

Chapter
Two

IFÁ PRIESTS AND THEIR SYSTEM OF DIVINATION

The Ifá Society

The paraphernalia of the Ifá divination system have been discussed in the previous chapter. The custodians of this paraphernalia are priests and diviners known as *babaláwo/iyánífá* (fathers or mothers of Ifá divination) who adorn themselves profusely with beads, prominent among which is *idè* which they tie to their wrists and the necks. Another distinguishing mark of Ifá priests is the *jèrùgbé*, a bag made of cloth which most of them hang on their shoulders (Plate 7). It is because of this habit of carrying a bag that the term *àpò* (bag-carrier) is used to connote an Ifá priest. A senior Ifá priest sometimes carries about with him as a walking stick, a decorated staff made of wrought iron called *òsùn* (Plate 8). It is always held carefully. According to a certain taboo, it must never fall flat on the bare ground. It is also usual for an Ifá priest to carry on his person a carved club-like object known as *iróké*³ (Plate 3) which is used to invoke Ifá during the process of divination.

There are five classes of Ifá priests. The first and most important class is made up of priests known as Babaláwo Olódù. These are full Ifá priests who have been initiated into the secrets of Odù⁴, the mythical wife of Ifá. They are the most qualified Ifá

priests being at once diviners and healers. The second class of Ifá priests consists of priests who have been initiated to Ifá but have not been initiated into the secrets of Odù, and who have all the paraphernalia of Ifá divination, and are fully authorised to practise the art of divination. They are known as *babaláwo ẹlégán*. The third class of Ifá priests is made up of people who have all the paraphernalia of Ifá divination but who are forbidden to use them to divine for people outside their own households probably because they don't know enough chants of Ifá. The fourth class are those Ifá priests who are healers. They are full Ifá priests but they divine solely for healing purposes. The fifth class is made up of trained Ifá priests who are neither diviners nor healers but who have been trained as Ifá priests. They have all the paraphernalia of Ifá but they do not use them. Each of them is usually in some full time gainful employment but they attend the regular assemblies of Ifá priests and they maintain a disciplined attitude to life which is characteristic of Ifá priests.

In ancient times, the Ifá society was centrally controlled by the king of each Yoruba kingdom through an officer who acted as a contact man between the members and the government. In Oyo, for example, the Ifá society is under the control of a chief styled *Ọ̀nàìlémọ̀lẹ̀*, who is the political head of the Ifá society. The society retained the full freedom to choose its own chiefs and regulate its affairs so long as it did nothing contrary to the government's civic orders. Nowadays, the control of kings over the Ifá cult has almost completely disappeared.

The Ifá society is not a secret cult although some of its deliberations are held as secrets which the un-initiated must not know. The opportunity for training as an Ifá priest is available to all children both male and female and adults throughout Yorubaland. There are some female diviners who are called *iyánífá*.

The Ifá society is one of the best organised societies among the Yoruba. At the head of the society is the *Àràbà*, who is the supreme high priest of a very large area which sometimes covers an entire district with many towns and villages. After the *Àràbà* comes the *Olúwo* who is the Ifá high priest for a particular city or community. From the *Àràbà* downwards there are altogether sixteen major chiefs of Ifá. The following are the sixteen most important Ifá priests⁵. Please, note that *Òyó* town does not have *Àràbà*. Please, also note that the list below is not necessary hierarchical. In *Ilé-Ifè*, *Agbangbò*n is next in rank to the *Àràbà*.

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|---------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1 <i>Àràbà (or Olúwo)</i> | 8 <i>Balésín</i> | 15 <i>Obaléyò</i> |
| 2 <i>Ojúgbò</i> nà | 9 <i>Òtún Awo</i> | 16 <i>Àgbòngbò</i> n |
| 3 <i>Akódá</i> | 10 <i>Òsì Awo</i> | 17 <i>Ajíténá</i> |
| 4 <i>Asèdá</i> | 11 <i>Èkèrín Awo</i> | |
| 5 <i>Áwíşẹ</i> | 12 <i>Alára</i> | |
| 6 <i>Erinmi</i> | 13 <i>Ajerò</i> | |
| 7 <i>Àrànsàn</i> | 14 <i>Qwàràngún</i> | |

As already mentioned in the preceeding chapter, the first day of the Yorùbá four-day week is devoted by Ifá priests to the worship of Ifá. The day is known as *ojó awo* (the day of ifá). On this day, Ifá priests assemble at the house of their local chief priest. There, they eat, drink cast Ifá, and make sacrifices to Ifá. Chanting of Ifá is not unusual at such congregations. As they chant, some of them produce special dance music on the Ifá *ìpèsè* (also known as *àràn*) drum⁶ and to this they dance merrily around the house.

In most communities, Ifá priests meet regularly once every month and once every year. The yearly meeting is observed as a festival which is known as *Mọlẹ*. The annual *Mọlẹ* festival is very

elaborate, and it is usually held in honour of the king. Most of the important activities of the festival therefore take place in the palace of the king. These activities include offerings, chanting of Ifá and dancing. In some communities, Ifá priests dance round the town during the annual *Mọlẹ* festival.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the annual *Mọlẹ* festival and the other congregational assemblies of Ifá priests is the chanting of Ifá texts which is referred to as *ìyẹrẹ*. The chanting of *ìyẹrẹ* is a well developed art among Ifá priests, and it is usually done in choral form, led by someone who is a good chanter. To every complete utterance chanted correctly by the leader of the chant, the other Ifá priests chant *han-in*, meaning 'Yes, that is right.' However, if the leader has chanted a sentence wrongly, the other priests inform him of this and tell him to correct his mistake. If he makes another mistake, he might be shouted down, and another priest who is sure of himself immediately takes over from him. Where a priest makes serious mistakes while chanting and refuses to stop chanting in defiance of the expressed objection of the congregation, he might even be thrown out of the meeting in shame. By this rigid insistence on the correct recital of Ifá texts, Ifá priests, have made it almost impossible for spurious passages to appear in the Ifá literary corpus.

