Ifá in Yorùbá Thought System

Omotade Adegbindin
To the memory of
Professor Kolawole Aderemi Adio Olu-Owolabi
my teacher, my priest, a man with a will of iron
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Series Editor’s Foreword

The Carolina Academic Press African World Series, inaugurated in 2010, offers significant new works in the field of African and Black World studies. The series provides scholarly and educational texts that can serve both as reference works and as readers in college classes.

Studies in the series are anchored in the existing humanistic and the social scientific traditions. Their goal, however, is the identification and elaboration of the strategic place of Africa and its Diaspora in a shifting global world. More specifically, the studies will address gaps and larger needs in the developing scholarship on Africa and the Black World.

The series intends to fill gaps in areas such as African politics, history, law, religion, culture, sociology, literature, philosophy, visual arts, art history, geography, language, health, and social welfare. Given the complex nature of Africa and its Diaspora, and the constantly shifting perspectives prompted by globalization, the series also meets a vital need for scholarship connecting knowledge with events and practices. Reflecting the fact that life in Africa continues to change, especially in the political arena, the series explores issues emanating from racial and ethnic identities, particularly those connected with the ongoing mobilization of ethnic minorities for inclusion and representation.

Toyin Falola
University of Texas at Austin
Acknowledgments

I am most grateful to Africa’s most prominent historian and cultural icon, Professor Toyin Falola, for reasons far too numerous to mention. Like Òpíílîkî in Ìrosùn Méji who thinks less of his own pursuit and serves others selflessly, Professor Falola worked tirelessly to ensure the publication of this book. I thank him immensely for his interest in me and his generosity, which includes providing me with good books on every visit to Nigeria. You shall remain stronger than cudgels torn from the armpits of the baobab!

I express my profound gratitude to Professor Adedotun Ogundeji of the Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan, whose vision and keen insights so dramatically helped this book. I thank him for his useful suggestions and for staying with me throughout the process of preparing the manuscript. I appreciate his humility and thank him for going to the field to provide some useful photographs for this project. Above all, I thank him for giving me the opportunity to have a university education.

In my department, I thank Professor Adebola Babatunde Ekanola, a forthright teacher, who was involved with signing of certain papers at the beginning of this project. Anything you touch becomes gold! I thank Dr. Francis Offor and Dr. Isaac Ukpokolo for their brave encouragement all the time. I enjoy the unstinting support of Dr. Bolatito Lanre-Abass, Mrs. Abosede Ipadeola, Dr. Adeshina Afolayan, Dr. Chris Agulanna, Dr. Amaechi Udefi and Professor Olatunji Oyeshile. I appreciate the interest which Ademola Lawal and Adetola Layode took in the progress of this work. I am indebted to Professor Dipo Irele who first gave me the opportunity to work on Ifá and for sharing with me his own insights into other aspects of Yorùbá oral tradition. My thanks also go to the non-academic staff of the Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan.

Outside my department, I thank Professor Ademola Dasylva and Professor Ayo Kehinde of the Department of English for their encouragement. I appre-
ciate the wonderful support of Professor Solomon Oyetade and Professor Ar-}
{inepe Adejumo of the Department of Linguistics and African Languages, Dr.}
{J.K. Ayantayo of the Department of Religious Studies and Dr. C.O. Jegede of}
{the Institute of African Studies. I thank Dr. A.S. Ajala and Dr. Chinyere}
{Ukpokolo of the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology whose tough}
{questions and lively discussion on Ifá system helped in shaping this work. I}
{thank Dr. Kazeem Omofoyewa of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Stud-
{ies, Dr. Tunde Awosanmi of the Department of Theatre Arts, Dr. Nike Akinjobi}
{and Dr. Adeshina Sunday of the Department of English, for their friendship.}
{I must express my profound gratitude to Dr. Bamidele Iromidayo Olu-Owolabi}
{of the Department of Chemistry for her genuine concern, generous hospitality,
{kindness and support. I am indebted to the entire staff of the Institute of African}
{Studies, University of Ibadan, especially Mrs. E.M. Emoekpeire who gave me}
{access to a number of invaluable materials for this research.}

