



## Female Power in Textual Discourse and Practical Action, the Roles of Iyanifa in the Ifa Divinatory System Among the Yoruba

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### ABSTRACT

This is a study of female power within the divinatory literature and ritual action of Ifa among the Yoruba people. The essay investigates the dialectics of the feminine between the reified textual domain of Ifa literature and the practical experiences of women in selected Ifa communities in the Yoruba towns of Ibadan, Akure, Oshogbo, Oyo, Badagry, Abeokuta, Epe and Ife. Through a focus on the agency of female diviners, Iyanifa, as dramatized in Ifa literature and as demonstrated in the actual practice of Ifa in the communities in question, this essay explores a segment of the manner in which Yorubaland navigates issues of female empowerment within the gender dynamics that shape Yoruba culture. The study used a participant observation method that spanned a decade, which allowed the researcher in observing and joining the activities of the Iyanifa and women Ifa adherents during worships and rituals. Practice and Discourse as propounded by Lila Abu-Lughod was used in drawing the differences and similarities in theory and practice of Ifa. The findings are significant to the ongoing discourses in gender constructions and reconstructions, identity issues, Yoruba spiritualities and decolonization. It is also important for Diaspora Ifa communities because it provides frameworks valuable for mapping the manner in which these communities address gender issues as they draw upon a template of religious textualisation and practical action emanating from a culture different from the Diaspora contexts in which these adaptations are taking place

## INTRODUCTION

### **Overlapping Centralities of Ifa and the Feminine in Yoruba Cultural Temporalities**

Ifa may be understood as the central cognitive system of classical Yoruba culture. This strategic positioning has led to Ifa being mined by scholars for the insights of that culture into all aspects of existence as understood in Yorubaland, covering the spectrum from the humanities, such as literature, to the sciences, as in mathematics.

The female presence is particularly significant to Ifa on account of the system's pervasive textual depiction of human and divine women in various contexts, the practical roles played by women in general in Ifa ritual and the specialized roles of women, represented by Iyanifa, in those rituals.

This interweaving of textual and practical demonstration enables Ifa to be used as a platform for exploring relationships between discursive forms in Yoruba culture, represented by Ifa literature and the lived experience of Ifa communities, with particular reference to women.

This relevance of Ifa in relation to the feminine is demonstrated in this work in the context of the classical period in which Ifa literature was composed, a period represented here purely by reference to this literature.

The significance of Ifa in relation to the feminine is also explored in this paper in relation to the post-classical period. This is represented by the time of the field research between 2001 and January 2018 that informs the essay. It is also demonstrated in the relationship of this research span to subsequent periods within the context of ongoing social changes in Yorubaland,

These contexts of lived experience reference the role of Ifa in the construction of self among Yoruba women in relation to access to power and authority, resonating with the role of religion in constructing conceptions of the feminine and shaping women's social roles around the world.

In the course of investigation, observations based on interviews and participation with the target group concerning the practice of Ifa divination in general and in particular the specific roles of women in such ritual practice were made. Specific attention was focused on enquiries into the changes in the roles of women and to the documentation (please see discussion) of such changes as they have occurred over time and their effect on the generality of Ifa divination.

#### **Ifa as Yoruba Cultural Nexus**

Bolaji Idowu, (1962) describes Ifa as an intricate system of divination grounded in the deity Orunmila. He depicts the Odu Ifa, the organizational system of Ifa, as a body of literary forms consisting of two hundred and fifty six Odu, divided into numerous verses known as "ese". These verses are a repository of the Yoruba universe, an extensive corpus shaped by depictions of Yoruba lifeways, framed within an overarching philosophical and spiritual framework integrating myth, literature and history.

Olodumare (God) is believed to have endowed Orunmila, the divinity most intimately associated with Ifa, with special wisdom and foreknowledge, making him the accredited visioner into the intricacies of human fortunes which Ifa unravels.

Idowu (1969) says: "there is no doubt that Orunmila is universally worshiped in Yorubaland. His cult is found everywhere. Therefore his priests would claim that he is a universal king."

As J.d Clarke (1939) testifies, the Ifa Oracle was often consulted in all major affairs of life, in sickness, in contemplating a journey, in considering the choice of a life partner and at any important turn in adult life. Even after the marginalization of Ifa and other classical cognitive and spiritual forms by Western modernity emerging through colonialism, Ifa remains a point of succor for many in Yorubaland, is exported into different parts of the world and is the subject of increasing academic study in various disciplines, its significance undergoing a global expansion even as its prestige experiences contraction within its homeland.

The Odu Ifa are believed to be the responses vouchsafed to enquirers by the oracle through the babalawo-the adept in the esoteric knowledge of Ifa and the Iyanifa, the feminine adept of Ifa. Depicted as emerging in relation to particular divinatory contexts which become templates for the future as they resonate with similar contexts across time and space, Odu Ifa may be described as the most fixed and reliable sections of Yoruba oral traditions (Idowu, 1962).

## LITERATURE RIVIEW

### **Cultural Construction of Women in Ifa among the Yoruba People**

In spite of the pre-eminence of Ifa in the life of Yoruba, women are relegated to the background in the practice of the cult. Adefioye Oyesakin (1982) is of the opinion that there exist few, if any women Ifa Priest, because women are, like in other traditional Yoruba cult, barred from knowing its secrets.. He however says, women features prominently in the vast literature of Ifa. Ifa actually paints a vivid picture of women and the views expressed therein reflect the views of an average Yoruba person about women.

A problem encountered was that of personal and divergent interpretations of the same issue, principle and symbols. For instance, the general belief is that women no matter the status and age cannot be initiated in to the cult of 'odu'. Some are of the opinion that women can enter the Igbodu (the sacred grove for initiates) but cannot see Odu (the symbol of initiation). While I also came across a younger and an exposed babalawo who asked 'why not? A woman that have reached menopause can see the Odu, who as a result of a ceased menstrual circle could be regarded as male and thus allowed access into "Igbodu".