To illustrate *ìyẹrẹ* chanting, the following *ẹsẹ* is quoted from the Ifá literary corpus in the manner that it will be delivered at an *ìyẹrẹ* session with the *han-in* refrain chorally chanted in response to every correct sentence. The last few lines of the *ẹsẹ* contain the chorus proper which is chanted together by the leader of the chant and the other priests. This chorus proper is sometimes repeated several times by the priests as they dance to the music of their drums and gongs.

LEADER: Igbó gbọrọrọ ni mo lẹ é sáké.
GROUP: Han-in.

- LEADER: Ọdàn gbọrọrọ ni mo lè é hokùn.
GROUP: Han-in.
LEADER: Kí n tóó dé.
Wọn joyè lẹyìn mi.
GROUP: Han-in.
LEADER: Mo dé, mo bá mọ̀rìwò ọ̀pẹ̀ yẹ̀-yẹ̀-yẹ̀
Lálàdèè mi.
GROUP: Han-in.
LEADER: A díá fún Olóógundúdú
Èyí tí n lẹ̀ j'Àjànà nÍfẹ̀.
GROUP: Han-in.
LEADER: Olónìímoró j'Àjànà nÍfẹ̀.
GROUP: Han-in.
LEADER: Baraapetú j'Àjànà nÍfẹ̀.
GROUP: Han-in.
LEADER: A ò kú mọ̀.
GROUP: Han-in.
LEADER: Àjẹpẹ̀ loyè awó jẹ.
GROUP: Han-in.
LEADER: Àjẹpẹ̀ loyè awó jẹ o.
GROUP: Àjẹpẹ̀ loyè awó jẹ.
Olónìímoró j'Àjànà nÍfẹ̀
A ò kú mọ̀
Àjẹpẹ̀ loyè awó jẹ.⁷
- LEADER: I went into the vast forest
To fetch building poles.
GROUP: That is right.
LEADER: I went into the vast grassland
To fetch building ropes.
GROUP: That is right.
LEADER: Before I returned,
They installed a chief in my absence.

- GROUP: That is right.
 LEADER: I returned to find plenty of palm fronds
 In my abode.
 GROUP: That is right.
 LEADER: Ifá divination was performed for
 Olóógundúdú⁸
 Who was going to be installed as the Àjànà⁹ of Ife.
 GROUP: That is right.
 LEADER: Olónìímoró¹⁰ was installed as the Àjànà of Ife.
 GROUP: That is right.
 LEADER: Baraapetú¹ was installed as the Àjànà of Ifẹ.
 GROUP: That is right.
 LEADER: We will not die.
 GROUP: That is right.
 LEADER: Ifá priest was installed into a long lasting title.
 GROUP: That is right.
 LEADER: Ifá priest was certainly installed into a long lasting title.
 GROUP: Ifá priest was installed into a long lasting title.
 Olónìímoró was installed as the Ajana of Ife.
 We will not die.
 Ifá priest was installed into a long lasting title.

In ancient times in Yorubaland, Ifá priests were usually very poor. This was because they were not paid directly for the services they rendered to the community. For their livelihood, they had to depend entirely on certain parts of the offerings given to Ifá and sometimes on gifts from clients.

No *babaláwo* should use his position to enrich himself in any way. He must not refuse anybody his service on account of money. If any person is too poor to pay the customary pittance for divination, the *babaláwo* must divine for him free of charge; or if the person cannot afford the prescribed sacrifice, the *babaláwo* must take whatever that person can afford and translate the will for the deed. It seems, in fact, that the *babaláwo* is under a

vow of poverty, to spend himself in the service of the community, making just enough to keep himself alive. His real reward being in the service of Ọ̀rúnmìlà.¹²

One important attribute of all Ifá priests, whatever their status in the society, is humility. Humility is manifest both in their appearance and their manners. This, as will be shown below, is an outcome of the great discipline and perseverance involved in their training. It can hardly be gainsaid that the Ifá society, comprising as it does properly disciplined, humble and well-informed priests, is one of the most important and most useful societies of the Yoruba people.

The Training of Ifá Priests

The training of Ifá priests is a supreme example of sacrifice in human endeavour. It demonstrates that human memory can be stretched to an almost limitless extent for the retention of knowledge. The aim of the training is to give the would-be priests a disciplined attitude to many problems in life. In ancient times, Ifá priests were the guardians, counsellors, philosophers and physicians of their various communities. It was therefore, the primary aim of the training to prepare the would-be priests adequately to meet the grave responsibilities of important positions in the community. Most people start their training as Ifá priests between the ages of seven and twelve. If the training goes well without a hitch, and if the trainee has a retentive memory, the training lasts not more than ten to twelve years.

There are usually many dropouts during the training with only a small percentage of those who start the training completing it successfully. This is due to several factors of which the most important are firstly the mental rigour, and secondly, the extremely hard conditions of living involved in the training.

Throughout the period of training, the master priest and his trainees live together as brothers. Age and seniority are respected and given priority among trainees in certain matters.

The trainees do household work for the master priest. This is especially the case with master priests who have no wives. Such people depend on their trainees for carrying out all the menial jobs of their households, it is also not uncommon for the master *babaláwo* to have a small farm near the town or village in which he lives. In such a case, a number of his trainees are sent to the farm regularly to do all the necessary work ranging from weed clearing and planting to the harvesting of crops. The mastery priest only goes to the farm once in a while to supervise the activities of the trainees.

The training starts by teaching the would-be priest how to use the paraphernalia of the divination system. This includes learning how to use the divining chain, and the sacred palm-nuts of divination to find out the appropriate *Odù* relating to particular clients. This part of the training is known as *dídá-owó* (learning how to use the divining chain for divination) and *ètìtẹ-alẹ* (learning how to use the sacred palm-nuts for divination).

