

Yorubas' Ifa System and Human Destiny: An Oral Narrative Account

By Enaikele, M. D. and A.T. Adeleke

ABSTRACT

Ifa mythology is one of the most well-known African divination systems and is unique to the Yoruba people. Ifa provides explanations for why humans have different destinies. This study explores the oral tradition of Ifa mythology and how its emphasis on human destiny has come to enact itself in the Yoruba people's beliefs and behavioural responses, as expressed in rituals performed by Ifa priests. The study was conducted during the Ifa festival at Osogbo. Six officiating priests at the festival were purposively selected as key informants. Nine worshippers were also interviewed. Using participant observation methods, the study's findings reveal expository and ostensive views of reality using a narrative approach to present the Ifa mythological account of Yoruba world view of human destiny. Ifa reveals hidden facts about the past, present, and future. It also provides explanations and solutions to calamities, anxieties, uncertainties, health challenges, material well-being, and the fulfilment of destiny. Ifa mythology preserves a way of life of a people that projects Africa in all its dimensions of myth, customs, traditions, history, beliefs, heritage, and rituals.

Key Words: Ifa mythology, human destiny, Yoruba, Southwestern Nigeria, oral tradition

INTRODUCTION

Sociologists and anthropologists are commonly faced with the problem of providing an all-encompassing definition of human destiny. The challenge is that some definitions may be desirable for sociologists and anthropologists, but not acceptable to philosophers and theologians. Despite this, sociologists and anthropologists agree that the concept of human destiny is generally expressed through myth. All cultures create myths. Myths express human imagination in a rich diversity of ways by creating a world view. They are expressed in oral and literary traditions and these traditions are important means of preserving and transmitting culture, traditions, values, and belief systems. Drawing from anthropology, the mythical conception of "God", human life, death, and destiny reveal a striking similarity across cultures (Oke, 2004). This raises a fundamental question of how human beings across cultures have developed a common mythical concep-

tion of "God", human life, death, and destiny in such a way that gives intelligibility and meaning to the world.

Oke (2004) notes that intelligibility, logical thinking, explanation, and meaning of the metaphysical world were visibly present in the Neanderthal stage of human evolution. At that stage, the metaphysical was dominated by a search for explanation and meaning of the abstract force and mystery called "destiny" that influences human life. Belief in the metaphysical explanation of human destiny may have given rise to religion and inspired the worship of God. Humans have tried to communicate with a Supernatural Being to influence metaphysical and spiritual forces in the course of their struggle for survival, amidst often unfriendly militating forces of nature. He concludes that belief in God is evident throughout the history of humankind.

Taylor (1983) illustrates further that metaphysical conception of human destiny is in essence an attempt to rationalise the mysteries of the human experience in

one's journey through life. It explains the supernatural world and the meaning with which people construct their reality of either success or failure and life's contradictions. That destiny accounts for one's circumstances of birth, social position, health, and successful achievement or failure in life. It provides individuals with practical guidelines and addresses the central question of human existence. Destiny takes us beyond the physical to the realm of the supernatural, and is deeply rooted in the cosmic and spirituality of human existence. As with religions the world over, indigenous African religions have used the notion of destiny to outline the purpose of individuals on earth (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979).

YORUBA OVERVIEW

The Yoruba are prominently found in Southwestern Nigeria, comprising Osun, Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti and Lagos states. They are also found in parts of Kwara and Kogi states in the Northcentral region. Apart from Nigeria, the Yoruba diaspora can be found in neighbouring West African countries like the Republic of Benin and Togo, in South America, particularly Brazil, and in some Caribbean countries like Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, where the Yoruba were forcibly taken to during the 17th and 18th century trans-Atlantic slave trade (Elebuibon 2004).

The Yoruba people have a unique history, myth, folklore, culture, and language. Studies of the world view of human destiny among the Yoruba reveal that they have a complex conception of human destiny built around Ifa mythology. Yoruba consult Ifa divinities in order to determine hidden facts about the destiny of a new born baby; how much happiness or unhappiness, prosperity or misery, fortune or misfortune a person will have in his/her journey through life. But in recent times, these practices are fading, especially with the growing intolerance toward indigenous religions and traditional divination systems (Idowu, 1973). This is attributed in large part to centuries of

African cultural contact with western civilization and especially the influence of Christianity and Islam on Yoruba culture and traditions.

