# *IFÁ* AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF LITERACY: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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## INTRODUCTION

Before Placide Tempel's *La Philosophie bantoue* (Bantu Philosophy), the dogma of regarding philosophy as essentially Western had already reached an unimaginable apogee, in part because the polygenetic theses of such personages as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Hegel, and Lucien Levy-Bruhl, to mention a few, had at the time become indispensible research materials for early anthropologists and white missionaries. The Eurocentric theses and the rise of modern science; thus, gave rise to the imperious notion of Occidental superiority in philosophy. These also augment the racial hypothesis of seeing the African as the "other," the hypothesis which thrived as a veritable paradigm in most writings in Europe. To extricate the African from the status of the "other", African intellectuals and philosophers, in particular, embarked on an intellectual decolonization of the Africans and published several volumes of remonstrative reportage. The published volumes reveal, among others, that racial writings earned such sterling popularity around the world at that time because African cultures were significantly oral in character. In the period preceding colonialism and during colonial era, therefore, Western intellectualism saw writing as a precondition for philosophy and, by extension, history and science.

Later, after Tempel's publication, there emerged two dominant schools in the enterprise of African philosophy, namely the traditionalists and the universalists; while the universalists inherited the Eurocentric dogma of seeing philosophy as that which necessarily requires a writing tradition since it is (erroneously) believed that ideas can only be preserved and exchanged in books and journals, the traditionalists believe that writing is not a precondition for philosophy, that ideas can be preserved through mnemonic devices like songs, folklore, proverbs, and so on. The universalists thus constitute a group of insistent champions of literacy who valorize writing at the expense of orality; the traditionalists, on the other hand, hold the wrong assumption that narrative assertions in oral texts can overcome the historical fluidity of oralism. However, it is our belief that the intransigent relationship between the universalists and the traditionalists persists in the enterprise of African philosophy because the two dominant schools have failed to recognize the need to furnish a paradigm of interaction or dialogue between their projects. From the standpoint of *Ifá*, therefore, this paper rejects the written-oral dichotomy that is central to both the universalist and the traditionalist orientations, occasioned by their parochial and provincial conceptions of philosophy respectively. The paper shows how *Ifá* oral text puts a premium on the need to incorporate the contributions of both the oral and written cultures in order to understand the complete intellectual configuration of our human society.

## THE MEANING OF *IFÁ*

That *Ifá*'s ancestry is traceable only to the Yorùbá, an ethnic group in South-Western Nigeria and some parts of the Republic of Benin and Togo, is not contentious; scholars of *Ifá* are however divided on the meaning of *Ifá*. Abosede Emanuel affirms this by identifying two views, namely, the traditional view and the analytical view, which attempt to explain the meaning of *Ifá* from different perspectives. The former, according to him, "is the theological view but it also promotes a popular interpretation of the meaning of *Ifá* derived from analysis of words."[1] The latter "examines *Ifá* as a human institution – and employs evidential criteria similar to those employed in the examination of other revealed religions…"[2] He explains further that:

> The analytical view regards Ifá as a human institution founded by…Òrúnmìlà… whose system is practised by present day Babaláwo… The traditionalist view accepts Ọ̀rúnmìlà as both a human prophet and a god and that Ifá is the word proceeding from the mouth of the Omnipotent.[3]

The analytical view on the meaning of *Ifá* regards *Ifá* not as a god but as a datable practice. A strand of the analytical view posits that *Ifá* was introduced into the Yorùbá country by Onígbógi, a distant Yorùbá king who flourished around the 14th century A.D. Another strand relates that one Se□tílù, a native of Nupe, introduced *Ifá* to Yorùbá people in the late 18th and early 19th centuries A.D. Stephen Skinner, an Australian researcher in magic and the occult sciences, follows this analytical trend and claims that the Yorùbá inherited the word *Ifá* from the North African Arabs between the 8th and 11th centuries.[4] Skinner's position was informed by the etymological correspondence between the Arabic word "*Afar*" and the Yorùbá word "*Ifá*". Skinner's reliance on the aforementioned etymological correspondence took him far to the extent of deriving "*O□rúnmìlà*" (the Yorùbá deity of wisdom, the divine arbiter of *Ifá* divination system) from the Arabic word "*al Raml*", which stands for the science of divination by sand-cutting. It has been observed, however, that Skinner's claim has little credibility because "phonetic correspondence between…two Arabic words and Yoruba equivalents is not sufficient proof of the derivation of the latter from the former."[5] Besides this, subscribing to the analytical view – with all its plethora of dates – will destroy the religious and mythological basis for the worship of *Ifá* as a primordial god whose origin, the Yorùbá believe, is traceable to the creation of the universe. This work therefore puts a premium on the traditionalist view. But the traditionalist view has also generated a controversy and brought about two conflicting ideas on the meaning of *Ifá*. On the one hand, *Ifá* is used as the metonym of *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* and, on the other hand, taken to mean the apparatus or instrument used by *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* during divination. To have a lucid understanding of the subject, therefore, it is pertinent for us to take an erudite plunge into certain published volumes and also examine the views of prominent scholars on the subject. According to Wande Abimbola:

> The Yorùbá god of wisdom is mostly called by either of two names, Ifá and Ọ̀rúnmìlà, both of

> which are the centre of controversy. A number of writers hold the mistaken view that the name 'Ọ̀rúnmìlà' refers to the deity himself while the name 'Ifá' refers only to his divination system.[6]

In Abimbola's view, the names '*Ifá*', and '*Ọ̀rúnmìlà'* can be used interchangeably, meaning that "the two names, *Ifá* and *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*, refer to the same deity."[7] Abimbola adds, however, that "while the name '*Ọ̀rúnmìlà'* refers exclusively to the deity himself, the name '*Ifá*' refers both to the deity and his divination system."[8] William Bascom and Wande Abimbola share the same view on the meaning of *Ifá*. In one of his published works, for instance, Bascom maintains that "*Ifá* is used to mean both the system of divination and the deity who controls it; and that this deity is also known as Ọ̀rúnmìlà."[9] *Ifá* is further described as:

