

Exploring the Language AND Style in *Ese Ifa* in Yorubaland for Contemporary Global Relevance

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Abstract

This paper attempts an exploration of the language and style in *Ese Ifa* in Yorubaland with the purpose of revealing the gross under – utilization of the resources of this vital Yoruba cultural heritage. The other purpose in this paper is to show the elaborateness, the universality and the antiquity of *Orunmila's Ifa* as the religious and philosophical Scripture of the Yorubas. Through interviews, personal experience, and observation, the paper establishes that the language and style in *Ese Ifa* is an oral tradition deeply rooted in the culture of the people and it is essential to preserve its indigenous nature. This is discussed from mythological and spiritual perspectives. It highlights the role of *Ese Ifa* in the social, religious and political milieu of the Yoruba people; and finally, the paper concludes that even until today, *Ese Ifa*, with its rich linguistic and poetic features, is recognized by the Yoruba traditional body of knowledge embracing history, philosophy, medicine and folklore despite the trappings of modernization. It is expected that the paper will help in illuminating important aspects of the dynamics and significance of the Yoruba Oracle, *Ifa* within the context of religion-spiritual vision in the post – colonial Nigeria, in modern Africa and the globalized world.

Keywords: Yoruba, Orunmila, Ifa Oracle, Ese Ifa, Language and Style, Mythological.

Introduction

The Yorubaland (Yoruba: Ile-Yoruba), lies in the Southwestern part of Nigeria. Yoruba is the second largest language group in Africa, consisting of over 20 million people. The term ‘Yoruba’, according to Frank A.Salamone (2010:319), ‘encompasses about twenty-five separate groups, each one culturally different from the other’. The people trace their origin or descent to a great ancestor, Oduduwa, who came from Ile-Ife. The bulk of the people are today found in Ogun, Ondo, Oyo, Lagos, Ekiti and substantial parts of Kwara

and Kogi State bound together by language, traditions and religious beliefs and practices. Islam, Christianity, and the ‘traditional’ Yoruba pantheon, the *Orisa*, are all embraced in Yorubaland. The bond shared by all Yoruba people is the centrality of ritual to specific occasions, as well as to everyday life.

Orunmila (Ifa) is central to the traditional religion of Yoruba people and it is one of their principal primordial Deity, second only to *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being) in terms of benevolence and wisdom. It is with this theme of *Ifa* Oracle that this paper is concerned. The emphasis is only on the exploration of the language and style in *Ese Ifa* in Yorubaland that connect the society as a whole. The foregoing and many other preliminary and major critical assumptions have conspired to create the template for the topic of this discourse ‘Exploring the language and style in *Ese Ifa* in Yorubaland for contemporary global relevance’. The paper is divided into four sections. The first examines the origin and role of *Orunmila* in Yorubaland. The second section deals with *Ifa* Oracle. The third part explores the language and style in *Ese Ifa*. While doing this, the paper looks at the elaborateness, the universality and the antiquity of *Orunmila’s Ifa* as the religious and philosophical Scripture of the Yorubas. The final part is the conclusion.

Methodology

The present paper has benefited from earlier writings on *Ifa* Oracle in that they have pointed the way to further analysis which is attempted here. The paper is based on the field-work which I carried out on the language and style in *Ese Ifa* in Yorubaland, the recorded samples are used in this paper. All the recorded samples came mostly from Iperu, Ogun State in the Western axis of Yorubaland. All unacknowledged quotations are from my personal collections. The recordings were done on magnetic and visual tapes, and the sounds transcribed as recorded. To translate *Ese Ifa* (chapters in *Ifa* corpus/incantations) into English and yet preserve their exact meaning is not an easy task. I have, however, tried to meet the difficulty by being rather literal and keeping very close to the original in my translation.

Origin and Role of *Orunmila* Deity in Yorubaland

In the pantheon of Yoruba divinities, *Orunmila* is one of the higher or benevolent primordial divinities. Other outstanding divinities are *Orisa-nla*, *Olokun*, *Ogun*, *Esu* (Elegbara), *Sango*, *Oya* and *Osun*. Oral traditions also emphasize the part played by *Orunmila* in guiding the destinies both of the divinities and of men. Traditionally, the Yoruba believe that *Olodumare* has endowed *Orunmila* with special wisdom and knowledge to the end that he may be His accredited representative in matters relating to man’s destiny. *Orunmila* possesses intimate knowledge of matters affecting human destiny. One reason given for his intimate knowledge of matters affecting human destiny is that he

was fully present during the time when man was being created which was also the time when each individual's destiny was sealed. Thus, Orunmila can predict the future as well as prescribing remedies for any eventuality. It is in the light of this that Idowu (1962:77) affirms:

