

## IFA DIVINATION SYSTEM: AN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION OF YORUBA KNOWLEDGE CREATION

<sup>1</sup>Oni Akinsoji Francis and <sup>2</sup>Kolawole K. Olojo-Kosoko

Email: Oakinso1@binghamton.edu; +16073128890/ olojokosoko.kk@laaustech.edu.ng; +2348028344206

### Article Info

**Keywords:** Ifá divination system, African science, Yoruba knowledge, Technological parallels, Traditional practices

### DOI

10.5281/zenodo.14244030

### Abstract

This paper examines the Ifá divination system in Yorubaland, positioned as an African science and a sophisticated body of knowledge that functions like a device designed to solve human problems. The Ifá divination system relies on the expertise of a trained practitioner, the Babaláwo (Ifá priest), who decodes the messages of Ifá from Orunmila to guide clients through their challenges. This paper draws parallels between the components of the Ifá system and modern technological frameworks: the Odu Ifá as an inference engine, the ese (poems) as the knowledge base and the Opon Ifá (divination tray) as a display board for Ifá consultations. Tracing its origins and affirming its authenticity as a key element of Yoruba knowledge creation, this paper also explores the similarities between Ifá divination and contemporary scientific methodologies. Despite its roots in traditional practices, this paper highlights the ongoing relevance of Ifá in technological and scientific contexts, particularly in health, communication and knowledge systems.

### Introduction

Ifá divination is an ancient African religious practice and form of artistic heritage rooted in the cultural and spiritual systems of Yorùbá. According to the Yorùbá oral tradition, Ifá divination originated thousands of years ago, with some sources suggesting its beginnings can be traced back several millennia.<sup>3</sup> Ifá is a deeply spiritual practice centered around a complex pantheon of deities known as Orisa, with Ọlódùmarè as the supreme being. This structure gives Ifa a unique blend of monotheistic and polytheistic elements, emphasizing a single, all-encompassing divine source while honoring multiple deities.

Due to Africa's limited historical records, particularly before European documentation, the source of Ifá and its associated artistic practices remain unknown. Europeans who first encountered African arts made significant contributions to the literature on African art, religion, and culture, shaping much of the historical knowledge we have today. Ptolemy's mapping of the continent in 140 A.D., which documented features like the Nile River and

<sup>1</sup> Art History Department, Binghamton University, New York, United States.

<sup>2</sup> Art and Industrial Department, Lagos State University of Science and Technology, Ikorodu, Lagos.

<sup>3</sup> The earliest report of Ifa divination comes from the coast of what is now Ghana, as described by Bosman, who served as a factor for the Dutch at Elmina and Axim for 14 years at the end of the seventeenth century. See also the full source of the origin of Ifa divination in William Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 3-6

the Great Lakes of East Africa, marks one of the earliest instances of geographic recognition, yet Africa remained largely undocumented by European centers of record keeping until the Age of Discovery. During this period, the European exploration of sub-Saharan Africa began, marking the beginning of Africa's expanded contact with other parts of the world.

However, African societies have distinct historical and cultural identities. Many African cultures view the veneration of ancestors as essential to both their cultural and spiritual identity. For example, in Yoruba cosmology, reverence for ancestral spirits is foundational, with beliefs in ancestor deities who guide and protect their descendants. Yorubaland, traditionally called *Káàár Ojire*, is the homeland and cultural region of the Yoruba people in West Africa, encompassing the present-day Osun, Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, Oyo, and Lagos states in Nigeria. Rich in culture and spirituality, Yorubaland was a thriving center of religious and artistic heritage before the European incursion.

In reality, many African societies believe that they were created and sustained by the guidance of their ancestors. Nigeria, with its rich cultural diversity, exemplifies this through regional belief systems, such as the Yoruba-speaking regions, which have robust religious traditions centered on ancestor veneration and spiritual practices. This cultural heritage underscores the resilience and continuity of African identity, art, and belief systems.



**Plate 1:** Ptolemy's map of Africa around 140 A.D

### ***Connecting the Spiritual and the Divine: The Origins and Practice of Ifa Divination Among the Yoruba***

The history of Yorùbá traditional religion is often traced to the migration of Odùdùwà<sup>4</sup>, who, according to Yoruba oral tradition, journeyed to present-day southwestern Nigeria. Odùdùwà is regarded as an ancestor and foundational figure in Yoruba history, and he is often celebrated as the progenitor of Yorùbá land.<sup>5</sup> The Yorùbá religious system is based on the belief that death does not signify the end of life; rather, the dead are believed to continue their existence in the spirit realm, where they can be invoked, honored, and even worshiped. Stones,

<sup>4</sup> Oduduwa is one of the most important figures in the Yoruba religion and mythology. He is considered the progenitor of the Yorubas and the founder of the Yoruba Kingdom of Ile-Ife. According to Yoruba tradition, Oduduwa is considered the first ruler (Ooni) of Ile-Ife, and he is associated with the creation of the world, the establishment of kingship, and the unification of the Yoruba ethnic groups.

<sup>5</sup> Robin Law, "How Truly Traditional Is Our Traditional History?" The Case of Samuel Johnson and the Recording of Yoruba Oral Tradition," *History in Africa* 11 (1984)

carved wood figures, and specific animals are used as symbolic vessels or channels for these spirits, allowing them to be venerated as ancestral or nature deities.

In Yorùbá cosmology, Ifá serves as a critical intermediary between the divine and human realms. According to Yorùbá tradition, Ifá divination was revealed to humanity by Ọ̀rúnmilà, who is not the Supreme Being but is revered as a prominent deity of wisdom, knowledge, and divination.<sup>6</sup> Ọ̀rúnmilà is regarded as a principal Ọ̀rìṣà, endowed with the ability to discern hidden knowledge and foresee future events. He is associated with omniscience and acts as a custodian of wisdom and cosmic order, distinct from Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being and creator in Yorùbá religion.

