

# Ifá and Òrúnmìlà's Meme: A Symbolic Comparative Analysis

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## Abstract

The meme of Ifá and Òrúnmìlà in the African milieu is such that has a lasting print on its culture. So many studies exist on the symbolisms and activities of the duo in the African cosmology but few works have been devoted to the memes and relationships of Ifá and Òrúnmìlà which would have established the belief in the dynamics and workings of Olódumare as the godhead. The paper reveals that the chronicles (Odu) of Ifá divination make use of mathematical-like signs and symbols that require a critical semiotic analysis to unpack its complexity. This study concludes that there is a symbiotic relationship between Ifá and Òrúnmìlà; while Ifá is more of the objects of divination system, Òrúnmìlà is the messenger that delivers Ifá's messages.

**Keywords:** Ifá, Òrúnmìlà, Ifá corpus, symbolism, semiotics

## Introduction

In the African cosmology, Ifá is regarded as the spokesperson for the living. Because of the staunch belief of the Yoruba in Ifá divination and their strong attachment to its story of creation, it is regarded as the living foundation of Yorùbá culture. Munoz sees Ifá's scope beyond the Yorùbá cultural society when he says, "Ifá is the most universal divinity among the Yorùbá and other West African people."<sup>1</sup> Because of the universal spread of Ifá among the nations of the world, Ifá is known to different people by different names throughout the world. For example, Ifá is known as Fa among the Fon of Republic of Benin, Eva to Nupes, Ifá in Cuba, USA, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Surinam and Togo. Ifá is referred to by the Ewe as Afa, Ephod by Jews, Geomancy by Europeans and Margays.<sup>2</sup> With these different realisations of Ifá nomenclature which cut across nations of the world, the prominence of Ifá is not in doubt. In 2005, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proclaimed Ifá as one of the 86 traditions of the world to be recognised as masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage of humanity.<sup>3</sup> By this

<sup>1</sup>L. Munoz. *A Living Tradition: Studies in Yorùbá Civilization*. Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2003, 179

<sup>2</sup>J. Odeyemi. "Ifá and Oriṣà Temple." 2013. Web. 13 July 2012. <oyekuofun.com/what-is-ifa/>, p.5

<sup>3</sup>B. A. Robinson. "Ifá: The Religion of the Yorùbá People." 2008. Web. 26 July 2021.

proclamation, Ifá joined the league of heritages and therefore requiring urgent preservation. Ifá, as a religion, science or literary text, has over time been of great interest to scholars in different areas of human endeavors- like medicine, philosophy, religion, art and culture. Ifá nomenclature, especially on religion, has cut across nations and tribes around the world. For instance, just like among the Yorùbá people, Ifá "is considered as the god of divination in Igala culture. It is believed that, Ifá carries messages from the invisible world to the visible world. This is why Ifá is a medium of dialogue or intermediary between the living and the ancestors."<sup>4</sup> Ifá communicates in symbols. The messages of Ifá encapsulate the past, present and the future of the Yorùbá people in particular and the humanity in general. As a result of this, Ifá has gain prominence; not only among the Yorùbá nations alone; but in the world generally. On the other hand, Ọ̀rúnmìlà is the messenger of Ifá oracle. This means that, Ọ̀rúnmìlà was the first Ifá priest. However, the use of these two names or words made some scholars and authors to say that there is no difference between the two. That is, Ifá is Ọ̀rúnmìlà as Ọ̀rúnmìlà is Ifá.

### **Aim and Objective of the Study**

The aim of this study is to establish a relationship between the symbolic memes of Ifá and Ọ̀rúnmìlà. The objective of the study is to demonstrate some contexts which Ifá can exist without Ọ̀rúnmìlà and vice-versa.