Christianity was first brought to Nigeria by Augustinian and Capuchin monks from Portugal. The first official mission in Yoruba land was in Badagry, a town outside of Lagos, where the Church of England established a Methodist church in 1842. Arabs from the north first brought Islam to Nigeria in the 11th Century and by the 16th Century it had gained prominent acceptance in northern Nigeria. In the 19th Century, Fulani reformists (followers of Uthman Dan Fodio) took Islam across the River Niger to the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, attempting to eradicate indigenous religions, including Ifa, and introduce Islamic culture and values (Ozigboh 1988). They described Ifa as primitive, idolatrous, and fetishistic (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979), and viewed it as a threat to the goals and ideals of Islam.

The experience of demonizing indigenous religions is not unique to Africa. In his book, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim provides a systematic expression of the term "primitive religion" to describe the religious beliefs and practices of Australian Aborigines, which, in context, are similar to indigenous African religions. He states that the religion is prehistoric—with the culture of the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic ages—even when available evidence for prehistoric religions was so limited as to render any meaningful construction, labelling, and speculative view of the religions (Oke, 2004). Largely perpetuated with obstinacy and dishonesty via academic and theological inventions, such views represent prejudice and racial thinking calculated to draw a distinction between western religions and indigenous religions.

Despite centuries of persecution, the Ifa divination system persists and was declared, in 2005, by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as an "endangered cultural heritage" that needed to be safeguarded from extinction (UNESCO, 2008). As a response, the World Oral Literature



Fig. 1: Map showing location of Osogbo in Osun state. Source: <http://www.satellitecitymaps.com/africa-map/nigeria-map/osun-state-map/osogbo-map/>. Retrieved November, 2017.



Fig.2: Map showing location of Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove. Source: <https://www.africanworldheritagesites.org/cultural-places/traditional-cultural-landscapes/osun-osogbo.html>. Retrieved November, 2017.

Project was established to inspire scholarly interest in exploring the “endangered oral tradition/cultural heritage” of indigenous peoples around the world (World Oral Literature Project, 2016). Oral tradition represents a unique expression of a people’s heritage and culture. So, the loss of oral tradition is invariably a loss of the social thought of a people. In an attempt to preserve Ifa mythology, this study explores and investigates the oral tradition of Ifa mythology built around human destiny and how this has come to enact itself in the

people’s thoughts, beliefs, and behavioural responses as expressed in rituals performed by Ifa priests.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study was carried out in Osogbo (Figure 1), the capital of Osun state in Southwestern Nigeria. According to oral history, the name Osogbo was coined from the mythical story of Oso-igbo, the “forest, or grove, of wizards” that lies along the bank of the Osun River. The river goddess of the Osun River has the ability to give children to barren women, and the power to heal the sick and afflicted. Today, Osogbo shares boundaries with major towns like Ikorun, Ilesha and Ede, is reputed as a major commercial and industrial city, and is famous for its annual Osun Osogbo Festival, held in August, which has attracted UNESCO World Heritage recognition.

The study was conducted during *Odun Ifa* (Ifa festival), an annual festival similar to inter-congregational thanksgiving harvest ceremonies. It is jointly celebrated among Ifa priests in the following indigenous communities: Isale-Osun, Ooke-Bale, Ita-Olokan, Igbonna, Oloba-Ile, and Oluode. The festival involves elaborate ceremonies and rituals for five days in order to initiate new *Babalawo* (Ifa priests); offer thanks for past blessings and protection; and to ask for future benevolent rewards for worshippers, especially for those seeking the fruit of the womb. The festival is celebrated with consultation of *Orunmila* (the divinity), with invocation of verses from the *Odu ifa* (Ifa literary corpus), ritual sacrifices, and breaking of kola-nut. The festival is usually an occasion for people with votive offerings (*Ebo eje*) to redeem their pledges to Ifa divination. Above all, the festival provides the means by which worshippers are brought together to share meals and for newly initiated Ifa priests to show appreciation by entertaining friends and well-wishers.