The divining chain is one of the first instruments in the paraphernalia of Ifá to be introduced to the would-be priest. He is taught how to recognise the various combinations of the half-nuts of the divining chain that make up each *Odù*. The trainee learns one *Odù* every other day, or in the case of very dull boys, one *Odù* every week. Each trainee's progress depends entirely on his own memory and intelligence.

This part of the training of the would-be priest does not end until the trainee is able to use the divining chain to recognise the respective signatures of the two hundred and fifty six *Odù* in the Ifá divination corpus.

After the student Ifá priest has mastered the use of the divining chain, he is introduced to the sacred palm nuts, that is, *ikin*. This part of the training is known as *ètìtẹ-alẹ*, and it consists of teaching the would-be priest to be able to use the sacred palm nuts to find out the appropriate *Odù* by making marks on the yellow powder of

divination. As the sacred palm nuts are used less frequently by the Ifá priest than the divining chain, less time is devoted to this part of the training.

By far the most important part of the work of the student Ifá priests is learning by heart a number of *ẹsẹ* from each of the two hundred and fifty six *Odù*. Particular attention is paid to the principal sixteen *Odù* which are also the first sixteen *Odù* in the corpus. There seems to be no fixed number of *ẹsẹ* which each trainee must learn before he qualifies for initiation, but most of my informants confirm that in ancient times, nobody would be respected as a good Ifá priest unless he has learnt by heart at least sixteen *ẹsẹ* in each of the two hundred and fifty six *Odù*. Nowadays, however, it seems that most Ifá priests know less than sixteen *ẹsẹ* in each *Odù*.

The *ẹsẹ* are memorised at the steady rate of one per day. In the case of very long ones, the master priest could divide the *ẹsẹ* into two or three parts and devote one day's tuition to each part. It is a common sight to see many trainees queing up to take their turns while learning their *ẹsẹ Ifá*.

Each *ẹsẹ* is learnt in the form of recitation in the first instance. The master priest says one complete line at a time, and the trainee parrots the words after him several times until he is able to retain the whole line in his memory. This is done for each line until the whole *ẹsẹ* has been covered. Thereafter, the onus is on the student to find time to repeat the whole *ẹsẹ* to himself several times. This process is termed *rírán Ifá* (reiteration of Ifá verse).

According to many of my informants, after a trainee has properly memorised the first sixteen *ẹsẹ*, the task of learning Ifá verse by heart becomes relatively easy for him. It is widely believed that many of the trainees are greatly aided by a medicinal preparation known as *ìsọ̀yẹ̀* (memory aid) which they take with their food three times a day. This medicine is supposed to make it impossible for any Ifá priest to forget any *ẹsẹ* which he has already painstakingly learned by heart.

Learning how to chant the *ẹsẹ* is reserved for a much later part of the training. A clever trainee, however, acquires the art of chanting Ifá verse by imitating his master when chanting *ẹsẹ Ifá* everyday during the process of performing Ifá divination. A trainee could also learn the art of chanting Ifá verse by attending the regular assemblies of Ifá priests. Ifá priests could, however, specialise in chanting as part of their post-initiation training.

The *ẹsẹ* is memorised with such a great reverence that not a single word is missed. It is considered extremely sacrilegious for anybody to add or subtract anything from the corpus. The *ẹsẹ* must always be learnt in the very form in which it has been preserved and disseminated from ancient times. It is believed that in this way the texts in the Ifá literary corpus have been kept free from errors. The corpus, therefore, remains till today one of the most reliable genres of Yoruba oral literature.

Another important part of the trainee's work is the learning of the appropriate sacrifices that a client must be asked to offer if a particular *ẹsẹ Ifá* turns out as the solution to his problem. The name given to the section of the corpus in which detailed instructions are provided about various sacrifices is *ọkararaẹbọ*. It is a very difficult and confusing part of the corpus since every *ẹsẹ Ifá* has its own appropriate sacrifice. The would-be priest therefore has to learn a number of items required for sacrifice among which usually include clothes, money, cooked food, fresh fruit and drinks. In addition, he has to learn the proper process of using these things for sacrifice. For example, one *ẹsẹ Ifá* may stipulate that a piece of cloth used for sacrifice should be burnt while another stipulates that it should be cut into pieces. Another *ẹsẹ Ifá* may name six things to be offered as sacrifice, and furthermore prescribe that the various items should be arranged in a particular order and deposited in the bush or placed on the shrine of a particular divinity.

In addition to learning by heart the things required for sacrifice, and learning how to use them for sacrifice, the would-be priest has to

learn certain poems that are meant to be chanted whenever certain sacrifices are being performed. These chants are not actually in the main stream of the literary corpus known as *ẹsẹ*. They are special chants meant only for sacrifice.

Initiation and Post-initiation Training

When the master priest is satisfied with the trainee's ability in the different branches of Ifá mentioned above, he allows him to present himself for initiation. Of the numerous stages in the initiation ceremony, the four principal ones are described below.

The first stage is the ceremony marking what is known as *şşíí òpèlẹ́ já* (ceremony marking the mastery of the *Odù* by using the divining chain). This is a very important ceremony involving the offering of sacrifice to *Òrúnmìlà* and the giving of a feast for all Ifá priests in the community concerned. The ceremony which lasts for only one day involves the use of the following food for both the sacrifice and the feast: (i) *Èkọ* (solid maize gruel), (ii) *Abo Adiẹ* (hen), (iii) *Ekú* (rat), (iv) *Eja* (fish), (v) *Iyán* (pounded yam), (vi) *Ọkà* (solid food made from yam flour), and (vii) *Ọtí* (drinks).

The second stage of the initiation rituals involves the propitiation of *Èşù*.¹³ This ceremony is referred to as *gígún Èşù* (the making of the paraphernalia of *Èşù* for the would be priest). During this ceremony the image and the other paraphernalia of *Èşù* (Plate 10) are presented to the would be priest. Sacrifices are also made to *Èşù* and to *Òrúnmìlà*.

