

Investigating African Belief in the Concept of Reincarnation: The case of *Ifá* and *Ayò Ọlópón*. Symbolism among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria

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The concept of reincarnation, a situation where a dead person comes back to life, is as old as human beings. However, there is divergence in the belief among various religions. African religion such as *Ifá* uses symbols to validate the belief in reincarnation. *Ifá* is the foundation of the culture of the Yoruba people. The present study aims to define the concept of reincarnation in *Ifá* and in *ayò ọlópón* to substantiate African beliefs in the concept of reincarnation. No known work either relates *Ifá* with the concept of reincarnation or connects *ayò ọlópón* with *Ifá* to solve a cultural problem. The present study fills this gap. Symbolism, a mode in semiotics where an object signifies or represents something or somebody, is adopted for the analysis of the study since symbolism is fundamental to *Ifá*. The visitation of *Odù* in *Ifá* is related to the *ayò game*, linking the symbolism in both *Ifá* and *ayò ọlópón* to the realization or application of the concept of reincarnation in human life, especially among Africans and the Yoruba people. It is determined that there is synergy between *Ifá* and *ayò ọlópón*, and reincarnation. The study concludes that reincarnation is an encapsulated concept illustrated by *Ifá* and *ayò ọlópón*- the religious and social life of the Yoruba people. African cultural symbols are tangible means of cultural heritage that solve contemporary and controversial human issues such as the African belief in reincarnation.

Keywords: *Ifá*, *ayò ọlópón*, *Odù-Ifá*, reincarnation, semiotics, symbolism, culture.

Introduction

Generally, the belief in reincarnation, which is a concept that the dead can come back to life again, is a controversial concept as there is no consensus on the established findings regarding the validity or veracity of the concept. However, African religion, such as *Ifá*¹, sheds more light on the reality or possibility of the concept of reincarnation for human-beings. There are some issues generated by the belief in the concept of reincarnation, such as the possibility of the dead coming back to life again. If it is possible, what or

¹ The Yoruba divinity of wisdom and knowledge. A spokesperson for all other divinities.

when is the starting period of reincarnation and when does it conclude? These are some of the controversial questions associated with the concept of reincarnation among philosophers and believers of different religions across the globe. Examining *Ifá* and *ayò ọlọpọ́n* provides some answers to the questions posed above. Furthermore, the analysis considers the African and Yoruba belief on reincarnation and how such a belief is expressed— such as the period of commencement and termination of the reincarnation among others. On the one hand, the visitation of *Odu*² in *Ifá* has been typified with the concept of reincarnation, and, on the other hand, extended to *ayò ọlọpọ́n*³. Therefore, the main aim of this study is to establish the concept of reincarnation in *Ifá* and *ayò ọlọpọ́n*. The objectives of the study are to account for the visitation of *Odu* to earth as related to human birth; to connect the process of reincarnation with the manipulations of *ayò* seeds; to investigate the starting and terminal point of the process of reincarnation in *Ifá* and *ayò ọlọpọ́n*, and to establish a nexus between *Ifá* and *ayò ọlọpọ́n*, the religious and social life of the Yoruba people.

Theoretical Framework: Semiotics

Semiotics is applied to this study because “symbolism underlies *Ifá* divination” [1, p.135]. Semiotics, which is the study of science of signs, is better understood through symbolism. It can be traced to the pioneering works of Charles Sanders Peirce [2], the American philosopher and Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss Linguist [3]. Peirce believes that semiotics is an abstract entity and a sign is something that represents somebody or something in some respect or capacity. This notion of “representing” is mediated by an interpretant. Peirce notes that “a sign is anything which determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its object) in the same way the interpretant becoming in turn a sign” [2, p.35]. This means anything can be adopted as a sign. Peirce’s model is adopted for this work as the elements of the model are sufficient and appropriate for the analysis.

Three modes of significations are regarded to be sufficient to describe any form of sign. These include the icon, symbol and index. However, the symbol mode is adopted for the current study. In symbol mode, there is no resemblance or connection between the signifier and the signified, that is the object and what it stands for. A symbol’s connection with its object is a matter of convention, rule or agreement between the users. Such symbols, rules and convention between the signifier and the signified must be learnt. In Yorùbá tradition, it can be realized in the form of *Àrokò* (symbolism), as such an object or something represents something or somebody in real life. “African cultures have their own symbols pregnant with meaning. A reflection on these symbols, with a meaning view to making the implicit meanings explicit will constitute African philosophy” [4, p.115]. This is why associating cultural meaning to symbols is important; the challenge within the purview knowledge of semiotics. In other words, the interpretation of a symbol is

² One of the major divinities, believed to be the wife of *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*, the *Ifá* progenitor. All of the *Ifá* messages (major and minor) are coded in *Odu* and generally referred to as *Odu-Ifá*.