> The chief Yorùbá system of divination and probably the most complex in Africa… its characteristics are the precision of the system, its vast corpus of related verses and its religious foundation of the worship of the Orisha, Ifa, or Orunmila.[10]

The import of the foregoing is that *Ifá* can be used to describe a system of divination and, as a god, requires "a form of worship undertaken by *Ifá* devotees as well as a compendium of performances including praise singing."[11] But, as Abimbola rightly points out, there are a number of people who hold the view that *Ifá* is nothing other than the received instructions from *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*, the Yorùbá god of wisdom. E.M. Lijadu supports this latter position when he contends that *Ifá* is "the word issued by *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* during divination."[12] Adebowale Akintola belongs to the same camp as Lijadu. He explains that:

> What is universally known as, and called Ifá is, simply put, the philosophy of, or wisdom divinely revealed to, Ọ̀rúnmìlà. In other words, it is the body of primordial or fundamental knowledge concerning life, and which originally derived from Ọ̀rúnmìlà.[13]

Among the practising *babaláwo* (*Ifá* priests) who are the custodians of the received instructions from *O□̀rúnmìlà*, however, the general opinion is that *Ifá* and *O□̀rúnmìlà* can be used interchangeably to refer to the Yorùbá deity of wisdom. This stance is also supported by the frequent use of these terms by the native Yorùbá speakers. Besides, there is in the *Ifá* literary corpus itself [14] textual evidence in favour of the view shared by Bascom and Abimbola, finally bringing an end to the perceived controversy .

In *Ifá* oral text or literary corpus, it is instructive to say, there are 16 basic and 256 derivative figures. The 256 derivative figures are divided into two parts, namely, the major categories known as *Ojú Odù* which are 16 in number and the minor categories known as *Ọmọ Odù* or *Àmúlù Odù* which are 240. The combination of the two hundred and forty minor *odù* or *Àmúlù Odù* and the sixteen principal *Odù* will furnish us with a comprehensive chart of the order of precedence in the *Ifá* system. We should also add that there are symbols or signs, usually double vertical markings,

used to indicate each of the verses of *Ifá* and their respective gospels. Interestingly, the totality of these markings depicts "all the possible combinations of the sixteen principal or senior apostles and the two hundred and forty second-tier apostles (the amulu-odus)."[15] Sophie Oluwole complements the foregoing when she suggests that "The younger 240 Odù could therefore be reasonably regarded as members of later generation of disciples and apprentices trained by the first 16."[16] As oral text, therefore, *Ifá* is a store-house for Yorùbá pristine wisdom embracing philosophy, medicine, history, folklore, and so on.

**PERSPECTIVES ON ORAL/WRITTEN DICHOTOMY**

In Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*,[17] Ramatoulaye, no doubt the heroine of the book, lauds the importance of literacy in society when, with ardent enthusiasm, she declares:

> The power of books, this marvelous invention of astute human intelligence. Various signs associated with sound: different sounds that form the word. Thought, History, Science, Life. Sole instrument of interrelationships and of culture, unparalleled means of giving and receiving. Books knit generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress.[18]

Jack Goody, an eminent social anthropologist, conveys Ramatoulaye's opinion when he asserts that writing, "indeed any form of visual transcription of oral linguistic elements, had important consequences for the accumulation, development and nature of human knowledge."[19] These claims by Goody and Ba's Ramatoulaye are true; after all it appears that their claims do not overtly suggest "that intellectualism is absent in non-literate cultures."[20] Also, in the contemporary time, the success of science which gained its hegemony through writing is a pointer to the huge importance of writing or litracy in society. But the claims by Goody and Ba's Ramatoulaye would become contentious if they were indeed a valorization of writing at the expense of orality. As a matter of fact, written/oral dichotomy has been an issue central to the Eurocentric discourse on writing. According to Ama Mazama:

> The idea that writing plays a special role in human development is one that has permeated European thinking, from Cordorcet to Popper. The latter, for instance, distinguishes between three Worlds: World 1, the physical world; World 2, the world of our conscious experience; and World 3, the world of the logical content of books, libraries, computer memories, and so forth. World 3 is the world of theories and intellectual discoveries, in other words, of critical thinking.[21]

This excerpt seems to lend credence to the assumption that lack of writing necessarily hampers individual cognitive development. In fact, it is argued in many quarters that the oral mind is pre-scientific and that oral people "are unable to go beyond the Piagetian concrete operational stage … because oral language is an

instrument of limited power to explore ideas."[22] This view is corroborated by Karl Popper and Walter Ong. While the former, adopting the Hegelian spirit, contends that full consciousness of self can never be realized without writing or literacy[23], the latter believes that writing is "indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials."[24] Ong stresses his point further by directing his barb at oral people. He maintains that:

> We know that all philosophy depends on writing because all elaborate, linear, so-called "logical" explanation depends on writing. Oral persons can be as wise, as wise as anyone, and they can of course, give some explanation for things. But the elaborate, intricate, seemingly endless but exact cause-effect sequences required by what we call philosophy and by extended scientific thinking are unknown by oral people.[25]