The third stage is known as *fífojúkan Odù* (initiation into the secrets of *Odù*). During the ceremony, the would be priest feasts many Ifá priests from far and near, after which the sacred pot believed to be the abode of *Odù*, the mythical wife of Ifá, is ceremoniously opened for him to see. In turns the Ifá priests present look inside the sacred pot. The actual contents of this pot are not revealed to the un-initiated, information about them is treated as a major secret of the Ifá society.

There is a lot of drumming, dancing and chanting at appropriate intervals during the *Odù* initiation ceremony. Two of the *ẹsẹ Ifá* usually chanted during the ceremony are given below.

Ọmọdé ọ fojú bOdù lásán;
Àtgbà ọ fojú bOdù ní ọfẹ’
Ẹni tó bá fojú bOdù yòò sì dawo.
A díá fún Ọràngún, Ilé ìlá,
Tí ó gbàlẹjò láti ọde ìdan.
Wọn ní bó bá fojú bàlẹjò,
Orin ní kí ó máa kọ.
A fojú bOdù,
A ríre ọ.
A fojú bOdù,
A ríre.
Àwá mà mà kúkú fojú bOdù,
A ọ kú mọ.
A fojú bOdù
A ríre.¹⁴

Little children do not see Odù free of charge;
Old people do not see Odù without paying a fee;
He who sees Odù will become an Ifá priest.
Ifá divination was performed for Ọràngún of Ila,¹⁵
Who would receive a visitor from the city of Ìdan.¹⁶
He was told that when he saw the visitor,
He should start singing.
We have seen Odù,
We have found good fortune.
We have seen Odù,
We have found good fortune.
We have certainly seen Odù,
We shall not die.
We have seen Odù

The fourth and last stage of the initiation is known as *wíwọ ıgbó Ifá* (entering the sacred grove of Ifá). This is the most elaborate of all the principal stages of Ifá initiation ceremony. More than two hundred different items including food, drinks, clothes, beads and many other materials are required for the ceremony. The most important of these things are:

(i) *Yanrìn òkun* (sand taken from sea shore), (ii) *Yanrìn ọsà* (sand taken from shore of lagoon), (iii) *Èèbà epo* (small gourd of palm oil), (iv) *Ọpọlopọ iyọ* (plenty of salt), (v) *Àgò adıe* (coop full of fowls), (vi) *Igi ọnà* (a wooden sculpture), (vii) *Aşo funfun ọpá márùn-ún* (five yards of white cloth), and (viii) *Ọpọlopọ owo eyọ* (plenty of cowries).

The ceremony involves feasting, dancing and chanting of *esẹ Ifá* for several days. Sacrifices are made to many divinities including Ifá and Èşù. Four or five chief priests of the society lead the would-be priest into sacred grove where they thoroughly examine him on different aspects of the Ifá literary corpus. Throughout his sojourn in the forest, the would-be priest ties a piece of white cloth round his neck and waist. He emerges from the sacred grove at the head of a long procession of people dancing and singing. Here is one of the chants of the occasion.

Àwá tẹ ọ nífá o,
Kó o túnra ẹ tẹ,
Títẹ la tÈjì Ogbè
Tó fi mórı wọgbó.
Àwá tẹ ọ nífá o,
Kó o túnra ẹ tẹ,
Bó o dorı ọpe,
Má şe jowó sí.¹⁹

We have initiated you into the secrets of Ifá.
You should re-initiate yourself.
This was how Èjì Ogbè²⁰ was initiated
And he himself into the forest.²¹

We have initiated you into the secrets of Ifá.
You should re-initiate yourself.
If you get to the top of the palm tree
Do not let your hands loose.

It must be noted that the training of Ifá priests does not end with the initiation ceremonies. A good Ifá priest regards his training as a continuing, life long process and realises that the post-initiation part of his training is very crucial. No Ifá priest can excel in his work without undertaking post-initiation training.

During his training, it has been strongly impressed on him that it is his duty to help all clients with all problems, and where he fails to know the immediate answers to any problem, he should be able to know where and how to get useful and appropriate information to help his clients. Therefore, when a client comes up with a problem the solution to which a particular Ifá priest does not know, he asks his client to come back later. Before the client returns, the Ifá priest goes round to his colleagues for information. It is quite common for Ifá priests to go at night lamp in hand, to see their fellow priests especially when they are faced with an apparently intractable problem. In this way, the successful Ifá priest learns more and more day by day, and improves himself steadily as he continues his practice.

The training of Ifá priests up to the time of initiation is essentially broad and general, but after initiation the training becomes specialised. Among the areas in which a priest of Ifá may specialise, the most important are healing, chanting of Ifá texts, and knowledge of rare texts in the literary corpus.

Specialisation in a particular field sometimes takes the priest of Ifá to distant places. It may happen, for example; that the only Ifá priest who is a renowned specialist in healing is, at a certain time, in a particular part of Yorubaland. In such a case, all Ifá priests who want to specialise in healing will have to go to that particular specialist for training. In this way, all successful Ifá priests usually travel a great deal throughout Yorubaland acquiring

more knowledge and broadening their outlook on life as they mix with different kinds of people.

Specialist training is usually very short and intensive. In the humorous words of one Ifá priest who is a specialist in healing “no Ifá priest desirous of becoming a renowned specialist in healing will ever feel contented with his ability until he can cure the lame, the dwarf and the hunchback.”²²

The Odù and the Èṣẹ of Ifá

The Ifá literary corpus consists of two parts, namely, *Odù* and *èṣẹ*. The corpus is divided into 256 distinct volumes which are called *Odù* and each *Odù* is sub-divided into numerous verses which are called *èṣẹ*. While the number of the *Odù* is known, the number of *èṣẹ* in each *Odù* is unknown. This is due to the constant growth in the content of *èṣẹ Ifá*, a growth which certainly does not affect the form of the text.

