on it. This is mixed with African black soap and used for washing. It is supposed to bring good luck to anyone using it. The charm is also prepared by roasting the mushroom with the bark of *Ceiba pentandra* Gaertn. and that of *Adansonia digitata* Linn. and divining on it. This is eaten periodically.

Apart from this, *T. robustus* is used medicinally as a remedy for *Maagun*.³ This remedy

³ *Maagun*: This is a magic drug put on a woman, unknown to herself, so that when she commits adultery it may cause her paramour to fall over three times and die. The effect of *maagun* on the paramour may assume

is prepared by pounding the mushroom with *Loranthus* species growing on *Jatropha curcas* Linn., the fruits of *Piper guineense* Schum. & Thorn. and some fresh pork. The compound is collected in a bottle and thoroughly mixed with lime juice and Schnapps and administered orally.

TERMITOMYCES GLOBULUS

Heim & Goossens

Termitomyces globulus is another mushroom that grows in contact with termite nests in the soil. It is known in Yoruba as *Olubeje* (Yor. *Olu* = mushroom + *ibi* = place, spot + *me je* = seven, i.e., a mushroom growing in seven different spots). The mushrooms grow in large groups on soil and as many as seven groups may be produced within short distances of each other.

The origin of this growth habit could be found in a Yoruba myth that tells us about a poor and miserable woman who used to live in one village in the olden days. One day this woman went to the forest to fetch firewood, and there she found some mushrooms growing. She gathered these and took them as a present to an *lfa* priest who told her that he did not eat mushrooms. However, for her kind gesture, the *lfa* priest promised her a favour. He said by means of his magical powers he would make the mushrooms grow in larger quantities so that she could collect and sell them for as much as 16 Cowries" and thereby be relieved of her poverty for life. In those days anybody who owned as much as 10 Cowries was a rich person. *Thelfa* priest then divined on the divination sand" and gave this to her, instructing her to return to the spot and sprinkle the sand all over the place and call on the mushroom to appear in larger numbers. On visiting the place after doing this, the woman discovered that the mushroom had grown there in large groups and she was able to count at least seven groups in the area. These she collected and sold for 16 Cowries and thus became a rich woman.

different forms, e.g., constant coughing, somersaulting, extreme lassitude, haemorrhage, etc.

⁴ *Cowries*: Small shells used as native money in parts of Africa, India, and Asia in the past

⁵ *Divination sand*: Fine white sand sprinkled on the divining board on which the oracle is consulted by the diviner. Wood dust is also used for this purpose.

This in the Yoruba belief was how *T. globulus* started growing in groups, and the practice of sprinkling sand on where it grows in order to make it grow still persists today. Instead of using the divination sand, however, people now use ordinary sand.

Medicinal Use

Hunters prepare a magical prescription of the mushroom chewed with seven seeds of *Aframomum melegueta* K. Schum. and the leaf of *Phyllanthusfloribundus* Muell. When this is spat on the palm and rubbed on the gun or the bow and arrow with some incantations, the hunted game becomes drowsy and easy to kill.

CALVA TIA CYATHIFORMIS (Bosc) Morgan

The Yoruba people strongly believe that *C.cyathiformis* is produced by the bush-fowl (*Francolinus bicalcaratus*). Hence the Yoruba name for the fungus is *1 so-aparo* (Yor. *iso* = effluvium + *aparo* = bush-fowl).

A Yoruba myth tells us that centuries ago the bush-fowls, in a bid to gain recognition among farmers, went to *Orunmila* to divine. They complained to *Orunmila* that mating with each other usually left no visible mark, it only resulted in a discharge of effluvium by the females and because of this the farmers had no regard for them. They appealed to *Orunmila* to help them so that the effluvium discharged subsequent to mating would result in something that would be of value to the farmers, as this was the only way they could win their recognition. *Orunmila* divined for them and asked them to sacrifice ten eggs to the gods. They brought the eggs and *Orunmila* made the sacrifice. Since then wherever there was mating between a male and a female bush-fowl, this fungus usually appeared a few days later. Farmers then started collecting and taking them home to show the people and to eat them. This in the Yoruba belief is the origin of *C. cyathiformis*.

Medicinal Uses

The origin of this fungus as contained in the above myth determines its uses medicinally.

Ground with another fungus, *Daldinia concentrica* (BoIt. ex Fr.) Ces. & De Notaris, and mixed with the African black soap, it is a remedy for leucorrhoea. The soap corn pound is used by the patient for washing her vagina at prescribed intervals.

As a cure for a disease known in Yoruba as *Maasomaaso*, *C. cyathiformis* is ground with some other herbal ingredients and administered orally. This disease, strongly believed to prevent pregnancy, is commonly described by the Yoruba people as a condition in which a woman begins to discharge effluvium through her vagina. It is probably the disease known in orthodox medicine as pneumaturia.

DISCUSSION

Fungi have been associated with fairies, witches, superstitions, mythical beings and legends since mediaeval times. The ancient beliefs and superstitions about the "Fairy Rings" as well as the association of *Hirneola auricula-Judae* with Judas Iscariot are well known. Puff balls were once believed to be sown by spirits. *Exidia grandulosa* has been referred to as "Fairy Butter" in the Northern counties of England where it was believed that the fungus is made in the night and scattered about by the fairies. The same fungus has been associated with witches in some other countries and termed "Witches' Butter." Another belief which is still prevalent in Sweden is that trolls milk the cows and scatter the butter from which *E. grandulosa* originates. Hence, it is known as "Troll's Butter." In certain parts of England puff-balls are termed "The Devil's Snuff-Box," while in Scotland where their spores are believed to cause a type of blindness, they are known as "Blind Men's Een."

As far back as the 5th Century B.e. fungi have played a prominent role in medicinal practices. *Polyporus officinalis* has been used both as a counterirritant and as a universal remedy for all corn complaints and disorders. *Boletus edulis* has also been employed as a cure for a number of different complaints. In mediaeval times therapeutic applications of fungi have been made arising from the superstitious beliefs relating the appearance of a particular fungus to some purpose for

which it was supposed to be suitable. Among such fungi was the Jew's Ear, *Hirneola auricula-ludae*, which owed its reputation in throat cases probably to the fancied resemblance of its hymenial surface to the fauces. *Elaphomyces granulatus* was formerly regarded as an aphrodisiac and used in the preparation of love potions. In West Surrey and Sussex *Daldinia concentrica* was carried until quite recently by old men as a charm against cramp.

As these and similar beliefs and applications are well treated by Rolfe and Rolfe (1925). However, prior to the recent series of studies by the author (Oso, 1975, 1976, 1977) little was known on how the various ethnic groups in Nigeria relate to and use mushrooms in their daily life.

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