In Ong's assertion we see on the one hand a repeat of the epistemological assumption that relegates all forms of fideism by placing a premium on the "unrestricted and rather naïve faith in reason."[26] On the other hand, we notice a reaffirmation of one of the features of the universalist notion of philosophy, that philosophy in the real sense of the word "requires a writing tradition in that ideas are preserved and exchanged in books and journals."[27] In the enterprise of African philosophy, the oral/written dichotomy was inherited by such philosophers as Hountondji, Wiredu and, to some extent, Bodunrin.[28] For Hountondji, philosophy "begins at the precise moment of transcription."[29] Henry Louis Gates, an African-American, also reflects the intellectual sentiments of Hountondji and company when he embraces the Eurocentric sentiment of Hegel's and argues that philosophy essentially has to do with a written language without which "there could be no ordered repetition or memory, there could be no history."[30] In short, Gates and Hountondji are of the view that only through writing is it possible for us "to store linguistic material in an exact form over long periods, in principle to infinity."[31] Looked at very closely, three major points can be distilled from the views of Hountondji, Gates and other insistent champions of literacy: that, without writing, there can be no philosophy, a people cannot have history and there is no possibility of science. The first point, we must admit, has been dealt with by a number of scholars in the field of African Philosophy; nevertheless, it is not frivolous for to repeat the errors in these points from the standpoint of *Ifá* as an oral text. Perhaps the second and the third points deserve great attention since history and growth of science are often tied to literacy, the basis of the declaration that science and history are inconceivable without writing.[32]

## *IFÁ* ON THE POSSIBILITY OF PHILOSOPHY, HISTORY AND SCIENCE IN ORAL CULTURES

Taking the first point, we should recall that many scholars have insisted that the alphabet was an invention of the Greeks[33] and this has served as the basis for many people to claim that literacy began in Greece as an exigent foundation for the enterprise of philosophy to flourish. But an insightful study of the chronology of Greek literacy would reveal that "writing was not a significant cultural factor before

Plato."[34] Paulin Hountondji, one would suspect, was aware of this historical fact and this explains why he insists that philosophy started with Socrates because the latter's disciples committed his discourse to writing.[35] Thus:

> One would conclude … that Hountondji does not recognize the Pre-Socratics as philosophers, inasmuch as no one is sure that Thales wrote anything …, nor Heraclitus, or Pythagoras for that matter … It appears that in this regard Hountondji is not in tune with the European philosophers he holds as his models.[36]

The point to be stressed is that the history of philosophy is not complete without evident recognition of the "oral" contribution of the Pre-Socratics to the enterprise. Though one must not overlook the fact that writing engenders a "comparatively permanent and reliable storage of information outside fallible human memory,"[37] it is also true that writing itself cannot create thought. Creation of thought is clearly congenial to the formation of ideas which may not necessarily have to be fixed or documented before they are made available to philosophy or reflection. "If ideas are capable of transmission from one mind to another without the intermediary of documentation," Owomoyela asserts, "then the receptive mind can be a reflective mind."[38] Here, again, we should take seriously Socrates' warning that anyone who relies heavily on writing as that which will provide something reliable "must be exceedingly simple-minded."[39] As a matter of fact:

> All alphabetic writing can do is record what people think and say; it cannot itself create thought. Western Europe had its excellent alphabet throughout the six or seven hundred years of its Dark Ages without any notable intellectual progress or even innovation. Indeed intellectual progress and innovation were not much in evidence in the Roman Empire despite widespread literacy and a large reading public, nor in the earlier Byzantine empire.[40]

It makes sense to posit here that the emphasis on oral/written dichotomy (inherited by the votaries of analytic school in African philosophy) is responsible for the intransigent relationship between them and the traditionalists. In other words, this intransigent relationship persists in the enterprise of African philosophy because the two dominant schools have failed to recognize the need to have paradigm of interaction or dialogue between their projects (that is, oral and written projects). The position of *Ifá* on oral/written dichotomy will perhaps help to show a way out of this problem. In *Ogbè-rẹtè*, *Ifá* says:

> Báà ró tí a à bọ́ gún
> Báà róbì a à bòrìsà
> Báà bá róbìnrin a à leè bímọ
> A díá fó kànlérínwó irúnmalè
> Wó n ń lo f'Èdè ọmọ Olódùmarè sobìnrun

Wó□n ní wọn, ó kára ńlè□
Ẹbọ ni wó□n ó s□e
Ò□rúnmìlà nìkàn ló gbé□bọ níbè□ tí ń tubọ….[41]

Without wine, we cannot appease the ancestor
Without kolanut, we cannot appease the gods
Without a woman, a man cannot procreate
Thus divination was undertaken for the 401 gods
As they fought over Èdè, Olódùmarè's daughter;
They were told to offer sacrifice
But only O□rúnmìlà heeded the divine warning ….

The story is related in *Ogbè-rẹtè*□ that, once upon a time, *Ò□rúnmìlà* and other Yorùbá divinities were competing to take Èdè, *Olódùmarè*'s daughter, as wife. Each of the divinities consulted a diviner on what to do to be able to emerge as Èdè's suitor and was advised to offer certain sacrifice in order to be victorious. Alas, all the divinities except *Ò□rúnmìlà* did not offer the sacrifice and at the end *Ò□rúnmìlà* emerged as Èdè's suitor. When approached by friends and well-wishers to relate the secret of his success, *Ò□rúnmìlà* started to sing saying:

Kátó mò□ọ́gbó□, kátó mò□ọ́fọ̀
Àti mèdè ò□pè□ lósòro;
Kátó mò□ó□dá, kátó mò□ó□tè□
Àti mèdè ò□pè□ lósòro;
Kátó mò□ó□rú, kátó mò□ó□tù
Àti mèdè ò□pè□ lósòro….[42]

To learn, to teach
All can be sought in Ifá;
To cast, to write
All can be sought in Ifá;
To apply, to decipher
All can be sought in Ifá….