There are two categories of the *Odù*. The first category consists of the *Ojú Odù* (The principal *Odù*), which are sixteen in number. The second category consists of the *Ọmọ Odù* or *Àmúlù Odù* (Minor *Odù*), two hundred and forty in number.

The *Odù* are regarded as divinities in their own right. Ifá divination myths tell us that before the final return of Ọ̀rúnmìlà to heaven, he promised his children and his followers that he would send to them certain divinities who would perform some of the functions he used to perform when he was on earth. He promised that these divinities would be known as *Odù* and they would come down from the sky. When Ọ̀rúnmìlà finally returned to heaven, his children and his follower began to make preparations for the coming of the *Odù* from the sky. For the sixteen principal *Odù* they made sixteen thrones one of which was well decorated and placed in an open place while the other fifteen thrones were arranged around it in the form of a circle. The people then started to watch the sky for the descent of the *Odù*.

When the sixteen principal *Odù* were coming down from heaven, Òfún Méjì, also known as Òràngún Méjì, was their leader.²³ The ranks of the principal sixteen *Odù* in heaven was as follows:

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|-------------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1. Òfún Méjì | 7. Òsá Méjì | 13. Òdí Méjì |
| 2. Òsé Méjì | 8. Ògúndá Méjì | 14. Ìwòrì Méjì |
| 3. Ìrètè Méjì | 9. Òkànràn Méjì | 15. Òyèkú Méjì |
| 4. Òtúá Méjì | 10. Òbàrà Méjì | 16. Èjì Ogbè |
| 5. Òtúúrúpòn Méjì | 11. Òwónrín Méjì | |
| 6. Ìká Méjì | 12. Ìrosùn Méjì | |

But when the principal sixteen *Odù* came to the frontier gate separating heaven from earth, they reversed their order of procession so that the 16th and the most junior *Odù*, Eji Ogbè, went through the frontier gate first. He was followed by the 15th *Odù* and the 15th was followed by the 14th and so on until the first *Odù* came last.

Immediately Èjì Ogbè went through the frontier gate, he entered into space and descended into earth. When the large gathering of people saw him, they hailed him as the king of the *Odù*. They carried him shoulder high and placed him on the big throne prepared for the leader of the *Odù*, thinking that he was the most senior of all. The second *Odù* to descend from the sky was also hailed as the deputy of the king of the *Odù*. In this way, the ranking of sixteen principal *Odù* was completely reversed, giving the following new order:

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|-----------------|--------------------|----------------|
| 1. Èjì Ogbè | 7. Òbàrà Méjì | 13. Òtúá Méjì |
| 2. Òyèkú Méjì | 8. Òkànràn Méjì | 14. Ìrètè Méjì |
| 3. Ìwòrì Méjì | 9. Ògúndá Méjì | 15. Òsé Méjì |
| 4. Òdí Méjì | 10. Òsá Méjì | 16. ÒfúnMéjì |
| 5. Ìrosùn Méjì | 11. ÌkáMéjì | |
| 6. Òwónrín Méjì | 12. Òtúúrúpòn Méjì | |

The order of seniority of the sixteen principal *Odù* has since remained as above till today.²⁴ Èjì Ogbè is regarded as the most senior *Odù*, but whenever Ifá priests cast Òfún Meii, they hail him as king, saying *hèèèpa* (We hail you)!

As mentioned above, the sixteen principal *Odù* are more important than the minor *Odù*. The sixteen principal *Odù* contain the most important *ẹsẹ Ifá* and it is considered a duty by all Ifá priests to know as many *ẹsẹ* as possible from this part of the *Odù* corpus. As a result of the greater attention paid by Ifá priests to the sixteen principal *Odù*, most of the extant *ẹsẹ Ifá* belong to this part of the *Odù* corpus.

The *Ọmọ Odù* are also regarded as divinities. As their name implies, they are regarded as the children of the sixteen principal *Odù*. They are also known as *Àpólà Odù* because each of them bears the names of two principal *Odù* combined. For example, the first and most important *Ọmọ Odù* is known as *Ogbèyèkú*. This name is a combination of the names of two *Odù*, namely, *Ogbè*, the first *Odù*, and *Ọyèkú*, the second *Odù*. The two hundred and forty minor *Odù* are arranged in twelve groups. Each group is known as *Àpólà*. The twelve groups bear the names of twelve of the sixteen principal *Odù*. They are arranged as follows:

- | | | |
|----------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| 1 Àpólà Ogbè | 6 Àpólà Ọwónrín | 11 Àpólà Ìkà |
| 2 Àpólà Ọyèkú | 7 Àpólà Ọbàrà | 12 Àpólà Ọtúúrúpòn |
| 3 Àpólà Ìwòrì | 8 Àpólà Ọkànràn | 13 Àpólà Ọsẹ |
| 4 Àpólà Ọdí | 9 Àpólà Ọgúndá | 14 Àpólà Ìrètẹ |
| 5 Àpólà Ìrosùn | 10 Àpólà Ọsá | 15 Àpólà Ọsẹ |

Each *Àpólà* consists of a number of *Odù*. The first section contains 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. The names of the thirty *Omo Odù* in the first section, *Àpólà Ogbè*, are given in full below in their order of seniority.