### **Theoretical Framework: semiotic approach**

Semiotic is the study of signs. It has three modes of description which include: sign, symbol and icon. Symbolism, which underlies Ifá divination system is adopted for this study. In Ifá symbolism, "each ẹ̀ṣẹ Ifá represents man in his eternal struggle for a way of life. The individual client in his symbolic identification with this primordial man takes the symbolism full cycle."<sup>5</sup> Symbol serves as a medium of writing in the prehistoric period of development, that is, "symbols transferred our prehistoric ancestors into organized human beings within the context of cultural livelihood and institutions."<sup>6</sup> This is because; a symbol is an expression of an idea, intension or feeling, just like a verbal or writing forms of communication.

The knowledge of semiotics covers different aspects of human and non-human lives. "Symbolism means to attribute more than its superficial value to a word or action through the way the word is used or action is presented. The entire system of Ifá divination is based on symbolism."<sup>7</sup> The use of symbol is keenly contextual and cultural. As a result of this, "various kinds of symbols are used in

<sup>4</sup>I. Negedu. "The Igala Traditional Religious Beliefs System between Monotheism and Polytheism" (nd). Web. 17 May 2017. <http://dx.doc.org/10.04314/og.v10:1.7.>, 5

<sup>5</sup>O. Ọ̀látúnjì. *Features of Yorùbá Oral Poetry*. Ibadan: University Press, 2005, 135

<sup>6</sup>S. Madubuike. "The Role of Language in Socialization and Culture." *African Culture and Civilization*, Ed. Ademola Ajayi, Ibadan: Atlantis Books, 2005, 325-44, 136.

<sup>7</sup>O. Ọ̀látúndé. "Classification of Yorùbá Oral Poetry." *Yorùbá Language and Literature*. Ed. Adébiṣi. Afọlayan. Ile-Ife: University Press, 1982, 60, 47-68.

communication. For example, men use amulets, confess sin, make laws, observe codes of behavior, explain dreams, classify relatives in specific categories etc. with the help of symbols. Without symbol there would be no culture. Man would merely be an animal.”<sup>8</sup> This opinion suggests that human society can hardly be realized without the use of symbols. The use of symbols is not limited to the human society alone but also serves as a major means of communication with the divine or worship.

In symbol mode, there is no resemblance or connection between the signifier and the signified, which is, the object and what the object stands for or represents. A symbol's connection with its object is a matter of convention, rule or agreement between the users. Such symbols, rules and convention between the signifier and the signified must be learnt. In Yorùbá tradition, it can be realized in form of Arokò (symbolism), as such an object or something stands for something or somebody in real life. Other semiotic modes, as proposed by Peirce in addition to codes are icons and index. However, other semiotic modes are outside the scope of this study.

As explained earlier, knowledge of semiotics covers different aspects of life. This work adopts the cultural semiotics, which is concerned with the use of cultural objects or signs associated with cultural meanings. A sign can create multiple meanings, depending on the culture in which it exists. The application of the cultural religious elements depends on the individual or personal knowledge. However, “we all have little experience in many areas of everyday life.”<sup>9</sup> Since the meaning invented on a symbol is cultural (including religious symbol), it means there must be individual cultural orientation or knowledge about a symbol. Individual understanding of the cultural symbol depends on the values an individual associates with a symbol. The distinction between the semantic knowledge and world knowledge (for example, cultural and personal knowledge) is a doctrine of cultural semiotics. Proper interpretation of religious symbols cannot be undertaken outside the cultural components of religion.

The meaning of a symbol (including religious object or art work) is revealed by the code of that symbol. “A symbol is a representation of a meaning or a value, an external sign or gesture which by association conveys an idea or stimulates a feeling. All communication, whether through language or otherwise, makes use of symbols.”<sup>10</sup> This means, communication is made possible by symbol. One can only comprehend meaning and differences between Ifá and Òrùnmìlà through symbols.

The identification, description and understanding roles of symbols in the

<sup>8</sup>I. Roy. *Anthropology: The Study of Man*. New Delhi: S. Chand and Company, 2003, 672

<sup>9</sup>S. Lobner. *Understanding Semantics*. London: Hodder Arnold Publishers, 2002, 201.