Words cannot express my gratitude to Shennette Garrett-Scott of the De-
{partment of History, Case Western Reserve University, Ohio, who read the}
{first draft of this book with a keen editorial eye and provided helpful comments.}
{I must thank Tim Colton of Carolina Academic Press, Durham, for his patience}
{and useful suggestions at the final stage of this project. My warmest regards}
{go to Gbadega Adedapo, Managing Director of Rasmed Publications, Nigeria,}
{for his genuine concern and encouragement towards the completion of this}
{book. I thank my typist, Yemi Balogun, for her tireless work on the first draft.}
{I owe a special debt to members of the Association of Nigeria Theatre Prac-
{tioners, Ogun State Chapter, especially Gbenga Adebayo, for their support.}
{I am happy to thank those who shared with me the thoughts of publishing this}
{book: Adekunle Adeyemi of the Department of Accountancy, Banking and Fi-
{nance, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Bature Tukur Magazi,}
{Kwabena Asumang, Joan Sansavoir, Keighley Bass, Kunle Fajuyigbe, Emile}
{Shirley, Ayobami Adeleye, Mufutau Alade Adewale, Olakiitan Omotosho and}
{Oyeronke Sanusi for her love and concern.}

I thank Chief Olalere Akano and Chief Osuolale Ifabunmi who corroborated
{the myths of origin of Ifá with rare flair and lucidity. My profound gratitude}
{goes to Mr. Olusegun Ogundele and Chief Olanipekun Fakayode for their tire-
{less assistance during this research. I am particularly indebted to these Ifá}
{priests for setting me straight on the esoteric subject of Yorùbá mythological}
{figures and letting me into the rich repertoire of Ifá verses that enrich the main}
{thrust of this project.}

I thank my brother, Nurudeen Adekunle Raji of the Department of Mechanical
{Engineering, Lagos State University, Ojo, who has always given me his
full support. Finally, this research would not have been completed without the constant support and tolerance of my wife, Tawa, and the children, especially my daughter, Adetutu, who always kept my company to the field for information and photographs. They have endured my journey through stress, euphoria and aggravation. I am grateful to them.

I must say that the list here does not suggest that those individuals whose names are mentioned are the only ones who have contributed in one way or the other to the realisation of this book.
Introduction

The purpose of this work is to show that *Ifá*, an oral text of the Yorùbá, is philosophical. I will establish this by examining its philosophical significance in the Yorùbá thought system. However, since different scholars on Yorùbá studies have used the term “Yorùbá” in different ways, it is illuminating that we first and foremost state what we mean by the term in this study.

In his well-read book, *Yorùbá Culture: A Geographical Analysis*, Afolabi Ojo uses the term “Yorùbá Proper” to designate only the Oyos.¹ By implication, Ojo’s assertion conveys the erroneous idea that “the Ifes, Owus, Egbas, Ijebus, Ondos, Ekitis . . . are mere sub-tribes.”² Acknowledging “the cultural impact of religious headquarters,”³ Remi Obateru challenges the exclusion by Ojo of the Ife community, in particular, from his conception of “Yorùbá Proper.” He shows the error in Ojo’s thesis of “Yorùbá Proper” by pointing out that:

All Yorùbá communities . . . regard Ife as their mother city—a city from where they fanned out in all directions to their present territories, taking ‘Ife Culture’ with them. Yorùbá history and archaeological investigation confirm this. If Ife is the point of dispersion, it is difficult to justify the description of a migrant sub-group (the Oyos) as the only Yorùbá Proper.⁴

