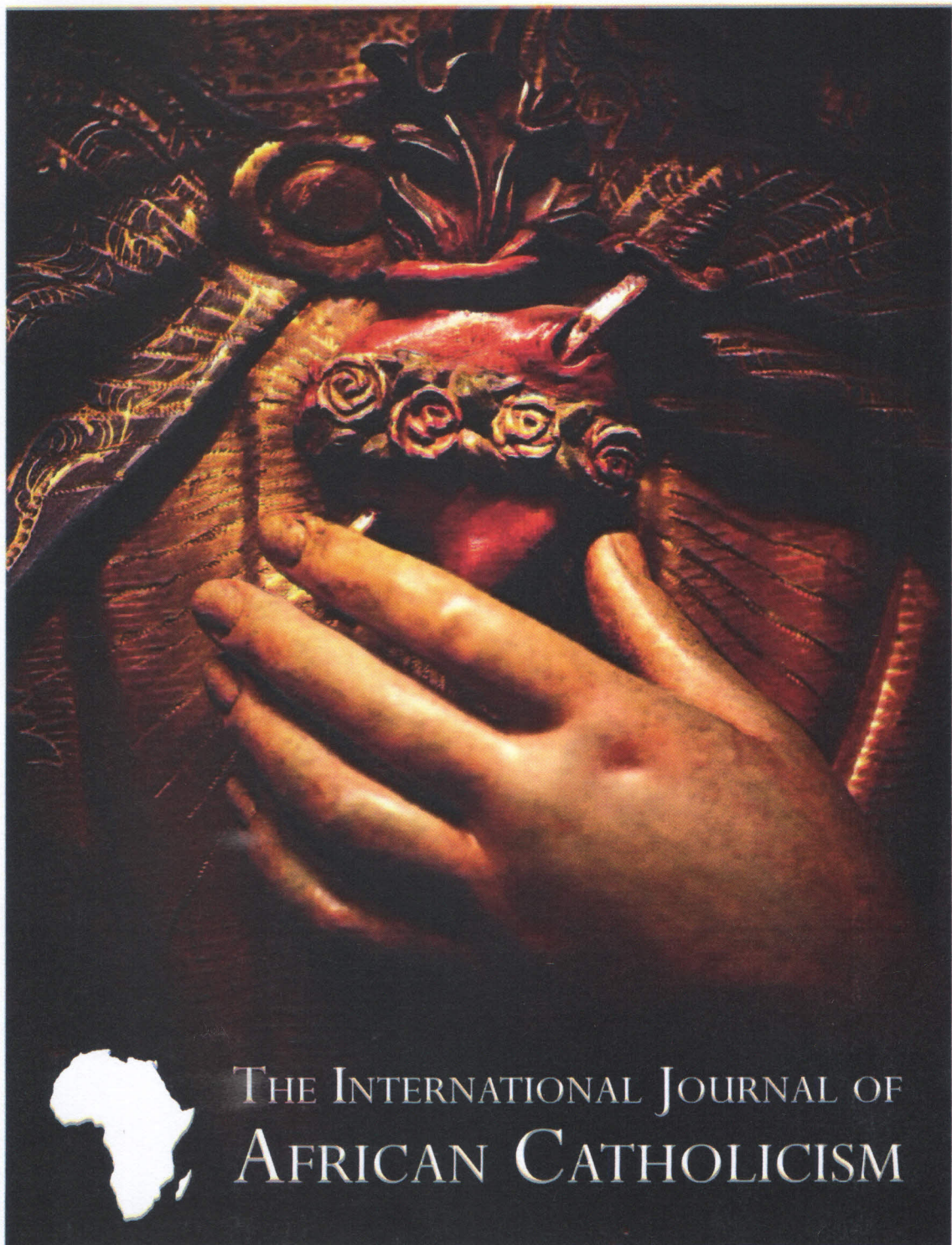




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Ifá Symbolism and the Concept of Reincarnation: A Challenge for the Catholic Christians

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Abstract

Unarguably, Life after death has been a contentious subject of research among scholars and humanity. The belief on the concept of reincarnation, that, there is possibility for a dead person to come back to life has generated a lot of debates among Catholic denomination notwithstanding that, the concept of reincarnation has been criticised, mostly on the basis that, it does not give consideration of eternal hope to Christians. *Ifá* is, believed to be the foundation of Yorùbá culture. This study is aimed at investigating the concept of reincarnation from the perspective of *Ifá* theology as insights to the understanding of the concept of reincarnation; as many scholars did not make use of any religious symbol, especially *Ifá*, to substantiate their positions. The study adopts semiotics, which is a science of signs; because, symbolism is basic of *Ifá* divination. It is found out that, *Ifá* epistles testify to the existence of the concept of reincarnation and provide the time and cycle of occurrence of reincarnation. Similarly, the misconception about reincarnation by some Christian faithful, especially Catholics, as being against eternity is erroneous and misleading. This study concludes that, reincarnation as supported by divinations from the biblical and *Ifá* is a concept ordained by God as a means of actualising God's purpose for mankind.