<sup>10</sup>R. M. Maciver, and H. C. Page. *Society: An Introductory Analysis*. India: Trinity Press, 1949, 153.

people's beliefs, thoughts and manners of life cannot be separated from each other. The value of an object is proportional to its use in cultural expressions—symbolism. That is, “the essence of an object is that which finds expression in the concept which the object embodies, the concept under which it must be identified if it is to be or remain what it is.”<sup>11</sup>

The symbolism of Ifá in relation with the Yorùbá belief is necessary for the comprehension of the meaning of symbol in religion and culture. That is, symbols in religion discharge two unique roles, signifying what they mean in religion and its practice. The first is functioning as something that “represents,” “stand for,” or “signifies” something else.” The second is functioning as “the means by which the people orient themselves to the symbol's referent.” In combining these two inclusive functions, religious symbols provide religious followers the pathway to understanding and negotiating the meeting points between the mundane world and the ultimate reality – thus encompassing corporate and individualistic connotations in relation to the two spaces.<sup>12</sup>

This means that symbolism entails something in place of another thing or somebody. That is, in the absence of the original symbol the improvised symbols stand in. Symbol is learnable. Meaning that, because of the multi-various meaning associated with it, proper understanding of such meanings demand pedagogical knowledge. Ifá religious elements are symbolic. The symbols are coded in Odu, realized in two forms. The sixteen major or principal Odu and the two hundred and forty minor Odu. These Odu are believed to be sufficient to encapsulate all human and non-human situations. Each of the Odu is connected or associated with human. The Ifá symbols are connected in various ways with the Yorùbá system of living. This is why Ifá is regarded as the foundation on which the culture of the Yorùbá people rests. These symbols are relational; as the past, present and the future of the Yorùbá people are brought together to attain and achieve continuity.

In this study, despite the fact that, Ifá text is a culture bound genre, data is translated into English for the benefit of a wider audience. The Yorùbá data are interpreted as possible; but, in some cases, not interpreted, in order to retain the local colouration of the original texts, especially, Ifá, “since the indigenous language is more conducive to the interpretation of an indigenous genre.”<sup>13</sup>

## Discussions and Analysis

<sup>11</sup>F. A. Olajide. In Defence of the Unborn and the Limit of Existential Options. Inaugural lecture delivered on 6 June, 2017, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria, 2017, 9.

<sup>12</sup>I. Aderibigbe. Contextualizing Religion Study and Practice. Ilorin: University of Ilorin Press, 2016, 60.

<sup>13</sup>T. M. Ilesanmi. Yorùbá Orature and Literature: A Cultural Analysis. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press Ltd, 2004, 111.

This section discusses some misconceptions about Ifá and the misunderstanding between Ifá's and Ọrúnmìlà's symbolism. Before now, some authors refer to the two (Ifá and Ọrúnmìlà) as the same, while some are of the view that the two symbolized two different things. In other words, on the one hand, some authors and scholars believe that, Ifá and Ọrúnmìlà symbolized the same person. On the other hand, some are of the opinion that the process of divination and the voice that proceeds out from the process is Ifá, but the divinity is known as Ọrúnmìlà. For example, one of the opinions that Ifá is different from Ọrúnmìlà says:

Àwọn ịsọrì kìíní nínú àwọn olùwádíí wònyí gbà pé kò sí ìyàtò nínú 'Ifá' àti Ọrúnmìlà. Àbájáde iwádíí wò ní ẹnìkàn náà ní n jẹ orúkọ méjéjì. Ịsọrì miiran gbà pé ọ̀nà tí Ọrúnmìlà n gbà ẹ́ ẹ́ ẹ́ rẹ àti ohùn tí n fọ lẹnu bí ó bá n yẹ ẹ̀niyàn lẹwọ kan ibò wò ní í jẹ 'Ifá' àti pé írúnmọlẹ́ tí ó n ẹ́ ẹ́ yì ní 'Ọrúnmìlà.'<sup>14</sup>

The first group of these scholars believed that there is no difference between 'Ifá' and 'Ọrúnmìlà'. The outcome of their findings is that the same person bears the two names. Another group believes that the process with which Ọrúnmìlà performs his work and the proceeds of his mouth during the process of divination is referred to as 'Ifá' and that the deity himself is 'Ọrúnmìlà.'

