

ANTHROPOLOGY OF IFA: A STUDY OF TRADITIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY, ETHICS AND WISDOM

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Abstract

Ethics, wisdom and folk science are integral parts of traditional African knowledge of which Ifa is the greatest manifestation among the Yoruba. However, these traditional integral parts of African anthropological realities have come under the assaults of foreign influence. This paper examines the concept of Ifa and its relevance as a medium of knowledge and ethics, wisdom and science in traditional African society using the Yoruba as a case study. It uses ethnography, which is acclaimed as most suited for the study of traditional communities. Methodologically, the paper employs anthropological paradigms of participatory-observation, field notes and contextualisation. Data obtained from the study indicate the prevalence of Ifa practices among the people despite the influence of foreign religions, Western education and modernization. Findings reveal that Ifa is a veritable medium of general knowledge, morality and science for the people. The field report shows that the physical, psychophysical and metaphysical realms of traditional Yoruba people are saturated with Ifa. The people value it and see it as an authentic means of traditional knowledge. The paper concludes that Ifa portends real value if harnessed with modernization because of its valuable usage in traditional epistemology, science and wisdom.

Keywords: Epistemology, Ethics, Ethnography, Ifa, Wisdom, Tradition

Introduction

Traditional African epistemology, ethics and science among the Yoruba hinge on several variables, of which one of the most acclaimed is *ifa*, the oracle of divination. The Yoruba in their quest for wisdom, knowledge and understanding employ *ifa* as a medium of research and documentation, source of knowledge and science and embodiment of ethics and beliefs. *Ifa* is the most popular Yoruba deity among the pantheons. *Ifa* moderates the traditional political, and socio-religious activities of the people. The practice of divination cuts across all African ethnic groups, where veritable means of traditional knowledge have been developed and harnessed for the use of the people (Jordan 2000). Thus, *ifa* is not limited to the Yoruba alone. Among the Igala, it is called *ifa*, the Igbo call it *afa*, the Nupe call it *eba* and the Ebirra call it *ifa*. The Ewe speaking people in Togo and Ghana call it *afa*. *Ifa* extends to the Americas through the Atlantic slave trade. The *ifa* system flourishes in the midst of Caribbean nations (Eason 2008).

The writer's interest was heightened when he discovered that African youths are not enthusiastic about *ifa*. The plausible explanation for this could be as a result of its been

labelled occultic, barbaric and devilish since the advent of the White missionaries among the people. However, the writer discovers that the activities of prophets in the Christian churches and Muslim marabouts are exactly the tasks of *babalowos* (diviners) who use the *ifa* system. Study by Tubi (2015) shows that many adherents of foreign religions are clients of *aworo* (priests) of traditional religious system who are adept in *ifa*. *Ifa* was listed by the UNESCO in 2005 as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of humanity (<https://ich.unesco.org>)

Ethnographic Insertion

The research involved an ethnographic insertion. The period covers a period of 6 calendar months. It involves a period of insertion whereby the researcher lived within Yoruba land and had close observatory-participatory involvement with the people. For a closer study of the practice of *ifa* among the Yoruba, it was desirable to focus on a particular group of the Yoruba. The research focused on the Okun-Yoruba, which occupies the northeastern-most part of Yorubaland. The choice of the Okun-Yoruba hinges on various factors. The people live on the northeastern edge of Yorubaland on the borderline between the Nupe in the North, Ebirra in the East. Also the Okun share contiguous boundaries with other Yoruba groups in the West and South. The Okun is a collective name for six interrelated dialects of the Bunu, Ijumu, Kiri, Owe, Oworo and Yagba. They are found in Kogi, Ekiti, Ondo and Kwara states, Nigeria. They consider themselves as kiths and kins who migrated from Ile-Ife from earliest times. Sizable portion lay claim to Oyo ancestry.

They occupy the six Local Governments of Kogi West district namely Ijumu, Bunu-Kabba, Lokoja, Mopa-Muro, Yagba East and Yagba West. The research took data from communities which were considered pristine in the celebration of traditional religion and practices. All communities have come under the onslaughts of Islam, Christianity, modernization in various degrees. However, these communities in which the researcher undertook his study have been acclaimed by the Okun speaking peoples as maintaining various aspects of their pristine traditions despite the aggressive attacks of foreign influence.