Obateru further explains that the designation of “Yorùbá Proper” to only the Oyos arose from the politico-military preeminence that the Oyo kingdom once enjoyed, which no doubt “profoundly enhanced the status of Oyo Kingdom and the Alafin (King of Oyo) at the expense of the other Yorùbá kingdoms and their Obas (Kings).”⁵ Thus, Obateru believes that Ojo’s thesis of “Yorùbá Proper” should also seriously consider the indispensability of those communities he calls “sub-tribes” within a more accurate conception of “Yorùbá Proper.” The Oyos often claim the semantic connotations of the term “Yorùbá” originated from their region and, as such, have used this as a basis to regard themselves as “Yorùbá proper.”⁶ However, some scholars have described ef-
forts to monopolize the term as “an arrogant behaviour without any historical justification,” and that the term “Yorùbá” “belongs to all the Yorùbá-speaking tribes with their different dialects.” It bears noting, therefore, that our use of the term “Yorùbá” in this study is coterminous with J. A. Atanda’s view that:

The bulk of the Yorùbá people are found in the south-western part of modern Nigeria, where they form one of the leading ethnic groups. Specifically, they effectively occupy the whole of Ogun, Ondo, Oyo and Lagos States and substantial part of Kwara State in the country. A substantial number of the Yorùbá people also inhabit the south-western part of the Republic of Benin (i.e. former Dahomey) which is contiguous with the area the people occupy in Nigeria. All these areas enumerated in Nigeria and in the Benin Republic formed what was known as the Yorùbá country before the European partition of Africa and the accompanying European rule. This Yorùbá country lies roughly between latitudes 6° and 9° North and longitudes 2°30’ and 6°30’ East. Its area is about 181,300 square kilometers. Beyond this area, pockets of Yorùbá population are found in other parts of Nigeria and in some other West African countries. Similar pockets of their population, largely offshoots from their West African base, are also found across the Atlantic, as far afield as the Caribbean and South America, particularly in Cuba and in Brazil.

The need to examine the philosophical significance of Ifá in the Yorùbá thought system is motivated by a number of reasons. One of these reasons is highlighted by Barry Hallen who believes that, for a long time, academic philosophers have overtly expressed their indignation against “the suggestion that an anonymous corpus of writings that included myths, legends, poetry, song, and proverbs was truly worthy of the title ‘philosophy.’” Another reason that informed this study is that Ifá occupies an important position in Yorùbá oral tradition, in part because “the general sanctions behind Yorùbá religion operate to maintain faith in the Ifá system.” The tone of these two reasons, one might suspect, is perhaps the basis for the suggestion by some scholars (philosophers included) that Ifá is nothing more than a religious and mythic discourse that is not worthy of the title “philosophy.” More importantly, this study is motivated by existing studies on Ifá which show a dearth of a comprehensive analysis of the philosophical relevance of the Ifá literary corpus.

Most renowned scholars of Ifá, such as E.M. Lijadu, William Bascom, J. D. Clarke, Raymond Prince, and Wande Abimbola, have no doubt done an impressive job documenting and characterizing Ifá oral literature. However, their studies have presented ethnological discussions and structural analysis
of Ifá that convey the impression that Ifá is a characteristic social institution with only religious, ethnographical, and sociological significance. In other words, their studies are silent on the philosophical import of the Ifá corpus. The failure of these scholars to explore the philosophical dimensions of Ifá can be imputed to their “professional” interpretation of Ifá from the point of view of social anthropology. Thus, one is not surprised to find out that William Bascom’s most voluminous work on Ifá is nothing other than “an emphasis ... on the Yorùbá ... on the method of divination, the manner in which it ‘works’ and the Ifá verses that are of such fundamental importance to the entire system of divination.” It should be added that Bascom’s finest papers on Ifá are, like the work of J.D. Clarke, a distillation of his most voluminous works. They all are a reflection of the socio-anthropological interpretation of Ifá.