Ifá, as a divinatory practice, is therefore considered the most consulted and trusted means of seeking guidance in the Yorùbá pantheon. Through the wisdom of Ọ̀rúnmilà, practitioners of Ifá gain insight into personal and communal matters. This practice is upheld by the Bàbáláwo, or Ifá priest, who interprets the will of Ọ̀rúnmilà through the sacred corpus Odù Ifá. Consequently, Ifá is regarded as one of the most revered sources of knowledge and spiritual authority in Yorùbá culture, providing a framework for navigating life's uncertainties and connecting with the divine.

The history of Ifá divination in Yorùbá land is as old as the history of its people. Ifá's practice in Yorùbá land is generally believed to have predated the arrival of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria. Islam reached Nigeria through the Borno Empire between the 11th and 14th centuries, with its initial introduction dated around 1068 A.D. Christianity, however, was introduced by Portuguese Augustinian and Capuchin monks in the 15th century<sup>7</sup>. Ifá is an ancient art that was long practiced among the Yorùbá people in Nigeria and the Republic of Benin, but it is not limited to them. It is also practiced among the Fòn of the Republic of Benin, where it is known as "Fá." The Ève (Ewe) of Togo also call it "Afá." Additionally, it is practiced by Yorùbá descendants in Cuba and Brazil, where Ọ̀rúnmilà is worshiped. Interestingly, there is a similar philosophy in China known as the I-Ching divination system.<sup>8</sup> Divination trays and other ritual objects dedicated to Ifá worship can offer insights into the historical origins of Ifá divination in Africa. The oldest known specimens associated with Ifá divination date back to the Kingdom of Dahomey (in present-day Benin) as early as the 16th century<sup>9</sup>. These objects were traditionally used in Fá divination—a practice closely related to Ifá among the Fòn people of Dahomey that shares similarities with the Yorùbá Ifá divination system. (see Plate 2).

---

<sup>6</sup> Adegboyega Oyekunle Oluwayemisi, "The Metaphysical and Epistemological Relevance of Ifa Corpus" (2017): 13

<sup>7</sup> A. F. C. Ryder, "Missionary Activity in the Kingdom of Warri to the Early Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2, no. 1 (December 1960):3,3, 10&11

<sup>8</sup> I-Ching is a philosophical and spiritual text used for guidance, insight, and understanding the world. The I-Ching system is based on 64 hexagrams, each composed of six broken or unbroken lines representing yin and yang elements in various combinations. These hexagrams are believed to offer wisdom on the interconnectedness of natural and spiritual forces.

<sup>9</sup> Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton III, and Rowland Abiodun. 1989. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (New York: Center for African Art in Association with H.N. Abrams, 1989)





**Plate 2:** Fon people, Republic of Benin, Ifa drainage tray (Photo Source: Black Atlantic Art)

The origins of Ifá divination in Yorùbáland can be traced to two accounts. The first recounts the history of Setilu, who was first introduced to Yorubaland by Alaafin Ofiran, the son of King Onigbogi. This account was noted by Samuel Johnson in his 1921 book *The History of the Yorubas* and can be summarized as follows:

According to oral traditions, Oduduwa encountered Setilu at Ile-Ife, but Ifá was officially recognized under the authority of Alaafin Ofiran in the Oyo Empire. Ofiran, son of Onigbogi, ascended the throne in the 16th century after his exile from Oyo. During Alaafin Ofiran's reign (around 1542), Ifá was established as the principal oracle for the Yoruba people. Setilu subsequently initiated followers into the mysteries of Ifá divination, which gradually spread as the predominant oracle system throughout Yorubaland. This custom symbolized the Yoruba people's religious heritage and was widely practiced throughout Yorubaland.<sup>10</sup>

The second account traces the origin of the documented Ifá knowledge to the first book of Ifá in Yorubaland, *Ifá ni Pa*. Published in 1896 by Rev. E. M. Lijadu, an Anglican priest and native convert, this work was groundbreaking. Rev. Lijadu sought to appraise Ifá practitioners and acknowledge Ifá as a central component of the Yoruba belief system<sup>11</sup>. His book describes Ifá as a Yoruba traditional religion, emphasizing its effectiveness in addressing various challenges and establishing a historical relationship between Ifá and Christianity. Through this comparative approach, *Ifa ni Pa* provided a unique compendium of information on Ifá divination, aligning elements of Ifá with Christian teachings.

The book is a compendium of information on Ifa religion in relation to Christian teachings in Yorubaland. Lijadu referred to numerous *Òdù Ifá* (divinatory verses) to support Christian teachings. In 1897, Bishop Charles Phillips, a prominent figure in the Yoruba Anglican clergy, wrote a preface to the book, commending Lijadu's initiative in bridging the narratives of Ifá with Christian doctrine. According to Lijadu, the book served two purposes:

Èkíní: *Nígba tí àwọn tò ñ kọ Ifá sori bá mò pé wọn lè ka Odù Ifá nínú iwé, mo rò pé ó yẹ kí wọn kọ iwé kíkà, àti kí wọn fì ọrọ̀ inú Bíbélì wé Odù Ifá. Wọn yóò sì rí èyí tó dára jù fún ara wọn*<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> E. A. A. Adegbola, *Ifa and Christianity Among the Yoruba: A Study in Symbiosis and in the Development of Yoruba Christology, 1890-1940* (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 1976):74 See also Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*, ed. Obadiah Johnson (London: Routledge, 1921). Fasanya, Akin. 2004. *The Original Religion of the Yorubas*. Retrieved from <https://laits.utexas.edu/africa/2004/database/fasanya.html>

<sup>11</sup> Rev. E. M. Lijadu, *Ifa ni Pa*, first published in 1896.

