

Ifa in Oshogbo

By Vincent Charles and Molaundo Jones

Important Words and Concepts

Awo	Babalawo
Divine	Embodiment
Ifa	Initiation
Initiates	Odu
Orisha	Sacred
UNESCO	

Introduction

In 2014 Charles Vincent Burwell and Molaundo Jones journeyed from their home in Brooklyn, New York to Osogbo, Nigeria in Yorubaland, West Africa. Charles Vincent Burwell traveled to Nigeria to become a priest of Ifa. Ifa is a traditional religion that began in nearby Ile Ife, Nigeria and can be found in many parts of West Africa. Charles asked Molaundo to accompany him to Africa to document the initiation. The photo essay illustrates various aspects of the largely secretive ceremony.

















Picture Captions

1. **Awos** (Ifa initiates) prepare to begin the process of initiating into Ifa. The priest (kneeling) divines to allow the initiation process.
2. **Awos** pictured being prepared and dressed for **initiation**. This includes bathing, receiving garments, and removing hair from the crown of the head.
3. Senior **Babalawos** (priest of Ifa) divine and recite **odu** (sacred text) on day one of the initiation process. The conclusion of these divinations will determine whether the **initiates** will be permitted to receive **Ifa**.
4. Having been divined and acceptance as initiates of Ifa, the Awos prepare to enter the sacred shrine for initiation. As full initiates they are said to, now, carry Ifa with them. In this state, they are by proxy considered the **sacred embodiment** of the orisha Orunmilla. They will remain in this state until the conclusion of the initiation process.
5. The initiates pray to the offerings for acceptance into Ifa by the creator (Oludumare/God). Each article offered will be divined upon by the senior Babalawos.
6. CHIEF AWÓSANMÍ ỌŞUNTÓGÙN SÉKOU ALÁJÉ stands on the banks of the Osun River in the Osun **Sacred** Grove.
7. An initiation into Ifa requires the efforts of a community of individuals. Many have initiated into Ifa at a very young age. Regardless of age, the young Awos retain a striking knowledge and understanding of the principles of Ifa and the **Odu** (sacred text).
8. At the conclusion of the initiation, the Awos are presented to the community as Babalawo and Iyanifa. Rather than the end of a process, initiating into Ifa is the beginning of a journey that will continue for many years. To become a Babalawo or Iyanifa with full rites and privileges, the Awos have committed to years of study and ritual. In Osogbo, Nigeria, a Babalawo must commit to no less than 12 years of concentrated study as the sacred text is vast. The Babalawo and Iyanifa, as high priests and priestesses of Ifa, must have a commanding understanding of botany, geology, the divinity of Odu and Orisha, and philosophy.
9. The Awos visit the Sacred Grove. The Osun Sacred Grove, on the outskirts of the city of Osogbo, is one of the last remnants of primary high forest in southern Nigeria. Regarded as the home of the Orisha of fertility Osun, one of the pantheon of Yoruba gods, the landscape of the grove and the Osun River is dotted with shrines, sculptures, and art works that honor Osun and other Orisha. The sacred grove, which is now seen as a symbol of identity for all Yoruba people, is probably the last in Yoruba culture. The Sacred Grove is listed as an **UNESCO** World Heritage Site.
10. Back in New York.

I wanted to be sure that it is understood that one cannot "decide" to become a priest of Ifa, rather, they must be allowed to do so by the presiding Babalawos of the particular house. It must, then, be divined upon.

It is very uncommon for photographs to be allowed during an initiation - to many, it is frowned upon. This is more so the case in the west as African Americans are particularly sensitive to who has access to information based on the manner in which information has been used against them in the west. There is an omnipresent concern that once the White majority has access to the customs, rituals, and principles, African Americans will find themselves pushed toward the margins. This is less so of an issue in Africa as they are more enamored with the exposure that social media has provided them. This same access is, incidentally, the reason for the resurgence of African spirituality in the New World. Its emerging popularity in the west has created a renaissance in Yorubaland where Orisha and Ifa currently rank behind Christianity and Islam in terms of popularity despite being the birthplace of the sects.

Vincent Charles