- | | | |
|--------------|-----------------|----------------|
| 1 Ogbèyèkú | 6 Ìdingbè | 11 Ogbèbàrà |
| 2 Ọyèkúlogbè | 7 Ogbèrosùn | 12 Ọbàràbogbè |
| 3 Ogbèwèyìn | 8 Ìrosùnòkánjúà | 13 Ogbèkànràn |
| 4 Ìwòribogbè | 9 Ogbèhúnlé | 14 Ọkànrànsodè |
| 5 Ogbèdí | 10 Ọwónrínsogbè | 15 Ogbèègùn |

16 Ògúndábèdé	21 Ogbètòmọpòn	26 Ìrẹ̀ntẹ̀gbè
17 Ogbèríkúsá	22 Òtúúrúpọ̀gbè	27 Ogbèsẹ̀
18 Òsálùfógbèjọ	23 Ogbèalára	28 Òsẹ̀ogbè
19 Ogbèkà	24 Òtúáoríkò	29 Ogbèfohunfólólóhun
20 Ìkágbèmí	25 Ogbèatẹ̀	30 Òfúnnagbè

Each one of the two hundred and fifty six *Odù* has its own specific divination signature. Both the sacred palm nuts and the divining chain are used alternatively by Ifá priests to arrive at the signature of each *Odin*. The sacred palm nuts are used in the following manner. The Ifá priest puts the sixteen palm/huts in one of his palms and tries to take all of them out at once with his other hand. If two palm nuts remain in his hand, he makes one mark on the divination board containing the sacred yellow powder of divination. If one palm nut remains, he makes two marks, but if nothing remains or if more than two palm nuts remain in his hand, he makes no mark at all. Each mark or pair of marks is made, one beneath the other, four times. When four marks or pair of marks have been made, the whole pattern thus formed is the signature of a particular *Odù*. The following are the signatures that may be obtained by using the sacred palm nuts.

1 <i>Ogbè</i>	2 <i>Ọ̀yẹ̀kú</i>	3 <i>Ìwòrì</i>	4 <i>Òdí</i>
1	11	11	1
1	11	1	11
1	11	1	11
1	11	11	1
5 <i>Ìrosùn</i>	6 <i>Ọ̀wọ̀nrín</i>	7 <i>Ọ̀bàrà</i>	8 <i>Ọ̀kànràn</i>
1	11	1	11
1	11	11	11
11	1	11	11
11	1	11	1
9 <i>Ògúndá</i>	10 <i>Ọ̀sá</i>	11 <i>Ìká</i>	12 <i>Òtúúrúpọ̀n</i>
1	11	11	11
1	11	1	11
1	1	11	1
11	11	11	11

13 Ìrẹ̀tẹ̀	14 Ọ̀sẹ̀	15 Ọ̀fún
1	1	11
1	11	1
11	1	11
1	11	1

When the divining chain is used, the Ifá priest holds the chain in the middle and throws it before himself. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the divining chain has four half nuts of the ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀ tree tied to each side of it. Each one of these half nuts has a concave and convex surface. When the divining chain is thrown forward as described above, all or some or none of the half-nuts may come to rest with their concave or convex surfaces facing upwards. The pattern so formed on each occasion by the half-nuts on the chain is regarded as an Odù. For example, when all the ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀ half nuts present their concave surfaces, the pattern is regarded as the signature of the first Odù (Eji Ogbè). When all the half nuts present their convex surfaces, the pattern is interpreted as the signature of the second Odù, Ọ̀yẹ̀kú Méjì. When the middle two on each side of the divining chain present their concave surfaces and all the other half nuts present their convex surfaces, up the pattern is taken to be the signature of the third Odù (Ìwòrì Méjì).

The whole of the Ifá literary corpus known as *ẹ̀sẹ Ifá* is based on the Odù. What a priest of Ifá tells his client is therefore taken directly from the Odù corpus. This is contrary to an opinion popularly held that Ifá priests are clever psychologists who read the problems of each client from his general appearance.

We must now turn our attention to the second category of the Ifá literary corpus, the *ẹ̀sẹ Ifá*. As mentioned above, each Odù contains an unspecified number of *ẹ̀sẹ*. While the Odù are important for the divination aspect of Ifá, the *ẹ̀sẹ* form the main bulk of chants in the Ifá literary corpus. At the same time, the *ẹ̀sẹ* are quite important for the divination aspect of Ifá because the pronouncements and predictions of the Ifá priest are based on the

content of *ẹsẹ Ifá*. '*Ẹsẹ Ifá* is the central and most important part of Ifá divination system'.³³

The form of *ẹsẹ Ifá* is predominantly poetic. The poems of *ẹsẹ Ifá* are of varying lengths, some being as short as only four lines while others are as long as six hundred lines. It is the long poems of *Ifá* greatly treasured by Ifá priests that are referred to as *Ifá Nláńlá*. *Ẹsẹ Ifá*, whether long or short, make use of very interesting poetic devices e.g. personification, play upon words and repetition.³⁴

Ẹsẹ Ifá pervades the whole range of Yoruba thought and action throughout history.³⁵ Some deal with history, geography, 'religion, music and philosophy. *Ẹsẹ Ifá* may be a simple story about a man going on a journey and asking for advice on how to make the journey successful. It may be a highly philosophical story showing the merits and demerits of monogamy. It may deal with the foundation of a particular town. There is certainly no limit to the subject matter which *ẹsẹ Ifá* may deal with.³⁶

The Process of Ifá Divination

The two categories of the Ifá literary corpus, the *Odù* and the *ẹsẹ* have been discussed above, but the process by which the priest of Ifá uses both the *Odù* and the *ẹsẹ* to solve the problem of his client is yet to be described. The long and complicated process of Ifá divination begins when the client confides his secret problem to Ifá. This is done in several ways. The most popular way is for the client to whisper his secret problem to a coin and then throw the coin inside the paraphernalia of Ifá divination laid out before him. Another method is for the client to take up the paraphernalia of Ifá in his hands, and unfold his mind to it in a whisper. The Ifá priest is not allowed to hear any part of the client's whisper at this stage.

The next stage of the divination process begins when the priest of Ifá takes up the divination instruments and starts chanting certain poems to them. These chants usually include, a salute to Ọ̀rúnmìlà, sometimes salutes to certain other authorities. A typical introductory chant is quoted below:

Ifá, o gbó.
Ọmọ Ẹnìrẹ;
Ọmọ Ẹnìrẹ.
Ọmọ ejò méjì
Tí í sáré ganranganran lórí eréwé.
Akéré finú ẹgbón;
Akónilóràn bí iyekan ẹni.
Ìbà Akódá,
Ìbà Aṣẹdá.
Olójó òní ìbàà rẹ o.³⁷

Listen, O! Ifá
You, the son of Ẹnìrẹ,
The son of Ẹnìrẹ.
You the son of two snakes
That dart about on leaves.
You, the short person
With a mind full of wisdom.
You are the giver of wise and brotherly counsel.
By your leave, Akódá.³⁸
By your permission, Aṣẹdá.³⁹
The owner of this day,⁴⁰
I seek your authority.