Whereas Chief Ifayemi Elebuibon pointed it out that there are some men that are denied the odu ritual who are 'Elegan' (weak men) so there is no way a woman can be initiated into the secret of odu, but in any case both men and women can take part in the 'Itafa' ritual.

Finding a middle ground between such different interpretations of the same fact was a problem that required a careful balancing between myth, fact and the personal interpretations of the interviewed respondents.

To Ifayemi Elebuibon, women are regarded in Yoruba sensibility and in Ifa in several ways, due to their dual and equal tendencies towards being good

and evil. They are basically regarded as the weaker sex, perceived as unreliable, inquisitive, jealous, emotional, beautiful, caring, loving and also dangerous. In the Odu Ifa itself, some Odu Ifa are used to illustrate some perceptions of women in Ifa, to this end, the Odu will be divided into two sections. Ifa tells us why women are dangerous to men and should be avoided while "B shows clearly that in spite of these dangers, they are attractive and irresistible.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Section "A" Women's Negative Image**

#### **No. 1 Odu (Elebuibon, 2001)**

Ose Ogbe (jealous nature of women)

Jojobo: The light complexioned wife of Orunmila

Bi obinrin ban gbaja meji

A o saimo pe eruruaiye lode

Adifa fun Osala Oseremagbo

Njo tolo re gbe jojobo ni iyawo

(When the woman started to wrap up with two - sashes around her waist that was when trouble came to earth. Ifa divination was performed for Osala of Osermagbo. The Day he was going to take Jojobo as wife).

Already Obatala had a dark complexioned wife (Awoko), he now took to a fair beautiful woman (Jojobo). This aroused the jealousy of his first wife who absconded with his genitals thus making it impossible for Obatala to consummate his new marriage.

#### **No. 2 Odu (Elebuibon, 2001)**

Awonrinsidin

This Odu shows the stubborn nature of women.

'Odoje, daughter of 'Oorisala'

'An gbe iwo niyi lajase

Obajio dajo oju omi

Adifa fun Odoje omo Orisa

(We proclaimed poisonous medicine at ajase, Obajio was made judgment over the river, Ifa divination was performed for odoje, daughter of Oosala).

Odoje the daughter of Orisa was destined to be the wife of a babalawo. A faith she sorely resented and fought against rejecting all eligible suitors, until she stupidly went off with Iku (death) on a market day. She however managed to escape as a consequence of the sacrifice she was asked to perform. On her arrival home she recanted her stubbornness and married a babalawo.

### **Section B. Women's Positive Image:**

Oyesakin (1982) avers that apart from women's physical attraction, women, according to Ifa, perform certain functions that make them complementary to the men. They bear and take care of children. They take care of the home and economically, they lend helping hands to men, because they sell what the men produce from the farmlands and provide assistance when a man is in financial difficulty.

The physical attributes of woman such as her complexion; breasts she possesses and her ability to adorn herself, makes men struggle to have her.

In one Odu, Orunmila fought hard to marry 'Ile-Olawo' and the fact that he was already drunk on her beauty is expressed in:

(Odu 3) Beauty of a woman  
"Oun le fee bayii?  
Won ni korubo,  
Ile-Olawo naa si nii  
Eeyan pupa ni,  
Rodorodo lo ri

(Can I ever marry her? They say he should offer sacrifice. This woman call Ile-Olawo is very fair in complexion she is radiantly beautiful,Orunmila is already dazed by her beauty).

But according to Ifa. It is not sufficient for a woman to be beautiful and attractive, she must also be neat so as to overwhelm her man.

Odu 4: (neatness of a woman)  
Siyinke, Siyinke  
Ba lafinju ba ji a siyinke soko  
Awon obun si ni kutukutu yon fa"

(Exposing the teeth, to really expose the teeth. When a neat woman wakes up she exposes white teeth to brighten up her husband. But the dirty ones usually wake up with a drag)

From all indications, Ifa has not defined the word 'beauty' What Ifa corpus offers us here are what some men will prefer as they say one man's meat is another man's poison. While white teeth, fair complexion moderate breast might be attractive to some men, some other men would still prefer the opposite of all of these. The Yoruba for example favor black complexion that they gave it the praise name- 'adumaradan' (radiant black complexion)

Apart from the physical attractions enumerated above, women are indispensable at home not only in the domestic work they do, but the companionship and care of the children. Orunmila was so desperate to have a woman take care of him and his home that he made a wrong choice of woman, Aworan (Picture) who he later sent away.

And that a man becomes more responsible when he takes a wife for he will then get exposed to the world

'Ta 'ba-laya tan  
Eni gbangba la n'je'  
(As soon as a man takes a wife, he becomes big).

However, Yoruba people frowns at getting children out of wedlock, hence the idea that every woman should get married, and bear children of her own. It is also of note that it is a misfortune for a woman to get married and not bear children.

Furthermore, Ifa affirms to problems center around the struggle of women to get children, like Yemese had to leave her abode and travel far on the instruction of Ifa before she could bear children. Also Oya who is a Yoruba goddess was completely overwhelmed when she could not bear children of her own.

Ifa shows that a woman could be subjected to humiliation of any kind to get children for example Malamala' was instructed to offer sacrifice and to get a

buffalo's horn painted with cam-wood and mount it on her back like a baby and then dance round the town.

Economically, a woman is indispensable to a man, she sells whatever he produces and bails him out whenever he is in financial embarrassment. The excerpts are as follows.

