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# 3 A Semiotic Investigation of Socio-Religious Links between *Ifá* and *Ayò Ọlọpọ̀n* among the Yorùbá of Nigeria

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## Abstract

*Ifá* is believed to be the foundation of Yorùbá culture. This means every aspect of Yorùbá life, including religion, philosophy, science, ideology, recreation, literature and so on has one link or another with *Ifá*. *Ayò ọlọpọ̀n* is a Yorùbá indigenous game that is played internationally today. However, the relationships of *Ifá*, as one of the major religions of the Yorùbá with *ayò ọlọpọ̀n* as a major social (recreation) aspect of the Yorùbá life is open to scholarship. This gap is filled by this study. This work investigates the relationship between *Ifá* cultural binary code and *ayò ọlọpọ̀n*. Semiotic, which is the science of signs, is adopted for the analysis of the study because, symbolism underlies *Ifá* divination. Binary code expresses two forms of cultural elements or beliefs of the Yorùbá people. Code of binary, as one of the semiotic elements of *Ifá* is related with that of *ayò ọlọpọ̀n*. It is found out from this study that, *ayò ọlọpọ̀n* cultural binary code is an extension of *Ifá* binary code. As a result of the links between *Ifá* binary code and *ayò ọlọpọ̀n*, this work concludes that, the cultural elements of *ayò* are derived from *Ifá*. Therefore, *ayò ọlọpọ̀n* cultural values are more appreciated beyond mere recreation but encapsulate some cultural values closely related with *Ifá*, the springboard of the Yorùbá culture.

Keywords: *Ifá*, *Ayò ọlọpọ̀n*, Binary, Code, Semiotics.

## Introduction

Relationships in a cultural dynamic like, religion, account for wider patterns of relationships among human societies. Understanding the cultural dynamics of a society is an imperative in to understanding their value system. In a predominantly Yorùbá society, *Ifá* is believed to be the springboard of Yorùbá culture. *Ayò ọlọpọ̀n* is an indigenous game played on a game board-*ọlọpọ̀n ayò*, containing twelve holes, six holes on each player's row usually by two mature males in the open place. Today, the nomenclature of the game has cut across nations of the world. Therefore, this work examines the relationship between *Ifá* and *ayò ọlọpọ̀n* around cultural binary code. It is necessary to relate *Ifá* code to *ayò ọlọpọ̀n* code because, on one hand, *Ifá* is regarded as the foundation on which every aspect of the culture of the Yorùbá people rests. On the other hand, *ayò ọlọpọ̀n* as an ancient Yorùbá indigenous game has not been related with other cultural elements so as to establish cultural relationship.

In 2005, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proclaimed *Ifá* as one of the 86 traditions of the world to be recognized as masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage of humanity (Robinson 2008). By this proclamation, *Ifá* joined the league of heritages and therefore require 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 history, philosophy, religion, art and culture.

*Ayò Ọ* was introduced to Ọ̀sun Ọ̀sogbo festival in Nigeria some nineteen years ago. It is the only Yorùbá game that is played in over 70 other Yorùbá festivals. Perhaps, the popularity of *ayò ọlọpọ̀n* among the nations of the world comes about as a result of the perceived links the game has with *Ifá*. However, before now, the writer has not discovered any research work that has been carried out in this regards.

Scholars such as Ajayi (1990) and Longè (1983) have worked on the scientific representations of *Ifá* binary code as contain in Computer Science and Mathematics. Their works

*lò pón* is a Yorùbá indigenous game that is played internationally today. However, the relationships of *Ifá*, as one of the major religions of the Yorùbá with *ayò olóppón* as a major social (recreation) aspect of the Yorùbá life is open to scholarship. This gap is filled by this study. This work investigates the relationship between *Ifá* cultural binary code and *ayò olóppón*. Semiotic, which is the science of signs, is adopted for the analysis of the study because, symbolism underlies *Ifá* divination. Binary code expresses two forms of cultural elements or beliefs of the Yorùbá people. Code of binary, as one of the semiotic elements of *Ifá* is related with that of *ayò olóppón*. It is found out from this study that, *ayò olóppón* cultural binary code is an extension of *Ifá* binary code. As a result of the links between *Ifá* binary code and *ayò olóppón* this work concludes that, the cultural elements of *ayò* are derived from *Ifá*. Therefore, *ayò olóppón* cultural values are more appreciated beyond mere recreation but encapsulate some cultural values closely related with *Ifá*, the springboard of the Yorùbá culture.