Keywords: *Ifá*, reincarnation, Catholic faith, *odù*, symbolism

Introduction

Until recently, scholars have raised valid queries on the concept of reincarnation as God's ordained means of actualising the purpose of human existence. Reincarnation, which is the belief that, "after bodily death, souls are reborn in yet another body—has returned as a New Age fad, backed by marketing hype. And the doctrine is spreading so quickly that it is raising the eyebrows of many in the Church" (Aquilina 2017, p. 1). The concept has been sometimes tagged to be "unbiblical" "heresy" "unscriptural." However, despite various objections by some Catholics on the concept of reincarnation, they are holding to their faiths on the belief of reincarnation.

The controversies and divisions on the concept of reincarnation prompted a Catholic world conference; to debate, discuss and take a position on the subject. This conference- “a 1990 Gallup poll found that 25 percent of the Catholics in the United States believe in reincarnation. And it’s not just America. Another recent survey, by the University of London, concluded that, 28 percent of the people in France believe in reincarnation, ...The Vatican called scholars from around the world to a March 17-20 conference on the subject, “Reincarnation and the Christian doctrine” (Aquilina 2017, p. 1). The outcome of this conference was against the adoption or belief on the concept of reincarnation, because, major Church leaders emphasised that, “reincarnation is incompatible with Christian doctrine” (p. 1). One can say, from the above opinion that: (i) the belief on the concept of reincarnation is a religious world concept (ii) the percentage of Catholics in favor of the concept (25 percent) in America and, in France (28 percent) cannot be overlooked. (iii) the period of the opinion poll on outcome of the conference on reincarnation has been long and (iv) the resolution against the concept of reincarnation was not based on opinion polls but, resolutions of the Church leaders and (v) there are pro-reincarnation and anti-reincarnation Catholic Christians. This study therefore, aims to discuss the challenges facing the Catholic Christians by investigating into the existence of concept of reincarnation as established in *Ifá* and examine biblical interpretations of the concept of reincarnation within the knowledge of *Ifá* theology. “*Ifá* is a divination system created by the Yorùbá people of South Western Nigeria some 2000 years ago. In the course of succeeding centuries, The *Ifá* priests (Babalawo) have developed the original form bequeathed them by **QRUNMILA**, the reforming prophet of the **ODUDUWA ERA** of Yorùbá history (5000B.C. – 500A.D.) in many ways but have kept its canons essentially unchanged to this very day” (1908 translated into English by Emanuel, 2010, p. ix).

Some human problems and among the Yoruba are resolved through *Ifá*. “*Ifá* literary corpus is very extensive in the range of subjects it covers as well as the scope and depth of the treatment of each subject.” This is why *Ifá* is described as, “*àmòimòtán*” (Morákinyò 1983, p. 66). That is, “that which is capable of being completely known” (Akiwọwọ 1983, p. 43). *Ifá* corpus also talks about the concept of reincarnation, the knowledge of which is helpful to the better understanding of the controversial concept among the Catholics.

Yoruba Concept of Reincarnation

Reincarnation, the belief that, “the dead could reincarnate into the family” (Káyòdé (1984, p. 5) has accommodated into Yorùbá belief system. The Yoruba people believe that, since the soul of man is immortal, it is capable of returning to earth through rebirth. “The Yorùbá, for instance, strongly believe that reincarnation is a royal route by which departed ancestors return to earth” (Fátókun 2005, p. 134). To the Yorùbá, the journey of an individual began from heaven to the earth and the circle of existence rotates in death and living.

There is the belief in the metempsychosis which is the passage of someone’s soul after death into the body of another person or animal. “The theory of reincarnation is irrefutable since it is a metaphysical theory” (Adébòwálé, 2012, p. 183). The belief is substantiated by three events connected with the Yorùbá beliefs on reincarnation. First, the belief is associated with some Yorùbá names given to the new born children, born immediately after the death of the grandfather or grandmother such as Babátúndé, Babajídé and Babárinde (father returns), Ìyábò and Yéjídé or Yétúndé (mother returns). Second, the Yorùbá belief on the *àbíké* (born to die) as in names like Mọlọmọ, Kòsókó and Dúrósinmí assert the Yorùbá belief on the rebirth of the dead child. A form of *àbíké* can be realized in form of *Elèrè/Emèrè*; that is “wandering spirit of children given to the prank of entering into pregnant women and being born only to die or sheer

relish of the mischief" (Ìdòwú 1962, p. 126). Also, the Yorùbá belief on *àkúdàáyà*, the belief that, "the souls of those who died mid-life may go and live in distant towns and assume a quasi-physical existence there" (Adébòwálé, 2012, p. 180).

There have been different opinions about the originality of the concepts of immortality and reincarnation of the soul with the Yoruba people. While some scholars are of the opinion that, the concept is probably original to the Yorùbá, others think the concept was borrowed. "It has been controverted that the Yorùbá may not have the concept of immortality of soul from Plato, Pythagoras or St. Augustine" (Mákindé 2007, pp. 140 – 143). Makindé is of the opinion that, the idea of immortality of soul might have been even borrowed from the Yorùbá and that, immortality of the soul among the Yorùbá could be regarded as original with them or at worst, borrowed from some other neighboring African countries south of the Egypt, and certainly not from the Pythagoras or Plato (Mákindé 1983). Makindé's opinion was not however emphatic that, the concepts of reincarnation and immortality of soul are undoubtedly original to the Yorùbá tradition; probably because, such argument was not substantiated with Yorùbá oral or cultural symbols as supported in this study with of *Odù-Ifá*. Although, Makinde observes that, lack of documentation has denied African countries of written evidence of their cultural values and beliefs, he failed to explore the oral evidence from *Ifá*.