³ *Ayò ọlọpọ́n* is an indigenous Yoruba board game played by two players. It normally contains two rows, shared by each player, with six holes. Complete sets of the *ayò* seeds are 48, 4 seeds in each of the holes. It is played counterclockwise by dropping a seed in a hole and skipping any hole until the seeds are sown in the hand of the player who finishes. The winning numbers of seeds are 2 and 3 of the opponent’s row. The winner is determined by the player with the highest number of seeds — more than 24 which is half of the 48 seeds.

important in understanding the meaning of a sign, symbol or text. For the current study, it is the interpretation of religious symbols associated with the concept of reincarnation. “Interpretation is the main outcome of the semiotic process, or semiosis. Interpretation is the discursive result or output of positing meaning in any sign system. ... Interpretations often take the same form as the set of signs being interpreted” [5, p. 5].

The roles of religious symbols as means to solving religious issues and problems have been investigated by different authors and scholars. In summing up the role of symbols in religion, Goldman (1964), identifies a religious symbol as a major tool that helps the individual religious follower to understand the divine, and his or her own identity as a follower... Religious symbols come in many shapes and sizes, but their meaning is universally accepted by a given community or followers of particular religions. Within these contexts, a religious symbol is any object, word or gesture that serves to convey the meaning of a religious ideal... Another very important function of religious symbols is that they fundamentally assist followers of a particular religion in understanding their religion, and in addition, through the symbols others outside the particular religion are able to recognize it. Invariably, it becomes imperative that in order to understand a particular religion, its attendant symbols must be understood by knowing what they are [6, p. 61–62].

A symbol can be regarded as the basic and basis of communication, because symbols formed the writing system in the prehistoric period of development. African symbols “transferred our prehistoric ancestors into organized human beings within the context of cultural livelihood and institutions” [7, p. 330]. An adequate understanding of the symbolism of African symbols and objects requires the knowledge of semiotics, which covers different aspects of human and non-human life.

The roles played by symbols, especially in *Ifá* the religion of the Yorùbá people, cannot be overemphasized because “symbols have become significantly functional in the practice of religion... Religion makes the use of symbols as communication linkages imperative” [6, p. 60]. They serve as a means of interaction and peaceful co-existence between human (visible or physical) supernatural beings, divinities and ancestors (invisible or spiritual) world. “From the religious perspective, the world can be said to be divided into the physical (visible), and the metaphysical (or the spiritual) levels. Both realms have binding and interactive forces exchanging between them to function harmoniously” [8, p. xiv].

Ifá and *ayò ọ̀lópón* Background

Ifá cannot be described from one perspective, as its scope covers every aspect of Yoruba life in particular and humanity in general. However, *Ifá* is popularly associated with religion as religion is the foundation of culture. *Ifá* has been related to science, philosophy, mythology, etc. As a religion, *Ifá* “is a divination system created by the Yorùbá people of South Western Nigeria some 2,000 years ago. In the course of succeeding centuries, *Ifá* priests (Babalawo) have developed the original form bequeathed to them by Ọ̀runmila, the reforming prophet of the Oduduwa Era of Yorùbá history (5000B. C. — 500A. D.), in many ways, but have kept its canons essentially unchanged to this very day” [9, p. ix]. *Ifá*, as a religion is not only a major divination among the Yoruba, but “other West African people” [10, p. 179]. For example, *Ifá* is known to different people by different names throughout the world. Its nomenclature has cut across nations and tribes around the world. For instance, *Ifá* “is considered as the god of divinization in Igala culture” [11, p. 5].

Ifá is known as *Fá* among the Fon of the Republic of Benin, *Eva* to Nupes, *Ifá* in Cuba, USA, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Surinam and Togo. With these different realizations of *Ifá* nomenclature which cut across nations of the world, the prominence of *Ifá* is not in doubt. In 2005, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proclaimed *Ifá* as one of the 86 traditions of the world to be recognized as masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage of humanity [12, p. 1]. By this proclamation, *Ifá* joined the league of cultures and therefore requires urgent preservation. *Ifá*, as a religion, science or literary text, has over time been of great interest to scholars in different areas of human endeavors, such as literature, philosophy, religion, art and culture. *Ifá* is sacred to the Yoruba or African religion, as the Bible is to the Christianity and Quran to the Islam.

Like *Ifá*, the international status of *ayò ọlópón* is also not in doubt. For instance, apart from its popularity among the Yorùbá, it is called *Gisoro* in Burundi, *Oware* in Ghana, *Achochodi* in Ivory Coast, *Adjito/Vadjito* in Benin, *Ayo Eleh* in Igbo and *Kalati* in Sweden [13, p. 1–2]. The game plays vital roles in some Yorùbá festivals. It was introduced to Ọṣun Ọṣogbo (a river goddess) festival in Nigeria some nineteen years ago. It was adopted for *Odù*⁴ by Ọrúnmilà. For example, the board game and the manipulations of seeds have been related to the *Ifá* system, which serves as evidence that Ọrúnmilà, the *Ifá* progenitor, must have been the inventor of the game board [14].