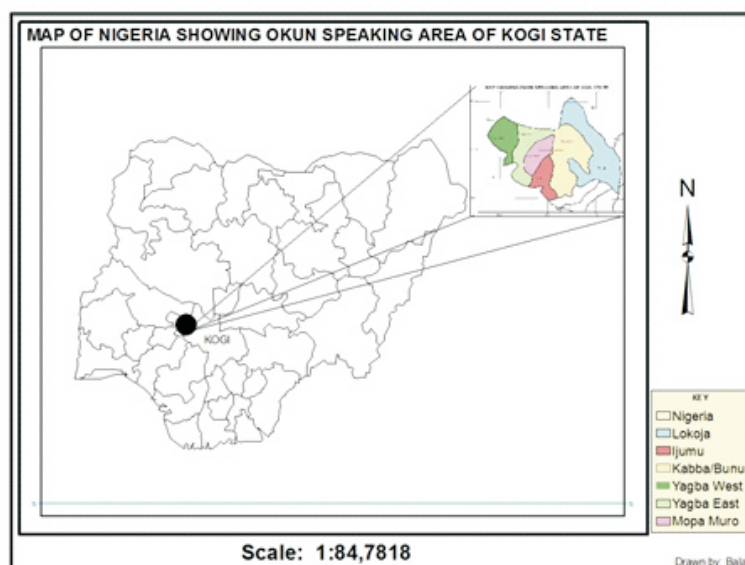


Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing Okun-Yoruba speaking Area of Nigeria

Understanding Ifa

Ifa is one of the principal deities among the Yoruba. It was bequeathed to the Yoruba by Orunmila at Ile-Ife. Hence, he is acclaimed as the patron of divination. *Ifa* is the oracle of divination. In it is reposed the power of clairvoyance and discernment. According to Karade (1994), Olupona and Abiodun, (2016) *ifa* has clear knowledge of all things. *Ifa* is the intermediary among the principal deities which are *esu* (divine messenger), *ori* (literally head, which is akin to *chi* of the Igbo) and *ogun* (deity of iron). It is the most consulted deity in the pantheons of the Yoruba. *Ifa* involves systematic and intricate mathematics called *odu* (corpus), each *odu* is made of 256 parts which in turn are divided into *ese* (verses) (Drewal and Drewal 1983, Adewuyi 2018). From close observation, the researcher posits that mathematically, *ifa* is very elastic in number, because it can be multiplied severally depending on the arithmetical competence of the diviner.

The basic sixteen *odu ifa* are; *ogbe*, *oyeku*, *iwori*, *odi*, *irosun*, *iwonri*, *obara*, *okanran*, *ogunda*, *osa*, *ika*, *oturopun*, *otura*, *irete*, *ose*, *ofun*. These sixteen *odu* gives clue to all things, situations and circumstance. *Ifa* chants are not written down but are strictly coded in orature so much so that a single miss in the chants will render the process ineffective. For this reason, *ifa* apprenticeship is tedious and lasts for three to four years and tutelage under experienced *ifa* diviner is considerable tedious and continuous for a longer time

1. <i>ogbe</i>	2. <i>oyeku</i>	3. <i>iwori</i>	4. <i>odi</i>
I	II	II	I
I	II	I	II
I	II	I	II
I	II	II	I
5. <i>irosun</i>	6. <i>owara</i>	7. <i>obara</i>	8. <i>okonron</i>
I	II	I	II
I	II	II	II
II	I	II	II
II	I	II	I
9. <i>ogunda</i>	10. <i>osa</i>	11. <i>ika</i>	12. <i>oturopun</i>
I	II	II	II
I	I	I	II
I	I	II	I
II	I	II	II
13. <i>otuwa</i>	14. <i>irete</i>	15. <i>ose</i>	16. <i>ofun</i>
I	I	I	II
II	I	II	I
I	II	I	II
I	I	II	I

Fig 2: Odu Ifa (Ifa corpus)

The researcher observed that *ifa* divination involved a client/inquirer who approaches a diviner to make inquiry about anything of concern. The inquirer is given a set of *ifa* materials, (in this instance four pieces of kolanut lopes). The inquirer cubs them in his hand and whispers his intention quietly to the lopes. He then gives them to the diviner. The diviner will use the four lopes to divine for the inquirer by throwing up the four lopes. From observation, *ifa* divination with kolanuts has multiple positions. After throwing up the four lopes, they will fall down in four possible positions: (1) Two face up and two face down, (2) three face and one faces down, (3) four face up, (4) four face down. In interpreting these four positions, after close observation the researcher opines that the case of “two face up and two face down” seems the most favourable of all positions for the inquirer who comes to make inquiry.