Interpretation of symbol is as important to the understanding the meaning of a sign, symbol or text, especially, the interpretation of religious symbols associated with the concept of reincarnation. "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" (Irvine 2004, p. 5). There is no doubt that, the interpretations of the concept of reincarnation needs to be undertaken with different approaches so as to investigate and establish what really the concept is.

This attempt is believed to account for what the concept of reincarnation symbolises. The questions about whether the spirit of the dead (as a good or wicked person) inhabits in an animal, plant or human at reincarnation is outside the purview of this study but, rather seeks to respond to the questions on the existence of the concept of reincarnation and describe how the concept operates within the rubric of *Odù-Ifá* oracular system. *Odù-Ifá* is a medium of communication between the *Ifá* Oracle to the *Ifá* client. All the messages of *Ifá* are coded in *Odù* and interpreted by an initiated *Ifá* priest.

***Ifá's* Relation to Catholic Belief**

The relationship of *Ifá* with Catholic faith have been addressed by scholars. *Ifá* is regarded as the spokesperson not only for the gods but also for the living. It is regarded as the foundation of Yorùbá culture (Abimbólá 1977a). The messages of *Ifá* encapsulate the past, present and the future of the Yorùbá people in particular and humanity in general. As a result of this, *Ifá* has gained prominence; not only among the Yorùbá nations but globally. "Variations of the *Ifá* System are found used in several other parts of Nigeria besides Yorùbáland and in some of the countries bordering on Nigeria" (Abimbola 1976; p. 3). In addition, "the one practiced by the Yorubas, however, seems to be the most sophisticated and highly developed" (McGEE 1983, p. 99). *Ifá's* nomenclature has cut across nations and tribes around the world. For instance, *Ifá* "is considered as the god of divinization in Igala culture. It is believed that, *Ifá* carries messages from the other world to this world. *Ifá* is also a medium of dialogue between the living and the ancestors" (Negedu, nd, p. 5).

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...With this

system is connected the priest of Ifá and we think may be added the Urim and Thumm,⁵⁶ as in it is supposed to reside oracular vision or prophetic power of foretelling future events” (Clarke 1972, pp. 279 – 280). The connection or similarities in the oracular objects- Urim and Thumm are further demonstrated to be related with that of *Ifá*. Urim and Thumm (as mentioned in relations with Ifá) are mentioned in several places of the bible: Nehemiah 7 verse 65, Numbers 27 verse 21, Exodus 28 verse 30 and ISamuel: 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.” **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 Hilchot Kelai HaMikdash (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) (Jeffery 1991, p. 298 – 299) (bold mine).

One can deduce from the above 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 reveals the biblical equivalence of *Ifá* with Urim and Thummim. According to the student Bible Dictionary by Dockrey et al (2000), “Urim (Yoo rim) and Thummim (Thum im). Objects used by the high priest to try to find the will of God (Ex. 28³⁰; Is. 28⁶⁻²⁵). The objects of unknown shape and size were carried in the high priest’s clothing Urim and Thummim may have been stones, serving as a type of lots” (p. 238).

⁵⁶ Objects mentioned in the Old Testament in connections with the breastplate of the high priest.

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, Setilu⁵⁷ 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” (Johnson 1887, pp. 40 – 41). The equivalence in *Ifá* divination symbolism with biblical reference shows there is nexus between the two religion positions on the concept of reincarnation. Similarly, it shows that, African religious symbols such as *Ifá*, is relevant to solving some religious issues confronting the present believers. The value of an object is proportional to its use in cultural expressions– symbolism.

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 Thummim are related with *Ifá* in various forms. For example, Orímòògùnjé (1993, p. 58) reports that:

Tí a bá wo Urim áti Thumim tí Olódùmarè sọ pé kí àwọn ọmọ Héberù fí máa bèèrè nńkan lówó Òun⁵⁸ nígbà tí ikú Mósè súnmọ etilé, a lè so èyí mó ilàná yẹńwò 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 lè sọ pé ó bá nńkan tí ihínrere tí Jòhánù n fihàn pé “Ní àtètèkọse ni ọrọ wà, ọrọ wà, ọrọ wà pẹlú Olórun, Olórun sì ni ọrọ náà”⁵⁹

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.”

⁵⁷ Some authors such as Johnson (1887) believed he brought *Ifá* divination among the Yoruba.

⁵⁸ Numbers 27.

⁵⁹ John 1:1.

The relationships between the two forms of divinations equally show that, they are divine media for divinations.

Likewise, the Yorùbá divinities have some associations with Catholic Saints. That is the two beliefs have some things in common. For example, the “African worship was mostly directed at Saint Barbara, Saint George, Saints Cosmas, and Damianus, Saint Jerome, Saint Anthony, Saint Lazarus, Saint Rochus, Saint Anne, Saint Our Lady of Candelmas, and above all Our Lord of the God End (o senhor de Bomfim). The true reason for this devotion of the Saints at that to the Nago-Yorùbá these names of Catholic Saints represented those of their principal Oriṣà” (Fatunmbi 1977/8, p. 24).

Interpretation and association of symbols with meanings has to do with the knowledge of the individual intelligence. Such association and interpretation should also be backed up with evidences and facts to substantiate such links between the two elements in contrasts in terms of their semiotic relationships. “Much in the same way as the Yorùbá deities were preserved under the names of Catholic Saints, other African etho-cultural groups preserved their deities within system of correspondences between deities. In Bahia, for example, there are Candombles of Angolan and Congo origin which have burrowed their ceremonial rituals and ecclesiastical organizations from Yorùbá practice” (Nescimento do Abdias 1977/8, p. 66).