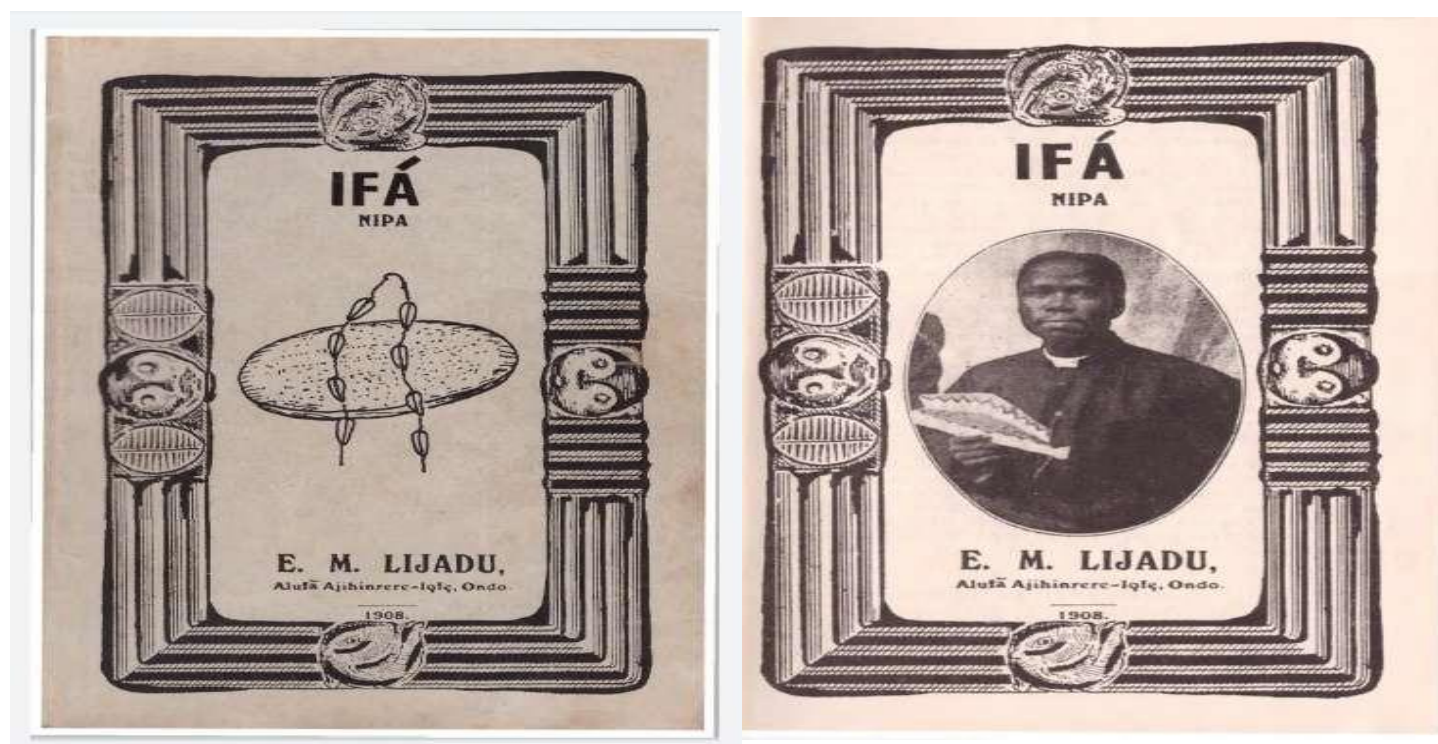
<sup>12</sup> Rev. E. M. Lijadu, *Ifa ni Pa*, first published 1896: 10-30

First, demonstrating that the Ifá corpus can be read in written form would encourage Ifá devotees to learn literacy skills and explore biblical comparisons. This, he believed, would help individuals make informed religious choices.

Èkejì: Ìwé yìí yòò jẹ́ iránlówọ́ púpọ́ fún àwọn oníwààsù ọ̀rọ̀ Ọ̀lórún, nítorí pé wọ̀n yòò túnbọ̀ mọ́ bí a ti mú nínú ọ̀rọ̀ Ifá láti fì òtítọ́ inú ìwé Ọ̀lórún hàn dájúdájú.

Second, the book was designed to assist Christian preachers in understanding the Ifá corpus as a bridge to reinforce biblical truths and establish faith in divine teachings.

Following publication, *Ifá ni Pa* drew scholarly interest, fostering deeper exploration of Ifá as both a religious and epistemological framework in Yorùbá land. Today, Ifá is esteemed not only as a traditional belief system but also as an intellectual source, embodying Yorùbá spirituality, cosmology, and knowledge systems.



**Plate 3:** Ifa Nipa by Rev. E.M. Lijadu. (1897)

### ***Babaláwo as a Custodian of Knowledge: Ifa Divination and the Sacred Tools of Yorùbá Wisdom***

To understand the epistemological significance of Ifá divination, one must explore the role of the *Babaláwo* (Ifá priest). Then who is Babaláwo? Babaláwo<sup>13</sup> is an expert diviner who is deeply versed in the vast literary corpus Ọ̀dù Ifá. Possessing knowledge that transcends the comprehension of an ordinary individual, the *Babaláwo* employs a range of divinatory skills to guide clients toward heightened awareness and understanding. Through

<sup>13</sup> Babalawo is trained in Ifá divination, which involves the use of the Odu Ifá, a complex system of signs and verses, to communicate divine wisdom. Through divination, Babalawo guides personal, spiritual, and community issues by interpreting the signs of



the use of specialized ritual objects, intricate incantations, and profound symbolic language, *Babaláwo* addresses and offers remedies for diverse human challenges.<sup>14</sup> A *Babaláwo* is not only considered an exceptionally trained diviner but is also recognized for his ability to memorize and interpret the *Òdù Ifá* (see Plate 4), which is often referred to as the “unwritten book” of Yorùbá cosmology. This extensive oral text consists of hundreds of verses or *Òdù*, each containing parables, philosophical insights, and prescribed rituals used to understand and harmonize spiritual and material realms.