Odu 5. "Morounfolu ni oun ofee,  
Tinuawe naa ba ni oun ofee. Tinuawe ni maa gbe  
oja lo lati odo morounfolu, a lo taa, a mu owo wale. Igba ti  
yo fi di'gba die won ti la won ti ko ile.

("Morounfolu sought for the hand of Tinuawe who agreed. They eventually got married. Tinuawe usually carried to the market whatever Morounfolu produced and brought the proceeds back home. Within a short time they became rich and built a house").

Ifa narratives indicate the mutual interdependence between a man and his wife. The husband and wife are likened to the kolanut and the leaf. There are special leaves which Yoruba people use to preserve kolanuts from the attack of worm and beetles. According to the analysis, the leaf is the husband and the kolanut is said to be the wife.

Prior to the time the man gets married he has been consequently cheated by the customers who were buying his products.

Odu 6: Oda-awo awo koro  
Aabo obinrin re  
Omo won oke ijero  
Bi ada owo ti n da mi  
Bee ni aabo n bo mi

(Oda-owo, the Priest of Koro, Aabo his wife, their daughter at Oke-Ijero  
As soon as I am in dire need of money  
The protector provides for me)

By the time the husband and the kolanut which is the wife gets separated after a quarrel and within a short time.

'Ewe n ro obi naa si n ro'  
(The leaf was withering, the kolanut was also withering)

When Ifa was divined for them, they were advised to re-marry and...  
Ni awon mejeeji ba tunfe ara won, lo ba tun bere si dara fun won.  
(The two of them re-married and things turned out the better for them)

In conclusion, the account given in these research findings shows the favorable image of the woman. Their beauty and complementary services make them indispensable. This is really the reason why men struggle to have them. Even Yoruba divinities compete for women. According to Ifa, Abejide the daughter of Olofin was competed for. The task of drawing water from a nearby stream with a sieve was given.

Orunmila accomplished this task after he offered sacrifice to Esu (The trickster god).

At this point, it should be noted that all the duties which Ifa says women should perform and which make them indispensable are the exact duties that a woman perform in a traditional Yoruba society.

Unlike other ethnic groups in Nigeria, traditional Yoruba women do not farm, they harvest and sell the farm produce to take care of the children and to undertake most of the domestic duties.

This role has substantially changed with modern civilization. This has led to the inability of some educated Yoruba women to combine domestic work with office work which has unavoidably led to matrimonial problems and divorce.

Table 1. These Practices are Analyzed by the Following Tabulation

<b>Practices</b>	<b>Historical</b>	<b>Contemporary</b>	<b>Implication</b>
Rituals: Initiations to the secret of Odu	Women did not play any active role.	Women still do not participate.	This ritual acts are very rigid and cannot be changed.
Itefa ritual this is a ritual for self-realization or (baptism)	Women played active roles then.	Women still participate actively in the processes	This implies that the roles assigned to women are still intact
Worship	There was no evidence of a structure worship service and/or centre	There is now a structured worship services and centres with influences of westernization/modernization. This is reflected in the order of services to osemeji, in the burial rites, birth rites and marriage rites.	This implies that Ifa can accommodate change in practice, consequences of modernity and westernization
Reason for getting into Ifa	It is strictly restricted to 'esentaye' (destiny) and the entire household of Ifa adherents	Membership is now open to the general public with perception to be converted. As well as in search for cultural for knowledge.	This indicates that Ifa divination has taken a global dimension as adherents are drawn from all over the world.
Locality	Ifa divination was obviously restricted to the Yoruba localities.	Ifa divination has diffused from the traditional Yoruba societies to broader scopes. Ifa shrines are	This implies that people move with their belief system and

		now found all over the world such as in the United State of America, Brazil and Cuba	culture for globalization.
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From the above the place of women concerning the Ifa ritual and practice is multi-factorial in Ifa and Yoruba society in both the public and the domestic spheres. For instance, historically, female involvement in Ifa divination and ritual practices could be traced to 'Osun; (the river divinity of fertility) who was by oral accounts one of orunmila's wives (orunmila: master of ifa divination -Wande Abimbola 1976), who gave her sixteen cowries (Erindinlogun) system of divination, to be used for lesser affairs, as opposite to the divinatory chain "opele". This latter case is an example of the historical role of women in the domestic sphere. However, this erindinlogun' though minor, is very important to the public, as such practice forms an integral part of the entire corpus of Ifa worship and ritual practices. Expectedly, deviations from the classical notions of the roles of women in the situation under study is encountered. From interactions, different accounts concerning the roles of women, ensuing from problems of contradiction, misunderstanding, misrecognition and misinterpretation affect accounts as recounted by respondents. However, practitioners of Yoruba religion are aware that when ritual becomes static, when it ceases to adjust and adapt, it becomes obsolete, empty of meaning and eventually dies out. They often express the need to modify rituals to address current social conditions. Sometimes change is the result of long deliberations; often times it is more spontaneous Drewal (1992).

Western goods and technology are evident everywhere in Africa. Anthropologists have often associated such change with modernization, beginning with the colonial period, or before, through to the present. For example, James Peacock (1975) notes that:

Modernizing movements, whether Protestant, Muslim, or Buddhist reformations, Melanesian cargo cults, or Communist revolutions all endeavor to purge traditional ritual. The obvious reason is that ritual which has supported the established order must be destroyed. A more basic reason is that ritual action by its very repetitive rigidly celebrates the eternal, the socio-cosmic structure that was, is, and ever shall be. The modernizing activity that relentlessly thrusts toward harnessing new means to valued ends unavoidably opposes a symbol of the unchanging.

These deviations from the norm are through discarding, reshaping and integrating new ideals into the general traditional accounts. Discrepancies and temporal changes being highlighted. Cultural discourses changes with time, though the practices might remain intact or move on, depending on the people.