In addition, Adéoyè is of the opinion that, it is on earth that Ifá symbolizes Ọrúnmìlà, but before their coming to the physical world, the two were different. However, Ifá corpora are silent on the name of Ọrúnmìlà divinity before his existence on the surface of the earth. There are Ifá corpuses to support this. For example, Abimbólá says, "the fact borne out of my own research, however, is that the two names, Ifá and Ọrúnmìlà refer to the same deity."<sup>15</sup> Abimbólá agrees that, 'Ọrúnmìlà' refers 'exclusively' to the deity himself, while the name Ifá refers to the divinity and his divination system. However, Ajàdí, sees Ifá as, "corpus, the vehicle of Yorùbá divinities."<sup>16</sup>

The etymology or meaning relation in "Ifá" is also contentious, as, some authors are of the opinion that, Ifá means "to scrape all", as the name sounds. Other authors however believe that, there is no connection between the sounds of the word associated with "Ifá". For example, Abimbólá says, "Ifá has also led some writers to much speculations sometimes tending towards folk etymology. Some writers say that the word Ifá, comes from the root 'fá' which means 'to scrape' or, in an idiomatic sense, 'to embrace, to contain'... There is nothing either in the Ifá

<sup>14</sup>F. A. Olajide. In Defence of the Unborn and the Limit of Existential Options. Inaugural lecture delivered on 6 June, 2017, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria, 2017, 9.

<sup>15</sup>I. Aderibigbe. *Contextualizing Religion Study and Practice*. Ilorin: University of Ilorin Press, 2016, 60.

<sup>16</sup>T. M. Ilesanmi. *Yorùbá Orature and Literature: A Cultural Analysis*. Ilé-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press Ltd, 2004, 111.

myths or in the Ifá Corpus itself to support this view.”<sup>17</sup>

One can argue against the position of Abimbólá by looking at the word formation of Ifá and the meaning associated with the word. It is observed in this work that, 'Ifá' is a derived noun. 'Fá' means 'to scrape'. 'Fá' is a verb, while 'I' is a prefix. There is a semantic relation between the verb: fá “to scrape” and the derived noun, through prefix: “I + fá = Ifá” (to scrape). For example, Chomsky says about words “that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions they refer to.”<sup>18</sup> The imitation of sounds in Ifá is associated with the action that the word performs, that is, an action that, Ifá's knowledge is all encompassing. According to Chomsky, “There is some sound symbolism in language – that is, words whose pronunciation suggests the meaning.”<sup>19</sup> Chomsky's opinion best describes the situation with the word, Ifá. There is sound symbolism in Ifá, its pronunciation is associated with its meaning as described above.