Investigating into *Ifá* symbolism in relation with the Catholic belief will significantly improve our understanding on the concept of reincarnation, its values and influence among or with religions.

Theoretical Framework: semiotic approach

Semiotics is the science of signs. 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.

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. Such symbols, rules and convention between the signifier and the signified must be learnt. In Yorùbá tradition, it can be realised in form of *Àrokò* (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, the symbol mode adopted in this study. Symbolism is when, "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” (Aderibigbe 2016, p. 60).

It is noted that, *Odù* are associated with human. The *Ifá* symbols are connected in various ways with the Yorùbá system of living. Those symbols are relational; as the past, present and the future of the Yorùbá people is brought together to attain and achieve continuity. *Ifá* oracular system can be studied from different approaches because of its cultural contents and contexts of use. Therefore, there is the “necessity for systematic and in-depth study of the literary corpus associated with *Ifá* brings to focus a number of methodological issues” (Morákinyò 1983, p. 66).

Semiotics can be applied to all human aspects of life. For example, bio-semiotics is science of signs in relation to human-beings. “We have two meanings of ‘semiotics’; semiotics as a discipline or general science of signs and semiotics as specifically human semiosis” (Petrilli and Ponzio, 2007, p. 3). The human semiotics is relevant to this study as its knowledge relates to human-beings. Symbolism is central to *Ifá* divination. It “underlies Ifa divination system, the core of which is the recitation of the *ẹṣẹ Ifá* pertinent to the problems of the person consulting the *babaláwo*” (Ọlatunji 2005, p. 135). In any form of semiotics, whether bio-semiotics, computational semiotics, socio-semiotics among others, 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” (Ọlajide, 2017, p. 9). The symbolism of *Odù-Ifá* is perceived to be relevant to the understanding of the concept of reincarnation in this study.

Analysis

The links of the Yorùbá belief system with *Ifá* are coded in *Odù*. Investigating *Odù-Ifá*'s symbols to different aspects of Yoruba life in particular and humanity in a way that gives a better understanding about Yoruba belief system. This is because, there is no human problem and solution that is not proffered by *Ifá*. The links of *Odù-Ifá* visitations with one another is discovered in this study to be. That is, the symbolisation of each of the 16 principal *Odù-Ifá* with its corresponding number of times of visitation is linked with reincarnation process.

All the 16 major *Odù-Ifá* symbolise the dual nature of gods. That is, world is composed of the physical and spiritual elements. These elements are also contained in any scriptures- *Ifá* or the Bible. Yoruba people believe that all the *Odù* had at a time lived as human on earth. Therefore, linking the *Odù* with the human reincarnation in this study should not be seen or regarded as strange. Like human-beings, the journey of *Odù* began from heaven and ends there. That is, "the Yorùbá concept of existence transcends the time when the individual is on the earth" (Abimbola 1975, p. 417).

The concept of reincarnation should be based on the visitations of the major *Odù-Ifá*, which every human-beings is believed to have links with the 16 basic names of *Odù Ifá*. For example, the life span of human life has been projected and established with this formula: " $kC(16, 1) = P(16,16)$, total possible number of life form living on earth at any one time" (McGEE, 1983, p. 112). That is, the projections on the pre-existence, existence and post-existence of human-beings can be evinced from *Ifá*. Therefore, this study is additional knowledge, not only that, *Ifá* accounts for the concept of reincarnation but, in addition, the possibilities of times or occurrences the circle of reincarnation can rotate.

The table below, showing the arrangement of the visitations among the sixteen major *Odù-Ifá* is helpful to demonstrate the concept and process of reincarnation.

30 =	2c (15, 1) =	2p (15, 1)	Èjì Ogbè
28 =	2c (14, 1) =	2p (14, 1)	Òyèkú Méjì
26 =	2c (13, 1) =	2p (13, 1)	Ìwòrì Méjì
24 =	2c (12, 1) =	2p (12, 1)	Odí Méjì
22 =	2c (11, 1) =	2p (11, 1)	Ìrosùn Méjì
20 =	2c (10, 1) =	2p (10, 1)	Òwónrín Méjì
18 =	2c (9, 1) =	2p (9, 1)	Òbàrà Méjì
16 =	2c (8, 1) =	2p (8, 1)	Òkànràn Méjì
14 =	2c (7, 1) =	2p (7, 1)	Ògúndá Méjì
12 =	2c (6, 1) =	2p (6, 1)	Òsá Méjì
10 =	2c (5, 1) =	2p (5, 1)	Ìká Méjì
8 =	2c (4, 1) =	2p (4, 1)	Òtúrùpòn Méjì
6 =	2c (3, 1) =	2p (3, 1)	Òtúá Méjì
4 =	2c (2, 1) =	2p (2, 1)	Ìrètè Méjì
2 =	2c (1, 1) =	2p (1, 1)	Òsé Méjì
0 =	2c (0, 1) =	2p (0, 1)	Òfún Méjì

(McGEE, 1983, p. 104)

Looking at the table above (in the first column), one notes that, the arrangement is in a decreasing geometric progression, by 2 from 30 to 0. Every *Odù* has a dual nature, a male and a female. This informs why the *Odù* symbols on the right must be duplicated on the left hand on the divination board. Therefore, the 2c and 2p as indicated in the second and third columns with their visitation times become necessary. The fourth column shows the *Odù*. *Odù* in *Ifá* is, believed to be human-being (as earlier explained). Therefore, the process of the visitations among the *Odù* have human relationship. That is, “the numbers in each group are derived from the successive visits and return visitations of the deity whose name is associated with that group in the next deity in line, starting from the second deity to the sixteenth” (McGEE 1983, p. 104).