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### Introduction

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In 2005, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proclaimed *Ifá* as one of the 86 traditions of the world to be recognized as masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage of humanity (Robinson 2008). By this proclamation, *Ifá* joined the league of heritages and therefore require 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 history, philosophy, religion, art and culture.

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Scholars such as Ajayi (1990) and Longé (1983) have worked on the scientific representations of *Ifá* binary code as contain in Computer Science and Mathematics. Their works establish that *Ifá*'s basic knowledge is based on binary which Computer Science and Mathematics derive their binaries. However, their works did not address the cultural binaries on one hand and on the other hand did not relate cultural binary code of *Ifá* with *ayò olóppón*.

### Review of Related Literature

#### Discussion of Concepts

*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, *Gepmancy* by Europeans and Margays (Odeyemi 2013, p. 5). With these different realisations of *Ifá* nomenclature which cuts across nations of the world, the prominence of *Ifá* is not in doubt.

Like *Ifá*, the international status of *ayò olóppón* is also not in doubt. For instance, apart from its popularity among the Yorùbá it is called *Gisoro* in Burundi, *Oware* in Ghana, *Achochodi* in Ivory Coast, *Adjito/Vadjito* in Benin, *Ayo Eleh* in Igbo and *Kalati* in Sweden (Appiah-Agy 2013, pp. 1-2).

The game plays important roles in some Yorùbá festivals. “*Ayò olóppón* is the oldest board game that is still widely played in the world today. It has been in existence for the seventeen thousand years.... Its exact origin has been lost to history” (Haggerty 2011, p. 1). The popularity of *ayò olóppón* in the Diaspora is not in doubt. This may perhaps be one of the reasons “the Swedish people are laying claims to the invention of the game” (Haggerty 2011, p. 1). Today, the original cultural significance of the game has almost disappeared, as *ayò olóppón* is mainly nowadays valued for its entertainment purpose. This observation was made by O’Connel when he noted that, “nowadays, this game board is played worldwide and many of the original values are not upheld or recognized” (2012, p. 3).

### Empirical Review

Scholars in the areas of sociology of Yorùbá, culture, language and anthropology have written about Yorùbá traditional games. Kòmóláfẹ̀ (1978, pp. 149–78) estimates Yorùbá traditional games to be over twenty. He categorised the Yorùbá indigenous games into four: indoor, outdoor, children and adult games. Among all the games, *ayò olóppón*, according to Arómóláran and Mustapha (1976, p. 139) is a game that has more materials than the other games. It is also the only Yorùbá game that has international recognition as well as the game that has the most standardised rules and processes, probably because of the presumed association believed to be connected with *Ifá* religion.

Ládélé, Mustapha, Aworinde, Oyerinde and Oladapo (1986, pp. 1–18), Dáramólá and Jéje (1967, pp. 8–12), Arómóláran and Mustapha (1976, pp. 139 – 40) worked on the principles governing *ayò olóppón*. However, these previous works did not attempt to relate symbols and codes in *Ifá* divination system to those symbols and codes in *ayò olóppón*. This was probably because, their works were more of an introduction meant for illustration and pedagogical purposes for secondary schools. It seems the previous works did not see *ayò olóppón* beyond its entertainment value: As this research work will show however, there are links between *Ifá* divination and *ayò olóppón*, particularly in cultural binary code. In Òkèwándé (2017a), I established the relationship of *Ifá* with *ayò olóppón* around symbols, icons, index and codes. The philosophical relations between *Ifá* and *ayò olóppón* are given attention using a semiotic analysis in Òkèwándé (2017c). The study establishes that, *Ifá* moral philosophy greatly influences *ayò olóppón*, which demonstrates the influence of *Ifá* on *ayò olóppón* as the foundation on which the Yorùbá culture rests.