Ifá and *Ayò ọlópón* Processes

In *Ifá* divination, two divination objects are mostly used by the *Ifá* priests. These are *ọpẹ̀lẹ̀* (divination chain with eight *ọpẹ̀lẹ̀* seeds tied to it), and *ikin*, the *Ifá* sacred palm nuts. In the performance of *Ifá* divination by *ikin*, the *Ifá* priest places the sixteen sacred palm-nuts (*ikin*) in his palms and attempts to take the palm-nuts with the second palm, “if one palm-nut is left in his hand, he makes two marks on the yellow powder of divination, but if two palm-nuts are left in his hand, he makes one mark. If none of the palm-nuts are left, he makes no marks at all. This process is repeated until an *Odù* signature is obtained” [15, p. 11].

Ayò ọlópón is played on the traditional game board containing twelve holes on two horizontal lines (six holes by the right and left sides of the players). It is played in such a way that the players sit directly opposite to each other with the game board in the centre on a bench or an object. The game starts after each of the twelve holes is occupied by four *ayò* seeds, making a total number of forty-eight *ayò* seeds. The game is primarily played by two matured males (approximately fifteen years old and older) in the open and watched by the spectators.

The *ayò ọlópón* game starts by taking any of the four *ayò* seeds on the row of the game board player, distributing it in a counterclockwise movement in the next four holes. This is known as sowing. This exercise is repeated until all the *ayò* seeds in his hand are exhausted. None of the holes must be skipped when sowing. “Harvesting” or “capturing,” which is the process of winning *ayò* seeds of the opponent player, is done when the *ayò* seeds in a hole (after sowing) are two or three up to the maximum of five holes in a single movement or sowing of *ayò* seeds. The sowing of *ayò* seeds following the holes on the lines of

⁴ The wife of Ọrúnmilà as her iconic symbol.

the game board is regarded as line tracing; similar to the tracing of line by the *Ifá* priest on the divination board. Line tracing in *Ifá* has been related to line tracing in the *ayò* game, suggesting that the *ayò* game is an extension of the *Ifá* divination system [16].

The winner is determined by the player having more *ayò* seeds than the opponent. In other words, a player with more than twenty-four *ayò* seeds emerges as the winner since the total number of *ayò* seeds on the game board is forty-eight. It is possible for the players to play to a draw. This is traditionally described as *omi* (draw game). The game continues until a winner emerges twice. If a loser of the *ayò* game is defeated more than two times, he gives way for another *ayò* player to display his competence with the winner. However, this rule is not rigid, as the players may continue after a player is defeated twice if there is no interested player to continue the game.

Investigating the African Concept of Reincarnation in *Ifá* and *Ayò Olóṣón* Symbolism

Before now, there has been no agreement among scholars in the fields of philosophy and religion, especially African Philosophy, as to whether the concepts of Yorùbá immortality of soul and reincarnation are original or borrowed into the Yorùbá culture. However, no previous scholars explore African cultural symbols to substantiate their opinions, which likely makes the concept of reincarnation unclear among Africans in general and among the Yoruba in particular.

Reincarnation theory also is present in the Yorùbá belief system. Particularly, “the dead could reincarnate into the family” [17, p. 5]. Africans believe that since the soul of man is immortal, it is capable of returning to earth through rebirth. This is the case with the Yorùbá who “strongly believe that reincarnation is a royal route by which departed ancestors return to earth” [18, p. 134]. For the Yorùbá, the journey of an individual began from heaven to the earth and the circle of existence rotates in death and life.

The Yorùbá believe in metempsychosis, which is the passage of someone’s soul after death into the body of another person or animal. The concept of “reincarnation is irrefutable since it is a metaphysical theory” [19, p. 183]. In Yorùbá theology, as evinced from *Ifá’s* epistles, reincarnation is one of the most important concepts of the Yorùbá traditional beliefs system. The belief is substantiated by three events connected with the Yorùbá beliefs on reincarnation. First, the belief is associated with some Yorùbá names given to newborn children, born immediately after the death of a grandfather or grandmother in names such as Babátúndé, Babajídé and Babárindé (father returns), Ìyábò and Yéjídé or Yétúndé (mother returns). Second, the Yorùbá belief in *àbíkú* (born to die), in names like Mọ̀lọ̀mọ̀, Kòsọ̀kọ̀ and Dúrósínmí, assert the Yorùbá belief on the rebirth of a dead child. Ìdòwú says a form of *àbíkú* can be realized in the form of *Elèrè/Emèrè* — the “wandering spirit of children given to the prank of entering into pregnant women and being born only to die or sheer relish of the mischief” [20, p. 126]. And third, the Yorùbá belief in *àkúdaáyà*. This is buttressed by the belief that “the souls of those who died mid-life may go and live in distance towns and assumes a quasi-physical existence there” [19, p. 183]. The notion is not limited to the Yorùbá alone; the same is noticed “in parts of Asia, tradition dictates that when a person dies, relatives will mark his or her body — often using soot — with the hope that the soul of the deceased will be reincarnated within the same family. The mark is said to become both a birthmark and evidence that the soul has been reborn” [21, p. 1].