For example in the case of the Iyanifa interviewed, some do not subscribe to traditional modes of dressing with beads and other ornaments, except during ceremonies and festivals. The logic of these adjustments is not always as apparent unless the observer has access to a particular participant's personal experience.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### **Socio-Demographic Background of Ifa Adherents 'Iyanifa' and 'Babalawo'**

This section presents a profile of the socio demographic background of Ifa adherents both women and men, in Ibadan. The intention is that such characteristic would present a biographical sketch on processes which account for the formation and growth of women in Ifa divination, as well as their various problems with the men in Ifa divination and business world. This section will be divided into two major parts the first will deal with social characteristics around Ifa divination. The latter will be sub divided into mini-parts including factors that led to their involvement in Ifa worship and divination; Ifa structure; participation in divination process; relationship between Babalawo and Iyanifa; influence of modernization.

Our study sample comprised of 40 Ifa adherents; 30 women (Iyanifa) and 10 (Babalawo) men. 20 respondents at Ose-meji in Ibadan, 2 respondents from Akure, 5 respondents from Oshogbo, 5 respondents from Oyo town, 1 respondent from Badagry, 3 respondents from Abeokuta, 1 respondent from Epe, 3 respondents from Ile-Ife.

Data collected on their age distribution shows that it varied from 25-64 years. The mean age is 42 years. The age distribution further shows that 20% of my respondents fall between the age of 25-24 years, 27% falls between 35-44 years, 30% are within 45-54 years while 6.7% falls between 55-64 and lastly 3% between the ages of 64 and above.

The fact that 30% of respondents fall within the ages of 35 -45 is an indicator that most of Ifa adherents are of middle age.

The distribution of the marital status of the Iyanifa shows that all of them are married except in the case of an African-American who was separated from her husband on taking a university t

Job appointment here in Nigeria. (25%) of the respondents are still young girls under the tutelage of the senior Iyanifa. The vast majority (75%) (24 out of 30 women) are still married.

To the Yoruba people, the institution of marriage transcends the narrow husband-wife affairs and because Ifa believers are still strongly in touch with their traditional Yoruba values. They consider marriage an institution ordained by Olodumare (God) and sanctioned by society. It is therefore considered one of the major milestones of human achievement that cannot be tampered with.

Also pertaining to marriage types, thirty nine (39) married respondents (97.5%) are polygynously married as it is part of Yoruba culture for a man to have more than one wife.

The educational attainment of the respondents varied since most interviewed were engaged in a number of petty trading activities and profession, (apart from the Ifa divination practice) which require different levels of education to aid the skills required for their jobs. 33.3% of the respondents had no formal education; 13.3% had primary/modern school certificate; 33.3% again had HND/degrees while 20% had gone to vocational training centres.

Most of the women (59%) are engaged in one petty trading or the other. 5% of the women are sustained by their husbands while only 12% make more income from family's landed properties. None of the women are been sustained by either their parents or children. Rather the responsibilities of these categories of people rested on the respondents.

### **Reasons for Getting into 'Ifa'**

The interviews suggest that women must have had reasons for going into Ifa divination. In many cases, divination is a means off 'earning more' and supporting a paid employment/trade. Many times women are destined to practice Ifa divination from 'Esentage' rite. Women involvement in Ifa divination could also be attributed to identity problem; many black women in diaspora are getting into one form of African traditional religion or the other while some could just be seeking for indigenous knowledge.

Among the respondents 25 (83%) stated it has been ordained for them to become a diviner, whereas 4 (13.3%) of the respondents explained that curiosity led them into Ifa cult and which later becomes fascinating to them. According to one (3.3%) of our respondents, cultural identity and self-realization was the motivating force that led her into Ifa divination.

However, believe in esentaye rite among respondents is total as all interviewed persons stated that in the Yoruba world view, 'ayanmo' 'ori' (head) or 'Ipin' (lots) are synonymous with destiny. The fates you choose from heaven before you set out to come into the world. 'Ipin' is known as destiny while 'Ori' represents the object that symbolizes it. All these are set out from the moment a child is born (as the esentaye rites is performed)

According to Ifayemi Elebuibon, knowing ones destiny is very important as it is believed to have a very strong imprints on the types of life that one lives. Hence the saying: *A kunle a yan ipin, a de le aye tan, oju n'kan ni'*, (we choose our destiny on our knees, to arrive the world and be in haste).

### **Case Study of 'Iyanifa'**

Three cases will be outlined here. The aim is to document briefly the changing 'faces' of 'Iyanifa' over the ages. The first will be Osun, the 'apetebi Orunmila' (the wife of Orunmila) who also doubles as a major divinity in Yoruba belief system the second, Esi kinni Olusanyin, an African-American ethnomusicologist and an iyanifa, and thirdly Mrs. Afinni I. Fakorede an iyanifa encountered and interviewed during the course of research.

**Case Study I:** Osun in Yoruba mythology was the wife of Orunmila, the Yoruba oracle divinity to which the Ifa cult is connected. She is also a divinity around which a flourishing Orisa worship is built and is the Yoruba goddess of fertility. She is said to be the first female Ifa diviner. She learnt the art from observing her husband at work, without his knowledge. Orunmila however got to know one day when he found her divining for a client and later discovered she had gone a step further by initiating new members in to the secrets of divination. Her husband now granted her the permission to use the erindinlogun (sixteen sacred cowries) system of divination. Another account from a respondent in Akure is that Orunmila on imminent departure, one of his many journeys to Ejigbomekun was asked by Osun what could she do about clients who would certainly come in his absence, he was said to have given her the

“erindinlogun” divination system to use for consultation while he was away. (Ethnography, 2000)

**Case Study II:** Esi-kinni Olusanyin an African-American was an ethno musicologist and a choreographer. According to Lolade (1999) she was born in the United States of America on January 15, 1939 to a middle class American migrant. In her quest to connect essentially with her origin, she took a research work on African music and dance. Her radical view about Afrocentrism made her change her original name from Esi Sylvia Kinney to a more Africanized and supplemented with the Yoruba name Esi-Olokun Kinni Olusanyin.