The sampling method used to select key informants was purposive. The six key informants were heads of

Ifa priests (*Agba Awo*), since they were the most qualified for interview purposes. Nine worshippers were also interviewed. These worshippers were those who came with votive offerings to redeem their pledges to Ifa divination.

We (the researchers) took part in the Ifa festival. Using participant observation, we were able to submerge ourselves into the social world of the Ifa adherents by showing intimate relationship as friends and as well-wishers, while maintaining our research objective. Data were gathered through observing and asking questions. Field notes of data were taken, in privacy, after each social contact. The interviews were conducted in the Yoruba language to enable informants to provide information without any inhibitions. As for the translation of information to English, we made efforts to strike a balance between literal and literary translation, even where some Yoruba words are so culturally bound that their usage has no English equivalent. Questions were not arranged in a fixed questionnaire. Answers to questions were gently probed to give the key informants a moment to reflect and gather their thoughts to elaborate on stereotypical answers so as to deepen the researchers understanding, especially to resolve doubt and ambiguity of concepts in the information given. In particular, preferences were given to answers focused on explanation of Ifa mythological account of human destiny, Ifa literary corpus, and how cosmological myth is expressed in ritual and ritualistic action of Ifa priests.

DISCUSSION

Ifa Mythological Account of Human Destiny

The Ifa mythology of human destiny is embedded in narrative oral tradition of the Yoruba. The religion largely came into existence and formed around the myths and mysteries of the Supreme Being (*Olodumare*), the universe, human creation, death, and destiny. The Yoruba people worship Olodumare through

the divination of *Orunmila Eleri-ipin*, meaning the witness to all human destiny. Ifa explains the mysteries of life, the creation of the universe, and the hidden facts about the past, present, and future. It explains the circumstances of birth and why humans all have different destinies that chart the course of one's life and why ritual sacrifice is pivotal to the fulfilment of human destiny.

According to Ifa mythology, there are two worlds: the earth (human world) and the sky heaven (spiritual world). Ifa rates Olodumare as the Supreme Being, who dwells in the sky heaven since time immemorial when the earth was still void and covered with endless pools of waters. Olodumare sent the *Orisa-nla* divinity to the world to create the earth with a snail-shell full of sand, a hen, a pigeon, and wall-gecko. The biblical account of the creation of the earth is not much different: "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. The earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (The Holy Bible, Genesis 1: 1-2).

Ifa, as a religion, evolved from the unique experiences of the Yoruba people, preserves their way of life, and projects attributes of their myths, traditions, heritage, and rituals. Ifa has no written literature of sacred scriptures. The behaviour of the worshippers is guided by internalisation of the religion's norms, values, taboos, and belief system. The religious belief and practices are learned orally by the worshippers through participation in the religious ceremonies.

Ifa uses sacrifice, purification, prayer, song, liturgy, poetic verse, literary corpus, festivals, and ceremonies to convey its cosmology. Ifa is believed to have the cosmic power of revealing the past, present, and future; and all matters connected with human destiny, expressed variously as *Ori*, *Akosedaye*, *Ayanmo*, *Akosile*, *Ipin*, *Akunleyan* and *Kadara*. Ifa expresses the will of Olodumare, Orunmila (the arch divinity and spiritual priest of Ifa) and other divinities. Essentially, Ifa is the



BY AYO ADEWUNMI

A group of Yoruba Dancers from Osun State, Nigeria in thier Traditional “Adire” attires.

foundation of all Yoruba divination systems.

The Ifa cosmological account of human destiny is not obscure. According to Ifa cosmological myth, before coming to this world, every human being is given a free-will to choose a destiny (*Ori*, *Ipin*, or *Akunleyan*). In Yoruba metaphysical thought, a human being is called *Eniyan* (meaning one who is given a free-will to make a choice). The literal meaning of the term *Ori* is the physical “head” but the cosmological meaning is “destiny”. The Yoruba philosophical interpretation of *Ori* means an individual’s personal God (*Eleda eni*) that guides, protects, and caters to the individual in his/her journey through life. This is expressed in the Yoruba philosophical thought as: *Ori ti o je eleda eni ni a ba ma bo nitori wipe oogun lo ni ojo iponju, ori eni lo ni ojo gbogbo*, meaning that *Ori*, the personal god of an individual, should be worshipped because charms are meant for trouble days alone but *Ori* takes charge of all days.