The Yorùbá beliefs in immortality and reincarnation of the soul has been controversial. On one hand, while some scholars are of the opinion that the concept is probably original to the Yorùbá, some, on the other hand, believe that it was borrowed. “It has been controverted that the Yorùbá may not have the concept of immortality of soul from Plato, Pythagoras or St. Augustine” [22, p. 140–143]. Makinde is of the opinion that the idea of immortality of soul might even have been borrowed from the Yorùbá against some contrary opinion. He believes that immortality of the soul among the Yorùbá could be regarded as original with them or at worst, borrowed from some other neighboring African country south of Egypt, and certainly not from Pythagoras or Plato [23].

It should be noted here that Makindé was not emphatic that the concepts of reincarnation and immortality of soul are undoubtedly original to the Yorùbá tradition. This is likely due to such an argument not being substantiated with Yorùbá oral or semiotic, symbol, evidence as supported here with the use of *Odù Ifá* and *ayọ ọlọpọn* on reincarnation. This makes such opinion suggestive or simply an assumption.

Makinde observes that the lack of documentation (even though he had not taken symbols as an alternative virile means of documentation) has denied African countries of written evidence of their cultural values and beliefs. He does, however, believe that the oral evidence from *Ifá* is a major source in order to locate and retrieve undocumented values. The discovery of Yorùbá artifacts such as that of *Ifá*, on which the culture of the Yorùbá rests its historical material or object, is used to discover, recover and establish the originality of the concept of reincarnation with the Yorùbá beliefs in the course of this research. *Ifá* provides data through symbols that can complement previous debates on the Yorùbá belief on reincarnation of soul. The deployment of *Ifá* symbols is an advancement of our knowledge from using Yorùbá artifacts, in addition to earlier oral evidence available to support the Yorùbá belief on reincarnation.

The links of the Yorùbá belief system with *Ifá* are expressed in *Ifá* symbols and words. *Ifá*'s words are coded in *Odù* (as previously noted), the symbolism of which have been associated with the belief in reincarnation. This is connected with the visitation of the sixteen principal *Odù* on the surface of the earth. For instance, “the 16 principal or original *Odù* are said to be of divine origin and to be the earthly counterparts of heavenly ‘deities.’ Therefore, each of them represents four entities, two in heaven and two on earth.” This is supported with the *Ifá* corpus contained in [24, p. 86] *Òkànràn Méjì* verse 5:

Òlù méjì di mérin. Kó sẹ
Òlù mérin di méjọ. Kó sẹ
Òlù méjọ di m̀erindínlógún. Kó sẹ

Two gimlets turn four. It is sanctioned
 Four gimlets turn eight. It is sanctioned
 Eight gimlets turn sixteen. It is sanctioned

It is equally observed that the figures of *Ifá* authority rotate within 2 and 16. In another context, the numbers rotate between 2 and 16. In other words, there is a chance for the dead person to come to life again from the second generation to the sixteenth generation within his or her lineage. These *Odù* visitations are carried out in their order of seniority. Table 1, provided by McGee [25, p. 104, 108], shows the arrangement of these *Àpólà* in *ẹsẹ Ifá*, starting with the second deity to the sixteen, and is helpful in demonstrating the arrangement of the visitations of the *Odù* to the surface of earth from heaven.

Table 1. Showing the Visitations of *Odù Ifá* [25, p. 104]