Reincarnation that occurs in the 16th generations is symbolised by *Èjìogbè* corpus that has the highest number of visitation. The second *Odù* corpus is associated with the reincarnation that occurs in the 15th generations with *Òyèkú Méjì*. The visitation numbers decrease (as indicated on the first column) from *Èjìogbè* that has “thirty *Odù* while the second section contains twenty-

eight. The number of *Odù* in each section decreases in an irregular pattern, giving a total of two hundred and forty” (Abimbólá 1976, p. 28) and (Àjàyí 2009, p. 21). The 16th *Odù*: *Òfún/Òràngún Méjì* has the least number of visitation because, the “cannot visit himself, we write C (0, 1), which indicates that the last deity visits himself once (McGEE 1983, p. 104). By this, reincarnation does not occur in the first generation, as the individual cannot reincarnate into himself. Going by the table of visitation of the *Odù* above, reincarnation that occurs in the 13th times or visitation are associated with *Ìworì Méjì* corpus, 8th with *Òkànràn Méjì*, 5th with *Ìká Méjì* and 4th with *Òtúúrúpòn Méjì*. “The 16 major *odù* are conceived as kings paying visits to those next below and having their visits returned. A total of 240 visits, the number of the minor *odù* is made” (Olátúnjí 2005, p. 127). The Yorùbá belief on reincarnation is semiotically established in *Ifá* symbols. For example, the beginning of reincarnation is suggested to be realised in two (2), within which an individual soul reincarnates.

This study shows that; the reincarnation in Yoruba does not start from the 16th generation as canvassed by some authors. “In all, there is the theory that a person comes back to life sixteen times, from the time of his first restful death... We therefore hold that in Yorùbá thought, the reincarnation begins after the 16th time; i.e., after 1120 years” (Mákindé 1983, p. 40). The visitation of *Odù Ifá* reveals that, the reincarnation process terminates at the 16th times, that is, 16th generation. Some authors are of the opinion that; the reincarnation process starts from 16th generation rather than second generation (Dieffenbach 2010). This study however shows that, *Odù-Ifá* visitations begin from 2: the second deity and ends with the 16th. This is in line with “the belief on reincarnation is linked to the ancestor’s belief. In Yorùbá religion, it is thought that, about two generations after death, every human soul has a chance to return to earth in the body of a new born, mostly within the same family” (Leroy 1995, pp. 132 – 136). The opinion that,

reincarnation has no terminal period but can occur at any time may not be supported with *Ifá* epistle. That is, the concept of reincarnation is “inexpressible longing to live forever” (Aquilina 2017, p. 2).

These opinions may look obscure to some individuals and belief systems; such opinions are influenced or swayed by human emotions, thoughts and premonitions. The view of Valbuena is here relevant to buttress the present submission. Human limited knowledge about nature may account for our ignorance on some natural existence and events about things. “When something in nature seems ridiculous to us, absurd or bad, is because we just have a partial knowledge of things, because we generally ignore order and the coherence of nature all together, and because we need that everything is disposed according with the dictations of our own reason; although what our reason declares bad is not bad according to the order and laws of universal nature but only according to the laws of our own nature separately considered” (2005, p. 37).

Death does not put an end to the existence of individual. “Physical death does not put an end to existence” (Káyòdé 1984, p. 5). The present generation is linked to the past by the process of immortality and reincarnation of soul. The ancestors or *orìṣas* play a ‘gap bridging’ between the living and the dead. This belief is supported with the journey of the divinities, including the Saints, and religious messengers. For instance, Jesus Christ declares that, before he was born (on the surface of the earth), he had been with the father (God) in heaven. This shows that, his earthly ministry only continued on the surface of the earth. He ended his journey in heaven as well.

The biblical references in support of the concept of reincarnation, interpreting the concept from the biblical context becomes difficult. For example, one of the context that is argued and interpreted rather against the concept than in its favor is the event that brought Jesus Christ together with his disciples on the clarification and affirmation of who Jesus Christ is, when Jesus

asked his disciples in Matthew 16^{13&14} (verses thirteen and fourteen), according to the biblical report:

¹³when Jesus came into the coast of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, whom do men say that I the Son of man?

¹⁴And they said, some say that thou art John the Baptist; some, E-lia; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.

From the opinions above, the Apostles of the Lord Jesus are not addressing the question from Jesus by their own experience of the knowledge of Jesus Christ; but, rather express the society's knowledge (Jewish cultural belief) about the peoples' knowledge on who the Lord Jesus Christ was. This is why some disciples responded "some say that thou art..." This could be interpreted that, the discussion had been going on among the people (not even among the disciples of Jesus Christ) that, Jesus Christ was likely to have been John, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets that have returned-reincarnated. This is related to the Yoruba belief and thoughts that,

a great ancestor, say warrior, who had lived a just, good and famous life, may come back to the earth reincarnated through one of his generations of sons or daughters. This is often noted when a particular child grows up with a certain characteristics similar to those of his ancestors. In some cases, the grown up child behaves the same way and achieves similar, if not greater, success in the field of his ancestor whom the Yoruba believe to have come back to life through one of his favoured sons or daughters (Makinde 1983, p. 48).

