

THE ETHICAL RELEVANCE OF IFA LITERARY CORPUS IN YORUBA'S ONTOLOGY

Adebayo A. Aina
Department of Philosophy
Olabisi Onabanjo University
Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria
adebayoaina@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng



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Abstract

The study borders on the ethical relevance of Ifa literary corpus in Yoruba's ontology. This work transcends the mere analysis of denigration of Yoruba oral tradition as being anachronistic, superstitious and dogmatic. It rather attempts to showcasing, among others the moral conditions in which Ifa serves as a means of administration of socio-political affairs in the Yoruba community. Beside other usefulness ifa acts as harbinger of moral truth in the midst of conflicting social and individual relationship. Moreso, Ifa is recognised as a social force in the community. This provokes the importance of encouraging caring and good conduct among people within the cultural settings. Nevertheless, it dwells on the principle of fairness in the dispensation of justice as well as on the value of moral rectitude. In fact, Ifa grounds the modes of social practice in Yoruba culture.

Keywords: Ethics, Ifa literary corpus, Ontology, Yoruba cosmology, Yoruba Socio-political system

Introduction

The Yoruba speaking people make up one of the major and influential ethnic groups in contemporary Nigeria. They spread across Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, Oyo, Osun, Lagos states and a substantial part of Kwara, Kogi and Edo States.¹ Their existence spans across the other West African countries of Benin Republic, Togo and Ghana. About thirty million people are estimated to live in South Western parts of Nigeria, one-and-a half million Yoruba live in Benin Republic,

which borders Nigeria to the west. Some of their inhabitations include, Ketu, Sabe, Port-Novo (also known as Ajase). In Togo, the Yoruba occupy the south central regions of the country. Togo's second largest city, *Atakpame* (ile- anaa) is a Yoruba city. There are about fifty Yoruba villages in Ghana. The belief in Ile-Ife as the cradle of life is one key element of Yoruba culture in Africa and the Diaspora. The conquest myth informed us that *Oduduwa* came from East Africa and settled at Ile-Ife, a place presumed to be

¹ J.A. Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History*(Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1990),1

the centre of the world. *Oduduwa* had seven grandchildren, the youngest of whom was *Oranmiyan* who founded the present ruling dynasties of Oyo and Benin.

Yoruba land remains divided into politically autonomous kingdoms, each centred on a capital city or town and headed by a hereditary king (*Oba*) who is traditionally considered sacred. The sacred kingship had long existed. Hence, *Oduduwa* is conceived as the father of the original crowned rulers. Ile-Ife is respected to be responsible for the dispatched beaded kings to all Yoruba kingdom.² Thus the claim to the ascendance of the throne must have been sourced from the royal lineage (*idileoba*) and using the description of the royal prince (*omooba*). According to Lloyd,

The lineage is a corporate group, its male members living together and having common rights to land and chieftaincy title. Elderly men conceive their town as composed of lineages little dependent on the other, each dependent individually on the *Oba*. Though tracing their origin from the hometown of their founder, they make no attempt to trace genealogically their ultimate descent from *Oduduwa*.³

By and large, at the demise of a king, the member of the royal lineage holds the right to the throne. Those eligible, include first, a son born to an *Oba* while on the throne except the first son (*Aremo*); the son must have been born by a free woman and not by a slave; he must be free of any

indictment or physical blemish. The sacredness of the new *Oba* starts with the custom of eating the excised heart of the late *Oba*. This is believed by tradition that a man who performed these rites, if not eligible by descent for the throne, would die. While an eligible ruler, who omitted the rites would not be able to withstand the magic regalia and he too would pass on prematurely. This consecration gives to the *Oba* the wisdom to rule justly. Another sacred character is that the *Oba* may not be seen eating in public place. In addition, he may take, as many wives as possible, but a royal wife may not be seduced by any other man.⁴

Most Yoruba men are farmers, growing yam, corn and millet as staples while cocoa is their cash crop. Yoruba women control much of the complex market system. However, some Yoruba are now either Christian or Muslim but belief in their traditional religion continues, and it remains alive too, even in the new world or countries to which Yoruba were transported to work as slaves. The Yoruba language has an extensive literature of poetry, short stories, myths and proverbs grounded in the *Ifa* literary corpus, which is referred to as the compendium of Yoruba philosophy.

