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How a Trade Built on Trust Shaped the Ijesa People

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Chapter 1
The Ijesa Are Children of Obokun

On the account. Before the trade, the markets and the money comes a simpler question: who are the Ijesa? This chapter answers it, and everything after it grows from that answer.

Ijesa, Descendants of Obokun

Ask anyone who has ever bought something in instalments, paid a little today and a little more next week, and they are living out a practice the Ijesa people were already perfecting a century ago. This book tells the story of the people behind that legacy, and of the God who settled them in the land that made it possible.

In the western part of Nigeria, God settled the Yoruba people. And within the very heart of Yoruba land, the Almighty laid down Ijesaland. Of all the Yoruba lineages God placed there, this is the one everyone came to know simply as the Ijesa: the Descendants of Obokun.

Who are the Ijesa? Why are they called Descendants of Obokun? What other oriki do they carry? What else about them is worth knowing? These are the questions this book sets out to answer, one by one, in the pages that follow.

Where Ijesaland Lies

The Ijesa are one of the principal groups within the Yoruba nation, found in Osun State. Ijesaland today comprises six Local Government Areas:

- Ilesa West, headquartered at Ereja in Ilesa
- Ilesa East, headquartered at Iyemogun in Ilesa
- Oriade, headquartered at Ijebu-Jesa
- Obokun, headquartered at Ibokun
- Atakunmosa West, headquartered at Osu
- Atakunmosa East, headquartered at Iperindo.

Ijesaland shares its borders with Osogbo, Ile-Ife, Ede, Ada, and Igbara-Oke. Ilesa itself is the capital of Ijesaland and the traditional seat of the Owa Obokun, its prominence in the region dating back to the colonial era.

A Name Spoken with Pride

When an Ijesa person wants to praise themselves, they say: "I am Ijesa, Descendant of Obokun." When a musician sings anywhere in Ijesaland, sooner or later they will greet the Ijesa people by that same name. One well-known Adamo singer greeted them this way:

> "Ijesa lo de be e o, Omo Obokun ni a re, Ijesa re e, Omo Obokun."

The Ijesa have arrived, it is said, descendants of Obokun we are indeed, here comes the Ijesa, descendants of Obokun.

Another sang it differently still:

> "Ijesa re, Arogun yo. Ye so gbodo fowo, Kan Omo Obokun."

Here are the Ijesa, warriors who conquer and return. Take care how you handle a descendant of Obokun.

Some twenty or thirty years before this book was first written, a well-known Ijesa broadcaster used to close her Ijesa-dialect programme on the radio with these words: "I, descendant of Obokun, am taking my leave now. I, child of one who sits in council. I have girded myself for battle as I always do. May no misfortune befall me. Until we meet again!"

In the original Ijesa dialect: "Nje Emi Omo Obokun mi re le. Emi Omo Ateni wijo. Amura ija bi oni ti mo tele. Oriburuku e ni se te mi. O di gba!"

But Who Was Obokun?

It is a curious thing: an Ijesa person can barely finish a sentence of self-praise without invoking Obokun. The same is true of anyone composing songs in the Ijesa dialect. But who, exactly, was this Obokun? How did the name come to be tied to the sea, to "*omi okun*"? Was Obokun a deity, or a man? To answer that, we have to turn to Yoruba history itself.

Yoruba tradition holds that Oduduwa was the father of all the Yoruba people. In his old age, Oduduwa began to lose

his sight, until he became completely blind. A babalawo, a priest trained to read the Ifa oracle, was consulted to find a cure, and Ifa gave its answer: only water from the sea could restore Oduduwa's sight. Ifa rejected river water from Ilesa's Ayao stream. It rejected the Osun River at Osogbo. It rejected the Ogunpa River at Ibadan. Ifa insisted on one thing alone: seawater, and nothing else, would open Oduduwa's eyes.

This was no small demand. In those days there were no cars, no bicycles: nothing that made a journey to the coast an easy errand. Yet without seawater Oduduwa's sight could not be restored, and no one could be forced into such a journey. History tells us that it was Owa, the youngest of Oduduwa's children, who stepped forward and offered himself for it.

He set out from the very heart of Yoruba land, heading straight for Lagos: "Eko, surrounded by water on every side," as the old praise-name calls it. He passed through Ibadan, the town of Oluyole. He passed through Ijebu, the town of Obanta. He passed through Ikorodu, and at last reached Lagos itself. How this brave man actually made that journey has passed into legend. Some say a mystical company carried him there, others speak of some swifter, unexplained means of travel. The details are lost to us now. What matters is that this hero completed the task he had set out to do.

Owa Obokun, the great forefather of the Ijesa people, reached Lagos and drew water from the Majidun waters, and from the lagoon at its very edge. He was no fool sent

by God on a wasted errand: he went straight to where the sea itself could be found in Lagos, drew the seawater Ifa had asked for, and carried it home.

This was, in truth, a hero's task, an act of real courage by the man who would become the leader of the Ijesa people. It is what every Ijesa person takes pride in to this day. It is what first placed the Ijesa name in the book of history. And it is what gave the Ijesa the oriki they still carry: "Ijesa, Omo Obokun," meaning Ijesa, Children of the One Who Drew Water from the Sea.

Your instalment. Pass on what you know. Tell someone who has never heard it, in your own words, why the Ijesa are called Descendants of Obokun. Do it this month.

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