*Ò□rúnmìlà* then told the people around him that he was victorious because he learnt early enough that the individual can only excel in the world if he combines all the processes of cogent thought: understanding and good use of language; writing and interpretation. In the song, *Ò□rúnmìlà* maintains the complementarist stance and shows that both writing and orality will help the individual to excel in society. The other divinities lost Èdè to *Ò□rúnmìlà* because they were "illiterates" in modern sense. *Olódùmarè* allowed *Ò□rúnmìlà* to take Èdè as wife because he was the only divinity who recognized that a man does not pride himself over oratory or writing alone, but by recognizing that there is no substantive division between the two. Jack Goody seems to reflect this when he says:

> The problem of assigning a work to an oral or literate tradition is that … there is a meaningful sense in which all 'literate' forms are composed orally … And there is also a meaningful sense in

> which all earlier oral works are known because they have been written down, usually by a literate member of … society.[43]

Bearing the foregoing in mind, let us now examine from the standpoint of *Ifá* the tenability of, first, the claim that a people cannot have history without writing. We take "history" to mean an account of past events or a study of past events, especially of human affairs.

Among those who valorize writing at the expense of orality the assumption is that only writing could capture a people's history since history, in their view, is based on facts as opposed to myths. This group also emphasizes the European belief in objectivity "which can be obtained only through the separation of the knower and the known accompanied with the objectification of the latter."[44] Also, an emphasis on the objectification of the known presupposes "the idea that meaning is ever stable, given, objective, and conserved through the ages by writing."[45] In the *Ifá* system, the general assumption is that the *Ẹsẹ Ifá*, rendered orally either in prose or poetic form, represent "an accurate account of what once happened or what has once been observed in the past."[46] Wande Abimbola explains that:

> History is the language of Ifá divination and "histories make men wise". A man who goes to an Ifá priest to ask for advice on whether he should go on a journey is not told a straight answer. He is given a long story of people who have traveled in the same direction or for a similar purpose and he will be advised to make his decision from this list of precedents. At least this long list of precedents will serve as a warning to the intending traveller. In this was Ifá guides the people who believe in him from the rich experience of the past. [47]

Thus, to achieve what could pass as "historical objectivity", a diligent *Ifá* priest normally consults senior *Ifá* priests or "better-informed colleagues on various subjects beyond his knowledge."[48] Since meaning is the most elusive part of any language, *Ifá* priests often come together in seminar-like gatherings to exchange views on *ẹsẹ Ifá* and ensure that the *ẹsẹ Ifá* are intact as historical material. These seminar-like gatherings are also of great significance in ensuring that the subject-matter of *ẹsẹ Ifá*, which is the whole range of Yorùbá thought and belief, is protected against multiple interpretation and reinterpretation. Though Wande Abimbola admits that there is a problem of change in *ẹsẹ Ifá* due largely to the "process of oral dissemination"[49] and "environmental conditions,"[50] his one point of interest to us is that there exists historical evidence in the *Ifá* corpus. Abimbola points out that there is historical evidence in the Ifá corpus from personal names and place names.[51] On the former, for instance, Abimbola delves into *Ìwòrì Méjì* and shows the possibility that the cross-bow was not a fighting implement of medieval Europe alone, but also a widely used implement in traditional Yorùbá society for hunting and fighting. The lines in *Ìwòrì Méjì* read:

> Pá-bí-ọsán-já;

Ọsán-já, awoo won lode Ìtóri
Àkàtàǹpó-jákùn-ó-dòbìírí-kálè□
A díá fún Ò□rúnmìlà,
Ifá ńlèé táyé Olúufè□ orò sọ
Bí ẹni tí ńsọgbá
Ta ní ó wàá bá ni táyée wa wò□nyí sọ
Ewé ò□pè□pè□ tilè□ sọ…[52]

Sudden-as-the-snapping-of-leather-string;
Leather-string-snaps,
The Ifá priest for them in the city of Ìtóri;
Crossbow-loses-its-string-it-dances-all-over-the-ground;
Cast Ifá for Ò□rúnmìlà,
When Ifá was going to mend the life of the king of Ifè□
As one mends broken calabash.
Who, then, will help us mend these our lives?
Palm-tree grows its leaves right from the ground.
It is Ò□rúnmìlà who will help us mend these our lives.
Palm-tree grows its leaves right from the ground.

In the above *ẹsẹ Ifá*, three names of *Ifá* priests (namely, Pá-bí-ọsán-já, Ọsán-já, Àkàtàǹpó-jákùn-ó-dòbìírí-kálè□) draw our attention to a possible historical evidence which relates the ancient tools used by the Yorùbá, though these tools "are either no longer in use nowadays or… have a restricted application."[53] Concerning place names, Abimbola uses empirically verifiable point to show that place names in *Ifá* are of historical significance. He therefore draws on *Ìká Méjì* [54] to prove that Ìká, a town now standing "some forty miles north-west of present Oyo,"[55] actually existed. However, Abimbola believes that sometimes it could be difficult to locate any particular place name due to frequent change in names and location.

Historical evidence in *Ifá* is not extracted from personal names and place names alone; there is also evidence of *ẹsẹ Ifá* that relate the histories of the foundation of particular towns[56] and of an *ẹsẹ Ifá* that recalls the conflict between Islam and Yorùbá traditional religion[57] during the early propagation of Islam in Yorùbá land. Interestingly, the present researcher learnt as a child, native of Ìbàdàn, that *Ò□sé□ Méjì* was the *odù* cast on the occasion of the foundation of Ìbàdàn.