The bible says, "out of the abundance of mind the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12³⁴). The disciples spoke out their minds in line with the peoples' belief. Even though, their response was not in line or answer to what Jesus symbolises; however, it has helped us to associate their response to their religious belief that, somebody can reincarnate. Likewise, Jesus Christ did not quickly silence them (his disciples) that, their response was unscriptural or heresy; but rather says, even though, that is the belief of the people about him, what of their own belief as his disciples? If the response of the community, expressed by the disciples to Jesus could "make

them fall from his grace”- heresy or unscriptural of the bible; Jesus would have thought them against the backdrop of the belief immediately.

Interpretation of the concept of reincarnation in support of the biblical tenet and doctrine has been severally canvassed from group of supporters of this doctrine.

The evidence of reincarnation as the correct interpretation of the “reincarnation of the Dead” on judgment Day is overwhelming. Jesus himself taught reincarnation as revealed in the Bible, the Jews believed in reincarnation during Jesus’ lifetime, the early Christians believed and taught reincarnation, the doctrine of reincarnation can be found throughout early Church history, and the doctrine can be found throughout Christian history before the Church officially declared it a heresy. Many early Christian texts had references to reincarnation (Williams 2017, p. 7).

The doctrine of reincarnation, referenced by the return (coming back of Jesus Christ) is related beyond the biblical or Christian religious context. For example, in the Islamic religion, reference is made that, “the Koran repeats many New Testament prophecies about **the return of Jesus** to save the Jewish people from the invasion of the Antichrist’s army. All of these writings will prepare Muslims to finally understand who Jesus truly is during the Great Tribulation period” (Jeffrey 1991, pp. 170 & 1) (bold mine). The use of “return” indicates rebirth or reappearance, which is all that the concept of reincarnation teaches. In another related context, referring to the teaching of Jesus that, Elijah did come, one of the opinions against citing this event in favor of reincarnation that, “in this place [when Jesus said Elijah was come and referred to John the Baptist] **it does not appear to me** that by Elijah the soul is spoken of, **lest I fall into the doctrine of transmigration**, which is foreign to the Church of God, and not handed down by the apostles, nor anywhere set forth in the scripture –Origen, A.D. 248” (Aquilina 2017, p. 4) (bold mine).

In the opinion above, the response is intentional and was not addressed objectively with fairness and unbiased mind. The grammatical interpretation of the bold phrases and sentences attest to this claim. He (the speaker) responded thus, having known that, accepting or conceding

with the other interpretation as an alternative will end him into the belief or doctrine he is kicking against. The opinion also expresses his own thinking and assumptions and, not constructively or critically argued in line with biblical foundation or basis.

One of the reasons why reincarnation is unacceptable, especially within the Catholic faith is the opportunity of unlimited chances of repeated life offered by, or associated with the concept of reincarnation. Again, Christians generally and, the Catholics in particular should rather argued against the concept of reincarnation based on the precept, ordinance and doctrine of the bible; and not allowing their (human assumptions) to sway them. Any attempt to give way to human presumption or assumption may be metaphorically end with “unscriptural or unbiblical” analysis. For instance, Arinze opines that, “belief in reincarnation **must not be regarded** as a minor mistake for people who profess the Christian faith indeed **it is a major challenge**, if not a conscious or unconscious undermining of the Christian worldview... Pope John Paul II acknowledged in his 1994 apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (“As the Third Millennium Draws Near”) that the belief in reincarnation expresses the human “inexpressible longing to live forever” (Aquilina 2017, p. 2) (bold mine). The interpretations of the opinions against the concept of reincarnation above is “suggestive”, this is why it must be regarded as “an enemy”; but, the concept undeniably still pose a major challenge to the Christian and Catholic faiths. In fact, the challenge it poses “is nothing new in the Church or in the world. It is an error as old perhaps, as human desire” (Aquilina 2017, p. 2). However, if the concept of reincarnation is an error as old as humanity, should it not be corrected and “laid to rest” rather than to just criticise it and, live it to “cause further havoc” to the Catholic faith?

Today, reasonable percentage of the Catholic and Christian faiths are increasing in favor of the concept described as alien to the bible; because, of their experience with the reality of the

concept and because, such dissenting opinions have not been convincingly done away with, within the ambit of the biblical teachings, knowledge and experience about the concept. However, the *Ifá* epistle does not prescribe an indefinite or infinity to reincarnation cycle as an apprehension to the opinion of Pope John Paul II, that, reincarnation is borne out of the opinion for “the human inexpressible longing to live forever.” This opinion is contrary to the *Ifá* prescriptions and teachings about the concept of reincarnation. This is supported by the opinion that, there is possibility for individual to reincarnate between two (2) and sixteen (16) generations (2-16). By this analysis, the reincarnation process rotates within 2 and 16. This can also be expressed as $>1 <16$ (Òkèwándé 2017a).