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

Table 2 above represents the visitation of each *odù* to the other in the *ayò* game. Making reference to *Ifá* (with which *ayò* derived its elements), Òlátúnjí states that “the 16 major *odù* are conceived as kings paying visits to those next below and having their visits returned” [1, p. 127]. This thus gives ÈjìOgbè thirty visits altogether, Òyèkú Méjì twenty-eight and so on until we come to Òfún Méjì who has none to visit. A total of 240 visits, the number of the minor *odù* is made and ÈjìOgbè has the highest number of Àpólà; indicated with $15_{(2)}$ or thirty (30) Àpólà. Òyèkú Méjì is next, represented by $14_{(2)}$ or twenty-eight *àpólà*. These numbers decrease by two to Òfún Méjì with $2_{(0)}$ or zero (0), the *Odù* cannot visit itself, just as the when there is a lap in *Ayò*, when the hole where the seeds were taken from is skipped. It cannot feed itself, but rather it feeds others. This indirectly illustrates the power of a hole over the others. McGee [25, p. 103], quoting McClelland [26, p. 421–430], says “the arrangement is a decreasing geometric progression by two, from thirty to zero (30-0).” Since 0 and 1 are numbers not recognized by *Ifá* or *ayò olòpòn*, since Òsẹ́ Méjì (1^2) and Òfún Méjì (0^2) are not visited, shown under ‘identification of *omò-odù* in *Ayò* seeds’ in the table. This conforms with the formula on *Ifá* divination and *ayò olòpòn*: >1 to <16 , between 2 to 15. There is an occurrence of the first section of *àpólà Odù* that contains 30, and in decreasing geometric order to 0. This gives a total of two hundred and forty (240) minor *Odù*.

Table 2. Showing the Visitation of *Odù* in *Ayò Ọlópón* (as Derived by the Author)
Representation of major and minor *Odù* in *Ayò Ọlópón*

S/N	Identification of <i>Odù</i>	Occurrence of <i>Àpólá Odù</i> in <i>Ayò</i> seeds	Number of Visitation	Number of Patterns of Occurrence
1	Èjì Ogbè	15 (2)	30	1
2	Ọ̀yẹ̀kú Méjì	14 (2)	28	2
3	Ìwòrì Méjì	13 (2)	26	2
4	Òdí Méjì	12 (2)	24	3
5	Ìròsùn Méjì	11 (2)	22	4
6	Ọ̀wónrín Méjì	10 (2)	20	3
7	Ọ̀bàrà Méjì	9 (2)	18	3
8	Ọ̀kànràn Méjì	8 (2)	16	3
9	Ògúndá Méjì	7 (2)	14	2
10	Ọ̀sá Méjì	6 (2)	12	2
11	Ìká Méjì	5 (2)	10	2
12	Òtúrúpòn Méjì	4 (2)	8	1
13	Òtúa Méjì	3 (2)	6	1
14	Ìrẹ̀tẹ̀ Méjì	2 (2)	4	1
15	Ọ̀sẹ̀ Méjì	1 (2)	2	0
16	Ọ̀fún Méjì	0 (2)	0	0
			Total = 240	Total = 30

It should be noted that the arrangement is in a decreasing geometric progression, by two from 30 to 0. Since the last deity cannot visit himself, it is marked by C (0, 1), which indicates that the last deity visits himself once. The geometrical progression in descending order is demonstrated in B. Àjàyí [27, p. 21]. In addition, Abimbólá also observes that “each *Àpólá* consist of thirty *Odù* while the second section contains twenty-eight. The number of *Odù* in each section decreases in an irregular pattern, giving a total of two hundred and forty” [15, p. 28].

The realization of the *Odù* in two represents the dual nature of nature and gods. The world is composed of physical and spiritual elements. The Yorùbá believe that the individual journey in life does not begin on the surface of the earth, but in heaven and it ends in heaven as well. It can be stated that “the Yorùbá concept of existence transcends the time when the individual is on the earth” [28, p. 417].

The Yorùbá belief in reincarnation can be replicated in *Ifá* symbols. For example, the beginning of reincarnation is suggested to begin from two — the second generation, within which an individual’s soul reincarnates. As noted, “the belief in reincarnation is linked to the ancestor’s belief. In Yorùbá religion, it is thought that about two generations

after death, every human soul has a chance to return to earth in the body of a newborn, mostly within the same family” [29; 30, p. 132–136]. As a result, there is possibility for an individual to reincarnate between two and sixteen generations. From this analysis, the reincarnation process rotates within 2 and 16; expressed as $>1 <16$ [14]. Looking at the table on the visitation of *Odù* and *ayò olópón*, one observes that the smallest number is 2, representing the possible number of visitations in reincarnation. In this manner, the present generation is connected with the past by the process of immortality and reincarnation of the soul. The ancestors or *oriṣas* play a ‘gap bridging’ between the living and the dead Yorùbá ancestors with the belief that “physical death does not put an end to existence” [17, p. 5]. It is also noted from the table above that the visitation of the two hundred and forty minor *Odù* are grouped into sixteen symbolizing the sixteen principal *Odù*. In this way, “the numbers in each group are derived from the successive visits and return visitations of the deity whose name is associated with the group of the next deity in line, starting from the second deity to the sixteenth. Since the last deity cannot visit himself, we write C (0, 3) to make it clear that the last deity visits himself once” (as indicated in Table 1 above) [25, p. 104]. The process observed here is derived from the process of visitation of *Àpólà-Odù* (minor *Odù*), bearing the same name, and to the major *Odù* next to it are believed to be the familial line. Abímbòlá also observes that “each *Àpólà* consist of thirty *Odù* while the second section contains twenty-eight. The number of *Odù* in each section decreases in an irregular pattern, giving a total of two hundred and forty” [15, p. 28]. Each principal *Odù-Ifá* is believed here to symbolize human generation.’