Also, Abimbólá<sup>20</sup> is against the view that, Ifá is named thus because, there is nothing, either in the Ifá myths or in the Ifá corpus itself to support this view. However, it is observed in this study that, this position has changed with Ifá corpora collections after Abimbólá's observations of 1976. For instance, Sálámí's illustrations in *Ọwónrín Iká* supports the position that suggests likely meaning relations with the name 'Ifá' to have been derived from 'fa' “*Ilé ayé wá bèrè síl dára. Wón wá n yin Ifá. Ẹwọ Ifá, o fá a tán ayé yẹ wón nlé ayé.*”<sup>21</sup> Meaning that, that was how the world became a better place. They then started to praise Ifá. 'You Ifá', they reasoned. You have cleared all hurdles of life; life pleased them so much in the earth. “Fá a tán” connotes solution to all things. However, Abimbólá is of the opinion that, there was no evidence of meaning relation between the names 'Ifá' as earlier explained.<sup>22</sup> But the Ifá corpus contained in Sálámí<sup>23</sup> is against the earlier position of Abimbólá, as the Ifá corpus above shows that there is meaning relation in the name 'Ifá'. From the morphological point of view, Sálámí may be right. The various scopes of Ifá further buttresses on limitless knowledge of Ifá. For example, the knowledge of Ifá contains different aspects of Yorùbá life. For example, there is Ifá myth which relates to the foundation of the Yorùbá towns and villages. Áásán is a branch of Ifá or ọfọ (incantation) mostly used to do evil. According to Yémitán and Ọgúndélé, Ifá contains two important aspects: 'science' and 'religion.’<sup>24</sup> In addition, Ọdẹyẹmí<sup>25</sup> categorizes importance of Ifá's scope into eight: the spiritual, religious, divine, the worship and sacrificial, medicinal, historical and cultural values.

<sup>17</sup>N. Chomsky, 'What is Language?' In V. Fromkin, R. Rodman and N. Hyam (Eds), *An Introduction to Language*. pp. 3-34, New York: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007, 7.

<sup>18</sup>See Chomsky 2007, 7.

<sup>19</sup>See W. Abimbólá. *IFA: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*. Ibadán: Oxford University Press., 1976.

<sup>20</sup>A. Sálámí. *Ifá: A Complete Divination*. Lagos: NIDD Publishers, 2002, 311.

<sup>21</sup>See W. Abimbólá 1976.

<sup>22</sup>See Sálámí 2002.

<sup>23</sup>O. Yémitán and O. Ọgúndélé. *Oju Ọ̀pá Apá kinni*. Ibadán: Oxford University Press, 1970, ix.

<sup>24</sup>J. Ọdẹyẹmí. “Ifá and Ori Ọ̀ Temple.” 2013. Web. 13 July 2012. <oyekuofun.com/what-is-ifa/>, 6.

own opinion, to trace the etymology of both 'Ifá' and 'Ọ̀rúnmìlà' may be impossible, since "such ancient names as Ifá and Ọ̀rúnmìlà do not permit straight forward analysis."<sup>32</sup> It is discovered in this study that, where one can occur, the other may not occur, and the two may co-occur in other context, therefore, the use of Ọ̀rúnmìlà or Ifá is contextual. For instance, Abimbóla relating the voice of Ifá in Ọ̀bará Mèjì:

Ọ̀rúnmìlà lálàá ikú mójú ojò náà.  
Ló bá gbé Ifáa rẹ kalẹ.  
Ó bí í leèrè nipa alá tí ó lá.<sup>33</sup>

...Ọ̀rúnmìlà then had a dream overnight.  
He then placed his Ifá on the floor.  
He asked him about the dream he had.

In the above Ifá corpus, the statement provides a distinction between Ifá and Ọ̀rúnmìlà. The Ifá corpus above recognizes Ifá as the oracle, while Ọ̀rúnmìlà is the diviner. It is often said that Ifá (as object of divination) is the source of power for Ọ̀rúnmìlà. This is why the Yorùbá do say that "Ifá awo Ọ̀rúnmìlà" (Ifá the cult of Ọ̀rúnmìlà). There is a contextual difference in the use of the two names in the Ifá corpus. Ọ̀dẹyẹmí is also of the opinion that, the two words (Ifá and Ọ̀rúnmìlà) are different entities. Ọ̀rúnmìlà is not Ifá. For instance, "just as OGÚN is not iron, and Mohammed is not the Quran... Ọ̀rúnmìlà is the herbing and interpreter of the Divine Message of Olódùmarè. That message is Ifá."<sup>34</sup> It is noted here that one is able to establish that some issues on Ifá can be resolved by recent Ifá corpus collections. For example, we are able to relate the power and scope of Ifá to its name. These observations show the limitless scope of Ifá's knowledge and as bedrock of the Yorùbá culture