However, the crux of the paper is the ethical relevance of *Ifa* literary corpus in Yoruba cosmology. It attempts first to clarify the idea of ethics and *Ifa* literary corpus with a view to conceptualising their meanings. Afterwards, some of the themes relating to the ethical values of the *Ifa* corpus are philosophically discussed.

² P. C. Lloyd, "Sacred Kingship and government among the Yoruba" *Africa*, xxx (1960):223.

³ Lloyd, "Sacred Kingship and government among the Yoruba", 225

⁴ Lloyd, "Sacred Kingship and government among the Yoruba", 228

Conceptual Clarifications: Ethics and Ifa literary Corpus

The word ethics is from the Greek word *ethikos*, which relates to *ethos* or human conduct. According to William Lillie, *An Introduction to Ethics*, it is 'the normative science of the conduct of human beings living in societies'.⁵ From this definition, ethics is scientific because it presents a systematic investigation on how it may be possible to deduce an agreeable piece of knowledge as a normative knowledge concerned with standards by which we judge human actions to be right or wrong.⁶ Ethics attempts to address the questions which ought to determine our behaviour. Moreover, judgement of this nature might turn out to be a referent-point for those who want to come near a cherished ideal.⁷ From this train of thought, the soundness of the unconditional obligation that follows this ideal must be established and tested. This implies that normative science does not only describe the standard by which we judge, it also emphasises the justification or truth of these standards.

More so, this approach involves the act of conduct by which we mean a consciously willed actions displayed by humans. These actions conditioned by freedom of choice and decision in order to make it possible for human beings to be responsible for their deeds. That is those inward motives and desires that produce bodily movements liable to be good or bad. These value judgements will not only address the problem of obligation, but also

point to the absolute nature of the concept of 'ought' involved. Thus, conduct is not concerned with the actions of lower animals. Rather, it is concerned with human actions. These actions depend on the application of relations of human within a limited society. In this respect, comprehensive ideas of a people's customs somehow determine what should be right and wrong actions of human beings in the society.

To this end, the value of ethics is not in the quest for truth, but in the development of width of outlook and seriousness of purpose in dealing with moral matters.⁸ It evaluates the extent at which human actions will contribute to human happiness, human good or human well-being. Human good aims at a state of affairs whereby our distinctly human needs are realised. This will make a difference to our attitudes and actions. In a bid to entrench good moral behaviour, some principles and rules of behaviour are written in *Ifa* corpus for proper guidance.

The *Ifa* literary corpus represents the Yoruba world-view. It includes their historical past, present, and future life, the nature of both natural and supernatural things, the relationship between them, the phenomena of human life and destiny, etc.⁹ In other words, the corpus serves as a compendium of the Yoruba thought system.

⁵ William Lillie, *An Introduction to Ethics* (Suffolk: the Chaucer Press, 1971), 2

⁶ Lillie, Lillie, *An Introduction to Ethics*, 3

⁷ Paul Roubiczek, *Ethical Values in the age of science* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), 6

⁸ Lillie, Lillie, *An Introduction to Ethics*, 19

⁹ Albert McGee, "Some mathematical observations on Ifa", *Journal of cultures and idea*, 1, no.1 (Dec 1983): 89-93

According to Abimbola,

It is... the store-house of Yoruba culture inside which the Yoruba comprehension of their own historical experiences and understanding of their environment can always be found. Even until today, Ifa is recognised by the Yoruba as a repository for Yoruba traditional body of knowledge embracing history, philosophy, medicine and folklore.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the *Ifa* corpus is divided into two functional parts, *odu* and *eseIfa*. The *odu* (a chief or a head) is two hundred and fifty-six (256) in number, sixteen (16) principal and two hundred and forty (240) minor. The Yoruba believe that the sixteen principal *Odu* (*ojuodu*) are mythically qualified to have descended from heaven and that the minor *odu* (*omoodu*) act as subordinate to the former.¹¹