Ifa is seen as the most reliable, humane and friendly of all the deities. According to Oba Joledo (personal communication), it is impossible for *ifa* to tell a lie. *Ifa* flourishes despite the onslaughts of modernization and foreign religions. It flourishes among the people because they have concerns and problems that modernity has not provided adequate answers to. Multiple issues such health matters, fertility/infertility, security, employment/job placement, promotion, family matters, community crisis, etc are all brought before *ifa* because of peoples' perception of *ifa* as highly reliable and efficient, (Adewuyi 2018, Neimark 2012, Akande; personal communication).



Fig 3: Researcher interviewing chief priest of Ogidi, Ijumu LGA, Kogi state.

Ifa is the apex of Yoruba wisdom, epistemology, scripture, and science. In it is contained all the accessories of knowledge which human beings need to succeed in life, (Epega and Neimark 1995, Akande; personal communication, Obahun; personal communication).



Figure 4: Researcher interviewing chief priestess of Alu, Yagba East LGA, Kogi state

There are different types of ifa, (Adewuyi 2018, Epaga and Neimark 1995, Karade 1994). The Yoruba enunciate various types of ifa based on the processes of divination (Fatimayin; personal communication). All forms of ifa perform the same roles but they are characterised by different paraphernalia and methodology of divining which brings clear differences between them. There are ifa agere (ifa on bowl), ifa iroke (ifa with tapper), ifa ikin (ifa with palm nuts), opele (ifa with chain), iyerosun (ifa with powder), ifa opon (ifa with tray) and ifa obi (ifa with kola nuts) amongst others. The researcher can conclude that ifa divinatory system is based on sorting and multiplication of binaries.

Anthropological Relevance of Ifa

Among the Yoruba speaking people, ifa plays significant roles in their political, social, economic and religious activities. Ifa cannot be divorced from the Yoruba. Despite the vigorous challenge from foreign religions and, Western education and modernization, ifa still plays significant roles in their activities. Tubi (2015) reports that the ones who have acquired Western education still largely patronise traditional diviners (babalawo/iyaonifa). Those who have accepted foreign religions of Islam and Christianity might still not blink an eye in consulting ifa for major decisions in their lives or families. Ifa though one of the many means of casting lots and obtaining prophetic messages among the Yoruba, is also considered as the most reliable and efficient (Adewuyi 2018, Adewumi; personal communication, Akande; personal cocmmunication).

In the course of this fieldwork, questions on reliability of *ifa* and *ifa* priests drew favourable answers from informants. Generally, the Yoruba expect *ifa* to speak the truth at all times and *ifa* priests were expected to be honest. When people were asked to juxtapose traditional *ifa* priests with clerics of foreign religions, they all agree that traditional *ifa* priests were considered more forthright in their dealings. Albeit, charlatanisms have crept into traditional *ifa* practices in recent years, the people argued that the worst charade in *ifa* practices come from the influence of corruption in the national polity.

People say that clerics and adherents of foreign religions still consult *ifa* priest for sundry purposes. It was stated by *ifa* priests in the course of the research that many Pentecostal pastors visit *ifa* priests to acquire power for effect ministry. People also say that *ifa* practice is cheaper than consulting modern pastors and prophets, imams and marabouts. They equally state that *ifa* provides effective remedy to most pressing situations.

The followings are considered as basic relevance of *ifa* among the Yoruba:

Ifa as source of wisdom and knowledge: *Ifa* is the epitome of wisdom and knowledge for the Yoruba people. It is seen as a divinely approved source of all types of knowledge for the people. Those who consult *ifa* are not expected to do wrong, because the truth is always laid before them. *Ifa* gives wisdom to adherents. It is a compendium of wisdom for the people (Akande; personal communication, Fatimayin; personal communication).

Ifa as corpus of science: Mathematical science, astronomy, cosmology, ecology, etc. are embedded in *ifa*. *Ifa* is a complex mathematical calculative system. It contains several mathematical formulas. There are basically 16 *odu* (corpus) which in turn is multiplied into 256. The figure can be divided into verses and then multiplied into thousands of verses. The Yoruba speak of over four thousand verses of *ifa* in which are found information on several scientific fields (Chief priest Akande; personal communication and priestess Arupe; personal communication).