The variation in Ifá's objects of divination is equally related in historical development with the Hebrew's form of divination found in the Bible. For instance,

the worship of Ifá is one of the principal branches and based on the great inestimable value of the palm nuts... It is perfectly natural that the great importance attach to some highly valued natural gift should, in the course of time, by a superstitious and idolatrous people, culminate in reverence and adoration. Such seem to have been the case with this palm nut than which nothing is more highly prized by the natives. With this system is connected the priest of Ifá and we think may be added the Urim and Thumm, as in it is supposed to reside oracular vision or

<sup>32</sup> W. Abimbola. *IFA: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press., 1976, 4

<sup>33</sup> W. Abimbola. *Awon Oju Odu Mererindilogun*. New York: Nok Publishers, 1977a, 90.

<sup>34</sup> J. Ọ̀dẹyẹmí. "Ifá and Oriṣa Temple." 2013. Web. 13 July 2012. <oyekuofun.com/what-is-ifa/>, 4.

prophetic power of foretelling future events.<sup>35</sup>

The connection or similarities in the oracular objects- Urim and Thumm are further demonstrated to be related with that of Ifá. The relationship of Ifá oracular objects here with the Biblical objects used by the priests further demonstrates distinction between Ifá and Òrúnmìlà- the message and the messenger. Also, the parallel biblical symbolism of Ifá with Urim and Thummim with stones is a relationship. The ancient medium (objects) of Ifá divination has been pebbles or stones. For instance, Sètílù practiced his Ifá divination with "16 small pebbles...In process of time, palm nuts, pieces of iron and ivory balls were successfully used instead of the pebbles. At the present day, "palm nuts only are used as they are considered more easily propitiated."<sup>36</sup>

The equivalence in Ifá divination symbolism with biblical reference shows the likely or perceived parallel opinions in the two religions positions on the symbolism of Ifá and Òrúnmìlà. The opinions above equally show the universality of the functions or roles of the religious symbols with the belief systems. In another words, the form of biblical media of enquiry with the use of Urim and Thumim are related with Ifá in various forms. For example, Orimóogunjé reports that:

Tí a bá wò Urim àti Thumim tí Olódùmarè sò pé kí àwọn ọmọ Héberù fí maa bèèrè nńkan lẹwọ Ọun nígba tí iku Mose sunmọ etilé, a lẹ sọ eyí mọ ilana yẹwọ tí àwọn Yorùbá, tí a bá sì tún tẹlẹ nńkan tí àwọn onímọ sọ, pé Ifá jẹ ọrọ ẹnu Òrúnmìlà àti Olódùmarè àti pé Ifá gan- an ni Olódùmarè, a lẹ sọ pé o bá nńkan tí ihinrere tí Jóhànù n fihàn pé "Ní atetekosé ni ọrọ wà, ọrọ wà pẹlú Ọlórùn, Ọlórùn sì ni ọrọ nàa."<sup>37</sup>

Looking at Urim and Thumim that God, the Olódùmarè commanded the children Hebrews to perform divination to inquire from him when the time of the death of Moses was near, we can relate this to the Yorùbá form of divination and if we follow the opinions of the scholars that Ifá is the voice of Òrúnmìlà and Olódùmarè and that, Ifá is Olódùmarè, we can say that, it is the same with what is contains in the Gospel according to Saint John that "in the beginning there was the word, and the word is God."

From the relationship between Ifá and Urim and Thumim, one can say that, the two forms of divinations are ordained by God; since it is God that instructed the

<sup>35</sup> J. A. Atandá. *Yorùbá History* Ibadán: University Press, 1980, 279-80.

<sup>36</sup> S. Johnson. *The History of the Yorùbas*. Lagos: CSS Bookshops, 192140-1.