To Professor Dapo Adelugba, she was not apologetic about being black; her entire research work was aimed at relating development in the black diaspora to development in Africa. She saw herself as an Afro-American trying to integrate into an African society and she wanted to be accepted into the mainstream of African thought. And springing from such a spiritual desire to integrate, she delved very deeply into African traditional belief system, she researched and at the same time worshipped the Yoruba Orisa. According to one of her students “Esi is more Yoruba than most of us” Esikinni was awarded a chieftaincy title by the Indigene Faith of Africa Association (IFA) in 1979. She was not only the Iyalaje of Osemeji assembly, but she was Iya Osun, Iyanifa and adherents of all other Orisa. With her participation in Yoruba traditions, she was able to extract numerous African motifs from Odu Ifa around which she developed musical theatre. She once suggested to me that I pursue a career in Ifa and that it is better to divine in the evening when there is no sun in the sky.

Esi kinni is believed to have been respected by the local community especially due to two reasons. Though she was a foreigner who might have been seen as a returnee. Secondly, she was an educated person who delved into Ifa with an educated mind, hence might have been able to absorb more than the local indigenes and help advance the boundaries of what was known. (Ethnography, 2000)



Fig2. Dr. Esi-kinni Olusanyin (Iyanifa)

**Case Study III:** Mrs. A.I. Fakorede is an Iyanifa and iya-egbeakorin, Osemeji, Ibadan. A middle aged woman, married to Mr. Fakorede with children. She sells imported cloths at Gbagi market. She believes anybody can learn the act of divination but in her own case, she is a daughter of ababalawo, who had gone to perform her esentaye ritual when she was ababy, and the oracle has declared her both as an apetebi and an iyanifa. Thus, she has been socialized into Ifa worship system from her childhood.

**She Agreed that Women's Roles in the House Alone is Overwhelming;**

"They cook, take care of the children and husband, wash clothes and dishes and the general cleaning of the house, and yet you are still required to tend to Ifa rituals as an 'apetebi' of a babalawo and do not forget that I have my own clients to attend to and market to sell as well." (Ethnography, 2000)

Though not educated in the western ways, she is very knowledgeable about Ifa and ijala (hunter's chants). She said that since she was not opportune to have had western education, she has made it a duty to send all her children to school and in fact, her first son is in the University of Ibadan. Furthermore, she is of the opinion that education should be constructive and that many women take education as an excuse to misbehave... "You see our girls working around naked, it beats my imaginations", she expressed. "In any case, any innovation and or civilization embraced should be positive and tailored towards a durable developments", she submitted.

From the above case studies, we can infer that these women have different personalities and outlook to life. Bringing into focus, their diverse intention, an example of Osun, shows that women can be liberated and independent as she was not afraid to have approached Ifa knowledge and excelled exceedingly in it. While Esi-kinni was thoroughly educated, literate, and a foreigner. But in her own case she was making a statement that even as a foreigner, she is black and proud of it, making it impossible for anybody to take away her identify. The third women who is an example of a contemporary Yoruba woman demonstrates a strong will to survive in a male dominated society by been relevant in her domestic space as a wife, a mother and daughter, and in the public sphere as an iyanifa. These three 'women are examples of raw energy, hard work and intelligence.

**Women in Ifa Divination**

One of my informants, Mrs. Taiwo Ifadunmade Akinpelu gave me insight into the first woman diviner. According to her osun' leyo aya Orunmila' (osun' leyo wife of Orunmila) was the first woman to divine. She stated that Orunmila on an imminent departure on a trip to 'Ejigbomekun was asked by his wife Osun-leyo what to do about clients in his absence, he then gave her the permission to divine with erindinlogun (sixteen cowries' system of divination). Another account by Adebayo Fagbohun, Osun was the first woman to divine, she learnt the art of divination by observing her husband at work. However Orunmila discovered one day on returning from a trip abroad, when he met his wife divining in his absence and had even initiated new members into the secrets of divination. He then granted her the permission to divine with erindinlogun. When asked whether 'Osun-leyo and 'Osun' are the same personality in Ifa, he affirmed that the two Osun are the same as Osun Osogbo, the fertility divinity.

However, Ifa in his infinite knowledge knows the jealous, treacherous and dangerously inquisitive nature of women. These and several other traits of women

are, set out in various Ifa corpus. Contemporary Yoruba traditional societies, women are regarded as good and bad, both qualities being flip sides of a coin.

In Ifa worship and divinatory practice, women are adherents-*iyanifa*. As mentioned earlier these individuals are trained in the literature and rituals of Ifa cult. Mrs T .1. Akinpelu (one of my informants in Ose-meji started learning from childhood and because her 'esentaye' have disclosed that she is going to become an 'apetebi', thus she learned from her husband. She admitted that Ifa can be learned on two basis; for a trade and for knowledge. In her own case she combines the job of Ifa diviner and petty trading. She had been granted the paraphernalia of a priestess.