Culture of different people of the world can be integrated within the rubric of semiotics (Ilesanmi 2004), Yorùbá culture is also inclusive. He sees binary in the Yorùbá belief as complementary as against other views that see binary as opposition. Meaning that, cultural binary code is expressed in pairs, “Such natural pairs are invariably loaded with cultural significance of the good and the bad, the permitted and the forbidden” (Chandler 2010, p. 1).

Recent findings by some scholars and authors show that, cultural significance of *ayò olóppón* cannot be underrated. For example, a proposal was made by Oyeleke et al on the benefits of inventing *ayò* game on social media that, “since *Ayò* is the most ancient traditional board games, it implies that sufferers will once again have the feel of their culture on mobile platforms... Its acceptability by demented people and potential sufferers will not be an issue... These attributes, we believe will help African sufferers to recover faster” (2014, p. 25). This agitation is aimed to have access to the game anywhere. However, their works did not relate the *Ifá* cultural binary code with *ayò olóppón*.

### Theoretical Framework

Semiotics, which is the study of science of signs, is adopted by this study because, *Ifá*, the central element in this work communicates in signs and symbols through the interaction of divination objects. Semiotics can be traced to the pioneering works of Charles Sanders Peirce (1931), the American philosopher and Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), the Swiss Linguist.

Three modes- icon, symbol and index of significations are regarded to be sufficient to describe any form of sign. In an iconic mode, the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the

signified in one way or the other. One can perceive a direct resemblance between the signifier and the signified (Peirce 1931). In symbol mode, there is no resemblance or connection between the signifier and the signified, that is, the object and what it stands for. A symbol's connection with its object is a matter of convention, rule or agreement between the users. In an indexical mode, the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some ways (physically or casually) to the signified. For instance, "odour" is an index for the presence of a he-goat around. This makes Yorùbá to say *orukọ de oorun de*.

Code- is the semiotic element employed for this study. A code is "a means of conveying messages, a vehicle of communication... The coding takes place simultaneously on different levels, and many other factors, such as memory span and general extralinguistic knowledge, play a part" (Geoffery and Short 1981, p. 122). Code, is the semiotic element employed for this study; because, "Semiology has so far concerned itself with codes" (Barthes 1964, p. 1). Linking a meaning to a sign is a vital role performed by code. This may be realised as a multi-level coding. The linkage of signs and their meanings are made known by code. This may be realised in a multi-level coding. Code helps to simplify phenomena in order to make it easier to communicate experience. Interpretation of it is important in understanding the meaning of a sign, symbol or text. In this case, the interpretation of *Ifá* cultural binary code with *ayò olopon*, is desirable for the understanding of the Yorùbá belief and thoughts associated with *Ifá* and *ayò olopon* elements.

#### Method of Gathering Data/Analysis

Data for the study are sourced from the existing related texts on *Ifá* divination and *ayò olopon* as relates with cultural binary code. In addition some data are collected from the field, where the *ayò olopon* players are. The *Ifá* cultural binary code is related with *ayò olopon*, cultural binary code so as to establish the relationship between the two elements- *Ifá* and *ayò olopon*. By comparing or linking two things, including cultural elements with each other, one would eventually realise, by symbol "association", their relationship.

The basic strategy in using a symbol as a cue is to pair something with the thing that it is to cue. Depending on the particular person, if this pairing is done often enough with enough intensity, over a long enough duration, or in an environment sufficiently free of distraction ... the person will come to associate the two things with each other. Such a symbolic association allows one thing to be used as a cue for the other (Combs and Freedman 1990, p. 126).

The Yorùbá adopts this consciousness of pairing two similar things that share related features, values and forms in common. Despite the fact that the *Ifá* text as used in this study is a culture bound genre, data collected are translated into English for the benefit of a wider audience. Some cultural terms or names are not translated to preserve the local or cultural flavor, color and values of African oral arts; this is to avoid misinterpretation and low comprehension "since the indigenous language is more conducive to the interpretation of an indigenous genre" (Ilesanmi 2004, p. 111). However, such are explained as may be necessary to ensure their understanding.