It is equally apparent from the table that the visitation rotates from the first *Odù* (Èjìogbè) to the last *Odù* (Òsé Méjì). Since the last *Odù* (Òfún Méjì) cannot visit itself, the visitation terminates on the last *Odù*. The semiotic representation of this visitation here suggests that the reincarnation circle rotates within two to sixteenth generations. In other words, the reincarnation begins from the second to the sixteenth generations. This is contrary to the belief of some scholars who stated that the reincarnation cycle begins from the sixteenth generation. These particular authors believe that “there is the theory that a person comes back to life sixteen times, from the time of his first restful death... We therefore hold that in Yorùbá thought, the re-incarnation begins after the 16th time, i.e., after 1120 years” [23, p. 40]. It should be pointed out that the determination of when reincarnation occurs is not sacrosanct, as the possibility is “divine.” Every human-being that is deemed to undergo reincarnation has sixteen possible times or chances to reincarnate. Therefore, “the number sixteen represents the variables of the human condition, the sixteen possible situations of human life” [31, p. 1].

From the visitation of *Odù* to one another and to the surface of the earth, it is shown that the reincarnation circle begins from the second deity symbolized by the second generation to the sixteenth *Odù*, symbolized by the sixteenth generation. This means that the highest number of visitation (reincarnation) of an individual is sixteen times. This new position about the Yorùbá beliefs in reincarnation has posed a challenge to the stance of previous scholars such as Adébòwálé [19] and Ìdòwú [20] who associated the Yorùbá reincarnation with events like *àbíkú*, *emèrè* or *elèrè* and *àkúdááyà*. It also concerns the beliefs of the Yorùbá reincarnation symbolization through names like Babátúndé (father returns) and Ìyábo` (mother returns). The dead person (of first generation) can come back to life immediately after death as shown above with Tables 1 and 2 on *Ifá* and *ayò* game visitations of *Odù* and *ayò* seeds. To the Yorùbá people, “the past is not a mystery and although the

future (the unborn) is yet unknown, it is not a mystery to the Yorùbá but co-existent in present consciousness... The stage of transition is, however, the metaphysical abyss both of god and man” [32, p. 36]. These opinions may seem obscure to some individuals and belief systems since such opinions are influenced or swayed by human emotions, thoughts and premonitions. African religious symbols are a medium for resolving some controversial issues. The major challenge is to comprehend what the concept symbolizes in religion as symbols, including concepts and words that have different meanings and interpretations.

Most if not all, religions present the physical world as temporary in nature... Thus, the next world or the place to which man proceeds after death is seen as being permanent and real. It must also be added that the religions have conceptions of a dual nature of man. That is, man is composed of two elements, the body and the soul. It is the soul element in man that has the capacity of surviving death. Here again, there are varying opinions on how the soul of man survives death and what happens to it after the survival and separation from the body [6, p. 181].

However, it is one thing to have a symbol, it is another thing to know or be able to culturally interpret the meaning(s) associated with such a symbol. If all religions share the same equivalence of universal beliefs about man, then the conceptions of religion on the concept of reincarnation cannot be different.

Another area of importance in relating *ọpọ̀n-Ifá*⁵ and *ọpọ̀n-ayò*⁶ to the concept of reincarnation is their forms. Both *Ifá* and *ayò* boards are “available in rectangular, circular and semi-circular forms” [15, p. 4]. For example, the *isàlẹ̀ Ọ̀yọ̀* forms of divination trays are carved in wood “and are basically in two shapes; often they are either circular or rectangular” [33, p. 4]. The rectangular form of the *ayò* board and round form of *Ifá* divination board are presented in Figure 1a and 1b below:

The history behind the carving of *ọpọ̀n* as a profession has been previously mentioned. It highlights the Yorùbá people as being creative, innovative and intelligent. The carvings “form one of the most prolific categories of Yorùbá wood sculpture” [34, p. 3]. The round form of *ọpọ̀n Ifá* symbolizes the Earth: no beginning or end. But the common form of *ọpọ̀n-Ifá* is a circular form. The images of the West, East, North and the South on