However, women are debarred from been initiated into the *odu* cult. Although they are allowed into the sacred groove of *odu*, (*igbodu*) where the *itefa* rituals are carried out. Myth has it that *odu* is believed to be the betrothed wife of Orunmila who refused to marry him, on one of Orunmila's visit to 'ajule orun' (heaven), he found out that *odu* was resident there as the wife of Onibode (heaven's gate keeper). Orunmila then brought her back to earth, on account of shame, she asked to be kept in a big pot and Orunmila granted her request. This is why a person is not considered to be a full *babalawo* until he has performed the ritual of "looking inside a pot" known as the pot of *Odu*. As corollary, an interesting twist to the tale which explains the taboo surrounding women and the women not viewing *Odu* was revealed by chief Elebuibon in the myth of "Oromodimodi". The tale recounts that Orunmila on a quest for knowledge went to consult the mythical female spirit "Oromodimodi" whom afterwards he made wife, after promising her that he would abide by her expressed wishes not to be seen by his other wives. Two of whom out of curiosity broke this taboo and met their deaths. Some other priests and priestesses agreed with Elebuibon, a certain *Iyanfa* in Oyo affirmed this during a discussion: "A o'le wo *Odu* o! Eewo gba ni, awon iya wa lo ko ba wa (we cannot view *Odu* at all! It is a serious taboo, our mothers have caused it). In actual fact, it is stated that women cannot partake or view the *Odu* ritual, as a matter of fact any woman who does so shall not only be affected but also invites the wrath of *Odu* on her household and entire community. (Ethnography, 2010)

Drewal (1992) has another account concerning the sanctity of *Odu*. According to her, the female deity *Odu* is represented by a closed calabash placed in a larger container always carried by a female figurine. According to her, women are prohibited from entering *Odu* groove, and there is a well-known story for this. Orunmila promised to keep *Odu* away from other women for she is thought to be harsh and vindictive, not only that, but women cannot be initiated through *itefa'* rituals. Nor can they even participate in the rituals of rebirth that takes place inside the *Igbo'du* even though they can interpret Ifa and can divine.

### **Roles of *Iyanifa* in Ifa Divinatory System**

Since the indispensability and importance of women in Ifa mythology and belief has been emphasized, their roles contemporarily will be looked into. The roles of *iyanifa* can be divided into public and domestic roles, Their roles in the public sphere include their functions as market women, artisans, midwives, farm helps and they are also leaders of politically powerful and influential groups. In

Ifa practice they are as already mentioned 'iyanifa' iyawo ifa or 'apetebi' (wife of a babalawo) and an iyawo ifa' (in this case, the phrase referred to a newly initiated man or woman and in some cases a person dedicated to the shrine of Orunmila)

In the domestic sphere, they are wives, mothers, and daughters and also function as diviners to their families. In Mrs. Afinni Fakorede's words, it is important for 'Iyawo Ifa or Apetebi' to greet Ifa in the morning before talking to anyone. Women assistance in the preparation of sacrifice (etutu) was demonstrated when I witnessed a babalawo attending to a client in Ogbagi Akoko, the wives and daughters of the babalawo prepared the goat slaughtered, made a pounded yam and saw to the proper arrangements of all other sacrificial items before it was carried to the assigned place.

We can now see that the roles of women (iyanifa) overlaps and are several things in the various spheres of their existence. As shown in the figure below, women are wives to their divinity and their husband as iyawo ifa, they are mothers to their biological children and at the same time mothers to their congregation, society and cult. They play the role of diviner in the both spheres

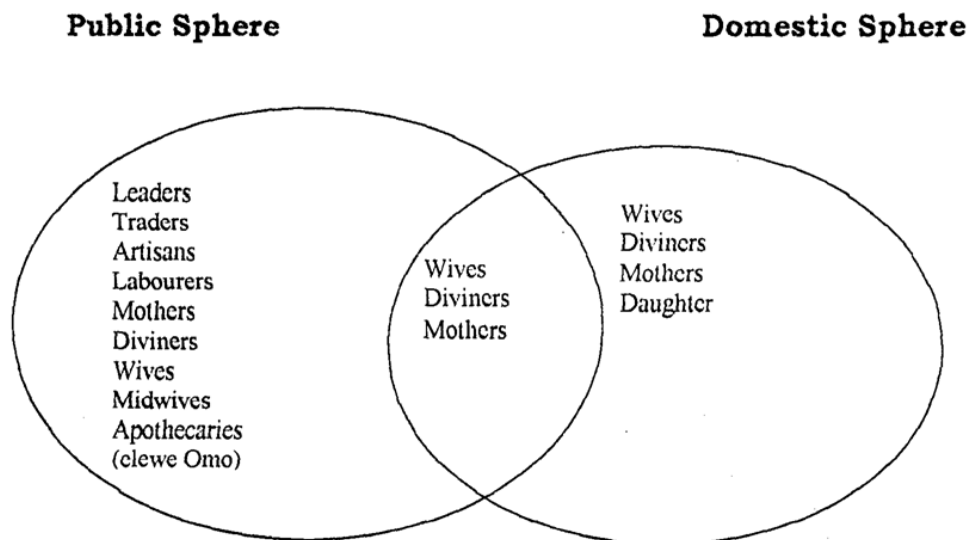


Fig 2. Roles of iyanifa

The overlapping roles of 'Jyanifa can also be demonstrated in the burial rites of a dead Babalawo. The burial rites is known as 'idifa igbehin' (the last divination). In this case a 'babalawo and the 'apetebi of the deceased who is also an iyanifa' are mandated to cast the 'ikin' of the deceased before lowering him into the grave. The Odu signaturesthat comes out were treated accordingly by the spectators who were mostly 'babalawo and iyanifa'. A babalawo confirmed that in 'awo' (members of a cult; either man or woman) burial rites, women play the most important roles like the apetebi playing host and chief mourner, making sure the idifa igbehin (last divination) of the deceased is well carried out. And despite the fact that she is bereaved, must make available foods and drinks for the guests. He went further to say that the generality of women present are to supply the praise songs (oriki) of the deceased and other dignities in attendance.