#### Analysis

Essentially, the binary code as contained in Yorùbá belief and culture is exhibited in *Ifá* divination process. For instance, in *Ifá* divination, the code of binary is observed as *awo* (the diviner) and *ògbèrì* (the supplicant/novice). The two binary words (*awo* and *ògbèrì*) are in the opposition or complementary relation. This binary code is equally at play in *ayò olopon*. For example, *òta* (the prospective *ayò* winner or a winner) and *ope* (the loser or loser to be in *Ayo*) are in the opposite relation as in *awo* and *ògbèrì*. In *ayò olopon*, "Ènì tí o pa ayo l'a npe ni 'òta'. "Ènì tí a pa l'ayo l'a npe ni 'ope'" (Daramola and Jeje 1967, p. 11). This means, the winner of the game is known as *òta*. The loser is regarded as *ope*. To the Yorùbá people, 'òta a ma a jé, ope o le fohun.' This means that the winner will always be responding to questions from the spectators while the loser is always speechless. In the course of *Ifá* divination, the diviner is regarded as the wiser between him and the supplicant. He expresses the wishes of the *Ifá* oracle while the client is expected to abide by the *Ifá* guidance because, *Ifá* is wise, and the supplicant is ignorant.

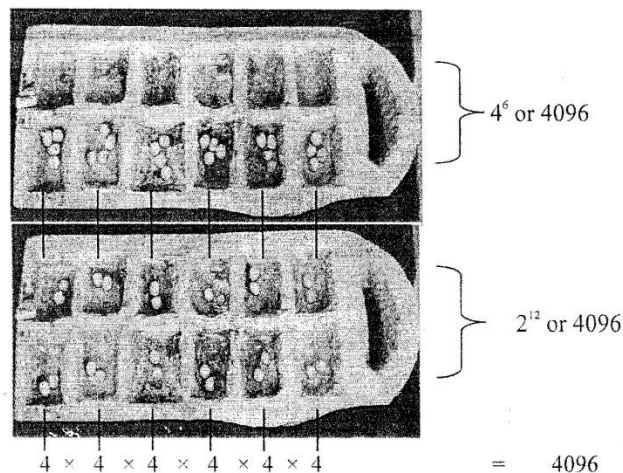
The code of binaries, sometimes realised in question form of “yes” and “no” or “true” or false”, is exhibited in both *Ifá* and *ayò olópon*. This form of binary is the simplest and most straight forward type of cultural binary question reduced to “yes” or “no.” That is, “every question, even those containing multiple choices, may be divided into subquestions that can be answered with a clear yes or no” (Verduijn 2012, p. 3). The relevance of this type of cultural binary expression is noted within *Ifá* divination. This is associated with the process of *ibo* (casting of lot in *Ifá* divination) for the supplicant as a prerequisite to *Ifá* divination. For example, if the supplicant selects the cowry in the course of *ibo*, it symbolises “yes”, but if it is “a bone” that is selected, it symbolises “no”, within the semiotic context of *Ifá* divination (Abimbólá 1976). This type of cultural binary code is in the expression of alternatives, that is, it expresses “symbols of specific alternatives” (Bascom 1969).

Similar situation to the above binary *Ifá* cultural symbolism is here noted to be associated with *ayò olópon*. This occurs in a non verbal code in form of symbolism, *aroko*. In this case, use of a stone or object symbolising a cultural idea is used during *ayò olópon*. For instance, on one hand, if one or two pebbles or a small piece of stick is/are placed in between the defeated player and the *olópon* *ayò* symbolising defeat which the number of the object symbolising the number of defeat. On the other hand, the player that has nothing as an object in front of him is winning or gaining upper hand. This is a binary expression of two ideas, through a non verbal code in both *Ifá* divination and *ayò olópon*. The ideas expressed in binaries of “a loser” and “a winner” communicated in a non verbal code.