According to Ifa, *Ori* is intractably and spiritually

connected with human destiny. Ifa sees destiny as a parcel or package containing the sum total of both good and bad fortunes that *Ori* has allotted to each individual person. This is expressed in the Yoruba philosophical thought as: “*Ti ibi ti ire ni a wa ile aye*”. *Ori* is chosen at creation from among a large number of several *Oris*. Choosing *Ori* is done by kneeling down before *Olodumare* in the presence of *Orunmila* to bear witness to the type of *Ori* one has chosen. This is why *Orunmila* is often referred to as *Eleri-ipin* (witness to all human destiny).

At the departure from heaven to earth, one passes through the gate of heaven (*Ibode-orun*) and the water of forgetfulness (*Omi-igbagbe*). At the gate of heaven, one is expected to declare the content of his/her destiny before the heavenly gate keeper (*Onibode-orun*), where shadow (*Ojiji*) is conferred to make the individual a mortal being. Individual shadow is considered to be a human’s counterpart or companion wherever they

go while alive. Once the shadow is conferred, it is believed to be permanent and unalterable. In indigenous Ifa views the shadow has spiritual symbolism. This is why a spell or charm cast on one's shadow can affect the physical essence of the person.

While at the gate of heaven, where one is expected to declare the content of his/her destiny, evil and terrestrial forces mill around waiting to possess a child so as to be their ambassador on earth. This is where gullible children believed to be *Abiku* (a child that dies repeatedly shortly after birth) or *Emere* (a mischievous spirit incarnate in infants) who burden their parents by dying soon after birth, are possessed. These forces have the power to know the secret of life and they take advantage of this to lure or trick the innocent soul coming to earth. At this stage, the destiny of the child can be altered. This is why it is a taboo among the Yoruba for a pregnant woman to walk in the hot afternoon or late at night.

From the gate of heaven, one passes through *Omi-igbagbe* (water of forgetfulness). The cosmological symbolism of *Omi-igbagbe* is that the cry that a child makes at birth causes him/her to forget or lose memory of the destiny he/she has chosen. The choice of good or bad destiny (*Ori rere* or *Ori buruku*), therefore, determines how much happiness or unhappiness, success or failure, prosperity or misery a person will have on his/her journey through life. This implies that every encounter and experience of humans on earth is predestined and predetermined at the point where one chooses destiny.

Ifa cosmological interpretation of *Olorire* (one with good destiny) is the person who is fortunate or successful, while *Oloriburuku* (one with bad destiny) is the person who experiences a chain of misfortune or ill-luck. Another Ifa cosmological account of destiny is that even if one has chosen good destiny, his/her success depends on how well one can favourably appease or propitiate the cosmic, spiritual, and supernatural forces through ritual sacrifices (*Ebo*), prayers (*Adura*),



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Figure 3: Opele (divining chain).

offerings (*Itore anu*), good character (*Iwa*), having a good mind or good intentions towards others (*Inurere*), abstinence from adultery and fornication, and making charms and amulets to neutralise the machinations of witches and wizards.

Ifa Priests

Ifa priests use a divining chain called *Opele* [Figure 3], which is placed on a white piece of cloth and finger prints on the divination wooden tray called *Opon-ifa* [Figure 4]. Ifa priests undergo rigorous apprenticeship training to acquire the knowledge of the Ifa literary corpus [see Appendix 1]. There are sixteen volumes—each one containing sixteen chapters of *Odu-ifa* with a large number of verses. When combined, there are a total of 256 chapters that address calamities, health problems, anxieties, uncertainties, material well-being, and the fulfilment of destiny. Each of the sixteen chapters has extensive narrative verses, prose, and poems about Orunmila and other divinities. According to Ifa mythology, the symbolism is that sixteen is cosmologically associated with the sixteen cosmic/spiritual or celestial elders (*Awon agbaagba merindinlogun*). These elders express the mystery of celestial bodies controlling



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Figure 4: Opon-ifa (divination wooden tray).

human destiny and events around the world, which Ifa priests must acknowledge, pay homage to, and show respect for before casting the divination chain Opele. The symbolism of sixteen corroborates Awolalu and Dopamu's (1979) report of divinations worshipped among African cultures like Ga, Ewe, Fon, Tiv, Akan, Ashanti, Mende and Komo, where the number sixteen has a central and key cosmic/spiritual significance to their divination systems.