Ifa as source of healing: Trado-medical services among the Yoruba rely heavily on *ifa*. *Babalawo* is expected to be adept in herbology and in treatment of several kinds of ailments. *Ifa* is akin to medical laboratory where diseases are examined. *Ifa* is also capable of prescribing remedies to ailments. The richness of *ifa* medical feat is that it encompasses both physical, psychological/emotional, mental/psychiatric, gynaecological, and spiritual treatments (Obahun; Personal communication).

Ifa as discerner of wills: *Ifa* is the vehicle of connecting heaven to earth, the means of discerning the divine will and even of the inner thinking of an individual. Because *ifa* is capable of knowing the divine will as well as the wills of all human beings and of all spirit beings, it is the most sort after of all deities. According to informant, “*Ifa* is consulted in several ways in thousands of places across the world, by multiple thousands of people on daily basis” (Adewumi; personal communication).

Ifa in counselling: *Ifa* provides the best medium of counselling for its clients. *Ifa* is the

embodiment of wisdom in its purest form. *Ifa* does not deceive nor lie, thus it is endowed with the power to confer the best means of counselling to troubled souls, (Obahun; personal communication).

Ifa as data storage/information: *Ifa* is a huge store house of Yoruba history, medical knowledge, mythology, philosophy and ethics. *Ifa* is a rich source of knowledge on logic, astronomy, cosmology, mathematics and ecology. According to the Yoruba *ifa* provides data on all things both spiritual and physical (Adewuyi 2018, Akande; personal communication).

Ifa as medium of esoteric knowledge: *Ifa* priests by using complex system of signs, chants and songs are capable of providing interpretations to all things which are considered as esoteric knowledge. Thus, it lies within the capacity of *ifa* to provide answers to things of the spiritual realms, (Fatimayin; personal communication).

Ifa as apocalyptic agent: Apocalypse literarily means “revelation”. Apocalyptic knowledge is the prime duty of *ifa* and its priests. *Ifa* is the main revelatory agent of the Yoruba. *Ifa* is the best source of revealing hidden things and events. The Yoruba assert that there is nothing hidden from *ifa*. *Ifa* has the capacity to unearth all buried things. Nothing is concealed from *ifa*. It is endowed with power to reveal the inner emotions of human beings, reveal stolen items, decisively good in detecting criminals, the most potent means of confirming traditional rulers, etc among the Yoruba. No Yoruba army would go to war in the past without consulting *ifa* and till today no king will be chosen without the consent of *ifa*, no marriage can hold without *ifa* (Fatimayin; personal communication, Obahun; personal communication).

Ifa in foretelling: The most authentic and reliable medium of foretelling among the Yoruba is *ifa*. *Ifa* is the most portent prophetic instrument that people use to make predictions about the future. Thus, every *ifa* priest is seen as a seer, who is capable of making predictions about how things and events will occur. Forecasting is well developed in *ifa* corpus. People believe that whatever *ifa* forecast shall come to pass, (Fatimayin,; personal communication. Arupe; personal communication).

Conclusion

This research focuses on the Okun-Yoruba speaking people who inhabit the north-easternmost part of Yorubaland, (Kogi state). They exhibit different methodologies of *ifa* divination. From close observation the research discovers that *ifa* consists of multiplication of binary oppositions with the aim of achieving a desired result. For the people, *ifa* represents the best of Yoruba system of knowledge, wisdom, science and metaphysics. The paper concludes that *ifa* is the epitome of knowledge, wisdom and science for the adherents. The study also observes that the Yoruba have different *ifa* methods.

By juxtaposition, the research opines that *ifa* and scientific computers bear similarities. It is clear that both systems are based on binaries. Thus, the paper

concludes that the binaries of modern computer system bear similarity to those of *ifa*. It is common knowledge that a binary in computers is a numeric system that is based on two digits. In fact, all computers use binary code made of two digits with which all data are processed. Thus, in mathematics and digital electronics, the concept of base-2 numeral also known as binary numeral is the norm. *Ifa* is a traditional base-2 numeracy used in divination.

The role of *ifa* in medical services needs to be assessed. The work of African medical anthropologists in this regard must be appraised for their usefulness in providing health care to the people. Herbology among traditional Yoruba is highly enriched with *ifa* knowledge. With this background, it is apt to state that *ifa* will remain with the Yoruba for a much longer time in spite of severe inroads of foreign influences.

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