However, the role of *odu Ifa* terminates at the point of divination process where two recognized methods are involved. The first is the casting of divination chain of four half-nuts of the *Opele* tree tied to either side of the string. The method is more accepted to the Ifa adepts because they arrive at interpretation of *eseifa* more rapidly than the adoption of the other method. The other method involves the process wherein the Ifa *priest* casts the sixteen palm-nut fruits (*ikin*) from one hand to the other. All these then depends on the *oduifa* that identifies the *ese* (verse) to be chanted during divination. In addition, the client selects by himself the associated verses to his problem.

Indeed, the verses represent the key to the entire system of divination. They bring to light a variety of issues to the client, such as epistemological, metaphysical and ethical issues. This *ese Ifa* is structured to be poetic and its prose vary in length. There are about one thousand, six hundred and eighty (1,680) verses: It is for this reason it becomes difficult for human to grasp all the verses.

The next concern is to show the extent to which the *Ifa* literary system is able to fulfil its ethical values in the society. This will be shown through the analysis of some of the themes in the *Ifa* literary corpus.

The Ethical Relevance of *Ifa* Corpus in Yoruba Cosmology

Ifa acts as a social force in the Yoruba society. Yoruba people believe it to be present when witnessing the initial *ipin* (allotment) of humans as performed by *Olodumare*. And this informed the process of *Ikosed'aye* (naming) ceremony for newly born children in order to enable parents to know which path the child should follow in life. An *Ifa* adept performed this on the eighth day after a child is born. Its purpose is to know beforehand the place of the child in the community. Example of this ethical value is in the *Oturupon-Gunda*, a minor *odu ifa* poem. Thus:

Kekere li a ti peka iroko
Bi o ba di agba tan, a ma gba ebo.
A dia fun otu abiyamo,
Won niomokekerekanti a bi fun un
yi,
Ti anponlehin,
Ole niomonayio ma ja bi o di agba;

¹⁰. Olatunji Olatunde, *Features of Yoruba Oral poetry* (Ibadan: University Press, 1986), 115

¹¹. Wande Abimbola, (1968) *ijinle ohun enuifa – Apakinni* (Glasgow: Aim press and publishers, 1968), 9

Ki won waruebokiomona le
Ma gbo'rosi won lenu.

It is in the seedling state that the iroko tree is pruneable, once it is fully grown, it becomes difficult; was the statement made to the beginner nursing mother, that the infant being nursed at present will become a thief when he is grown up; that a sacrifice should be performed to ensure that the child accepts discipline¹²

In this line of thought, the narration shows that children be trained in the tradition of moral discipline in order for them to be useful to the society. The above excerpt implies that an individual cannot run adrift from the community that nurtures him/her. Rather the individual, through socialization and the love and concern which the community extended to him/her, cannot now see him/herself as an isolated being. This social character is intrinsic to the notion of morality in Yoruba culture. This is grounded in human experiences in living together. The Yoruba maxim in support of this position says thus *Kairiḥ kaipo Iyiye loṇ ye ni* (which literally means: walking together is always suitable).¹³ Hence, man owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. Whatever happens to the individual is believed to happen to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group

is the responsibility of the individuals.

This moral discipline may include acknowledgements of the existence of common values, obligations and understandings and feels a loyalty and commitment to the community s/he belongs. All these underpin the notion that upholds the moral values and guides the type of social relations, attitude and behaviour that exist amongst individuals in Yoruba culture.