***Ifa* Oracle**

Connected with the cult of *Orunmila* is the geomantic form of divination known as *Ifa*. *Ifa* is a Yoruba oracle, the medium of *Orunmila*. It is a cultural practice and ritual and a link between the world of the spirit and of the living. Wole Soyinka sees *Ifa* as separate from *Orunmila*. *Orunmila* is for him the 'essence of wisdom', while *Ifa* is the 'god of divination and order' (*Idanre and other Poems*, 1967:37). In the epic poem, *Idanre*, the two gods are regarded as two separate deities (70). The study of language and style in *Ese Ifa* in Yorubaland therefore assumes that *Orunmila* and *Ifa* are one and the same god. The paper takes this position having considered that "most Yoruba scholars however, think *Orunmila* and *Ifa* as one and the same god" (Abimbola, 1976:3).

Orunmila knows all the secrets about man. This is why he is called *eleriipin* (the witness or advocate of destiny). *Olumoran Okan* (the one that knows the secret of the mind). From the shady to the mysterious, nothing is beyond revelation to him. In fact, the reason why a man adopts *Orunmila* (as his divinity) is either to make sure that his happy lot is preserved or that an unhappy lot may be rectified.

The above expositions become relevant in view of the fact that *Orunmila* is an oracle often consulted in the Yoruba setting to reveal secret things to the people. This explains why the *Babalawos* (*Ifa* Priests) are usually consulted for necessary guidance during the time of important decision. In pursuance of the same line of argument, Farrow (1926:71) remarks:

Ifa or the philosophy, knowledge, and acts of *Orunmila* while on earth, constitute a rather all embracing, comprehensive and uniquely pervasive system. This fact alone makes the system understandably large, of many parts, and with numerous components, covering all aspects of man's life... *Orunmila*, as the deity of Wisdom, embodies all knowledge and wisdom of the world: it takes, in consequence, two hundred and fifty-six (256) of his original and foundation disciples to transmit and preserve the wholeness of his primordial wisdom for the world.

For anybody wishing to understand the deeper meaning of accumulated *Ifa* wisdom and its structural organization, Abimbola (1976) gives a rich collection of original *Ifa* wisdom. The corpus is divided into

volumes (*Odu*), which amount to 256, and chapters (*Ese*), whose number is so vast that it is hard to determine reliably.

Ifa is the only active mouthpiece of Yoruba traditional religion taken as a whole. To the Yorubas, without *Ifa* the importance of other Yoruba gods would diminish. *Ifa* serves as an intermediary between the other gods and the people, between the people and their ancestors, and between the dead and the living. According to one saying in Yoruba ‘Orisa ti nko ni’ba to bo Orisa miran’ (*Ifa* is the only divinity that teaches one, how to worship other divinities). As a mouthpiece therefore, *Ifa* tends to popularize the other gods. Also, if a man is being punished by the other gods, he can only know this by consulting *Ifa*.

Olatunji (1984:10) further emphasizes this reality:

Ifa has always been throughout the history of the Yoruba a ‘sine qua non’ to life. This is because the Yoruba are rather curious about the future or what the outcome of an enterprise will be. It is in accordance with this view that Idowu (1962:5) explains:

Before a betrothal, before a marriage, before a child is born, at the birth of a child, and at successive stages in man’s life, before a king is appointed or a chief is made or in time of crisis, in terms of sickness and at any and all times, *Ifa* is assurance. Like the saying ‘oni l’ari a o r’ola on ni *babalawo* se nd’ifa l’ororun’ (it is today we see, we do not see tomorrow, hence the *babalawo* consults the oracle every fifth day).

Ifa is consulted by all Yoruba irrespective of religion, age or level of education, and when there is a major crisis, the Western educated, Christian or Muslim Yoruba, go secretly to the *babalawo* (*Ifa* priest-diviner) to know what should be done.

One must therefore consult *Ifa* who knows how to explain issues about present and the future. With this general background, on Yoruba traditional oral poetry therefore, the paper now considers the language and style in *Ese Ifa* in their various styles, forms and categories.

The Language and Style in *Ese Ifa*

The Yoruba are very rich in language. The Yoruba language is simple but with different accents and intonation which create a complex but nice intoxicating music to the ear. For example, the Yoruba can use one word to mean different things by the use of various intonations, in *igba* (in two hundred ways). Also, like the modern poem, one discovers that different methods of styles and language are utilized during different incantations of the *Ifa*. Some of the literary devices and styles used in *Ese Ifa* include repetition, metaphor,

simile, personification and so on. The illustration of this will be seen later in the paper.