To contextualize the role of the *Babaláwo*, one must appreciate Ifá within Yorùbá culture. Ifá is not merely a religious practice but a sophisticated system of knowledge integral to Yoruba epistemology. It encompasses historical, metaphysical, and ethical dimensions, presenting a worldview in which divine wisdom and human experiences are interconnected. Through this divinatory practice, *Babaláwos* acts as custodians of traditional Yorùbá knowledge, bridging the wisdom of the divine with the everyday realities of the Yorubas.



**Plate 4:** Image of a Babalawo diving with palm nuts.

Ifá is a sophisticated system of explanation, prediction, and influence, enabling individuals to seek guidance from higher spiritual beings through *Babaláwo* (Ifá priest). The *Babaláwo* interprets the messages encoded in the Ifá divination system and translates them to provide insight to clients. This system is intricate, with wisdom embedded in the oral corpus known as *Òdù Ifá*, which can only be deciphered by a trained *Babaláwo* who possesses specialized skills to interpret this “unwritten document.” *Odu Ifá* holds profound knowledge, encompassing the philosophical and ethical principles.

The Ifá divination process involves 16 sacred palm nuts, which are cast into the *Babaláwo*’s cupped hands. Marks are traced on a flat, often wooden divination tray (*opón Ifá*) sprinkled with light powder, traditionally yam or wood dust, to create the visual patterns of the *du*. This process reflects the intricate communication with the spiritual realm and highlights the exceptional power of Ifá divination.

To facilitate communication within the cosmic framework, a range of divinatory apparatuses, such as *broke Ifá* (divining tapper) and *opón Ifá*, are employed. The specific tools used by the *Babaláwo* can shape the outcomes

<sup>14</sup> Bernard E. Owumi and Yusuf B. Okewole, "Ifa Therapeutic Practices among Yoruba People in Oyo State, Nigeria," *The Nigerian Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 15, no. 2 (2017): 139-143

of a divination session, underscoring the symbolic power attributed to each ritual object. The mystical nature of Ifá divination is such that its apparatuses merit careful consideration to fully understand its depth and efficacy. Ifá divination can be performed with specific sacred objects collectively known as *Ifá paraphernalia*, which play a vital role in the divination process. These include *Ikin* (sixteen sacred palm nuts), *Òpèlè* (a divining chain), *Ìróké Ifá* (an ivory tapper used for invoking the spirit of Ifá), *Òpón Ifá* (a divination tray), *Òpá Òrèrè* or *Òsù* (an Ifá ritual staff), *Àpò Ifá* (an Ifá bag for storing divination tools), and *Ìlù Ifá* (Ifá drums for ritual chanting and invocation).<sup>15</sup>

Collectively, these objects form an essential toolkit that enables the *Babaláwo* (Ifá priest) to commune with the cosmos and interpret messages accurately. The question arises frequently: can Ifá divination function without these tools? This is similar to asking whether scientists can yield accurate results without properly using their instruments. In this sense, Ifá operates with scientific precision; the *Babaláwo* serves as a "scientist" who interprets outcomes based on established knowledge and ritual techniques, with the paraphernalia functioning as precise instruments.

It is crucial to note that Ifá is not a spirit but rather a divination system rooted in the Yorùbá tradition. The efficacy of this method is derived from the interaction between the *Babaláwo*, the seeker, and the paraphernalia, all working in harmony to reveal insights. Each tool in the Ifá toolkit has a unique role and symbolism, and the diviner's skill in employing these objects attests to the power and accuracy of Ifá divination. This set of paraphernalia is discussed in detail to further illuminate their individual functions and significance.

#### **Òpón Ifá (wooden tray)**

The *Òpón Ifá* (Ifá divination tray) is an ancient, meticulously carved wooden tray used by *Bàbáláwo* (Ifá priests) in the Yoruba divination system. The edges feature intricate zoomorphic and geometric carvings that add symbolic depth and sacredly meaning (see Plate 5). As a diagnostic tool, the *Òpón Ifá* is central to the divination process, where the *Bàbáláwo* decodes and interprets messages from *Òrúnmìlà*, the deity of wisdom and knowledge. The *Bàbáláwo* uses his fingers to inscribe marks in the tray's center, guided by divine messages, facilitating a mystical dialog that is believed to connect the physical world with the cosmic realm. The identity of the original creator of this divination tray has been lost, likely because of the absence of early historical documentation in Nigeria and West Africa. However, many carvers who specialize in *Òpón Ifá* trace their artistic lineage to *Arè Lagbayi*, a renowned master carver of the royal court of Old Òyó, who lives in present-day Nigeria. The tray is commonly adorned with the face of *Èṣù*, the deity associated with communication, and the mediator of *àṣẹ* (divine authority), along with other motifs relevant to Ifá divination<sup>16</sup>.

*Òpón Ifá* trays are traditionally carved in either circular or rectangular shapes. The tray is divided into symbolic sections, each associated with specific directional and cosmological meanings. At the top of the tray, facing the diviner, is the "Face of the Tray" (*Ojú Òpón*), representing the gateway to the divine realm. The portion nearest the *Bàbáláwo* is the "Foot of the Tray" (*Esè Òpón*), while the right side is known as the "Straight Path" (*Ònà Ògànrán*) and the left side as the "Direct Path" (*Ònà Múnú*).