Fig 3. A Woman Praise Singer at a Babalawo's Burial

In the case of chief Awolowo Aiyelagbe Oyeboade who died May, 2001, who was the Akogun awo ijo ose-meji Ibadan and as such was properly laid in state with the service of songs done by the choir of the aforementioned shrine which is comprised of women. Also, the iyaegbeakorin, in person of Iyanifa Fakorede (Mrs.) printed the programme for the service of songs, to the proper sitting arrangements, supply of food and drinks and general supervision of the reception.

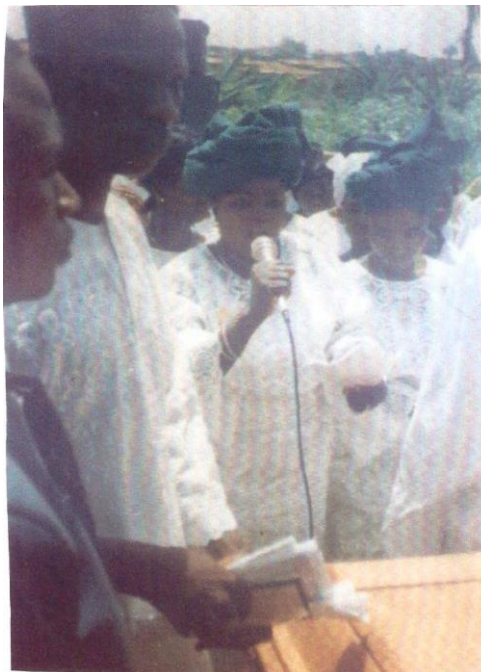


Fig 4. The Iya Egbe Akorin Supplying the Songs



Fig 5. While the Male Members of the Choir were Beating Gongs and Drums

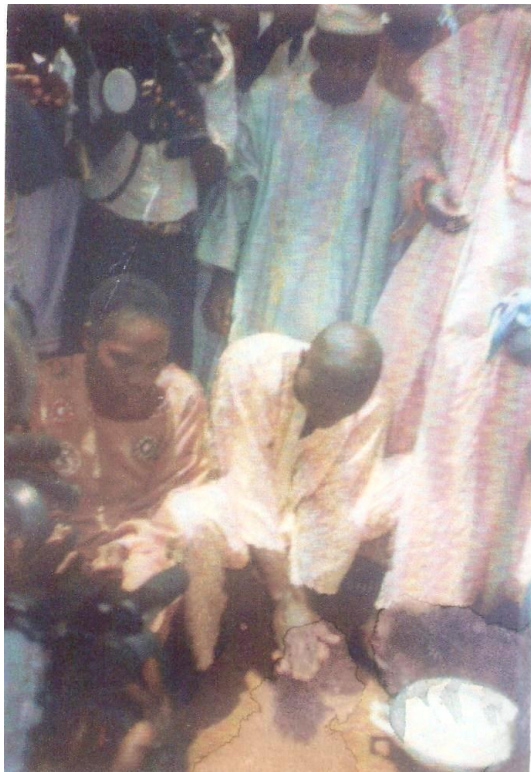


Fig 6. Iyanifaand Modern Discourses

Many scholars have submitted that Ifa is one of the important Orisa being worshipped in Yoruba. I also found out that Ifa plays major roles in the life of Yoruba people including making the other orisa relevant to their devotees. Abimbola (1976) stresses that 'without Ifa, the importance of other Yoruba [orisa] would diminish... As a mouth piece, Ifa serves to popularize the other Yoruba gods; he serves to immortalize them, also because traditional Yoruba people see Ifa as a body of knowledge, a system of social, emotional and pathological control, It is consulted very often. Bade Ajayi (1996) says: To the Yoruba, divination or consultation with the wisest Orisa, Orunmila is of crucial spiritual importance.

Having established the importance of Ifa to the Yoruba, developmental efforts can be channeled through Ifa. Such step had been taken by some scholars like Elebuibon who has compiled stories from ese-Ifa and has made documentary dramas, for example, Ifaolokun Asorodayo. Esikinni helped in integrating Ifa knowledge and theatre, Professor Olu Longe has also done tremendous work on 'Ifa divination and computer Science where he established the binary functionality of computer and the working of Odu. Also information on Ifa is on the internet, while some other young men and women are working on the possibility of consulting Ifa via the internet.

Roles of women have not changed significantly in Ifa divinatory practice. However because of the ever expanding nature of societal growth, and due to their multifunctional roles they have to play, contemporarily, the status of women has changed and broadened, from the traditional castes, for example 'apetetebi' 'iyawo ifa' and 'iyanifa' who were restricted to Ifa divination and its attendant rituals, are now exposed to a broader scope of professions, including well educated women like Esi- kinni. Also iyanifa can be drawn from any part of the world, examples Esi kinni and Suzan Wenger (a.k.a Aduni Olorisa) who were foreigners; the first been an African-American and the second, an Austrian.

The policy makers have found out that vertically oriented approaches to developmental issues are of limited success. Integration of women especially important women like 'iyanifa' into horizontally oriented plans and implementation is better. According to Adebayo Fagbohun, a full time babalawo asserted that if anyone wants anything from him, such should first talk to his wife. He asked, "Don't you know that you women are powerful? They can kill one and they can protect one". (Ethnography, 2018)

Another informant, Awodele Adererni confirmed this statement by making me realize that not taking to ones wife's advice is "dangerous" as such man is digging his grave and such person will not meet God at home, as God himself had created women for men in order to take care of his physical and spiritual needs: Another Important role of a women is that of the mother and child bond. According to Drewal, (1992): 'The Yoruba always state that their emotional ties with their mothers are much stronger than those with their fathers'. Because the attachment of a child to his/her mother cannot be replaced by any institution, as such, policies affecting the generality of human populace should be directed through women. By middle age, women's domestic roles shift from mother to grandmother and subsequently to great-grandmother. In all these phases, women are still required to help in socializing children into the social orders. As such they teach their daughters the care of children and at the same time act as midwives (agbebi) and herbalists (elewe omo). From the above roles, public, health (PHC) and community development (CD) initiatives should also be channeled through women.