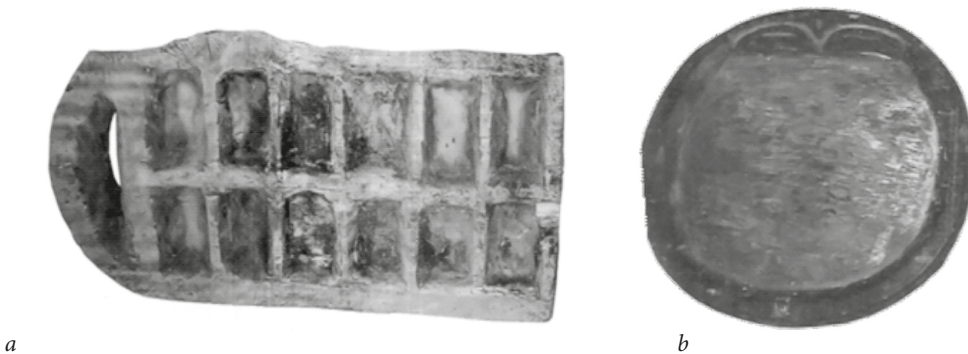


Fig. 1. Structural form: a — Ọpọ̀n-Ayò; b — Ọpọ̀n-Ifá (photos by O. T. Òkékéndé)

⁵ *Ifá* divination board.

⁶ *Ayò* game board.

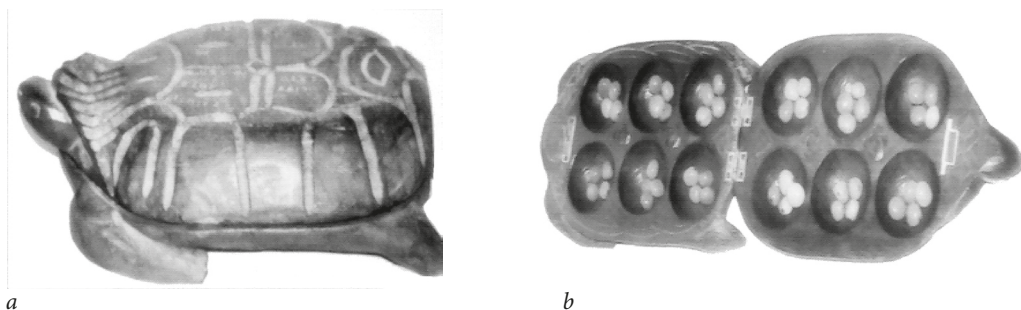


Fig. 2. Ayò board (òpón ayò) in a Tortoise Image: *a* — closed form; *b* — open form (photos by O. T. Òkèwándé)

the divination board are also present [35]. This may account for the four corners of the rectangular form of *Ifá* divination and *ayò òlòpón* boards. The circular form resembles the image of the world (in a circle form), which represents *Ifá* universal and omniscience power. The centers of both boards are left out either for the divination proper, as in the case of *Ifá* tray, and the real game to take place as in the game of *ayò*.

The circular form of *òpón-Ifá* symbolizes “the never ending cycle of creation and re-incarnation transition” [32, p. 4]. The four corners form of *òpón ayò* symbolizes the North, South, East and West of the Earth. *Òpón* symbolizes “the intrinsic nature of Òrúnmilà... Òpón reminds one of the attributes of Òrúnmilà as ‘Ò gègè- a-gbáyé gún’, that is primal order, the regulator of the universe” [36, p. 436]. “Òpón ni Ifá” [37, p. 150] is the divination board. While the round and oval forms of *òpón-Ifá* symbolize the complete knowledge and power of *Ifá*. Sometimes, the *ayò* board is carved in an oval shape and especially in the shape of an animal: reptiles, tortoise and crocodile. It is also at times represented as different objects used to decorate the edges of *òpón-Ifá*, seen in Figures 2a and 2b [15].

The arrangement of *ayò* seeds in the *òpón ayò* above contains a set of *ayò* seeds: four in each of the twelve holes with total sum of forty-eight seeds. *Òpón ayò* can take different forms and shapes, such as the oval shape pictured above. *Òpón ayò* in Figures 2a and b is the author’s own *ayò* board. “Some *òpón ayò* are foldable and lockable to keep the *òmò ayò* (*heloptelea granddi* ‘umaceae’) in place. Some *òpón ayò* even have stands” [38, p. 38]. In the above *òpón ayò* figures, B is the open form of A. When the oval or circle shape of *òpón-ayò* or *òpón-Ifá* in circular or oval form are opened as in Figure 2B above, it symbolizes the heaven and the earth. This, in some cases, is represented with a calabash to symbolize “the Yoruba visualization of the cosmos as a closed calabash whose top half represents the heavens (*òrun*) and the bottom half represents the earth (*aye*)” [39, p. 13]. Visual art objects, such as *òpón ayò* and *òpón Ifá* represent the unending nature of movement of human-beings from heaven to earth.