Moreover, this provokes the ethics of responsibility in the Community. In Yoruba society, responsibility is not merely a personal affair but also a caring attitude or conduct that one feels one ought to adopt with respect to the well-being of another person. This moral attitude *ifa* displays when it implores the parent of the ill-fated child to correct the situation through the means of sacrifice to appease the gods. This indicates that human beings in traditional Yoruba society are social being. To digress, it becomes reasonable for humans to be sociable because they lack self-sufficient power. They have to interact to make possible the division of labour and exchange of commodities which are necessary for the satisfaction of their material needs.

These include adequate food, shelter, and protection and established institutions such as the family, school, religious places and the state. By and large, these needs are felt by many as wants. It is believe that only through the conscious experience of needs as wants that survival is possible for

¹². O. Morakinyo, et. al. "The Yoruba Ontology of personality and motivation: A multidisciplinary approach", *Journal of Social/biological structure*, 4(1981):30

¹³. G.A.B.Bello-Olowookere, *Egberin Ijinle Owe Yoruba ati Itumo won ni Ede Geesi*. (Lagos: Concept Publications, 2004), 18

humans. For wants always transcend human's need, some of which may be non-material. For instance, humans value others company and friendship barring the economic and social benefits they derive there from. In addition, he stands to enjoy art-works, express himself on religious matters in his quest for knowledge. However, it is true that the objects of human wants are exceedingly multifarious. For instance, it is obvious that man is not always out for himself. Rather, he sometimes helps another in time of needs. This trait is displayed by man on daily basis. Even where the demand involves some sacrifices, he does not hesitate to oblige provided the reward or appreciation is either in this life or the world beyond. Obviously, the empirical fact this attracts is that humans refuse to be benevolent where it involves great hardship.

Be that as it may, human's personality is realised through the influence of *Ifa*. That is why the sayings that:

Ifa a soroda'yo
 A tunoriomoti o sunwon se
 Translate:
 Ifa that turns thought into joy,
 one that changes the bad destiny of a
 child to good one.

Another ethical value of *Ifa* is grounded in the *Otura-Rete* poem which dwells on the principles of fairness in the dispensation of justice. It indicates that justice is not what pleases one's relations and friends. Rather, in dispensing justice, there should be fairness. It narrates how *Akapo* (an ifa Priest) allegedly reported *Orunmila* to *Olodumare* for not responding to the needs of his wife and children..

Olodumare was annoyed without listening to *Orunmila's* version of the allegation. The poem goes thus:

Ojopatapanibose ole
 Adifa fun Orunmila
 Eyiti Akapo o pejonile Olodumare
 Ojopatapanibose ole
 Adifa fun Orunmila
 Niloreejejo Akaponile Olodumare.
 Heavy downpour provides a cover
 for the burglar's feet
 Ifa divination was performed for
 Orunmila
 When Akapo instituted legal action
 against
 Him at Olodumare courtyard.
 Heavy downpours provide cover for
 Orunmila
 who was going to defend himself on
 the
 accusation levied by Akapo at
 Olodumare
 Courtyard¹⁴

The poem explicates on the moral qualities leaders should possess while dispensing their responsibility. *Akapo* is a recognised representative of *Orunmila*. And as such, *Orunmila* should meet all his material needs. This will prevent *Akapo* from manipulating his divination practise for selfish interest which may cause him disfavour from *Olodumare*. In addition, he believes that the cheat prospers ostensibly but on close relation, one might discover that his material contentment is hollow and that he is not what he seems to be.¹⁵ This could have been the reason why *Olodumare* was initially annoyed without listening to *Orunmila's* version of the allegation.