There is terminal or limit to the possibility or probability of reincarnation and not in infinity. Assuming that, the concept of reincarnation offers repeated opportunities of existence, it has been interpreted to be the actual plan of God to mankind. Not all human undergo reincarnation (as explained earlier) but, those that have not met God’s standard(s) of entering his kingdom,

they are offered the option to return to another Earth life for further soul growth unless they have entered the Kingdom of God in the highest heaven. It is God’s will that no one perish (2 Peter 3:9) and no one can thwart God’s will; and God has provided a way of salvation for everyone through Christ, even those in hell. See (1 Timothy 2:3 – 4) (1 Timothy 4: 10), (Lamentation 3:31-33), (Isaiah 52: 10), and (Luke 3:5-6). I reached the same conclusion many others have: reincarnation is actually a gift from God allowing humans to have as many opportunities as necessary to become permanent residents of the highest heaven. “Hell” means having to dwell in lower, hellish after life realms, then reincarnation to be subject to death repeatedly until eternal life in heaven is attained. These hidden of mysteries of Jesus were not limited to Jesus or to Judeo-Christianity (Williams 2017, p. 7).

As explained earlier that, interpretation is, one of the challenges of associating meaning to symbols. In other words, the major problem confronting Catholic faith is the inability for to resolve biblically on the concept of reincarnation. For instance, there are within the Christian faiths who are disciples of the concept of reincarnation.

The eminent Christian leader who championed this interpretation of the resurrection was the early Church Father Origen (185-232 A.D.) who was the first theologian after Paul to develop a system of theology around the teachings of Jesus. Origen headed the famed Catechetical School of Alexandria founded by Mark the Apostle where he learned the secret teachings of Christ. Unfortunately, Origen's teachings on preexistence and its corresponding principle of reincarnation were later declared heresy and condemned at the Synod of Constantinople in 543 A. D. and was ratified by the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553 A. D (Williams 2017, p. 6).

Besides Origen, many research works in support of reincarnation as that, "of Dr. Ian Stevenson whose 40+ years of research yielded much scientific evidence suggestive of reincarnation. Dr. Kenneth Ring also studied reincarnation in NDE studies. Then there is my own reincarnation research where I provide evidence for the reincarnation of Abraham Lincoln" (Williams 2017, p. 7).

Another biblical interpretation on the concept of reincarnation within the Catholic belief is that,

the mystery of the "Resurrection of the Dead" on judgment Day when Christ appears has been misunderstood by the Church ever since reincarnation (rebirth) was declared a heresy in the 6th century A.D. ...The mystery of the "Resurrection of the dead" on the judgment Day is one of these mysteries. The organized Roman Church rejected any of these mysteries for varieties of reasons; but mostly because after hundreds of years since Christ's death, the Church leadership was greatly influenced by doctrines from the public at large who were not completely privy to these mysteries which they considered heresy. The Roman Church advocated a misinterpretation of resurrection as corpses 'sleeping' in their graves until judgment Day when Christ appears and corpses come out of their graves and regain their physical bodies including genitals. But the secret teachings involve two forms of "resurrection" (John 3:5):

(1) a spiritual 'resurrection' or spiritual regeneration by the Holy Spirit known as "born of the Spirit" (John 3:7-8), and

(2) a bodily "resurrection" or the rebirth of a human spirit in a new physical body – becoming 'born of water' (John 3; 3-6), symbolized by baptism, known as reincarnation. Once a person is born of a woman (by water", reincarnation) then born by the Holy Spirit, spiritual "resurrection" as Jesus taught, they can enter the Kingdom of God (John 3:5). Reincarnation is the result of not being "born of the Holy Spirit" (spiritual regeneration).

The eminent Christian leader who championed this interpretation of the resurrection was the early Church Father Origen (185-232 A.D.) who was the first theologian after Paul to develop a system of theology around the teachings of Jesus (Williams 2017, p. 6).

To demonstrate the existence of the concept of reincarnation further, “there are mysteries and secret oral traditions that came directly from Christ and the apostles which were not given to the public at large” (Williams 2017, p. 6).

In Africa generally, and among the Yorùbá in particular, oral genres are societal commodities in which, their cultural values are guaranteed and more flavored in orality. “orality was the means by which Africa made its existence, its history long before the colonial and imperial presence of the west manifested itself. In this sense, orality needs to be seen not simply as ‘the absence of literacy’ but as something self-constitutes *Sui generis*” (Gunner 2007, p. 67). In Yorùbá tradition, “*Ifá* divination protocols are the closest an ‘oral’ society could develop to fulfill the requirement of genuinely divine writing and speaking” (Adéèkó 2010, p. 288). Tradition of the people is believed to have a vital role in peoples’ life, including religion. The Catholics and Hebrews, Jews or Greeks are traditionally influenced by religion. For example, Okonda reports about tradition and Catholics that, “the Catholic Counter-Reformation, on the other hand, traditionally understood the words and actions of Christ and the Apostles transmitted orally and the liturgy. It wanted to mark the difference between the apostolic tradition, the singular, and the traditions of the people, in the plural” (2017, p. 57).

The opinion above demonstrates that, Africans generally and the Yorùbá in particular hold oral tradition in high esteem. The Catholic belief is equally associated with orality, as a dependable source of information. As a result of oral dissemination of history, there is the possibility that,

there is significant evidence that much of the original material about Jesus Christ, which was initially in the Talmud, was removed and censored during the Middle Ages. **This was done in an attempt to eliminate inflammatory passages that were misused by bigots as an excuse to assault Jewish ghettos in Europe.** As you would expect, this censored material included both positive and negative comments about Jesus. **Even**

negative comments are very helpful, in terms of establishing the historical truth of the life of Christ (Jeffrey 1991, p. 187) (bold mine).