It has also been observed that in traditional Yoruba society, women are of importance in revenue generating activities such as trading in petty items and farm produce, assisting in the farm; as farm laborers, assisting in site constructions as; 'Ponpon' (cement) carriers at the same time operating in the domestic sphere where they are not paid. All these put together make women a strategic point in

poverty alleviation programs and also a force to be reckoned with in an introduction of new agricultural devices like fertilizers, new seeds and mechanization of agriculture.

Furthermore, international Organization such as United Nations Organization (UNO) World Health Organization (WHO) United Nations Children Educational Fund (UNICEF) should endeavor to integrate cultural anthropologist in their policy formations, as these people have been trained to know how, where and when a policy affecting the people could be implemented. An informant suggested that many of these programs have failed because of government insensibility to peoples' cultures. He further stressed his worries, can you imagine this new awareness program on AIDS? Who says Ifa cannot heal AIDS, they should stop embarrassing people. It now came into my mind that we are trailing a dangerous path, as policy makers have left behind important population of uneducated, traditional and poor people.

These populations are the stores of important native knowledge. The implications of such exemption is a loss of important pieces of knowledge, which itself should be a mixture of the old and new.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This is a model relevant for present day dominant discourses about the roles of women in different spheres of social life. Not only in Yoruba land, but in Nigeria and all over the world.

It must be noted that culture and society play a greater role in and serve as a bane of active participation of women in religious rituals, and rites. Iyanifa operate more in the domestic sphere with the primary responsibility of taking care of the home. Their roles at home is such of a great magnitude that so many things are attached. They are into petty trading. Subsistence farming and home management, women have always worked in all societies of the world and at all times. In some instances they have worked harder than men especially at home without pay and with little or no acknowledgement, they are registered as 'house-wives in the national census. Although society and culture has relegated women to the background, they still perform duties that cannot be replaced by any other social institution.

It is now obvious today that these are whims, society ignorantly designed to undo itself. The ability to bring improvement into society, the knack for development is not only enshrined in men but equally in women effort should be aimed at integrating traditional beliefs and modern development in all aspect of human endeavors.

The discourse now is for women to be recognized and adequately appreciated in their different roles. The task requires rigorous action on the part of government, religious groups and private non-governmental organization.

Greater equality in the family is to the good of all.. The traditional myth that men are the decision makers, economic and spiritual providers, and women playing the domestic roles of mothers, wives and care-givers in the family should be revised. It is evident today that women's contribution in the different spheres are decisions for group and social development. Countries will continue to be underdeveloped if women are not accorded their place.

Overall findings of this research show that women are active individuals in socio-cultural and economic life of Nigeria. They are the pillars at home and are not left out in economic and cultural pursuits.

Women represent the nation's resources yet to be fully tapped, and since women represent the majority of the nation's population mechanisms must be set in motion to make judicious use of this wasted resource; if indeed development is not to elude the nation. But to be able to fulfil this, we have come up with some recommendations which could be of help to government/policy makers. The recommendations are:

The pivotal roles of women have been established. It is thus only reasonable that any initiative geared issues like education, primary health care delivery, development of high yield agricultural system, Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI), Awareness Programme on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and child spacing/family planning methods should be targeted at women if not solely but at least primarily.

The saying 'educate a woman and educate a nation' has been proven to be true all over the world for development, and women are primarily the 'educators' in any society, they should be the focus of any public education initiative which is to have any chance of success and continuity.

Economic empowerment programmes should have women as their focus due to the several economic roles they play.

Ifa should be integrated into the syllabus of the religious knowledge, because of its usefulness as contained in the moral teachings enshrined in the Ifa corpus.

Effort should be made towards the documentation of the Ifa corpus which is still primarily oral in form with its attendant disadvantages.

This research work be put to use as a blue print for development of traditional societies in the context of the 21st century.

#### Notes

- Iyalawo - My childhood name for women diviners.
- Iyanifa - Women diviners or Ifa priestess.
- Ifa - Divination Oracle of the Yorubas.
- Aje - Witches.
- Esu-Elegbera - Yoruba trickster god misinterpreted to be Satan.
- Apetebi - Wife of a babalawo
- Iyawo Ifa - Someone who is dedicated to the shrine of Ifa and /or a newly initiated person
- Babalawo - Ifa priest or male diviner.
- Eborá - Spirits
- Ose-meji - One of the odu Ifa and which Ibadan is established with.
- Igbín- Snails
- Ikarahun - Shells
- Odu - The mythical wife of Orunmila.
- Odu Ifa - Ifa corpus.
- Ese Ifa - Ifa verses

*Olarinmoye*

- Orunmila - Master of Ifa divination.
- Elegan - Weak men
- Garri - Cassava powder
- Esentage - The rite of knowing destiny at birth.
- Ikin - The sixteen sacred palmnuts for divination
- Opele - Divining chain
- Ifa Erindinlogun- Sixteen cowries system of divination
- Iyere osun- Palmwood powder for divination.
- Opon- ifa -Tray of divination
- Olodumare - Supreme being (GOD).
- Obatala- Yoruba Arch divinity
- Idifa igbehin- Last divination rite
- Aso Oke - Traditional woven cloth
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#### **FURTHER STUDY**

This research still has a delay, so it is necessary to conduct further research related to the topic of Female Power in Textual Discourse and Practical Action, the Roles of Iyanifa in the Ifa Divinatory System Among the Yoruba to improve this research and add insight for readers

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