Some Africans belief systems are depicted in art works or symbols. *Ayò òlòpón* among the Yoruba people belongs to one such work of art and symbols. Therefore, art works, including cultural objects, cannot be dissociated from the wisdom of people past or present:

But it is a matter of surprise how art appeared in the dim past, hundreds of thousands of years back. What inspiration acted behind those aesthetic activities? The Anthropologists, art historians, art critics, and philosophers all seek an answer. However, the various pursuits of creativity have been classified in a number of groups like visual art, oral literature, music

dance etc. Among these, visual art is the oldest as well as tangible form...Although much of the evidence has perished, a few have survived [40, p.521].

Ọpón ayò and *ọpón-Ifá* are some of the Yorùbá ancient visual art materials that are closely related with the belief and culture of the Yorùbá people. Interestingly, *ayò ọlọpón* and *ọpón-Ifá* are some of the Yorùbá art works that have been preserved till today.

The identification and dispensation of spirituality in *Ifá*, especially in connection with the concept of reincarnation, is extended and felt in the *ayò ọlọpón* game. The synergy between art works and spirituality is so fascinating that the expression of opinion is debated in the national dailies. For example, *The Nation*, reports that

the relationship between art and spirituality as well as the therapeutic effects of art on human soul from the theme of a group art exhibition, *Art and Spirituality*... Art and Spirituality was organised by the Jesuits as another platform to show the connectivity between art and spirituality... what you see around you is a pointer to what you don't see... All these works of art are pointers to the unseen supreme God. But a work of art becomes fetish when it turns God and you embrace [41, p.22].

The life of the Yorùbá people is greatly influenced by their religion as there is hardly anything associated with them that has no religious affinity. This observation has long been made by Clarke who noted: "my knowledge of the Yorùbá character and an observation for several years, of their conditions and of the working of their religious rites... and in their knowledge of many of the rude arts is to be seen in their religious systems" [42, p.276]. *Ayò ọlọpón* is among social activity that is established to be influenced by *Ifá* [14]. The inclusion of *ayò* to some religious festivals also attests to its links with religion. Furthermore, *Ayò ọlọpón* plays some important roles in several Yorùbá festivals. For example, it was introduced to the Ọṣun Ọṣogbo festival (a river goddess among the Yorùbá) some nineteen years ago.

In other to understand the culture of the Yoruba people, there is a need "to fully understand the centrality of art (ọnà) in Yoruba thought, one must be aware of their cosmology; ... so be it that the artist (oniṣe ọnà) plays an important role in Yoruba culture, serving as an agent for translating time-honored values into visual metaphors aimed at sustaining humanity in body and in spirit" [39, p.13]. Looking critically at the Yoruba thought behind the circular and rectangular object forms, such as those demonstrated and described above, one can conclude that there is a meaningful relationship with their belief in the journey of human-beings from heaven to earth or vice-versa in a cyclic or rotational form. The relationship is also evident in the symbolization of the four corners of the earth (North, South, East and West), which is keenly related to their belief in the concept of reincarnation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that, in general, the belief in the concept of reincarnation is encapsulated in African religious and sociocultural symbols and activities, and in particular among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria. The belief in reincarnation is enshrined and inscribed in the religious and sociocultural activities of the Africans, as evinced from *Ifá* and *ayò ọlọpón* among the Yoruba. These activities demonstrate how reincarnation is activated in peoples' lives.

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Исследование африканских верований в перерождение: ифа и айо олопон. Символизм среди йоруба Юго-Западной Нигерии

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Концепция перерождений так же стара, как и само человечество. Однако в различных религиях она понимается по-разному. Африканская религия ифа использует различные символы для подтверждения перерождения. Ифа — основа культуры народности йоруба. Настоящее исследование стремится определить понятие реинкарнации в ифа и связать с ним то же в айо олопон, чтобы обосновать африканские представления о перерождении. Нет работ, которые бы связывали ифа и реинкарнацию или соотносили айо олопон с ифа. Настоящее исследование восполняет этот пробел. В качестве метода анализа был выбран символизм как семиотическое явление, которое связано с объектом, обозначающим или представляющим кого-то или что-то. Посещение Одо в ифа взаимодействует с игрой айо, которая связывает символизм в ифа и айо олопон

с реализацией концепции реинкарнации в человеческой жизни. Выясняется, что существует синергия между ифа, айо олопон и реинкарнацией. Делается вывод о том, что реинкарнация — это инкапсулированная концепция, которая может быть проиллюстрирована при помощи аспектов религиозной и социальной жизни народа йоруба — ифа и айо олопон. Таким образом, африканские культурные символы представляются осязаемыми средствами культурного наследия, позволяющими решать противоречивые гуманитарные проблемы, такие как вера африканцев в реинкарнацию.

Ключевые слова: ифа, айо олопон, Оду-ифа, перерождение, семиотика, символизм, культура.

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