Despite the fact that the foregoing seems to lend credence to historical objectivity in *Ifá*, Abimbola cautions that "there are problems involved in the use of Ifá divination poems as sources for historical evidence."[58] In the main, this results from "the difficulty of separating myths from actual facts."[59] Abimbola seems to endorse G.I. Jones' definition of myth as that which "one wants to believe about the past and is based on belief or emotion."[60] Looked at more closely, Jones' conception of myth evokes the question of whether it is possible for a people to have a purely factual history. One could be tempted here to admit that, since the Greeks are considered as the inventors of literacy and the literate basis of modern thought[61], European history which supposedly started with the Greeks was fortified against myths as venal purveyors of historical objectivity. One might then think, going by the notion that written text is always value-free, that the Fathers of European history (the

Greeks) did not incorporate myth into the writing of their history. But, on the basis of the need to reevaluate historical facts by succeeding generations, one might argue that "history is necessarily founded on value systems, without which there could be no selection of facts."[62] Thus, hardly can a people's history be written without recourse to some myth. M.I. Finley underscores this point when he contends that:

> The atmosphere in which the Fathers of History set to work was saturated with myth. Without myth, indeed, they could never have begun their work. The past is an intractable, incomprehensible mass of uncounted and uncountable data. It can be rendered intelligible only if some selection is made, around some focus or foci.[63]

The above point by Finley no doubt amplifies the importance of the suggestion that *Ifá* divination-poems can be taken as reliable historical sources inasmuch as the information they purport to give is corroborated by either written sources or other bodies of oral literature like *Ìjálá, Oríkì* and *Rárà*.[64]

Having shown the falsity of the claim that, without writing, a people cannot have history, let us examine the more pervasive claim that only literate cultures could have science. Perhaps it is in the area of science (and technology) that the power of Western epistemological ethnocentrism on the rival picture of writing and orality is much felt. In fact, the popular opinion in the intellectual sphere is that Africa was "backward" in the development of science and technology due to lack of writing tradition in traditional Africa. This opinion goes on to affirm "the usual opposition of the non-scientific, magical and superstitious traditional man and the scientific, pragmatic and rational Westerner."[65] The point to note here is that there exists among Eurocentric scholars the belief that literacy was the sole and principal cause for the evolution of logical modes of thinking which gave birth to science. In clear terms, therefore, the Eurocentric mind would not imagine that science could ever flourish in oral cultures. But the grandiose claim that only literate societies could lay claim to science and technology is mistaken; after all science is understood as the system of behaviour by which man acquires mastery over his environment. Even if science is understood in a formal sense as a systematic and formulated knowledge, the Yorùbá (Africans) cannot be relegated as a people without science. Let us see how *Ifá* substantiates this claim by looking at the traditional Yorùbá society and the latter's contribution to scientific configuration of our human society.

Among the Yorùbá there is the widely-held belief that it is through *Ifá* oral text that an inquirer can understand the influence or "achievement" of other Yorùbá gods in society. This is not to say, as we have pointed out somewhere in this study, that *Ifá* should be regarded as superior to other gods in the Yorùbá pantheon; it only attests to the role of *Ifá* as the encyclopedia of Yorùbá history, belief and philosophy. Thus, it is not surprising that *Ifá* in *Ògúndá Méjì* eulogizes *Ògún* as the founder of ironworking or, in modern parlance, metallurgy which today is considered as "the backbone of our civilization."[66] In *Ògúndá Méjì*, *Ifá* reveals that:

> It was Ògún who introduced iron with a ringing sound to the world

> It was Ògún who introduced bronze with a ringing sound to the land of Sòkòrì
> It was Ògún who introduced brass with a ringing sound to the town of Ìjùmú
> It was Ògún who forged iron continuously
> Till he reached the expanse of heaven,
> Where Àjàgunmàlè initiated Ò□rúnmìlà in the casting of Ifá.[67]

The Yorùbá, especially the devotees of *Ògún*, rely on the above verse to support the claim that ironworking started with *Ògún* who is variously described as "the god of war", "the god of iron", "the patron of the smiths", and so on. For *Ògún* is a primordial deity and ironworking associated with him, no dates can be assigned to the beginning of the science of ironworking. As expected, non-Africans – especially European anthropologists and archeologists – would not condone the Yorùbá idea that the origin of ironworking is not datable[68]; these researchers do not see any connection between the material and the spiritual. They do not believe in any primordial history that sources its material from mythology. But it is noteworthy that the views of these anthropologists and archeologists are stimulatingly conflicting as to the dates and origin of ironworking technology. We have among these researchers those who contend that ironworking technology originated in Africa and that Europe borrowed it from Africa. Another opinion shared by other researchers is that ironworking technology was imported into Africa from the Middle East. Yet another opinion is that the technology originated in India.[69] Of the three opinions enumerated, only the first opinion is placatory – for it traces the origin of ironworking to Africa. However, the first opinion, like the other two opinions, fails to acknowledge the Yorùbá belief that the ancestry of this material culture is traceable to the divine. It is expected therefore that those who hold the opinions enumerated above would not embrace the view that ironworking technology first emerged from *Ògún*'s primordial industry. But one is easily struck by what could be gleaned from a Yorùbá mythological narrative concerning the origin of ironworking and its basic technological knowledge.

According to the narrative, *Ògún* in the far-away past was ordered by his community to go forth in war and conquer the neighboring towns. Before going to war, *Ògún* made a resolve to forge weapons that would be "stronger than cudgels torn from the armpits of baobab, durable as green grass by the riverside, swift as Eshu, more deadly than the elephant."[70] He then went ahead to embark on the painstaking task of extracting ore from "rich layers of gravelly laterite."[71] He manufactured charcoal by burning logs of wood and later fetched "a quantity of moist clay sufficient for the construction of a furnace."[72] The narrative explains that "with his old stone chisel, he drove a wedge into a tree stump, ripped out of the heartwood and lined the cavity with hot coals … Then … Ogun slept out the course of the sun."[73] The narrative continues, describing *Ògún*'s final task:

> Arising at nightfall from his bed of stone, Ògún went first to the burned out tree stump. Fitting a trimmed branch as pestle to this mortar, he began to pulverize the warm ore one handful at a time. He sifted the powder in a reed basket, washed the heavier particles in pure spring water, and set them

> to dry in hollowed log troughs. Then he went into his cave to prepare for the arrogant transformation.[74]

The "arrogant transformation" is related, thus:

> Ògún … created tools of iron. First he fashioned tools for himself – shaft hammers, a billet, an adze and tongs. Then he forged implements of war – swords, knives both stabbing and throwing, cutlasses, iron tips for arrows and materials for clearing paths.[75]