<sup>15</sup> O. I. Pogoso and A. O. Akande, "Ifa Divination Trays from Isale-Oyo," *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* 21 (2011): 39

<sup>16</sup> Are Lagbayi was a master wood carver in the palace of old Oyo, in present-day Nigeria. He was a Yoruba transcendental sculptor who lived as an Are, which means he was an itinerant or permanent stranger. Yoruba carvers traced their roots to Are Lagbayi, and his legacy continues in the open Ifá carvers. These carvers create trays with designs based on their own discretion or at the request of their patron diviners. Read also, R. O. Rom Kalilu and R. O. Kalilu, *Between Tradition and Record: A Search for the Legendary Woodcarver Ofooyo* (1992): 56.

The quadrants of the tray also carry individual significance:

- The upper right quadrant is associated with *Alábalotun*, which means “One who proposes from the right.”
- The upper left quadrant represents *Alásèlòsì*, “the one who implements from the left.”
- The lower right quadrant is linked to *Àtilétépòwó*, symbolizing “Early riser who sits down and prospers.”
- The lower left is *Afírukèrèsáyò*, “the one who holds a diviner’s fly whisk and is happy.”

The central portion of the tray, where Ifá verses are inscribed, is the *Erílàdé Òpón*, or the “Center of the Tray with the Crown.” This central point symbolizes the convergence of all spiritual realms. It is often depicted in a conical shape, representing the crown at the heart of the tray. This structure embodies the Yorùbá cosmological concept of balance, authority, and wisdom. The *Òpón Ifá* thus serves not only as a ritual instrument but also as a sacred microcosm reflecting the universe, making it indispensable to the divination practices of the Yorùbás.<sup>17</sup>



Plate 5: A circular divining tray (*Òpón Ifá*) carved about 1934 by Baba Alawode of Igana, Yorùbá land. To consult *Ifá*, the *Bàbáláwo* (diviner) places the *Òpón Ifá* (Ifá tray) before him and rhythmically taps it with an *Ìrókè Ifá* (Ifá tapper), a pointed instrument that serves to invoke the presence of *Òrúnmìlà*—the deity of wisdom—and other significant deities within the Yorùbá pantheon. The diviner uses specific palm nuts known as *Ikín Ifá*, which are traditionally selected for their association with Ifá divination. These *ikín* are distinct in that they have at least three “eyes” or indentations, making them suitable for the ritual.

The divination process begins by placing the *ikín* in the hollow of one hand and then attempting to transfer them to the other hand, leaving behind either one or two *ikín*. These remaining nuts indicate binary outcomes, which the *Bàbáláwo* marks by making single or double lines in the dusting powder (often from pulverized yam or wood).

<sup>17</sup> Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton III, and Rowland Abiodun. 1989. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (New York: Center for African Art in Association with H.N. Abrams, 1989): 23



spread across the *Òpón Ifá*. This marking process continues until a pattern emerges, corresponding to one of the 256 possible *Odù Ifá* (Ifá verses or oracles) in the divination corpus.<sup>18</sup>

Each *Odù* represents a unique binary sequence derived from a combination of single and double marks, which forms the foundation of the Ifá divination system. The *Bàbáláwo* relies on both advanced memory and mathematical skill to calculate these signs accurately and interpret the coded messages from the *Odù* for the client. This interpretation often involves reciting verses or stories associated with each *Odù*, which carry symbolic meanings and prescribe actions or sacrifices that may resolve the client's issues. The diviner translates these complex symbols into accessible advice for the client, ensuring that the guidance from *Ifá* is conveyed in a clear and comprehensible manner.

### *Odù Ifá (Ifá Literary Corpus)*

*Odù Ifá* is an oral corpus considered one of the most profound repositories of Yoruba wisdom, philosophy, and cosmology. It comprises sixteen primary *Odù* (often referred to as "books" or "chapters"), each of which contains a vast array of verses (*ẹsẹ*), forming a total of 256 *Odù*, collectively encompassing all conceivable life situations, events, and outcomes. These *Odù* serve as the foundational structure for Yoruba epistemology and scientific knowledge, encapsulating the accumulated wisdom of generations in a coded oral format<sup>19</sup> (see Plate 6).

To consult *Odù Ifá*, the *Bàbáláwo* (Ifá diviner) interprets binary markings on the *Òpón Ifá* (Ifá tray) with the symbols "I" for an odd count and "II" for an even count, akin to a heads-or-tails system. Each of the sixteen primary *Odù* names has distinct names and can be memorized and recited in a particular order, which varies slightly depending on regional or diasporic adaptations within the Yoruba cultural sphere. These primary names are typically represented in the following order: Èjì Ogbè, Òyèkú Méjì, Ìwòrì Méjì, Ìdí Méjì, Ìròsùn Méjì, Òwòrìn Méjì, Òbàrà Méjì, Òkànràn Méjì, Ògúndá Méjì, Òsá Méjì, Ìká Méjì, Òtúúrúpò Méjì, Òtúrá Méjì, Ìrètẹ Méjì, Òsẹ Méjì, and Òfún Méjì<sup>20</sup> (see Plate 6). There are 16 names; each represents a chapter with eight verses, and each verse appears twice, making 256. Each *Odù* is not only a chapter but also an organizing system within which multiple verses are housed, with each verse detailing moral, social, or spiritual principles.