However, having listened to *Orunmila*

¹⁴. Yemi Elebuibon, *Ifa: The custodian of Destiny* (Ibadan: Penthouse Publications, 2004), 57-60

¹⁵. Osamaro Ibie, *Ifism: The complete works of Orunmila*, Vol. 1 (Lagos: Efelu Ltd, 1992), 57

who explained that it is the priest's *Ori* that is responsible for his woes, *Olodumare* decreed that henceforth parties to quarrel should be present before any pronouncement by the arbiter.¹⁶ It shows that a leader should embrace the process of dialogue as a means of promoting mutual understanding. This will enable a leader to base his decisions on sound judgement. This idea is implicit in the saying that:

Agbo eejo etikan da, agba osikani (A partial arbiter is the chief of all evil-doers).¹⁷ A leader must carry his/her people along in as a problem-solving methodology. If he/she chooses otherwise, then s/he may find it difficult not only to rule but also to win the heart of his/her subjects. Implicit in this study is the tradition of joint critical examination and evaluation of wants, needs, desires, values, roles and commitments by the people before decisions are made. In addition, wisdom is not limited to a given class of people in traditional Yoruba society. Rather, it recognises the contribution of every rational being, old and young, towards the betterment of the whole community. The point here is that every person should have a chance to contribute to the development of the society. This implies that no point of view should be suppressed in the process of deliberation and no arbitrary exercise or power should be allowed. The importance of cross fertilization of ideas in decision making is germane in any society.

The next narration borders on the value of moral rectitude (*iwa*) in Yoruba culture. It is in determining a person's life, particularly their ethical practises. For example, to a person of good character,

people would say, *iwa eni naa dara*; while a bad character is described as *iwa eni naa kodara*. However, the Yoruba frown at bad characters. They believe that such *iwabuburu* (bad character) leads human beings nowhere in life. An example of this is in *Ogbe-Alara*, a minor *odu-ifa*. It presents Iwa as an exceedingly beautiful woman whom *Orunmila* married but lacked good behaviour. After a while, *Orunmila* could not tolerate her bad habit, and he, therefore, sent her away. This action attracts to *Orunmila* displeasure from his community. In addition, his clients deserted him and his divination practice was no longer profitable. In short, *Orunmila* lacked woman, clothing, money and other material things.

This prompted him to look for *iwa*, visiting all the sixteen important *Ifa* cult chiefs, with the following song:

Iwa, iwa la nwao, iwa.
 Bo o lowolowo, to o niwa,
 Owoolowoni.
 Iwa, iwa, lanwa o, iwa
 Omo la bi,
 Ta a niwa,
 Omoolomoni.
 Iwa, iwalanwa o, iwa.
 Ba a nile,
 Ta a niwa,
 Ile onileni.

iwa, iwalanwa o, iwa
 Ba a laso,
 Ta a niwa,
 Asoalasoni.
 Iwa, iwalanwa o, iwa.
 Ire gbogbo ta a ni,
 Ta a niwa
 Ire onireni

^{16.} Elebuibon, *Ifa: The custodian of Destiny*, 18

^{17.} Elebuibon, *Ifa: The custodian of Destiny*, 60

Iwa, iwalanwa o, iwa.
Iwa, iwa is the one I am looking for.

If you have money,
But if you do not have good character,
The money belongs to someone else.
Iwa, iwa is the one we are searching for.
If one has children,
But if one lacks good character,
The children belong to someone else.
Iwa, iwa is the one we are searching for.
If one has clothes,
But if one lacks good character,
The clothes belong to someone else.
Iwa, iwa is what we are looking for.
All the good things of life which a man has,
If he lacks good character,
They belong to someone else.
Iwa, iwa is what we are searching for.¹⁸

The poem further indicates that life can only be meaningful when humans uphold the virtue of good character. The quality of this character lies at the heart of the moral life man will live.

That is why Parents, in Yoruba culture, are advised to train their children to develop good character traits in order to grow and become worthy, respectful and respectable adults. But much of the early

training of the child is known as the direct responsibility of both parents, especially the mother. The Yoruba word for this training is called *eko*, which is inadequately juxtaposed and translated into English language as education.¹⁹ The full training is a cooperative effort in which members of the more inclusive groups such as age grades must play a part. It is believed that a child, through the process, builds up his/her code, whether of manner or of morals, item by item, as they come incidentally into the field of his/her experience.²⁰ For example, a Yoruba child is taught very early in life to respect age and defer to it. Thus they are educated in the symbolic art of prostrating in the case of a male child or kneeling in the case of a female child while greeting the elderly.²¹ Sometimes, a slight bow of the head and deliberate avoidance of the eye contact when being spoken to by the elderly are behavioural attitude associated with respect for age and the elderly that the child is expected to imbibe into norm repertoire when interacting with elders.