The proper performance of the divination follows the introductory chants. If, for example, the Ifá priest chooses to use the divining chain, he takes it firmly in the middle and casts it on the ground in front of himself, and reads the signature of the *Odù* that appears. He then chants the *ẹṣẹ* which he considers to be most representative of the character of this *Odù*. He could also give his client further details by chanting more *ẹṣẹ*. The amount of detailed explanation that the Ifá priest gives his client at this stage depends on the number of different kinds of *ẹṣẹ* that he knows from the particular *Odù* which has appeared. At this stage, however, the Ifá priest usually prefers to make a broad and general statement. He relies on the use of the *ìbò* to spell out further details.

The *ìbò* are used by the *Ifá* priest to translate his broad pronouncement into concrete details. As mentioned in the preceeding chapter, the *Ibo* are mere lots based on the two opposite alternatives of 'yes' and 'no'. It is the belief of the *Ifá* priest and his client that the client's *Ori* will make the right choice of alternatives for him when lots are cast. The commonest and simplest form of *Ibo* is a pair of cowry shells tied together and a piece of animal bone. Generally speaking, the cowry shell stands for 'yes' while the piece of bone stands for 'no'.

After chanting the most representative *ẹsẹ* in the *Odù* that appears, the *Ifá* priest gives the set of *ìbò* to his client, and asks him to put to it a question requiring the answer 'yes' or 'no'. If, for example, after the first performance of divination, the *Ifá* priest has made the general statement that *Ifá* says that someone is in danger of death, the client may use the set of *ìbò* to find out exactly who is in danger of death. Is it one of his children, one of his friends or one of his relations? Is it he himself?

The client may then whisper a statement like this to the set of *ìbò*: 'Ifá, you say someone is in danger of death, is the person my mother?' As usual, the *Ifá* priest is not allowed to hear this whisper. The client then drops the set of *ìbò* on the paraphernalia of divination while the *Ifá* priest picks it up immediately, and gives it back to the client after using it to touch the paraphernalia, and saying: 'The cowries mean 'yes', and the bone means 'no''. The client then picks up the *ìbò*, and keeps the cowries in one of his hands, and the bone in the other.

The priest of *Ifá* then takes up the divining chain again, casts it on the ground twice. If the *Odù* obtained during the second casting of the divining chain is senior to the *Odù* obtained during the first casting, the *Ifá* priest asks his client to produce the *ìbò* in his right hand. But, if the *Odù* obtained during the first casting of the divining chain is junior to the one obtained during the first casting, he asks his client to produce the *ìbò* in his left hand. If the bone comes up, the answer to the client's question is no, but if the cowry shell comes up, the answer is yes. If the answer to the client's question is 'no', it

means, of course, that the person who is in danger of death is not the mother of the client.

The *ìbò* are thus used as a means to amplify the first prediction of Ifá which, as mentioned above, is usually very broad and general. If, for example, after the first casting of the divining chain, the Ifá priest says that Ifá sees good fortune, the Ifá priest and his client may want to know what kind of good fortune it is, when the good fortune will come, and to whom it is likely to come. Whatever the nature of the amplification desired, the process described above is usually followed until all answers are obtained. Therefore, the Ifá priest may have to cast the divining chain many times when using the *ìbò* to find out a specific point.

When the client is satisfied that all his questions are answered, he tells the Ifá priest the actual problem he has brought before Ifá. The client's problem is then discussed and the Ifá priest helps further by analysing the different *ẹsẹ* he has chanted. In this way, the client is made to understand the prediction of Ifá about his own problem. If the divination is a successful one, both the Ifá priest and his client feel quite satisfied at the end of the long process of divination. But it is not unusual for the client to feel that he is not quite satisfied.

Ifá Divination Sacrifice

To every complete divination process, there is always a prescribed sacrifice. Whether the prediction of Ifá is good or evil, the client must always offer sacrifice. It is the belief of the Yoruba that if the prediction of Ifá is good, a sacrifice will help further to make it come to pass, and that, if the prediction is evil, a sacrifice will help the client to dispel the evil. Therefore, after the completion of the long process of divination, the Ifá priest will tell his client the sacrifice that goes with the prediction. The client then goes home to buy the articles required for the sacrifice, and brings them to the Ifá priest.

It is part of the training of Ifá priest to learn what types of sacrifice that goes with every *ẹsẹ*. This is not form part of the literary

corpus although there are a number of instances where Ifá divination sacrifice known as *ẹbọ Ifá* is included in the literary corpus. Although each cannot be put in a water tight compartment, it is quite accurate to say that Ifá divination sacrifice forms a separate corpus.

It is not unusual for the client to be unable to supply all the materials stipulated for the sacrifice. The Ifá priest must accept whatever fraction of the sacrifice his client brings to him. Neglect of due sacrifice is, sternly condemned by Ifá.⁴¹

Different kinds of materials are usually required for sacrifice by Ifá priests. These materials include cooked food, raw foodstuffs, cloths, live animal, including goats, rams, rats, fishes, birds, plants, leaves, roots of plants, sand, stones, etc. Below are two different lists of materials required for two distinct sacrifices. These sacrifices are mentioned in connection with two *ẹsẹ Ifá* taken from *Ọkànràn Méjì*.⁴²

- (a) *Ẹbọ ni ọ̀sùnwọ̀n àgbàdọ, àkúfọ̀ igbá àti ọ̀wá. A ó kèé ọ̀wá náà kéékèékéé, a ó kòó òròmọ̀diẹ̀ méjì lé e lóri, a ó kòó ẹgbọ̀kànlá lé e lóri pẹ̀lú ẹ̀kọ̀ mẹ̀rin, obì gidì mèsàn-án àti epo pupa, wọ̀n ó lẹ̀ rée gbé ẹ̀bọ̀ náà sí ojútò.*

(The client's sacrifices are: one measuring container for maize, broken calabash and a palm branch. The palm branch will be cut into two parts, and a chick will be placed on each one together with eleven times two hundred cowries, four lumps of maize gruel, nine real kola nuts and some palm oil. The sacrifice should be placed in an open place in this person's compound.)