#### A. Using Sixteen Palm Nuts

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Ogbe	Qyẹku	Iwori	Edi	Qbara	Qkanran	Irosun	Qwọnrin
1	1 1	1 1	1	1	1 1	1	1 1
1	1 1	1	1 1	1 1	1 1	1	1 1
1	1 1	1	1 1	1 1	1 1	1 1	1
1	1 1	1 1	1	1 1	1	1 1	1
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Ogunda	Qsa	Irẹtẹ	Otura	Oturupon	Ika	Qsẹ	Ofun
1	1 1	1	1	1 1	1 1	1	1 1
1	1	1	1 1	1 1	1	1 1	1
1	1	1 1	1	1	1 1	1	1 1
1 1	1	1	1	1 1	1 1	1 1	1

<sup>18</sup> Alamu, F. O., et al. "Title of the Article." *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Research* 1, no. 6 (October–November 2013): 526

<sup>19</sup> Olusegun Olu-Osayomi. "Dramatic Aspect of Ese Ifa in Yorubaland." (2027): Pg:14-15

<sup>20</sup> Adedeji, 'Femi. "Re-Examining the Musical Legacies in Yoruba Ifa Literary Corpus." *Department of Music, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria*. Pg 48

**Plate 6: 16 table figures of Ifa (using 16 palm nuts)**

Within the full corpus, these sixteen principals *Odù*—each containing sixteen subsections or "paths"—generate 256 variations through combinations of single and double markings. This binary system requires extensive memorization and interpretive skills, which are developed through years of rigorous training, enabling the *Bàbáláwo* to recall and apply oral verses with precision. A *Bàbáláwo* possesses this rare knowledge, which allows him to navigate the extensive Ifá divination system, providing insight and guidance based on the coded wisdom within *Odù Ifá*.

***Ìyèròsùn* (divination powder)**

*Ìyèròsùn* is a sacred powder derived from the termite-eaten wood of the *Ìròsùn* tree, which is revered for its spiritual connections within Yoruba cosmology. This fine dust is used by *Bàbáláwo* (Ifá priests) during divination and spread across the surface of the *Òpón Ifá* (Ifá divination tray) to facilitate the visualization and interpretation of *Odù Ifá* symbols (see Plate 7).<sup>21</sup> Traditionally, the *Ìròsùn* tree holds a unique status, as it is believed to have a deep connection to the spirit realm, enhancing the divination process by embodying the sacredness of nature in Ifá practice.

The preparation of *Ìyèròsùn* is ritualistic: *Bàbáláwo* procures the wood of the *Ìròsùn* tree during the dry season and leaves it on the ground, where termites consume the soft, outer layers, transforming it into finely textured dust. This process is significant because termites selectively eat the wood, leaving behind a fine residue that is symbolically enriched by nature. For divination, the *Bàbáláwo* sprinkles the *Ìyèròsùn* on the divination tray's surface, often accompanied by an initial invocation. Then he makes clockwise marks in the powder using his finger or tapper to encode the binary patterns of *Odù Ifá*, which represent messages from Orunmila, the deity of wisdom and divination.

**Plate 7: *Ìyèròsùn* powder.**

Without *Ìyèròsùn*, Ifá divination would be incomplete because this powder is the essential medium for inscribing and revealing *Odù Ifá*. The powder acts as a "screen" on which the divine message of Ifá is displayed, creating a space for spiritual communication.

***Ìkín Ifá* (sacred palm nuts)**

*Ìkín* are sacred seeds from the African palm tree (*Elaeis guineensis*). They are distinguished by their unique "eyes" or "eyelets," small indentations found at the base of each seed (see Plate 8). These eyes are typically in groups of

<sup>21</sup> Wande Abimbola, "The Bag of Wisdom: Osun and the Origins of the Ifa Divination," n. d.

three, four, or six and hold symbolic and functional significance in Ifá divination. The *Ìkín Ifá*—a set of sixteen sacred palm nuts—are harvested specifically from the *Òpè Ifá* (Ifá palm) tree, which is a tree of spiritual importance in the Yoruba tradition.

During divination, the *Bàbáláwo* (Ifá priest) holds the *Ìkín* in his hand and uses them to cast signs on the *Òpón Ifá* (divination tray), often in conjunction with the *Ìyèròsùn* (powder) to interpret the message from the Ifá deity, Orunmila. The nuts are used to create binary markings or patterns that serve as divinatory signs or omens that guide the interpretation of the *Odù Ifá*. The *Bàbáláwo* places these palm nuts on the *Ìyèròsùn* (termite dust) spread across the tray and shifts them to discern the right message from the divine. The number and position of the nuts determine the specific *Odù Ifá* to be consulted, and each combination offers a unique insight.

These sacred palm nuts are typically stored in a specialized bag called an *Agéré Ifá* (Ifá bag), which the *Bàbáláwo* carries with him for divination. This bag serves as both a physical and spiritual vessel, containing the sacred tools required for consultations. The process of divination, guided by the *Ìkín Ifá*, plays a central role in the consultation, offering insight into the spiritual, social, and personal matters of the client.



**Plate 8:** *Ìkín Ifá*

### ***The Science of Ifa: A Technological Perspective on Yoruba Divination and Its Epistemological Relevance***

Ifá's efficacy has established it as a reliable source of knowledge concerning the past, present, and future of the Yorubas. Ifá is believed to reveal an individual's destiny, and if the destiny is seen as unfortunate, it holds the potential to prescribe remedies to avert misfortune. Traditionally, Ifá is consulted for various purposes, including diagnosis, healing, decision-making guidance, communication, and understanding human interactions with the environment. It is frequently used to identify the hidden causes of events such as sudden death, accidents, property loss, and other disasters.