<sup>37</sup> C. Orimóogunjé. *Ifarasin Ibamu ero ati Igbagbo Yorùbá nipa Ijinji Ifá*. Opánbàtá: LASU Journal of Yorùbá Studies. Ed. Adefioye OweSakin. 1993. 1: 53-65, 58.

Hebrews to inquire through Urim and Thummim. The relationships between the two forms of divinations equally show that, they are divine media of divinations. The results of the divinations from the two media of enquiries are expressed in words; the metaphor of the words of God- God himself. It should be noted that, God is Olódumare in Yorùbá religious belief. Objects mentioned in the Old Testament in connections with the breastplate of the high priest are Urim and Thummim (as mentioned in relations with Ifá) are mentioned in several places of the bible. Examples are in the books of Nehemiah 7 verse 65, Numbers 27 verse 21, Exodus 28 verse 30 and 1 Samuel: 28 verses 3, 6, 13, and 14. Exodus talks about the mysterious Urim and Thummim that were to be "put in the breastplate of judgment" which would "be over Aaron's heart when he goes in before the Lord".<sup>38</sup> The Bible and various Jewish writings frequently refer to the Urim and Thummim which was used for divining guidance. According to Yoma 73b, the High Priest would consult this device on special occasions to determine the will of the Lord for the people...The HilchotKelaiHaMikdash (10:11) makes an unusual statement regarding the Urim and Thummim...A prophecy in Ezra indicates that the Urim and Thummim will finally be restored to Israel for guidance when Elijah and the Messiah appear: "They should not eat of the most holy things till a priest could consult with the Urim and Thummim" (Ezra 2:63).<sup>39</sup>

From this opinion, one opines that, divination is God's ordained method of knowing his mind on any matter that requires divine wisdom and guidance. The consultation of Urim and Thummim was strictly performed by the Priest as Ifá consultation is equally performed by the Ifá Priest. The opinions above also show that, both the Urim and Thummim and Ifá divinations perform the same religious functions. In addition, the debate above reveals the biblical equivalence of Ifá with Urim and Thummim.

The opinion of Orímóògùnjé is in support of the opinion that Ifá is a message (words), but he did not refer to Ifá as the message of Olódumare, but Olódumare himself. "Ifá is nothing else than Olódumare."<sup>40</sup> He cited evidences from the bible linking Ifá divination with 'Urim' and 'Thummim' that God commanded the Hebrews to ask things through. Also in the Saint John Chapter one verse one, the God himself was the word that was from the beginning. This word is Ifá, because the deep structural meaning of Ifá is a word. The opinion here suggest that, like any other universal Yorùbá religious poetry, difference is made between the deities and the associated poems; there should be difference between Ifá and Òrúnmilà as well. For example, Ògún (the deity) is different from Ìjálá, which is concerned with Ògún's history, characteristics, behaviours, philosophy and

<sup>38</sup>K. James. *Holy Bible*. U. S. A.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1977.

<sup>39</sup>G. Jeffrey. *Messiah: War in the Middle East & The Road to Armageddon*. Toronto, Ontario: Frontier Research Publications, 1991, 298-9.

<sup>40</sup>C. Orímóògùnjé. Ifárasin Ibámu èrò àti Ìgbàgbò Yorùbá nipa Ìjínjì Ifá. *Òpánbàtá: LASU Journal of Yorùbá Studies*. Ed. Adéfiyè Oyeṣákin. 1993. 1: 53-65, 57.

world view. Egúngún (the deity) is different from ẹ̀sà (the proceeds from the deity, its philosophy, behavior and so on).<sup>41</sup> Odégbolá is also of the opinion that, there is difference between Ifá and Òrúnmìlà. According to him, "Òrúnmìlà kii ẹ̀ Ifá rará. Ohùnbifò Ifá ni."<sup>42</sup> That is, Òrúnmìlà is never Ifá. He is just an interpreter for Ifá.