E. M. Lijadu, one of the earliest Christian catechists, is also one of the most cited individuals who have published on Ifá. Inspired by the canon of his faith, Lijadu sees Ifá as a religion whose mode of worship should be of great interest to Christians and be compared with the Christian religion with a view to winning converts into the Christian faith. Raymond Prince, also one of the earliest scholars of Ifá, regards Ifá as a religious text, though his emphasis is on “the management of psychiatric disorder by Yorùbá traditional healers.” Bolaji Idowu, a notable scholar in the field of religious studies, also discusses Ifá from the standpoint of Yorùbá religion. His work is a demonstration of the monotheistic nature of the Yorùbá religion, despite the fact that this conception is attenuated by the several gods or deities that the Yorùbá worship. In clear terms, Idowu’s work, like the studies carried out by Lijadu and Prince, is uncritical and only accentuates “the widespread, but mistaken belief that Africans are religious in all things.”

For his part, Wande Abimbola, conveniently the foremost African scholar of Ifá, acknowledges that Ifá is a repository of Yorùbá philosophy, but there is no evidence of the critical spirit of philosophy in any of his published studies. This means that his studies on Ifá lack, among others, what Olusegun Oladipo calls “conceptual sophistication” which could have given his studies some philosophical texture. It must be stressed, however, that Abimbola seems to recognize the ages-long affiliation of wisdom to the enterprise of philosophy.

I admit here that a number of scholars in the field of philosophy have, bringing with them a vocabulary and theoretical apparatus of the enterprise, attempted to show that Ifá should be regarded as a philosophical text. For instance, Sophie Oluwole, to demonstrate that some African literary pieces qualify as specimens of “strict” philosophy, delves into two Ifá verses, namely, Òyěkú Méjì and Òwónrín Méjì. She argues that the possibility of extracting a “thesis” and an “argument” from each of these verses points to the fact that
Ifá is philosophical in the real sense of the word. Her work is also commendable because she seems to have succeeded in discerning between mere ethnological and structural analysis and what passes muster as critical analysis of the Ifá literary corpus. However, when one considers several volumes of remonstrative reportage on the non-philosophical nature of such mythic and religious discourses as Ifá, Oluwole’s reliance on two verses (of the 256 Odùs, with their numerous verses that the system permits) to prove her point offers a fragmentary and tentative treatment of Ifá. Her work seems to allege an uncritical appraisal of Yorùbá thought system. Thus, to account for a clear-cut improvement upon Oluwole’s work, I delve into virtually all the sixteen principal odù of Ifá and a considerable number of sub-odus to establish the philosophical significance of Ifá.

Another work that underscores the justification for this study is Olufemi Taiwo’s article “Ifá: An Account of a Divination System and Some Concluding Epistemological Questions.” On the surface, one might be lured to commend the article as a decisive reflection on the epistemological questions in Ifá system. A closer look at Taiwo’s work will reveal, however, that he has not been able to analyse the epistemological perspective of Ifá beyond what Bascom, from the point of view of social anthropology, did in “The Sanctions of Ifá Divination” over six decades ago. Even if Taiwo’s work is regarded as a work in epistemology that provides “some way of grasping the philosophy of Ifá and the philosophical puzzles that it elicits,” we can argue that it is inexhaustive. Of course, epistemological questions in Ifá are not restricted to only the process of divination as Taiwo’s work seems to suggest.

This work is divided into nine chapters. In Chapter One, I look at the meaning and essence of philosophy with a view to showing the historical development of the enterprise and how the term “philosophy” has undergone several mutations in its historical periods. In this chapter, I show that even the pre-Ionian poets, Homer and Hesiod, had an imperceptible understanding of philosophy and also mention that Plato and Aristotle use the primitive definition of “sophia” as either cleverness or skill in handicraft or art or as general knowledge of or expert acquaintance with a thing. The attempt in this chapter is mainly to show how the term philosophy was conceived during its inauguration in the intellectual tradition of the ancient era and how it has progressively gone through a lot of mutations in its historical periods.