Ifa priests are also sometimes referred to as herbalists or doctors. With their spiritual powers, they are believed to possess the ability to read someone's destiny through his/her forehead, foot prints, and palm, even before consulting their divination chain and wooden tray. The lines on an individual's right or left palm are intractably and spiritually connected to his/her destiny. This is expressed in the Yoruba philosophical thought, *Ateleowo ni a ba ila, a ko mo eni to koo*, meaning that all human beings mysteriously discover lines on their palms but do not know the designer. With incantations (*Ofo*), an Ifa priest can gaze into the cosmic/spiritual realm through the lines on the palms to provide explanations for—and solutions to—a person's problem.

Ifa priests also render services connected with ad-

ministering treatment for ailments and serious health challenges that are spiritually connected. They provide charms and rings for protection, luck, love attraction, and for warding off misfortunes and evil. They are deeply knowledgeable about herbs, shrubs and trees, animals, and nature; and the various means by which these properties can be put to use to propitiate the supernatural, cosmic, and spiritual forces.

Ifa Ritual

Ifa mythological thought believes in the existence of witchcraft and the mystical power to tamper with one's good destiny. This relates to the meaning that Ifa symbolically attaches to charms, ritual sacrifices, and good character if one wants to succeed and have fulfilment of a good destiny in life. Cultural anthropologists seem to have no direct explanations for the non-empirical forces behind charms or the spiritual strength of charms other than the fact that perception about the efficacy of charms is socially constructed by the individual and definitions given to reality that justify the use of charms and the situations meant to be addressed. Charms are generally used to earn what cannot be obtained in an ordinary manner. We can, therefore, infer that making charms to achieve fulfilment of good destiny is not fetishistic as evangelists, preachers, and adherents of other religions (notably Christianity and Islam) tout.

Each culture and religion has a unique way by which people seek the influence of the supernatural and non-empirical forces through the use of different material objects to have protection or overcome evil machination. Roman Catholics, for example, believe in the spiritual power of the crucifix and rosary for protection. Muslims believe in the use of amulets and pocket-size versions of the Quran for protection. In Ifa mythology, if a man has chosen a bad destiny, with the necessary and appropriate rituals, prayers, offerings, and good character he/she can rectify it. Also, a person with good Ori (destiny) but with bad character

and obsessed with fornication and adultery can also have his/her good destiny turn bad. Other issues that can make good destiny turn bad include cursing (*Epe*), taking false oath before gods (*Ibura etan*), machination by evil ones—especially sorcerers, witches and wizards—and also the evil that one carelessly brings upon oneself (*Afowofa*).

One of the most pervasive forms of Ifa cosmological myth is expressed in ritualistic action (*Etutu*). The forms and nature of these rituals are diverse. Usually, they are performed to solicit favour of the Supernatural Being and spiritual forces for good luck; good health and fulfilment of destiny; or to ward off evil. Rituals, common in all religions, are ceremonies in which something is offered to the Supernatural Being or spiritual forces and the outcome is the reinforcement of the belief that the Supernatural Being or spiritual forces will show benevolent mercy and accede to requests. According to Ifa, the fulfilment of good destiny is the ability of one to harness the power of cosmic and spiritual forces by propitiating them with ritual sacrifice.

Where ritual sacrifices (“Ebo”) are connected with appeasing the cosmic, spiritual, and Supernatural forces to rectify bad destiny, votive offering (*Ebo eje*) may be demanded annually by Ifa divination: *Riru ebo eje a ma gbe eni, airu ebo yi ni iyonu*, meaning the consequences of failure to redeem pledges of votive offering are usually severe. While the Ifa priest chants and uses his divining chain and wooden tray, he calls on the grand Ifa spiritual divinity and witness to all human destiny to reveal what can be done to remedy the bad destiny.