Ifá divination's epistemology and functions demonstrate relevance in the modern period, functioning as a form of technologically based African science. Like a digital computer that uses the binary system for the representation and identification of numbers, Ifá is also based on a binary system of signs, which can be represented by palm nuts, marks on the divination tray, and other symbolic gestures. This connection to binary systems implies that Ifá can be viewed as a "computer-oriented" science that relies heavily on mathematical and analytical skills.<sup>22</sup>

However, Ifá has not yet been fully developed or integrated with modern technology. However, some Ifá apparatuses have functional similarities to modern technological devices. For instance, in Communication

<sup>22</sup> Alamu, F. O., et al. "Title of the Article." *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Research* 1, no. 6 (October–November 2013): 525



Management Systems, information is transmitted and received between two points, a concept similar to the Ifá communication system. In Ifá divination, information is transmitted from one apparatus to another, and through this process, the diviner communicates the message to the individual seeking guidance. Thus, the transmission and reception of information in Ifá can be understood as a form of communication, which is a central aspect of the system.

Ifá, in this context, can be viewed as a reliable source of Yoruba communication that links directly to the cosmos. Extrapolating from this, Ifá apparatuses can be regarded as African-based technological devices. Recently, some African scholars have proposed that Ifá operates similarly to telecommunication systems, functioning similarly to modern devices such as phones or televisions to communicate information<sup>23</sup> (see Plate 9). This comparison suggests that Ifá could offer insights into alternative communication systems rooted in African knowledge and technology.

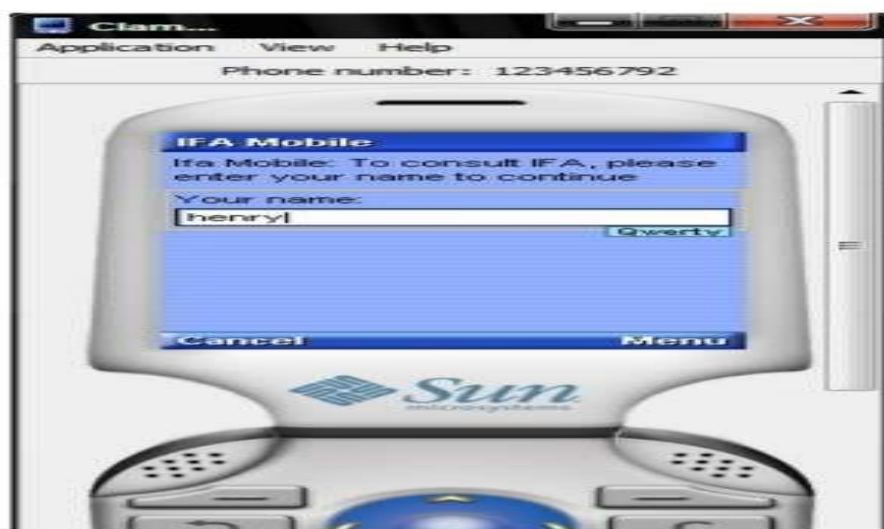


Figure 9. User section form.

**Plate 9:** Image of the Ifa mobile phone proposed by Olusegun Folorunso and Adio (2010)

### ***Ifa as a Traditional Healing System: Integrating Herbal Remedies, Diagnostics, and Modern Medicine***

For treating illnesses and diseases, Ifá is an effective traditional healing system, encompassing diagnostics and drug prescriptions among the Yoruba. Herbs and other materials for treating diseases are mentioned throughout the 256 verses (Òdù), from Ejiogbe to Ofun. Before the introduction of Western medical science, traditional medicine was the primary treatment, diagnosis, and management of various disorders and illnesses. Herbal remedies, which are reflected in the Ifá corpus (Òdù), provide effective therapeutic interventions.<sup>24</sup>

Ifá priests treat illnesses by combining various substances derived from herbal, mineral, and animal sources as part of the healing process. Numerous medicinal herbs are listed in the Òdù Ifá, along with detailed information on herbal preparations and disease management. For example, the Òdù Ikáméjì contains procedural healing instructions that can be applied to specific therapeutic contexts.<sup>25</sup> For instance, patients who sustain an injury from hot water may be treated using the prescriptions outlined in this Òdù. These treatments are administered in distinct stages, similar to how Western medicine employs stepwise treatments for different ailments.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Olusegun F. and Adio, "Mobile-Based Knowledge Management System for 'Ifa': An African Traditional Oracle," 2010

<sup>24</sup> Bernard E. Owumi, and Yusuf B. Okewole, "Ifa Therapeutic Practices among Yoruba People in Oyo State, Nigeria. Pg: 140

<sup>25</sup> Akin-Otiko, Akinmayowa. "Ifá Divination: A Method of Diagnosing and Treating Chronic Illnesses/Àmódi among Yoruba People. 2023: pg; 239-240

<sup>26</sup> Bernard E. Owumi, and Yusuf B. Okewole, "Ifa Therapeutic Practices among Yoruba People in Oyo State, Nigeria. Pg: 142

Before treatment begins, Ifá patients undergo a healing process to obtain an accurate diagnosis. This diagnostic process is crucial because the Yoruba believe that illnesses can have either spiritual or natural causes. Any illness believed to be caused by spiritual factors requires several stages of consultation to determine the appropriate remedy. In contrast, ailments caused by natural environmental factors are typically treated with herbal medicines or ointments prepared from ingredients such as shea butter and palm oil, which provide immediate relief.