The above narrative underscores the Yorùbá belief that knowledge of material relationships and causality is a representation of spiritual truth. More importantly, the narrative furnishes us with the idea that this "primordial" technology grew out of a series of cogent thought, affirming the intellectual significance of myth and showing that, if metallurgy is science, myth does not impoverish scientific thought as some modern-day Eurocentric scholars might think. The strength of this claim lies in the fact that, though the recitations of its rigorous processes are not frozen in the pages of a manuscript, ironworking has become the heritage of the Yorùbá smiths. That is, ironworking among the Yorùbá did not result from any evident cultural diffusion from outside the Yorùbá kingdom, nor was it a direct achievement of some non-African technicians and other experts present in Africa; the Yorùbá smiths owe this technology to the word-for-word mastery of the processes involved in *Ògún*'s primordial industry through oral transmission. We can from this end be lured to argue that the much-vaunted enlightenment of Europe could flourish without written texts. Granted this, Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton and Rene Descartes, considered the founders of modern science, could still formulate "a new scientific paradigm … a material world which functions like a machine"[76] through some mnemonic genius. This stresses the point that mnemonic activities could also bring about prodigious feats in science and technology.

From the foregoing, we can infer that there is a possibility of science in oral cultures and that science "is not European in origin."[77] Here, however, a critic might argue that what we term as Yorùbá (prototypical African) science as we have presented it through the industry of *Ògún* is crude, suggesting that it cannot be compared in any way to Western science and technology. C.E. Ayres reacts to this criticism and sees this line of thought as representing a crude positivistic attitude on the part of Eurocentric scholars. He then draws our attention to some negative aspect of Western science and technology. According to him:

> the prime mover in our recent developments is not that galaxy of noble truths which we call science, but the thoroughly mundane and immensely potent driving force of mechanical technology. Science is the handsome Doctor Jeckyll; machinery is Mr. Hyde – powerful and rather sinister.[78]

The tone of the above assertion of Ayre's is directed to the attitude of today's philosophers who are only infatuated with applicatory science without considering the incalculable imprecation that Western science has brought upon humankind.[79] The threat of atomic bomb is a good example. Nevertheless, there is wisdom in the assertion that intellectual heritage changes with each generation and that "fresh analysis carves new facets, new intellectual tools reveal new speculations in its structure."[80] This is in consonance with the need to incorporate the contributions of both the oral and written cultures in order to understand the complete intellectual configuration of our human society. Though many African intellectuals are still reacting to the traumatic experience of the pre-colonial Africa and are not really receptive to the universalist approach to African thought system, the foregoing underscores the desirability of an accessible knowledge pool from which the entire human family can benefit. In other words, there is the need to bring individual views in oral and written cultures together to enhance a wider human vision in the area of science and technology. Thus, in tone reminiscent of this recommendation, *Ifá* advocates in *Òtúúrúpon Méjì* that:

Pé□sé□-pé□sé□ lobìnrin ń lò□'kuru;
Wò□ìn-wò□ìn lọkùnrin ń l'ò□gì
ÒGì tí ò kúnná lẹlé□dè□ ń bù sán
Ìgúnnungún-ab'omi-láńtóró-bí-omi-agbada
Ọmu-nìfà-obìnrin, ọmú-nìfà-ọkùnrin
A díá fún Elébùtéé, awo ayé
A bù fún Odùkè□kè□, awo òde ò□run
Níjó□ tí wó□n ń lọ rèé tún Òtufè□ se
Ifá Elébùtéé s□e, t'Odùkèkè□ náà sì sẹ
A fọwó□ wẹwó, ọwó□ wa ti mó□
Àwa ti d'ọlọgbó□n méjì awo òde ò□run.[81]

A woman grinds bean-meal softly,
A man grinds the corn hastily,
The lumped corn-meal is food for the pigs;
Vulture-with-a-probing-eyes,
Women-benefit-from-breasts, Men-benefit-from-breasts,
Cast Ifá for Elébùtéé, the earthly priest,
For Odùkè□kè□, the heavenly priest,
On their way to redeem Ifè.
Elébùtéé's divination thrived, so was Odùkè□kè□'s.
We rubbed our hands together and they are clean
We thus become two wise men of divine gifts.

The above verse relates how, in the distant past, two *Ifá* priests of different orientations and outlooks came together and exchanged views in the bid to restore peace and development in Òtufè□, an ancient town. In Òtufè□, Elébùtéé and Odùkè□kè□ were the most famous and well-versed *Ifá* priests. But the two priests were sworn enemies, too, because each felt that he was superior to the other. As the two were now entangled in a war of rivalry, Òtufè□ continued to grow in constant bickering and strife. Social life was stifled and the natives became victims of all sorts

of ailments. Gradually and gradually, Òtufè became desolate and was almost on the brink of extinction as people were seeking refuge elsewhere. The situation became so unbearable that the king of the day had to summon the two priests to his court. In tears, he pleaded that the two priests should bury the hatchet and, instead, use their wisdom (as a knowledge pool) to improve the situation in Òtufè. Of course, the priests themselves had turned victims of their war: each had lost wives and children to the strife. They listened, humbled themselves before their king and swore to improve the situation in Òtufè. Thereafter, the two priests dialogued and learnt that the only way to redeem Òtufè was hidden in a lengthy Ifá verse. Elébùtéé had only committed the beginning of the verse into memory and could not complete it. On his apart, Odùkè kè had long forgotten the beginning of the verse, but could assist Elébùtéé in completing it. The two priests then came together and interpreted the hidden meaning of the verse. In the end, the two were able to redeem Òtufè from the brink of ruin.