Cosmic, supernatural, and spiritual forces are mostly appeased with the following items: rat (*Ekú*), fish (*Eja*), a male goat (*Obuko*), pig (*Elede*), cock/hen (*akuko/abo-adie*), chicken egg (*Eyin-adie*), pigeon (*Eyele*), snail (*Igbin*), banana (*Ogede-omini*), white bean cake (*Ekuru*), palm-oil (*Epo-pupa*), roasted yam (*Isu-sisun*), roasted corn (*Guguru*), kola-nut (*Obi*) and a

bowl of water (sometimes dew-water). In most cases, ritual items are presented to the temple of Esu divinity (*Ojubo esu*) by the Ifa priest. Sometimes, the clothing of the individual with bad destiny can also be submitted for onward delivery to the cosmic, supernatural and spiritual forces. The Esu divinity who serves as client messenger in the spiritual realm, has also shared in the blood of the animal sacrificed and would then order the negative forces accompanying the individual’s destiny to cease action because the individual has offered a ritual sacrifice (*Ebo*) in exchange for misfortunes, failures, ailments, unhappiness and bad destiny. Esu divinity can be cunning—difficult to predict and placate—and can disapprove of any ritual. The omen displayed by the kola-nut reveals if a particular sacrifice is accepted (*Ebo-ru*) or rejected (*Ebo-fin*). The outcome of the omen is to symbolically reinforce assurance on the acceptance or rejection of the ritual sacrifice offered.

According to Ifa cosmology, there are many cosmic and spiritual forces between the Supreme Being and humans—especially on matters connected with human destiny and events around the world—over which they (the spiritual forces) have control. There are two overarching forces in the cosmic realm: benevolent and malevolent. What ritual sacrifice essentially does is to appease the malevolent forces to stop the frustrations, hardships, and life troubles; and to rearrange the cosmic forces to bring solution to these challenges for the ultimate fulfilment of well-being, fortune, and happiness of the individual. Misfortunes will continue, except when stalled. Therefore, it becomes necessary to propitiate the benevolent forces in the cosmic realm for the individual to receive the desired outcomes.

The ritual process involves the priest presenting the sacrifice on a flat clay pot (*Ikoko-isasun*) to the Esu temple. It is the duty of the Esu divinity to deliver the sacrifice to the cosmic forces. Esu divinity is one of the divinities closest to Olodumare (Supreme Being). It reports to Olodumare on all matters of ritual and human

conduct. Multifaceted in character, Esu divinity can be invoked to harm someone's destiny and can also be invoked to offer remedy to bad destiny and misfortunes. Because of this character, human beings generally attribute the cause of their problems, frustrations, failures, and bad destiny to Esu divinity. Esu divinity is the one that tempts human beings, afflicts them with ailments, and makes life miserable for them—especially when they have sinned against the Supreme Being. This is the reason why Esu divinity is personified as the devil or Satan by Christianity and Islam. It is only Ifa that can thwart Esu's intrigues and Ifa priests are the one that understand how to placate Esu divinity with rituals and praises.

In using their divining chain, the Ifa priest recites verses from the Ifa literary corpus, saying aloud the invocations and incantations connected to the situation. Thereafter, the individual with bad destiny is asked to whisper his/her problem on money, which he/she will then place on the divination tray. When this is done, the priest proceeds to call on Orunmila, the witness to all human destinies, and acknowledges the Supreme Being. It is compulsory that the priest also acknowledges the sixteen cosmic ancestral spirits to witness the proceeding.

In the process, the individual's mother's name is frequently mentioned while calling on the grand Ifa spiritual divinity. The cosmological significance of this is the belief that the destiny of the mother can bring fortune to that of the child. Sometimes, where votive offering is not required, an individual with bad destiny may be asked to go and make offerings to the Ori of the parents if such person wants to overcome ill-luck and misfortunes associated with his/her bad destiny. If the parents are dead, animals can be offered to appease the paternal/maternal spirits. Examples involve asking the individual to present his/her supplications, requests, and problems to their paternal/maternal spirits through the left ear of a male goat to be offered as sacrifice. Others include breaking a snail into a bowl

of water to wash the individual's head into a flowing stream with a sponge and black soap—specially prepared for the individual—and his/her forehead marked with the animal's blood. Sealing the ritual sacrifice is the breaking the kola-nut to reveal the omen and whether the sacrifice is accepted or rejected. Once a destiny has been chosen (good or bad), it becomes permanent and totally impossible to change by ritual sacrifice or charm (*Ayanmo ko gba ebo beni ko gba ogun*).