The use of natural herbs and ointments derived from the Ọ̀dù Ifá not only validates the effectiveness of traditional healing practices but also links them to modern scientific approaches to medicine. In present-day Nigeria, traditional medicine remains highly relevant for treating various forms of illness and has been integrated into modern healthcare systems. Many Nigerians continue to rely on traditional remedies for chronic conditions. While traditional medicine remains especially popular in rural areas, urban populations also make significant use of complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) for conditions like hypertension, diabetes, and sickle cell disease.<sup>27</sup>

Nigeria's health care system increasingly recognizes the value of these practices, and significant efforts have been made to integrate traditional medicine into modern clinical settings. Nigeria's health authorities have supported initiatives aimed at improving collaboration between herbal medicine practitioners and conventional health care providers. The government has also worked to establish formal policies and regulations to guide traditional health practices, as well as training health professionals in both conventional and traditional medicine approaches. Despite the influence of foreign influences, particularly Western culture and medicine, Ifá divination for healing continues to thrive in Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

Ifá divination system can be classified as a body of knowledge functioning as a complex device used to address client problems. Just as a telecommunications device or a computer requires an operator, the Ifá divination system requires the expertise of a trained practitioner—the Babaláwo (Ifá priest)—who interprets the messages of Ọ̀rúnmilà for the client. The Babaláwo could therefore be seen as an intermediary or guide who helps convey the message of the patrons to Ifa or navigate the divination process to resolve patron challenges. Within this framework, the Ọ̀dù Ifá functions as an inference engine, the *ese* (poems) serves as the knowledge base, and the Ọ̀pọ̀n Ifá (divination tray) acts as the display board on which Babaláwo conducts consultations.

In conclusion, this paper has provided an extensive explanation of the Ifá divination system in Yorubaland, tracing its origins and affirming its authenticity as a key aspect of Yoruba knowledge creation. Additionally, the study explored the parallels between Ifá divination and modern scientific methodologies. Although not fully developed in the context of contemporary technology, the relevance of Ifá to technological and scientific advancement is profound, particularly in its application to health, communication, and knowledge systems.

### **Bibliography**

Abimbola, W. (n.d.). The bag of wisdom: Osun and the origins of the Ifa divination.

Adedeji, F. (n.d.). Re-examining the musical legacies in Yoruba Ifa literary corpus. Department of Music, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

---

<sup>27</sup> Pal, Sanjoy K., and Isa U. Lawal. "Current Status and Future of Traditional, Complementary and Integrative Medicine in Nigeria." *Tropical Journal of Natural Product Research* 7, no. 12 (December 2023):5405

- Adegbola, E. A. A. (1976). Ifa and Christianity in the Yoruba: A study of symbiosis and development of Yoruba Christology, 1890–1940 (Doctoral dissertation). University of Bristol.
- Akin-Otiko, A. (2023). Ifá divination: A method of diagnosing and treating chronic illnesses/Àmódi among Yoruba people. *Journal Title*, 239–240.
- Alamu, F. O., et al. (2013). Title of the article. *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Research*, 1(6), 525–526.
- Bascom, W. (1969). Ifa divination: Communication between gods and men in West Africa. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Drewal, H. J., Pemberton III, J., & Abiodun, R. (1989). Yoruba: Nine centuries of African art and thought. New York: Center for African Art in association with H. N. Abrams.
- Fasanya, A. (n.d.). The original religion of the Yorubas. Retrieved from <https://laits.utexas.edu/africa/2004/database/fasanya.html>.
- Kalilu, R. O., & Kalilu, R. O. (1992). Between tradition and record: A search for the legendary woodcarver Ooyo. *Journal Title*, 56.
- Law, R. (1984). How truly traditional is our traditional history? The case of Samuel Johnson and the recording of the Yoruba oral tradition. *History in Africa*, 11, 23–45.
- Lijadu, E. M. (1896). Ifa ni Pa. (Original work published in 1896).
- Olu-Osayomi, O. (2017). Dramatic aspect of Ese Ifa in Yorubaland. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, 5(10), 12–15.
- Oluwayemisi, A. O. (2017). The metaphysical and epistemological relevance of Ifa corpus. *Journal Title*, 13.
- Opogoso, O. I., & Akande, A. O. (2011). Ifa divination trays from Isale-Oyo. *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos*, 21, 39–56.
- Owumi, B. E., & Okewole, Y. B. (2017). Ifa therapeutic practices among Yoruba people in the Ikerian region, Oyo State, Nigeria. *The Nigerian Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 15(2), 139–143.
- Pal, S. K., & Lawal, I. U. (2023). Current status and future of traditional, complementary and integrative medicine in Nigeria. *Tropical Journal of Natural Product Research*, 7(12), 405.
- Pogoso, O. I., & Akande, A. O. (2011). Ifa divination trays from Isale-Oyo. *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos*, 21, 39.
- Ryder, A. F. C. (1960). Missionary activity in the Kingdom of Warri to the early nineteenth century. *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2(1), 1–26.
- Samuel Johnson. (1921). The history of the Yorubas: From the earliest to the beginning of the British Protectorate (O. Johnson, Ed.). London: Routledge.



Rom Kalilu, R. O., & Kalilu, R. O. (1992). Between tradition and record: A search for the legendary woodcarver Ofooyo. *Journal Title*, 56.

### **Authors' Biography**

#### **1. Kolawole K. Olojo-Kosoko**

Kolawole K. Olojo-Kosoko was born into Kosoko Royal family of Lagos. He graduated from the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, specializing in Painting. The quality of his works speaks for itself: he is a visionary and a perfectionist, very analytical in his expressions, people-oriented and culture-centered. He has participated in many art exhibitions. In addition, he has exhibited in many trade fairs in various States of the Federation. Presently, he is a lecturer at the Department of Art and Industrial Design, Lagos State Polytechnic, Ikorodu. He is Chairman of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA, Lagos State Chapter). Also, he is a member of the Universal Studios of Art. His works include Painting, Textile Design, Sculpture, Photography.

#### **2. Oni Akinsoji Francis**

I was born in Akinmoorin, Oyo State, Nigeria, in the early 1980s. I graduated from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, in 2009 and later earned a Master of Arts degree in African Visual Art History from the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan. I have taught Art History and Graphics at both the National Diploma (ND) and Higher National Diploma (HND) levels at the former Lagos State Polytechnic, now Lagos State University of Science and Technology, Ikorodu, Lagos. I am currently pursuing a PhD in Art History at Binghamton University, United States, with a focus on Yoruba ritual art, contemporary art, and art appreciation.