- (b) *Ẹbọ ni gọgọwú kan àti àkàrà mẹfà. A ó jẹ ọ̀kan lóde, a ó fí ọ̀kan lẹ́rì odi. A ó jẹ ọ̀kan ní idí Ẹ̀sù, a ó fí ọ̀kan lẹ́rì Ẹ̀sù náà. A ó jẹ ọ̀kan ní idí Ẹ̀sù kejì, A ó fí ọ̀kan lẹ́rì Ẹ̀sù náà.*

(This client's sacrifice are: one big white wrapper and six bean cakes. The client will eat one of the cakes outside the town wall and place one on the town wall. He will eat one of the cakes at the shrine of Ẹ̀sù, and place one on that shrine. He will eat

another cake at the second shrine of Èṣù, and place another one on that shrine of Èṣù.)

A good part of any sacrifice made by Ifá priests usually goes to Èṣù whose mythical wife is known as Agbèrù (receiver of sacrifices). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Ifá priests usually have a shrine of Èṣù near their homes. The mysterious relationship between Ifá, and Èṣù has also been discussed in the same chapter. As negotiator between the other divinities and Òrúnmìlà, Èṣù carries the sacrifice offered through Òrúnmìlà to the particular divinity for whom the sacrifice is meant.

Most of the sacrifices that Ifá priests ask their clients to offer are usually offered to particular divinities. A person may be asked to offer sacrifice to Ṣàngó, so that he may have victory over his enemies. Another person may be asked to offer sacrifice to Òṣànlá, so that his wife may have children. In this way, Ifá helps to immortalise the other divinities.

The psychological function of sacrifice in the community is rated very high by Ifá priests. They maintain that sacrifice helps to unite all the forces both natural and supernatural that operate in Yorùbá cosmos. Broadly speaking, these forces are four in number namely, divinities, the ancestors, witches, and other supernatural powers, and human beings. The function of sacrifice is to enlist the support of these four forces for whatever one may want to do, so that none of the forces work against one's purpose. The part played by human beings in making sacrifices successful is not underrated in Ifá texts. That is why during the offering of any sacrifice, people are invited to the shrine of the divinity to whom sacrifice is being made to watch the offering of the sacrifice and to eat part of the food used for the sacrifice.

The *ẹṣẹ Ifá* given in full below emphasises the importance of the human factor for the success of a sacrifice. The story is that of a farmer who wanted to farm on a piece of land. He was warned to make sacrifice to Orí (Head), Earth, *Eégún* (ancestor) and Òṣànlá (*creation* divinity). He offered the sacrifices, but he did not call his neighbours to take part in the sacrifice. He discovered later

that things were not all right for him on his farm. He then went back to his Ifá priests and told them his problem. His Ifá priests asked him whether he offered all the required sacrifice, and he answered in the affirmative. But when they asked him whether he made sacrifice to *Olúbòbòtiribò*, *baba ẹbọ*, he said that he did not know what was so called. Then, his Ifá priests told him that people's mouths is what is called *olúbòbòtiribò*, *baba ẹbọ*. The Ifá priests then said:

What is it that we propitiate in Ifẹ?
 People's mouths.
 It is their mouths that we propitiate in Ifẹ.
 It is their mouths

Agbongbón, awoo wón lóde ìlorèé; Àgbàyàngìdì, awo òde ìjèsà; Ọkúnrin yàngìdì yangìdì Ní wón ọ̀n dì ní àtípá. A díá fún Olóyímẹ́fún,	5
Yóó bulẹ́ Olówu roko. Wón ní ó bọ́gún ilé, Ó bọ́gún ilé, Ẹbọ́ rẹ̀ ò fín. Wón ní ó bọ́sà ọjà,	10
Ó bọ́sà ọjà, Ẹbọ́ rẹ̀ ò dà. Ọ̀sà ọjà ò gbà, Wón ní ó bọ́rí, Ó bọ́rí, Orí pá.	15
Wón ní ó bọ́lẹ́, Ó bọ́lẹ́, Ilẹ́ lu. Wón ní ó bọ́ Olúbòbòtiribò, baba ẹbọ.	20
Ó ní òun mò pé baba ẹni leégún ilé. Òun mò pé iyá ẹni lò̀sà ọjà. Ó ní òun morí lórí o, Òun mọ́lẹ́ nílẹ́.	

He was asked to make sacrifice	20
To <i>Olúbòbòtìribò</i> , the father of sacrifices.	
He said that he knew that one's father	
Is the Egúngún of one's household.	
He said that he knew Orí to be one's head,	
And he knew Ilẹ̀ to be the earth.	25
But he said that he did not know	
What was called <i>Olúbòbòtìribò</i> , the father of sacrifices.	
They told him that people's mouths,	
People's mouths were referred to as <i>Olúbòbòtìribò</i> ,	
The father of sacrifices.	30
What is it that we worship at Ifẹ̀?	
People's mouths.	
It is their mouths that we worship at Ifẹ̀.	
Their mouths.	
I have given to those over here	35
I have given to those over there	
Their mouths.	
Their mouths can no longer fight against me.	
Their mouths cannot.	
I have given to those in my household,	40
I have given to passers-by.	
Their mouths cannot.	
Their mouths can no longer fight against me.	
Their mouths cannot.	