Removal some messages from the account of the ministry of Jesus Christ has been criticised by some authors and scholars on the ground that, it denied people the freedom and right to worship- it was much less individualistic. In other words, for people to have freedom, they

must have access to all information and arguments that may be relevant to its ability to discuss public affairs fully and to assess in a competent manner the conduct of the officials it chooses... This approach can be considered to provide the foundation or the assurance that has been so critical to modern argument against censorship (John 8: 32): "And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free". Further biblical authority against censorship may be found in such "free speech" dramas as that described in (Acts 4: 13-21). Perhaps the most dramatic form of censorship in Christendom was that displayed in the development by the Roman Catholic Church of the Index *Lbrorum prohibitorium*, a list of proscribed books; the origin of which go back (in a primitive form) to the 5th century CE and which continued to have official sanction well into 20th century. The most spectacular instance of silencing of thinker of note may well have been the restrictions placed upon Galileo in 1633 (Encyclopedia Britannica 2002, p. 2).

There is the possibility of the direct reincarnation to have been affected- be censored out of the bible. However, there are parallel words and events that point to the likely presence or recognition of the reincarnation material in the bible and in its dictionaries and concordance, including the word as a linguistic symbol for the concept of reincarnation.

The purpose of God for mankind is impartial, unbiased of religion or faith. Religion is a way to actualising or fulfilling the purposes of God for mankind. Can African religions views be outside God's purpose for mankind? Has the Christianity religious belief on the concept of reincarnation been accurately or correctly interpreted? Can't there be move towards all religions or worldview on the controversial concept of reincarnation?

The term *worldview* may sound abstract or philosophical.... but actually a person's world view is intensely practical. It is simply the sum total of our beliefs about the world, the "big picture" that directs our daily decisions and actions. And so understanding worldviews is extremely important to how we live-to know how to evaluate everything from the textbooks in our classrooms to the unspoken philosophy that shapes the message we hear...The basis for the Christian worldview, of course, is God's revelation in Scriptures. Yet sadly, many believers fail to understand that Scripture is intended to be

the basis for all of life...Genuine Christianity is more than a relationship with Jesus as expressed in personal piety, church attendance, Bible study, and works of charity. It is more than discipleship, more than believing a system of doctrines about God. **Genuine Christianity is a way of seeing and comprehending *all* reality** (Colson and Pearcey 1999, pp. ix) (bold mine).

The understanding of the reality of biblical message and teaching on reincarnation or its symbolism to Christianity and, its impacts on their Christian race is a desirable challenge.

Understanding of life's laws is what Scripture calls wisdom. "Wisdom in Scripture is, broadly speaking, the knowledge of God's world and the knack of fitting oneself into it," says Cornelius Plantinga Jr., president of Calvin Theological Seminary. A wise person is one who knows the boundaries and limits, the laws and rhythms and seasons of the created order, both in the physical and the social world. 'To be wise is to know reality and then accommodate yourself to it.' (Colson and Pearcey 1999 pp. ix – x).

The universality of God's intention to mankind is unvarying as there are varying belief systems or doctrines about the intention of God towards mankind. The reality is that, there are physical evidences that support the belief of reincarnation, especially in Africa and among the Yorùbá in particular. In addition, the biblical arguments against the belief till the present time are insufficient, unconvincing and inadequate to substantiate the concept of reincarnation as unscriptural. Certainly, the belief on reincarnation has not been "the common ground shared by religions" but, rather has been "complex ground of battle and conflict" among religions and within the Christian and Catholic faiths. Therefore, what we presently have is the intra-religious misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the concept of reincarnation. This is why it is desirable to look outside the Christianity religion, such as in this case, *Ifá*- the religion of the Yorùbá people, which have been in various ways associated with the Catholic belief and, take a position based on the biblical consensus prescriptions on the concept of reincarnation.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation

This study has provided *Ifá* epistle about the concept of reincarnation. The study shows that reincarnation is a concept associated with and established in *Ifá*. The reincarnation circle rotates in-between the sixteen principal *Odù*. The process of reincarnation is anchored on the

visitation of *Odù-Ifá*. This study canvasses and concludes that, the proper interpretation of the doctrine of bible being relied on by some Catholics on the concept of reincarnation is yet to be understood and comprehended. This study recommends that, “We must also have some understanding of the opposing worldviews and why people believe them. Only then can we present the gospel in language that can be understood. Only then can we defend truth in a way that is winsome and persuasive” (Colson and Pearcey 1999, pp. ix - x) (bold mine). In other words, “a person must act virtuously but must personally choose to do so; he must be prepared to be exposed to alternatives, as inevitably he will be, and he must choose rightly if he is to merit and secure eternal salvation” (Encyclopedia Britannica 2002, p. 2) (bold mine). After all, every believer of a religion chooses to or not to steal, fornicate or kill; having known all the do and don'ts attached with these vices.

Biography

Olúwolé Tẹwógboyè Òkéwándé holds a doctorate degree in Yorùbá literature and culture. He has been lecturing in the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages since 1998. His research interests include African Religion and culture, stylistics and semiotics. He has published in reputable local, national and international journals.

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