With a sharp hermeneutic insight, one can admit that the above verse clearly translates to the need to ponder the way out of the problem oral traditions pose to the contemporary "letter-crazed" human family, "that their preservation depends on the powers of memory of successive generations of human beings."[82] The verse can also be understood as a cryptic emphasis on the need to syncretize both the oral and written projects, the need to rationalize and systematize largely mythological materials. This implies the imperativeness of static text, suggesting not that we valorize writing at the expense of orality. Rather, the verse reckons with the fact that writing is necessary in our civilization, but it should only be seen as an addition, "not an alternative to oral transmission."[83] Interestingly, too, *Ifá* says in another canto of *Òtúúrúpò n Méjì* that:

> Ọlọ gbọn ayé kan ò ta kókó omi m'étí asọ;
> Mò ràn-mò ràn kan ò mọ yèèpè ilè
> Arìnnàká kò dé ibi ò nà gbé pẹ kun
> A díá fún Alábahun
> Tí ń kó gbó n r'orí ò pẹ rèé kó sí…[84]
>
> No wise man saves water in the hem of his tunic;
> No wise man knows the quantity of sand on earth;
> No traveller knows the edge of the earth
> Divination was undertaken for Alábahun
> On his way to hoard human wisdom …

In his community, long time ago, Tortoise claimed that he was the wisest and had successfully proved this on many occasions when contacted on any pressing problem. For he claimed monopoly of wisdom, he decided to hide all human wisdom inside a legendary gourd so that no any other individual would be able to have access to it. He had proposed to hang the gourd on top of a palm tree. He finally got to the palm tree and decided to climb the tree. But he made several attempts to climb the tree without success and without knowledge of what was hindering him. He struggled to climb the tree, again and again … He was still struggling to climb the tree when a snail, passing by sluggishly, caught him. The snail stood by for a while in great amusement, knowing why it would be impossible for Tortoise to succeed in his task.

After a while, the snail drew Tortoise's attention and told Tortoise that strapping the gourd against his chest would make it impossible for him to climb the tree; his task would be accomplished if he strapped the gourd on his back. Reluctantly though, Tortoise tried the snail's suggestion and found out that he would have been able to climb the tree had he strapped the gourd on his back. It dawned on him that he was wrong on the assumption that he was the wisest in his community.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we have shown that the persuasion of the insistent champions of literacy is clustered with faulty presuppositions and argued that it is mistaken to valorize writing at the expense of orality. This, however, is not suggesting that we are unaware of the huge importance of writing and its indispensability in this age of science. It can be gleaned from the various *Ifá* verses examined in this work that the coming together of both oral and written civilizations will help the Yorùbá (Africans) to overcome in the area of science and technology (and other spheres of human intellectual endeavours) what Paulin Hountondji refers to as "scientific underdevelopment or, more exactly, scientific dependence."[85] Taking the complementarist stance, therefore, the point to stress is that Africa can borrow useful ideas from Europe, and also vice-versa. More significantly:

> we need a renewed, systematic reflection on the status, the mode of existence, the scope and limits and the perspectives of development of so-called traditional knoweldge.[86]

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**Endnotes**

[1]Abosede Emanuel, *Odun Ifá (Ifá Festival)* (Ilupeju: African Books Publishers, 2000), 60.

[2]Ibid., 62.

[3]Ibid., 101.

[4]Stephen Skinner, *Terrestrial Astrology: Divination by Geomancy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 69.

[5]Abosede Emanuel, *Odun Ifa (Ifa Festival)*, 66.

[6]Wande Abimbola, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1976), 3.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]William Bascom, "Ifá Divination: Comments on the paper by J.D. Clark," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute,* Vol. 69, 1939, 43.

[10]R. Hinnells, Ed. *A New Dictionary of Religions* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995), 337.

[11]Olufemi Taiwo, "Ifá: An Account of a Divination System and Some Concluding Epistemological Questions," Wiredu, K. Ed. *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 304.

[12]E.M. Lijadu, *Ifá: Ìmó□lè□ Rè□ Tí Se Ìsìn Ní Ilè Yorùbá* (Exeter: James Townsend and Son, 1923), 10.

[13]Adebowale Akintola, *Yorùbá Ethics and Metaphysics* (Ogbomosho: Valour Publishing Venture, 1999), 1.

[14]See Wande Abimbola, *Ìjìnlè□ Ohùn Ẹnu Ifá, I* (Glasgow: Collin, 1968). In virtuallty all the verses of the 16 major *Odù, Ifá* is repeatedly used to refer to *Ò□rúnmìlà* and vice-versa. See, for instance, such verses as *Èjì Ogbè*, *Ìworì Méjì*, *Òdí Méjì*, *O□̀bàrà Méjì*.

[15]Adebowale Akintola, *Yorùbá Ethics and Metaphysics*, 14.

[16]Sophie B. Oluwole, "African Philosophy as Illustrated in Ifá Corpus," *Ìmo□́dòye: Journal of African Philosophy*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1996.

[17]Mariama Ba, *So Long a Letter.* Oxford: Heinemann, 198.

[18]Ibid., 32.

[19]Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 78.

[20]Oyekan Owomoyela, "With Friends Like These … A Critique of Pervasive Anti-Africanisms in Current African Studies, Epistemology and Methodology," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 1994, 80.

[21]Ama Mazama, "The Eurocentric Discourse on Writing: An Exercise in Self-Glorification," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 1998, 4.

[22]David Olson, "From Utterance to Text: The Bias of Language in Speech and Writing," *Harvard Educational Review,* Vol. 47, 1977, p.278. Jean Piaget was a Swiss psychologist whose work has great impact on the study of the development of thought-processes. He claims that children acquire intellectual and logical abilities only through experience and interaction with the world around them.

[23]Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge*: *An Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 74.

[24]Walter Ong, "Writing is Technology that Restructures Thought: The Written Word," Bauman, G. Ed. *Literacy in Transition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p.25.

[25]Ibid., 43.

[26]Ama Mazama, "The Eurocentric Discourse on Writing," 4.

[27]Polycarp Ikuenobe, "The Parochial, Universalist Conception of 'Philosophy' and 'African Philosophy'," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 1997, 201.