In Chapter Two, I examine Eurocentrism and its conceptual extremes of philosophy and argue that philosophy is the prerogative of every individual, every culture. I question the logic of “the conventional insinuation that Africans must subject themselves to the tutelage of the Westerner because their own tradition is inferior and anti-developmental.”
Chapter Three avails us the opportunity to settle the controversy surrounding the meaning of *Ifá*: whether *Ifá* and Ọ̀rúnmìlà can be used interchangeably to refer to the Yorùbá deity of wisdom or not. Though a number of scholars, like Bascom and Abimbola, endorse the view that *Ifá* and Ọ̀rúnmìlà are interchangeable, their studies fail to produce textual evidence from the corpus in support of their claim. Finally, I endeavour to explicate how philosophical thinking, with the rise of modern science, began to lose its claim on wisdom as its defining characteristic and how *Ifá* emphasizes the ideal of wisdom and its ages-long affiliation to philosophy.

In Chapter Four, I examine the idea of Yorùbá ontology and show that cosmology and the concept of man are the basic components of the phenomenon. Under Yorùbá cosmology, I look at philosophical issues surrounding the concepts of Supreme Being (Olódùmarè) and spirits or divinities. I jettison the idea that the Yorùbá religion is polytheistic, despite the fact that this position seems to be attenuated by the several gods that the Yorùbá worship. I substantiate this position by rejecting the mechanistic view of the world that, from the standpoint of *Ifá*, runs contrary to the Yorùbá teleological view that Olódùmaré (God) is the creator of the universe. I also show how the Yorùbá conception of the universe—as that which is governed by two opposing forces, good and evil—evokes the classical Aristotelian teleological view of the world. I look at the Yorùbá concept of man, which engenders a discussion of the Yorùbá idea of human destiny. I show the different ways through which human destiny can be altered and how certain *Ifá* verses cast doubt on the fatalistic interpretation of *Orí* (destiny), arguing that such an interpretation does not accord with the deterministic attitude of the Yorùbá towards life.

In Chapter Five, I look at the nature and scope of epistemology, showing that knowledge is a universal phenomenon. I look at issues surrounding the admission of the existence of African epistemology and argue, against the provincial outlook of the advocates of a unique “mode of knowing,” that there are universally valid criteria of knowledge that allow people in different societies and cultures to share their views and experiences. I also delve into *Ifá* system and consider the possibility of epistemological relativism in Yorùbá epistemic system that shows that the paradigm of knowledge among the Yorùbá “stands in direct opposition to Western belief in the unity of nature and the attendant search for absolute certainty.”

In Chapter Six, I attempt a definition of ethics and examine the plausibility of Nietzsche’s claim that man is moral because of his weakness to challenge the dictates of his society. I examine the position of *Ifá* on whether religion is the basis of morality or not. I also look at what constitutes the good life from the standpoint of *Ifá*. 
In Chapter Seven, I question the authoritarian nature of African gerontocratic society, which some thinkers have claimed is responsible for lack of sustained curiosity and interest in change in Africa. I show in Ifá system how the Yorùbá idea of gerontocracy allows the individual to express himself in society, contrary to the assumption that only the aged occupy critical spheres in society.

In Chapter Eight, I examine how Ifá deals with the problem of written-oral dichotomy that, among others, is responsible for the intransigent relationship that exists between the votaries of the two dominant schools in African philosophy, namely, the traditionalists and the universalists. I show that this intransigent relationship persists between the traditionalists and the insistent champions of literacy (the universalists) because the two groups have failed to recognize the need to furnish a paradigm of interaction or dialogue between the “oral” projects of the traditionalists and the “written” projects of the universalists. I show how Ifá rejects the oral/written dichotomy and explicates that this dichotomy is occasioned by provincial and parochial conceptions of philosophy on the part of the traditionalists and the universalists respectively.

Finally, in Chapter Nine, I argue that socio-political development has continued to elude Africa due to the persistence of the radical disjuncture in value orientation between the citizens and the leaders. I show how Ifá proposes a way of harmonizing the citizens and the state in order to engender meaningful developmental projects in Africa.

Notes
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 78.
7. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 1.
23. Ibid., 5-11.
29. Ibid., 105.