Ifa literary corpus has two main parts: *Odu*(volume) and *Ese*(chapter). The corpus is divided into two hundred and fifty six (256) volumes called *Odu*:

The *Odu* corpus is a body of recitals which belongs to the intricate system of divination connected with the cult of Orunmila. They are believed to be the responses vouchsafed by the oracle through the priests to devout enquirers and suppliants, and constitute, in a systematic way, the religious philosophy of the Yoruba, which is a pragmatic one (Idowu, 1962:7).

The *Odu* is sub-divided into numerous chapters called *Ese*. Olatunji (1984:118) reveals:

Ese Ifa contains statements of human problems, wishes and hopes, and a testimony to how each personage has reacted to these problems. Some of these desires are universal human needs while others are pertinent to Yoruba life. The most recurrent ones are desire for children; desire to escape death, and victory over one's adversaries.

One can say that word-play is the most important stylistic feature in *Ese Ifa*. Word-play is "the juxtaposition of lexical items which are somehow similar in shape, to produce an effect of verbal dexterity (Olatunji, 1984:37). There are usually two parts to this; the word-play proper and tonal-word play. Sometimes both of these occur together. The word-play, which makes use of the *Ese Ifa* are the most recurrent. There are two types of word play. The first is either one or two syllables form the name of an *Odu* to a separate word. This word is used for word play. The second type of word-play is made of a word similar in form to the name of an *Odu*, there might be tonal change here. Example of the two different types of word play are illustrated below.

(i) The name of *Odu* is *Oye ku Meji* and the syllables that will be used for the word –play is *Ye, oye*:

Table 1:

Incantation	Translation
1. <i>Bi o ba ye</i>	If you move away to one side
2. <i>Emi o ye</i>	I will not move
3. <i>Yangi Ile won o gbodo yele;</i>	The stone foundation of a house must not fail the house
4. <i>Atari won o gbodo yeero oja</i>	The head must not fail to support the market woman

'Ye', here is constituted into only one meaning- "to move to one side" in lines 1 and 2 and in lines 3 and 4 it means "to fail"

Example 2: (II) (Second word-play)

1. O ye pee
 2. O bo poro
 3. B'o kan o ye
- “Ye”, in these lines means to shift to one side”

1. Ewe oloyeere
2. Yiye ni i se tabo
3. ... Ye di pee o waaboo

In the above quotations, “Ye” has different meanings. In line 1 “Ye” is part of the name of a leaf. In line 2, “ye” here is part of “Yi” which when brought together means “to consent”.

And finally in line 3, “Ye” is also part of a word. Thus, one can see the addition of the role of tonal word-play in *Ese Ifa* which brings different meaning and intonation to the different *Ese Ifa*.

Onomatopoeic words are used in *Ese Ifa* when animals or objects are referred to. For examples there are sound produced by the breaking of objects: Example 1: *Okuta la paa seje*

We cracked a stone that cannot bleed

“paa” in this example is the sound made when another object is used to break a stone, this brings a sort of crackling noise.

Examples 2: *Akuko Irele bi Irele*

O fi apapa idi mejeeji nale

O ro “jagajiigi hanranum”

The sound made in this last line by the cock described when it brings its two tail feathers together, is like that of an iron rod with tiny object tied round, so that when it strikes the ground, it makes a terrible and fearful noise. There is the use of these onomatopoeic words in some parts of *Ese*.

The use of these onomatopoeic words in *Ese Ifa* is to bring home the message in a much quicker manner to the people, it also creates a vivid picture for the listeners, so that the messages conveyed are brought home to the people.

Repetition is another stylistic feature in *Ese Ifa*. This is used to emphasize some words or for tonal balancing. Sometimes it is used for the plots of the long stories in *Ese Ifa*. In *Ese Ifa* several types of repetition can be perceived but there are two major ones, repetition of parts of the structure in *Ese Ifa* and repetition of single lines.

The most frequent occurrence of repetition is that of single lines.

Example 1:

Table 2

Incantation	Translation
1. <i>Igba iwoyi</i>	This time of the year
2. <i>Igba iwoyi</i>	This time of the year
3. <i>A dia fun moni yere igba oji</i>	Ifa divination was performed for He-who-has-locust-beans in the raining season.

