Olokun’s Anger

The Yoruba · south-western Nigeria and Benin

Where It Comes From

The Yoruba are one of the largest peoples of West Africa. Their tradition tells how the dry land was first made at the holy city of Ile-Ife. Yoruba stories are many and varied, and are often told within Ifá, a great body of sacred verse used in divination. The version here comes from the American folklorist Harold Courlander, who gathered African stories in anthologies in the twentieth century. It is a retelling, not a word-for-word record, and other tellings differ.

What Happens

In the beginning there is only sky above and water below. The water belongs to Olokun, the power of the sea. Obatala, a son of the sky god Olorun, climbs down from the sky on a golden chain and pours sand onto the water. A hen scratches the sand until it spreads into dry land, and Obatala settles at Ife and shapes the first people from clay.

Olokun was never asked. Angry that her waters have been taken, she sends great waves over the land, while Obatala is away in the sky. Fields are drowned and many people die.

The people make offerings, and Eshu, the messenger, carries their plea up to the sky. Orunmila, the god of wisdom and divination, comes down and calms the waters, and the land dries again.

In another telling, the smith-god Ogun forges a great chain, and Obatala uses it to bind Olokun in the depths of the sea.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. The power of the sea was angered that the dry land had been made out of her waters without her.

Who was saved, and how. The people who were left, through offerings and the work of Orunmila.

The boat or the refuge. No boat. Rescue comes when the waters are calmed, or Olokun is bound.

What came after. The land is restored, and the boundary between land and sea is set.

James Frazer, writing in 1918, thought Africa had almost no native flood stories at all. Later collectors found a few, like this one, but they are still rare across the continent, and they are often about the making of the world rather than a punishment.

THINK IT THROUGH

Olokun was angry because she was never asked. Have you ever seen trouble come from someone being left out?

Sources

Harold Courlander, as cited in Mark Isaak's collection, "Flood Stories from Around the World: Yoruba".

"Olokun", Wikipedia, for the version in which Olokun is bound.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.