Another *Ifá* binary code is realised in form of occurrence of two (2) and its multiples in *Odu*, the code by which *Ifá* messages are coded. Olatunji (2005) observes that some kind of duality and arithmetic progression underlies *Ifá* divination poetry. For example, the number two (2) and its multiples, recur not only in the twin form of the major *Odu*, but also in the paraphernalia of the art of divination. The recurrence of number two as contained in (Ajayi 2002) “*ṣwó meji ni ki won maa gba ranṣe. Iki meji ni e maa kii. Ẹrò meji ni ki e maa so*” (p. 83). This means that, casting of lots should be taken twice. They should be chanted twice. And they should say two words). *Ifá* is associated with two. In the opinion of Abimbólá “*ẹji, ẹji ni mo gbe Ng o gb'enikan.*” This means that, I favour people in twos not one (1977b, p. 17). During *Ifá* divination process, the *Ifá* priest manipulates his divination instruments twice as well. All the symbols of *Odu Ifá* (minor and major) are realised in binary forms (Abimbólá 1977a). As a result of realisation of two (2), “The symbol in *Ifá* divination is characterised by even numbers” (McGEE 1983, p. 101). The binary code associated with *Ifá* informs why some of the *Ifá* cultural numbers are expressed in even numbers.

Similarly, in the course of *ayò olópon*, the value of two seeds is demonstrated, such as in, “*Eni koro, ẹji koro, lo da kọ ọpon ayọ*” (Fabunmi 1972, p. 22). This means that, one inside, two inside cast divination for *ayò* game in the game board. The two seeds in this opinion are characterised by even number. We should be reminded that, the winning *ayò* seeds occur, when there are two seeds in a hole.

Through the principle of duality and arithmetic progression, we are able to establish that for an *Ifá* priest to be initiated, he must be able to recite, mark, read and interpret sixteen verses of two hundred and fifty-six *Odu* present in *Ifá* corpus,  $16 \times 256 = 4096$  or  $2^{12}$ . This is the product (multiplication) of the total row of *ayò olópon*. This can be represented in numbers as  $4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4 = 4096$  or  $2^{12}$ . This can be illustrated with the photographs below:



#### The Photograph showing Binary Form of *Ayọ* Seeds in Relation to *Ifa* Divination

The complete *ayọ* seeds in a row of *ọpọn ayọ* are represented by four *ayọ* seeds in a hole arranged in six holes on each side of *ọpọn ayọ*. The products (multiplication) of this expression are four thousand nine hundred and ninety-six ( $4096/4^6$ ). This symbolises the number of *ẹsẹ Ifá* to be mastered by the *Ifá* trainee before initiation. Since two (2), binary code is the focus of this section, the twenty-four *ayọ* seeds in a row of *ọpọn ayọ* can be redistributed in two (2) into all the twelve holes on the *ọpọn ayọ*. This will give us the same products, four thousand nine hundred and ninety-six ( $4096/2^{12}$ ), that is, two to the power of twelve, meaning that, the occurrence of two and its multiples of twelve. This is a starting (admission) or basic qualification into *Ifá* cult and the initiation or graduation point is for a trainee to master sixteen (16) of 256 *Ifá* poems, giving a total of 4096 verses. This means, the starting point of training for the *Ifá* trainee is two (2), and the terminal point (to be initiated) is sixteen (16) (Okéwándé 2017a). One can mathematically express this as  $>2$  but  $<16$  (for the uninitiated *Ifá* trainee) and  $>16$  (for the initiated *Ifá* priest). (Note:  $<$  is a sign of less than, while  $>$  is a sign of greater than).

It is equally noticed here that in *Ifá* divination system the marked symbols on the left hand side must be repeated on the right hand side for the identification of the appropriate *Odu* that manifests (Akintóla 1999 and Abimbóla 1976). This expression demonstrates that, it is by the occurrence of two and its multiples ( $2^n$ ) that we are able to identify some values of *Ifá* corpus. The occurrence of two (2) in *Ifá* in both divination and *ayọ ólópón*, also symbolise some values in the *Ifá* divination system (Okéwándé 2017a). For example, the value of two (2) in *Ifá Ókanran Meji* verse as contained in Abimbóla (1968, p. 86) states that:

*oolu meji di merin*/two gimlets turn four  
*kọ ẹsẹ*/to be executed  
*oolu merin di méjọ*/four gimlets turn eight  
*kọ ẹsẹ*/to be executed  
*oolu méjọ di merindinlogun*/eight gimlets turn sixteen  
*kọ ẹsẹ*/to be executed.