Example II

Table 3:

Incantation	Translation
1. <i>Ejo meji nja l'oke odo</i>	Two snakes were fighting on the bank of the river
2. <i>Won se araa won lonke</i>	They shook each other persistently
3. <i>Won se araa won lonke</i>	They shook each other persistently

The repetition of single lines as demonstrated above can therefore be perceived. Sometimes the repetition comes in even third, fourth, fifth line.

Personification: In Yoruba oral literature, personification as an important feature is also prominent in *Ese Ifa*. This is because in *Ese Ifa* (according to Abimbola (1976:30) stories of animals, birds, insects etc are usually told and when these stories are being told about human beings, the human characteristics are related to the animals or ordinary objects of nature. Parts of human body can also be personified. This enables the priest of *Ifa* to tell his stories in the characteristics of *Ifa* form without having to change the language and style.

An example of *owo* (human hand) being personified is illustrated below:

The hand is regarded to be the mother of the five fingers. And like a human being it is said to be responsible for the performance of sacrifice for her five offspring (fingers) to prevent death. Like a mother it cares for her children and prevent harm from coming to them.

Example:

Table 4:

Incantation	Translation
1. <i>Okuta la paa mo seje</i>	It is the stone which breaks suddenly without bleeding
2. <i>A dia f'owo</i>	Ifa divination was performed for Hand
3. <i>Omo aba run ja run</i>	Offspring of he who inherits five (fingers) and retains five (fingers)
4. <i>Won ni o rubo fun oo moore</i>	She was asked to perform sacrifice for her children
5. <i>Nitori iku</i>	To prevent death
6. <i>Gbogbo omo maraarun ti owo bi naa lo rubo fun</i>	Hand performed sacrifice for all her five children
7. <i>Gbogbo awon omo naa si ye</i>	And all the children survived

Simile is another figure of speech in *Ese Ifa* because descriptions are made more vivid by the use of this figure of speech.

Example 1

Table 5:

Incantation	Translation
1. <i>A dia fun Orunmila</i>	Ifa divination was performed for Orunmila
2. <i>Ifa o rata b' omo e</i>	Who would shield his children
3. <i>Bi igun igemo</i>	Like the vulture of "Igemo"

Example ii:

Table 6:

Incantation	Translation
1. <i>Ojo t'iku ba nwa mi ibo wa</i>	On the day Death is seeking for me
2. <i>Ifa, iwo ni o rata bo mi,</i>	Ifa, you are the one to shelter me;
3. <i>B'ewe nla ti i rataa boori</i>	As a big leaf shelters solid maize gruel
4. <i>B'eri ti i rataa bo yanrin lodo</i>	As a large body of water shelters sand in the river

From the above quotation, one can get a very clear picture of how *Ifa* (himself as a divinity) is really relied upon by the Yoruba.

Metaphor is another figure of speech used in *Ese Ifa*. This is mainly in the description of human characteristics to non-human objects. The use of metaphor in *Ese Ifa* therefore makes the language highly imaginative.

Example 1

Table 7:

Incantation	Translation
1. <i>S'aju oloko ni ikan see w'ewu eje</i>	It is in the presence of the farmer that garden egg wears a garment of blood

Example II

Table 8:

Incantation	Translation
1. <i>O wa to gege</i>	It is high time
2. <i>K'aje o gbarijo s'odo mi wayi o</i>	Money gathered together and come to me

The first example gives us the hopelessness of garden eggs in the hands of a farmer who handles it as he wishes.

Hyperbole is also made use of in *Ese Ifa* for emphasis and in vivid descriptions.

Example I

Table 9:

Incantation	Translation
1. <i>Mo duro mo ko run;</i>	I stood up and made one hundred soil heaps
2. <i>Mo bere, mo ko fa</i>	I stooped down and made one hundred and twenty;
3. <i>Mo f'idubule ko 'gba</i>	I lay down and made two hundred.

One sees here that the sentences are exaggerated, but the speaker in this Ese Ifa only wants to convey the great and tiring efforts the farmer had put in the job

Example II

Table 10:

Incantation	Translation
1. <i>O mu le ponti</i>	He filled the house with drinks
2. <i>O mona roka,</i>	He filled the street with food
3. <i>O fi gbogbo agbada din'ran</i>	He used all pots to fry meat

This is another exaggeration, because one knows it is impossible to fill the house with drinks and food alone and also all the pots to fry meat. The aim of the hyperbole here is to show the big expense of the host or the greatness of the occasion.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is evident that *Ifa* plays a prominent role in the life of the Yorubaland and their community. In fact, it is the best organized religious system which demonstrates practically all the elements of culture in the Yoruba land. *Ifa* reveals the future to them, provides explanations for avert the looming danger. Obedience to the injunctions of *Ifa* leads to prosperity and peaceful co-existence, while disobedience brings doom. “This is a testimony to the major role that the transcendent, the mysterious and the metaphysical play and continue to play in the life of the people, despite the presence of the trappings of modernization” (Faniran 2010;497).

