

# *Ifá* in Yorùbá Thought System

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*To the memory of  
Professor Kolawole Aderemi Adio Olu-Owolabi  
my teacher, my priest, a man with a will of iron*

# Contents

Series Editor's Foreword	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	xvii
Chapter One · The Meaning and Essence of Philosophy	3
Chapter Two · On the Existence of African Philosophy	25
Chapter Three · Philosophy as Wisdom: The <i>Ifá</i> Example	49
Chapter Four · Ontology in <i>Ifá</i> Corpus	89
Chapter Five · Epistemology in <i>Ifá</i> Corpus	113
Chapter Six · Ethics in <i>Ifá</i> Corpus	137
Chapter Seven · <i>Ifá</i> and the Problem of Gerontocracy in Africa	159
Chapter Eight · <i>Ifá</i> and the Consequences of Literacy	177
Chapter Nine · <i>Ifá</i> and the Development Crisis in Africa	197
Bibliography	217
About the Author	231
Index	233

## 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

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> By implication, Ojo’s assertion conveys the erroneous idea that “the Ifes, Owus, Egbas, Ijebus, Ondos, Ekitis . . . are mere sub-tribes.”<sup>2</sup> Acknowledging “the cultural impact of religious headquarters,”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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).”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> However, some scholars have described ef-

forts to monopolize the term as “an arrogant behaviour without any historical justification,”<sup>7</sup> and that the term “Yorùbá” “belongs to all the Yorùbá-speaking tribes with their different dialects.”<sup>8</sup> 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 off-shoots 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.’”<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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*.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> Bolaji Idowu, a notable scholar in the field of religious studies, also discusses *Ifá* from the standpoint of Yorùbá religion.<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> It must be stressed, however, that Abimbola seems to recognize the ages-long affiliation of wisdom to the enterprise of philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

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, *Ọ̀yèkú Mèjì* and *Ọ̀wónnrín Mèjì*.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> However, when one considers several volumes of re-monstrative reportage on the non-philosophical nature of such mythic and religious discourses as *Ifá*, Oluwolé'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 Oluwolé'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."<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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."<sup>28</sup>

Chapter Three avails us the opportunity to settle the controversy surrounding the meaning of *Ifá*: whether *Ifá* and *Òrúnmilà* 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 *Òrúnmilà* 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 *Olódùmarè* (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 *Ori* (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.”<sup>29</sup>

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

1. Afolabi Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis* (London: University of London Press, 1966), 18.
2. Remi K. Obateru, “Yoruba Proper: A Critique,” *Nigeria Magazine*, 107-109 (1971): 77.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 78.
6. Timothy A. Awoniyi, “The Word Yoruba,” *Nigeria Magazine* 134-135 (1981): 106.
7. Ibid.
8. O. Akija, “The Yoruba-Speaking Tribes.” In *Yoruba News*, Issue 15 (1932), quoted in T. A. Awoniyi, “The Word Yoruba,” *Nigeria Magazine* 134-135 (1981): 106.
9. J. A. Atanda, “The Yoruba People: their Origin, Culture and Civilization,” in O. O. Olatunji, ed., *The Yoruba: History, Culture, and Language* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1996), 4.
10. Barry Hallen, *A Short History of African Philosophy*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 11.

11. William Bascom, "The Sanctions of Ifa Divination," *The Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 71, No. 1&2 (1941): 45.
12. See E. M. Lijadu, *Ifá: Ìmòlẹ̀ Rẹ̀ Tí Se Ìsìn Ní Ilẹ̀ Yorùbá* (Exeter: James Townsend and Sons, 1923); William Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); J. D. Clarke, "Ifa Divination," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 69, No. 2 (1939); Raymond Prince, *Ifa: Yoruba Divination and Sacrifice* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1964); Wande Abimbola, *Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1976).
13. *Ibid.*, 1.
14. See Bascom, "The Sanctions of Ifa Divination," 43-54; William Bascom, "The Relationship of Yoruba Folklore to Divining," *The Journal of American Folklore* 56, No. 220 (1943): 127-131; William Bascom, "Two Forms of Afro-Cuban Divination," *Tax: Acculturation in the Americas* 2 (1952): 169-179; J. D. Clarke, "Ifa Divination," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 69, No. 2 (1939): 235-256.
15. E. M. Lijadu, *Ifá: Ìmòlẹ̀ Rẹ̀ Tí Se Ìsìn Ní Ilẹ̀ Yorùbá* (Exeter: James Townsend and Sons, 1923), v.
16. Raymond Prince, *Ifa: Yoruba Divination and Sacrifice* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1964), 1.
17. See Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962).
18. Olusegun Oladipo, "An African Conception of Reality: A Philosophical Analysis," Ph.D. Thesis, University of Ibadan, 1988, 16.
19. See Wande Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá* (Niamey: UNESCO, 1975), 29-39.
20. Oladipo, "An African Conception of Reality," 4.
21. See Wande Abimbola, *Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1976), vi.
22. Sophie B. Oluwole, "African Philosophy as Illustrated in Ifa Corpus," *Ìmòdòye: Journal of African Philosophy* 2, No. 2 (1996), 1.
23. *Ibid.*, 5-11.
24. See Olufemi Taiwo, "Ifa: An Account of a Divination System and Some Concluding Epistemological Questions," in Kwasi Wiredu, ed., *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 304-312.
25. See Bascom, "The Sanctions of Ifa Divination," 44-53.
26. Taiwo, "Ifa: An Account of a Divination System," 304.
27. V. G. Childe, *Society and Knowledge* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956), 107.
28. Sophie B. Oluwole, *Philosophy and Oral Tradition* (Lagos: African Research and Konsultancy (ARK), 1999), 113.
29. *Ibid.*, 105.