It is noted from the *Ifá* corpus above that, symbol two (2) is used in generating further important *Ifá* symbols' four (4), eighth (8) and sixteen (16), which are symbols postulated by scholars on numbers of *Ifá* verses to be learnt by a prospective *Ifá* priest. For example, McGEE (1983) notes that "some claim that there are 512, 1024, 2048 or 4096" (p. 112):

If he learns 2 =  $2 \times 256 = 512/2^9$   
 If he learns 4 =  $4 \times 256 = 1024/2^{10}$   
 If he learns 8 =  $8 \times 256 = 2048/2^{11}$   
 If he learns 16 =  $16 \times 256 = 4096/2^{12}$

A continuous recurrence of two to the power of two ( $2^2$ ), and two to the power of sixteen ( $2^{16}$ ) are very important *Ifá* symbols. In other words, the 2, 4, 8 and 16 numbers are symbols of *Ifá* authority. This is why *Ifá*'s sanction or authority is applied to these figures in the *?kanran Meji* quoted above. 'Aṣẹ' means 'authority'. 'Aṣẹ' is about execution...the application of ideas, words and theories in the real world" (Ajadi 2012, p. 124). Two (2), as indicated as the winning *ayò* numbers symbolising figure of authority as in *Ifá* divination.

One is able to derive *Ifá* binary numbers by the multiplication of 2 in 12 on *ayò* board in binary expression. The use of binary, represented in two (2) and its multiples has been associated with the Yorùbá ways and manner of life. "Of course, all of these numbers except zero are even and multiples of two. As a people's belief system greatly influences their mannerisms and customs" (McGEE 1983, p. 97). In other words, all the occurrence of two (2) and its multiples as shown above are expressed in even numbers (number divisible by two (2)).

#### Findings/ Discussion

It is found out from this study that, the cultural binary in *ayò olópón* is related to the *Ifá* cultural binary code. This means that, all the cultural life of the Yorùbá people including social aspect of life have some affinities with *Ifá*, the foundation of the culture of the Yorùbá. The interpretation and understanding of cultural binary code is one of the major themes in *Ifá* corpus; this is informed by the importance the Yorùbá people attached to this code. "Many systems of meaning are based on binary structures (masculine/ feminine; black/white; natural/artificial)... semiotic interpretation involves exposing the culturally arbitrary nature of this binary opposition and describing the deeper consequences of this structure throughout a culture" (Irvine 2004, p. 1). It is however established from the analysis that, cultural binary is not limited to *Ifá* alone but, is extended or connected to *ayò olópón* also.

It is discovered from the analysis that, such cultural binary expressions in both *Ifá* and *ayò olópón* may be symbolised with different cultural symbols or objects but, such expressions are interpreted in cultural binary form. This study found out that, the *Ifá* cultural worldview on cultural binary is extended or related to the *ayò olópón* cultural binary code. This is one of the reasons perhaps, why *ayò olópón* as indigenous Yorùbá game gained global recognitions and values than the other Yorùbá indigenous games. The established relationship of *ayò olópón* to *Ifá* attests to the belief that *Ifá* is indeed the foundation on which the culture of the Yorùbá people rests.

Before this study, despite the popularity of *ayò olópón* at home and in the diaspora, the cultural values of the game, the cultural binary expressions as well as the relationship of the game with *Ifá* have not been established. This study however suggests that, the social life of the Yorùbá people as demonstrated with *ayò olópón* is keenly related with *Ifá*. The cultural binary link between *Ifá* and *ayò olópón* has improved our understanding of the game beyond a mere relaxation or recreation.

#### Conclusion

This study concludes that there is synergy between *Ifá* cultural binary code and *ayò olópón*. This means that, *Ifá* and *ayò olópón* are related in cultural binary code. Therefore, *ayò olópón* can be regarded as an extension of *Ifá*, the springboard of Yorùbá culture. *ayò olópón* as one of the Yorùbá indigenous recreational activities derives its cultural elements from *Ifá*. With the establishment of links between *Ifá* and *ayò olópón*, one can aver that the cultural influence of *Ifá* are felt on the social activities of the Yorùbá people.

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