The Ifa account of using certain animals, plants, fruits, and materials from nature to communicate human requests to the cosmic and spiritual realm is clear. Each animal has distinct spiritual properties capable of relaying certain human requests to the cosmic, supernatural, and spiritual forces. For example, a female pig and banana have distinct spiritual properties of potency required for rituals connected with barrenness. A woman with good destiny of fruitfulness can have her womb blocked by sorcerers, witches, and evil—which she may have brought upon herself through fornication and abortion. Yet, apart from *Emere* (the mischievous spirit incarnate women), who may have spiritually taken the oath of barrenness at the gate of heaven when coming to earth, no one is endowed at creation with the destiny of barrenness.

According to Ifa belief, a person is composed of three parts: the body, soul, and spirit. When the body dies, the soul and the spirit returns to the spiritual realm. The spirit is capable of doing good or mischief to the living (Ikenga-Metuh 1990, Blockson 1987). This is why the spirit of the dead parent is in essence taken as sacred, deified, and venerated among the Yoruba. The spirits of dead parents—if well propitiated with great respect, ritual sacrifice, and rites—will guide the children's destiny in their journey through life. Ifa states further that, in the case of those who suddenly die (not by evil brought upon themselves) without fulfilling their days on earth as allotted by their destiny, these people (*Akudaya*) can metaphorically transmi-



BY FHADEKHEMMY

A Yoruba bride hugs her mother on her traditional wedding day.

grate into existence elsewhere to live like a normal human being—get married and have children—and complete their destiny. While they can do almost everything humans do, they are very difficult to recognise. They disappear and relocate elsewhere once a familiar person or member of their former family discovers their transmigration.

Ifa adherents welcome a new baby with an important ritual ceremony at the child's naming, which marks a rite of passage. Generally, the ceremony is important in revealing the child's destiny, the type of trade he /she should take to, and marriage partner. This ceremony takes place on the ninth day for a boy child and seventh day for a girl child, superstitiously connected with the belief that a man has nine ribs while a woman has seven ribs. During the ceremony, the ancestral spirits are invoked for blessings. The materials for naming include palm-oil, salt, bitter-kola, kola-nut, alligator pepper, sugar-cane, honey, fish and

a bowl of water. Each of these materials is symbolic. For example, honey, salt, and sugar-cane symbolise sweetness of life; alligator pepper symbolises fruitfulness; bitter-kola symbolises old age; water symbolises peace; and kola-nut symbolises the warding off of evil. Unfortunately, in recent times, the ritualistic activity of consulting the Ifa divination to reveal the destiny of a child has diminished.

CONCLUSION

Since time immemorial, one question that has engaged human consciousness is whether events are caused or they just happen? Are human experiences (good or bad) in life inevitably programmed as destiny; or is everything that has happened or will happen been predetermined as destiny? Furthermore, are disasters, wars, and other calamities programmed, predestined, and governed by cosmological and

supernatural forces? The question of destiny is one of the most equivocal religious issues because destiny expresses the mystery of the world—and the existence of a Supernatural Being.

The analysis of Ifa world view of human destiny indicates that the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria fundamentally recognise two different types of divinities: a Supreme Being called Olodumare and subordinate divinities called Orisa. The Supreme Being is recognised as God and Creator of the universe, while the subordinate divinities allotted with different responsibilities at the cosmic realm report to Him and serve as intermediaries between humans and Creator.