[28]See P.O. Bodunrin, "The Question of African Philosophy," *Philosophy*, Vol. 56, No. 216, 1981,13. Though Bodunrin concedes that writing is not a precondition for philosophy, he goes on to eulogise writing as necessary in the creation of a philosophical tradition.

[29]Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 106.

[30]Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Ed. *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1991, 7.

[31]Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*, 193.

[32]Michael Stubbs, *Language and Literacy: The Sociolinguistics of Reading and Writing*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, 193.

[33]See, for instance, Ignace J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952. Gelb argues that the Greeks invented a complete alphabetic system consisting of consonants and vowels, an improvement upon the Western Semitic invention of the consonantal alphabet.

[34]John Halverson, "Havelock on Greek Orality and Literacy," *Journal of the History of Idea*, Vol. 53, No. 1, 161.

[35]Oyekan Owomoyela, "Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1987, 88.

[36]Ibid., 89.

[37]John Halverson, "Havelock on Greek Orality and Literacy", 160.

[38]Oyekan Owomoyela, "Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration," p.88.

[39]Reginald Hackforth, Trans. *Plato's Phaedrus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952, 275C.

[40]John Halverson, "Havelock on Greek Orality and Literacy," 162.

[41]Sourced from Chief Fakayode Olanipekun, a practising Ifá priest, Sacred Heart Covent School, Inalende, Ibadan. Hence Oral Source I. "Èdè" in the excerpt literally means "language."

[42]Oral Source I.

[43]Jack Goody,*The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*, 80.

[44]Ama Mazama, "The Eurocentric Discourse on Writing", 8.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Wande Abimbola, "The Literature of the Ifá Cult," Biobaku, S.O. Ed. *Sources of Yoruba History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 46.

[47]Wande Abimbola, "The Place of Ifá in Yoruba Traditional Religion," *African Notes*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1965, 4.

[48]Wande Abimbola, "The Literature of the Ifá Cult," 48.

[49]Ibid., 49.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid., 50 – 55.

[52]Wande Abimbola, *Ìjìnlè Ohùn Ẹnu Ifá, I*, (Glasgow: Collin, 1968), p.48. The translation of the verse is taken from Wande Abimbola, "The Literature of the Ifá Cult," 51.

[53]Wande Abimbola, "The Literature of the Cult," 10.

[54]See Wande Abimbola, *Ìjìnlè Ohùn Ẹnu Ifá, I*, 121 – 124.

[55]Wande Abimbola, "The Literature of the Ifa Cult," 53.

[56]Ibid., 55 – 57.

[57]Ibid., 57 – 59.

[58]Ibid., 60.

[59]Ibid.

[60]G.I. Jones, "Oral Tradition and History," *African Notes*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1975, 7.

[61]Eric A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 82.

[62]Roy Prieswerk and Dominique Perrot, *Ethnocentrism in History: Africa, Asia and Indian American in Western Textbooks* (New York: NOK Publishers, 1978), 123.

[63]M.I. Finley, "Myth, Memory, and History," *History and Theory*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1965, 83.

[64]Wande Abimbola, "The Literature of the Ifa Cult," 61. For a thorough understanding of this point, see Bolanle Awe, "Praise Poems as Historical Data: The Example of the Yoruba Oriki," *Africa*, Vol. 44, No.4, 1974, 331–349; Bade Ajuwon, 1980, "The Preservation of Yoruba Tradition Through Hunters' Funeral Dirges," *Africa*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 1980, 66–72; Karen Barber, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women and the past in a Yoruba Town* (London: Edinburgh University Press, 1991); S.A. Babalola, *The Content and Form of Yoruba Ijala.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 118 –223.

[65]Oyekan Owomoyela, "Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration," 90.

[66]D.N. Cohan, "Metallurgy," in *The Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 18 (Dansbury: Grolier Incorporated, 1997), 764.

[67]David Adeniji, and Robret Armstrong, *Ise Irin Wiwa ati Sisun ni Ilee Yoruba (lron Mining and Smelting in Yorubaland),*Occasional Publication, Institute of African Studies, 1977, 5.

[68]The discovery of metals, according to Theodore Wertime, appears to have begun in the 6th Millennium and to have been reasonably well advanced by 2000 B.C. See Theodore Wertime, "Man's First Encounter with Metallurgy," *Science*, Vol. 146, No.3649, 1964, 1257.

[69]Alexis B. A. Adande, "'Traditional' Iron Metallurgy in Africa," Hountondji, P. Ed. *Endogenous Knowledge*: *Research Trails* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997), 68.

[70]Judith Gleason, *Orisha: The Gods of Yorubaland* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 45.

[71] Ibid., 46.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Ibid., 48 – 49.

[76]Bertus Haverkort. et al Eds. *Ancient Roots, New Shoots: Endogenous Development in Practice.* London: Zed Books, 2003, 17.

[77]Charles C. Verharen, C.C. "Afrocentrism and Accentrism: A Marriage of Science and Philosophy," *Journal* of *Black Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1995, 73.

[78]Clarence E. Ayres, *Science: The False Messiah.* Indianapolis: The Bobs- Merrill Co., 1927, 19.

[79]Oyekan Owomoyela, "Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration," 91.

[80]Theodore Spencer, "Review: Lovejoy's Essays in the History of Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1948, 439.

[81]Sourced from Mr Olusegun Ogundele, an Ifá priest, Department of Linguistic and African Languages, University of Ibadan, Ibadan. Hence Oral Source II.

[82]Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodolog.y* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965, 1.

[83]Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Study in Society and History*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1963, 345.

[84]Oral Source II. Alábahun is literally "Tortoise", used in the excerpt to depict any individual.

[85]Paulin Hountondji, "Producing Knowledge in Africa Today, the Second Bashorun MKO Abiola Distinguished Lecture," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 1995, 4.

[86]Ibid., 6.

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