Moreso, good *eko*(education) enhances a blissful married life. There is no doubt that a well trained girl preparing for wedding should see beyond her beauty. Indeed, the lack of beauty scarcely prevents a suitor but the absence of good *eko* marks out a girl child for criticism and disfavour within and without the family.²² That is the reason why a Yoruba says *obìrìn so ìwàl nuṣ o ni ouṣ o lorìòko* (A bad character spinster blames destiny for her lack of

^{18.} Wande Abimbola, *Yoruba Oral Tradition* (Ibadan: university Press, 1975), 396-399

^{19.} A. Fajana, "Some aspects of Yoruba traditional Education." *Odu*. 3, no. 1 (1966): 17

^{20.} N.A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1991), 311

^{21.} O.S. Elegbeleye, "The Yoruba Personality Assessment Criteria." *Studies. Tribes Tribals*. 3, no. 2 (2005): 86-87.

^{22.} Fajana "Some aspects of Yoruba traditional Education." 17

suitor). This also reflects in the field of leadership. A rich human without education may be by-passed in favour of a poor but educated person in the choice of a leader. The Yoruba saying to this effect is *owo fùn ni, koì tòì eḥiyan* (wealth is incomparable to a good person / education). Nonetheless, the concept of *eko* (education) might even surprise non-Yoruba speaking person if not to the level of ridicule whenever it is considered rude to give or receive anything with the left hand, and when a girl or woman serves an elderly person without being on her knees.²³ Further training and sanctions of a child extend to knowledge of the sanitary and aesthetic norms of people. This is important because a child without this training is sure to part with all good things of life. Thus the following Yoruba maxim: *Omoti a ko too lo ma gbe'le ta ko ta* (A prodigious child is bound to dispose off his parents' properties.) In this connection, it is important we make effort to instruct children in the values of the society and to help them acquire these virtues of *iwa*. In fact, the intention to refrain from pursuing the morally wrong depends on the quality of one's character. This we see in the Yoruba maxim: *Iwarere ni eso eniyan* (Good character is a person's guard). The recognition of this ideal makes it possible for people to recognise the importance of showing compassion, generosity and hospitality.²⁴ It signifies that one should always be open to the service of others' interests and welfare. In addition, this attitude further suggests that the worth of other human beings is equal to one's in terms of basic value, ideals and sentiments. This supportive attitude

shows the spirit of brotherhood, which covers not only family relations, but also persons between whom there are no blood ties at all.

In sum, *Iwa* is fundamental to the enrichment of Yoruba moral system. In the context of all material things of life as well as in the struggle to do the right things, the quality of a person's personal character is of paramount importance.

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to bring to the fore the ethical relevance of *Ifa* literary corpus in Yoruba cosmology. For the Yoruba, the corpus serves as the source of wisdom and philosophy. Its tenets contain body of knowledge the value of which can never be over-emphasised. It has also been exposed in various Yoruba proverbs which are reflections from *Ifa* corpus that good character is important to cultivate as displayed by *Ifa*. *Ifa* thus influences public opinions on the steps to take in life. It shows the importance of listening to parties involved in a quarrel by arbiter before adjudicating. In addition, *Ifa* addressed the ethical implications for the absence of good character (*iwa*) in a person's life. Hence, one can deduce that people risk the benefits of all good things of life whenever good character is amiss.

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²³. Fajana "Some aspects of Yoruba traditional Education." 23

²⁴. J.A. Sofola, *African culture and the African personality: what makes an African person African* (Ibadan: African Resources Publisher, 1978)

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