Though viewed by some as primitive, fetishistic, and idolatrous, the belief in Ifa is real to adherents and it works for them. The Ifa mythological account of human destiny—including the myth, oral traditions, cultural values, beliefs, social experiences and ritual sacrifices—helps to elucidate the Yoruba cosmology and adds to the rich biocultural diversity of human expression. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Dr. Mohammed D. Enaikele, Ph.D., AMNIM, is a rural sociologist, chief lecturer, and Deputy Provost (Academics) at Federal College of Fisheries and Marine Technology, Victoria

Island Lagos, Nigeria. He received his Doctoral Degree in Rural Sociology from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. For the past 22 years he has been lecturing at the Federal College of Fisheries and Marine Technology, Lagos, Nigeria. He has also served as Curriculum coordinator, Director of Programme, Deputy Provost (Administration) and Acting Provost. He has authored and co-authored several books and research articles published in both local and international journals. His research interests include Sociology of Dying Culture and Endangered Language, Rural Sociology, Cultural Anthropology and Multicultural Studies, Sociology of Agriculture and Food Security, Human Trafficking, Diaspora, and Conflict Studies.



Mr. Adeniyi Taofeeq Adeleke is a senior instructor at the Federal College of Fisheries and Marine Technology, Victoria Island Lagos, Nigeria. He has contributed to several edited

books and published articles in journals.

Address:

Federal College of Fisheries and Marine Technology
Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria

Telephone: +234-8020334102

Email: damohle16@gm

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APPENDIX 1

256 CHAPTERS OF IFA LITERARY CORPUS ("ODU IFA")

16	15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1		
Ogbe ofu	Ogbe ose	Ogbe irete	Ogbe otura	Ogbe oturup on	Ogbe ika	Ogbe osa	Ogbe ogunda	Ogbe okanran	Ogbe obara	Ogbe owonri n	Ogbe irosun	Ogbe di	Ogbe wehin	Ogbe oyeku	Eji ogbe	1	
Oyeku ofu	Oyeku ose	Oyeku irete	Oyeku otura	Oyeku oturup on	Oyeku ika	Oyeku osa	Oyeku ogunda	Oyeku okanran	Oyeku obara	Oyeku owonri n	Oyeku irosun	Oyeku idi	Oyeku biwori	Oyeku ogbe	Oyeku meji	2	
Iwori ofu	Iwori ose	Iwori irete	Iwori otura	Iwori oturup on	Iwori ika	Iwori osa	Iwori ogunda	Iwori okanran	Iwori obara	Iwori owonri n	Iwori irosun	Iwori idi	Iwori oyeku	Iwori bogbe	Iwori meji	3	
Idi ofu	Idi ose	Idi irete	Idi otura	Idi oturup on	Idi ika	Idi osa	Idi ogunda	Idi okanran	Idi obara	Idi owonri n	Idi irosun	Idi iwori	Idi oyeku	Idi gbemi	Odi meji	4	
Irosun ofun	Irosun ose	Irosun irete	Irosun otura	Irosun oturup on	Irosun ika	Irosun osa	Irosun ogunda	Irosun okanran	Irosun obara	Irosun owonri n	Irosun idi	Irosun iwori	Irosun takeleku	Irosun agbe	Olosun meji	5	
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Okanran ofu	Okanran ose	Okanran irete	Okanran otura	Okanran oturup on	Okanran ika	Okanran osa	Okanran ogunda	Okanran obara	Okanran owonri n	Okanran irosun	Okanran idi	Okanran iwori	Okanran oyeku	Okanran sode	Okanran meji	8	
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Osa ofu	Osa ose	Osa irete	Osa otura	Osa oturup on	Osa ika	Osa ogunda	Osa okanran	Osa obara	Osa owonri n	Osa irosun	Osa idi	Osa iwori	Osa oyeku	Osa logbe	Osa meji	10	
Ika ofu	Ika ose	Ika irete	Ika otura	Ika oturup on	Ika osa	Ika ogunda	Ika okanran	Ika obara	Ika owonri n	Ika irosun	Ika idi	Ika iwori	Ika oyeku	Ika gbemi	Ika meji	11	
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Ose ofu	Ose irete	Ose otura	Ose oturup on	Ose ika	Ose osa	Ose ogunda	Ose okanran	Ose obara	Ose owonri n	Ose irosun	Ose idi	Ose iwori	Ose yeku	Ose logbe	Ose meji	15	
Ofu ose	Ofu irete	Ofu otura	Ofu oturup on	Ofu ika	Ofu osa	Ofu ogunda	Ofu okanran	Ofu obara	Ofu owonri n	Ofu irosun	Ofu idi	Ofu iwori	Ofu oyeku	Ofu nogbe	Ofu meji	16	



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