Importantly also, this paper has examined the complex and rich linguistic and poetic aspects of *Ifa* which are very much in existence in today’s literature. The opinion of this paper is that its use should be encouraged and not condemned because it is a tradition that the Yoruba has identify with. It is an index of the cultural experience of the Yoruba, a symbol of their social and cultural identity. “Even until today, *Ifa* is recognized by the Yoruba as a repository for Yoruba traditional body of knowledge embracing history, philosophy, medicine and folk lore” (Abimbola, 1975;32). It is therefore anticipated that its adherence will assist in resolving some of the socio-political difficulties of the nation in the drive towards contemporary global relevance and human advancement.

Notes:

❖ All translations into English are mine (the author)

1. *Ifa* is a Yoruba oracle, the medium of *Orunmila* (Yoruba Deity of Wisdom and Omniscience). As it has already been indicated in this paper, *Ifa* is the philosophy, knowledge, and acts of *Orunmila* while on earth, constitute a

rather all-embracing, comprehensive and uniquely pervasive system. For a detailed discussion about the role and place of *Ifa* in Yoruba metaphysics, see Afolabi Epega's *Ifa, the Ancient Wisdom*. (New York: Imole Oluwa Institute, 1977) pp. 39 and 43.

2. *Ese Ifa* is a chapter in *Ifa* corpus, whose number is so vast that it is hard to determine reliably.

3. *Babalawo* is the ' Father of secrets or diviner in Yoruba. He performs functions ranging from predictions to healing. One can become a *Babalawo*, according to Olufemi Alofe(2005:77) in one of the following ways: inheritance from father, through apprenticeship and prescription by a priest during a divinatory event. In any case, one must necessarily undergo vigorous training for a number of years. He will perform stipulated rituals in the course of training to qualify for the job. Wande Abimbola (1976) is quoted by Andrew Igenozza (1982:187) that it is a very rigorous training. As a result of its complexities, the trainee has to start his apprenticeship early in life. An extraordinary phenomenon is the claim that whirlwinds (*aja*) carries someone away for years and is taught *Ifa* divination and other medicinal practices. Sometimes it last up to seven years. Such individuals usually possess extraordinary powers (D.O. Ogungbile, 1992:188). Other training could be longer as much as twelve years. During the apprenticeship, the trainee learns a vast store of technical and oral poem called *Odu*.

4. *Odu* are volumes in *Ifa* corpus.

Odu corpus is a body of recitals or gospels concerning the wisdom of *Orunmila (Ifa)*. *Orunmila*, as the Deity of Wisdom, embodies all knowledge and wisdom of the world; it takes in consequence, two hundred and fifty-six (256) of his original and founding disciples to transmit and preserve the wholeness of his primordial wisdom for the world. These two hundred and fifty-six foundation disciples of *Orunmila* are of two categories: sixteen (16) principal or senior disciples called *ODUS OR OLODUS*; and two hundred and forty (240) minor or junior disciples called *OMO –ODUS OR AMULU-ODUS*, and each of the latter being constituted as an aggregate of all the possible varying combinations of each of the principal sixteen (16) *OJU-ODUS*. This total, in-fact, reveals also that each of the sixteen principal *Odu*s, in its turn, too, has another set of (15) second-tier disciples. *OJU-ODU*, according to Fauser (1989:IV), is not merely principles of categorization, having good or evil connotations as the case may be, but they are also deities in their own right ordained from creation and often in conflict with each other. The numerical composition of the indicated assemblage of 256 apostles or *Odu*s behind *Orunmila* strongly suggests a mystical significance. Also, each of the 256 *ODUS* and *AMULU-ODUS* constitute one chapter (*Ese*); and each of which runs into several verses. This view is expressed by Afolabi Epega's *Ifa, the Ancient Wisdom (New York: Imole Oluwa Institute, 1977)*, pp.12, 14, 21 and

66. For a fuller understanding of information on this and on the pantheon of *Orunmila's Ifa: Its Structure and Scope* see, C.O. Ibie, *Ifism: The Complete Work of Orunmila* (Lagos: Imole Oluwa Institute, 1946) pp.43 and 66. Also see Wande Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1976) p.11.

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