In a similar context, Ifá connotes symbols and objects of divination most of the time. For example, appearance of symbols on the Ifá divination board is referred to as "Ifá tó yọ lójú ọpọ̀" (the symbol that appears on the divination board) Òrúnmìlà cannot occur in this context, as it will be contextually inappropriate to say that "Òrúnmìlà tó yọ lójú ọpọ̀."<sup>43</sup> That is, Òrúnmìlà that appears on the board. Interpretation of symbol is important in the understanding of the meaning of a sign, symbol or text. In this case, the interpretation of religious symbols associated with Ifá and Òrúnmìlà need to be further observed and demonstrated.

One of the objectives of semiotics, the study that is employed by this study is interpreting different symbols with various meanings that are possible with the symbols. For example, Irvine, observes that, "interpretation is the main outcome of the semiotic process, or semiosis. Interpretation is the discursive result or output of positing meaning in any sign system. ... Interpretations often take the same form as the set of signs being interpreted."<sup>44</sup> This opinion is demonstrated in the Ifá divination system, because,

Ifá system of divination seems to depend on the interpretation of the random, behavior of physical objects, called instruments of divination... This random behavior is somehow related to the wishes and/or behavior of the gods by the diviner. Only the Ifá priests seem to know how this is done. In contrast, the divination system based on astrology depends on the behavior of celestial bodies. This is the most striking difference between the Ifá and several other divination systems.<sup>45</sup>

The implication of this opinion is that, the celestial bodies are symbolized, including their behaviors or characters in Ifá divination process.

Furthermore, it is often said that, "Ifá sunko." Meaning that, Ifá has not been able to find solution to the client's problem, but cannot be said to be "Òrúnmìlà sunko" to contextually mean the same within divination context. It can only be interpreted to mean "Òrúnmìlà slept in the farm."<sup>46</sup> This is out of the context of Ifá divination. The contextual difference is as well noticed with the use of act of

<sup>41</sup>S. Matterson, and D. Jones. *Studying Poetry*. London: Hodder Arnold, 2000, 94.

<sup>42</sup>L. Odégbolá. *Iwe Mimọ Ifá: Esin Akọdà Olodumare*. Ibadan: Odégbolá Traditional Global Services, 2014, 2.

<sup>43</sup>This exclusive contextual use or occurrence of Ifá and Òrúnmìlà show limitation of equivalence assumption of the two.

<sup>44</sup>M. Irvine. "Media Theory and Semiotics: Key Terms and Concepts." 2004. Web. 13 July 2012.

<sup>45</sup>A. McGEE. "Some Mathematical Observations on the Ifá Belief System Practiced by the Yorùbá People of Nigeria." *Culture and Ideas*. 1983. 1 (1): 95-114, 109.

divination- “*dá ifá*” that is, perform divination. It will be out of context to say “*dá Ọ̀rúnmìlà*”,<sup>47</sup> literally meaning that, divine/defeated Ọ̀rúnmìlà. These buttress further that ‘Ifá’ is mostly used in relation to divination objects and symbols. While one is not in doubt that somebody’s profession can be referent of the person sometimes, there is however difference in the signified.

### Conclusion

This study concludes that, Ifá symbolizes the knowledge that evinces all things associated with the Yorùbá life and system of living, including religion. The application of the semiotic knowledge has given us insights into what the word symbolizes. Likewise, the symbolism of Ifá and Ọ̀rúnmìlà is demonstrated. Ifá symbolizes a divination system and objects, while Ọ̀rúnmìlà symbolizes the Ifá Priest, the first person known to be Ifá diviner. He used the objects of divination, identified, inscribed, and interpreted the associated symbols as revealed by the interactions of the divination objects which are mostly in form of *ikin* or *ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ* (sacred palm-nuts or divination chains).

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<sup>46</sup>This is another semantic variation in differentiating between *Ifá* and *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*.

<sup>47</sup>This is also a form of variation in meaning of *Ifá* and *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*.