

Contemporary Pedagogy of Applied Yorùbá Sacred Text

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Introduction

The major religions of the world have written scriptures which serve as spiritual guides for their adherents. In these contemporary times, Prothero in his seminal book *God is Not One* narrowed down major religions to these: Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yorùbá Religion, Judaism, Daoism, and Atheism.¹ The Yorùbá religion that is referenced here is specifically Ifá and Òrìṣà worship, to which most Yorùbá globally subscribe, and such subscription is mostly oral. It is that oral transmission of knowledge and wisdom that forms the basis of our interrogation and attention in recognizing writers and scholars in contemporary times, who have been providing coherent documentation and pedagogy of the oral forms of Ifá and Òrìṣà worship as sacred texts. Such efforts are now contextualized and referenced as the Odù Ifá Literary Corpus. However, “Indigenous African spiritual beliefs are not bound by a written text, like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam” (Olupona 2015: 5). In Yorùbá Religion (Yorel),² the Odù Ifá³ Corpus has served as the guiding light of the Yorelians since time immemorial (Abimbola 1997: 86). It offers guidance on themes that relate to life lessons, such as character, pride and humility, human relations, sex and sexuality, culinary arts, and financial management, to mention just a few. Even the human skeleton is derived from the Ifá Corpus (Àjàyí and Sanni 2006). The Yorùbá do not take spiritual guidance lightly, as

1 Prothero, 2010; see esp. pages 25, 65, 101, 131, 169, 203, 249, and 331.

2 Yorel is an acronym for Yorùbá Religion. See Ogunade 2017a: 97. Its adherents are Yorelians.

3 Ifá is Òrúnmìlà, the Yorùbá divinity in charge of divination.

they constantly make a recourse to Odù Ifá for investigation and direction, particularly on vital issues in life.⁴

This article focuses on some selected Yorùbá sacred texts and lessons that can be applied to day-to-day living. The areas of interest include human character, sex and sexuality, malevolent forces against humanity, sin as a causative factor of human challenges, and the origin of all evils. Therefore, we shall attempt analyses of these Yorùbá sacred texts, which continue to form the traditions of Yorùbá religious communities anywhere they are found worldwide. However, before we delve into the analyses of these selected sacred texts, it is helpful to give some background on Ọ̀rúnmìlà, the custodian of Ifá.

Ifá and Divinity in Yorùbá Religion

In the indigenous Yorùbá worldview, Ifá is simply the scripture brought into the world by Ọ̀rúnmìlà (the Yorùbá oracular divinity). The oracular divinity is the custodian of Ifá, the metaphysical orders of the Yorùbá nation,⁶ and its believers worldwide. The priest or priestess of Ifá is the mediator—called the Bàbáláwò (Bàbá- is Father) in the case of the male, and Iyánífá (Ìyá is Mother) in the case of the female, an elder in the priesthood order, who is consulted by clients for investigation and solutions to life's numerous challenges. The Odù Ifá corpus consists of 256 verses (proverbs, stories, and parables). The Bàbáláwò or Iyánífá performs a casting of lots on behalf of the client, using the Ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀ (sacred palm nuts) in a special tray—preceded by expressing an invocation to open the inner-eye and direct the pathway to shed light to the client's situation. There are sixteen *odù*, and their expressive configurations in the tray determine which of the 256 verses applies to the particular situation. The sixteen Odù are: Ogbè, Ọ̀yẹ̀kú, Ìwòrì, Odí, Ìròsùn, Ọ̀wọ̀ríin, Ọ̀bàrà, Ọ̀kànràn, Ọ̀gúndá, Ọ̀sá, Iká, Ọ̀túrúpòn, Ọ̀turá, Ìrẹ̀tẹ̀, Ọ̀ṣẹ̀, and Ọ̀fún. Each stands for a spiritual principle, one that is more elaborated in several epic verses. The expressive configuration is read from right to left and markings “pressed” on the Ọ̀pòn-Ifá (divining tray) on which the *ìyẹ̀rẹ̀-osùn* (divination powder made of *piper guineense*) has been spread, thus yielding the combination of: Èjì-Ogbè, Ọ̀yẹ̀kú-Méjì, Ìwòrì-Méjì, Odí-Méjì, Ìròsùn-Méjì, Ọ̀wọ̀ríin-Méjì, Ọ̀bàrà-Méjì, Ọ̀kànràn-Méjì, Ọ̀gúndá-Méjì, Ọ̀sá-Méjì,

4 Oral Interview, High Priest 'Yemi Èlẹ̀bùibon, The Àràbà of Ọ̀ṣogbo, 73 years, 1 Èlẹ̀bùibon Street, Off Ayetoro Road, Ọ̀ṣogbo, Osun State, Nigeria, 16 June, 2021.