

IMAGES OF WOMEN IN THE *IFÁ* LITERARY CORPUS

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IFÁ IS A WEST AFRICAN geomantic and literary system found in many cultures of that sub-region such as *Igbo*, *Èdo*, *Ebira*, *Gun*, *Ewe*, *Fon*, *Bete* and *Yoruba*. In all these cultures, *Ifá* is used mainly as a system of divination, and in some cases, as a rudimentary form of writing and communication. But among the *Yoruba*, *Èdo*, *Fon* and *Ewe* peoples, *Ifá* is an important genre of oral literature which has been transmitted from one generation to another for hundreds of years.

Among the *Yoruba* people of West Africa *Ifá* is the most authoritative and sacred form of literature. Based on two hundred and fifty six chapters with hundreds of verses in each chapter, *Ifá* is the most extensive form of oral literature found in Africa. The interesting thing about *Ifá* among the *Yoruba* is how it has been carefully preserved and transmitted from ancient times to the present day by a semi-secret society of priests known as *babaláwo* who have transformed it into an intellectual and academic system of knowledge (see Abimbola 1968a). Even today, *Ifá* is still being actively studied and disseminated in many parts of West Africa and the African diaspora.

This profound system of knowledge was carried to the Americas by African peoples who were captured and sold into slavery during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Even though *Ifá* must have been carried to many other American countries, it was in Cuba where it flourished and has been carefully preserved by the descendants of the *Yoruba* people taken as slaves to that island. Since the Cuban revolution of 1959, *Ifá* has been consistently introduced to nearly all countries of the Americas by Cuban people who left the island in waves of migrations which have occurred since then and have continued up till today. This second diaspora of *Ifá* priests included people of European stock who had become priests of *Ifá* in Cuba. As a result of its

Cuban connection, *Ifá* has today become a world wide system of belief, divination, ritual, literature and philosophy.

This profound system of literature and ideas has been studied in great detail by several authors including Lijadu (1901), Herskovits (1958), Bascom (1969), and Abimbola (1975, 1976, 1977) among others. Most of these studies are ethnographic and literary studies, none has however focused attention on the important issue of images of women even though there are hundreds of verses of *Ifá* dealing with that subject. In view of the antiquity and authoritative nature of *Ifá* as a sacred literature, it becomes incumbent on scholars of West African cultures delving into the issue of images of women to examine the vast resources of *Ifá*.

The following essay is therefore an attempt to study images of women from a body of oral literature generally believed to be an important aspect of West African culture. By so doing, we hope to recapture glimpses of the image of women since antiquity from at least one West African culture, but with ramifications covering a broader area even beyond the African continent. The ensuing stories about women are not the imaginations of informants about women, but myths, legends and folk tales enshrined in the sacred literature of *Ifá* and which have been passed on from one generation of *Ifá* priests to another.

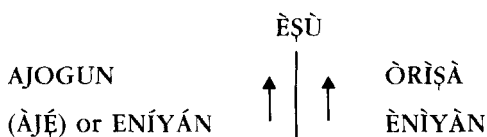
WOMAN AS ÀJÉ

Perhaps the most important image of woman which comes up from time to time in *Ifá* is that women are depicted as *àjé* (witch). In Yoruba society only a woman can be *àjé*. In the *Ifá* belief system, the universe is divided into two opposing camps: a) the forces who occupy the left hand side of the universe, and b) the forces who occupy the right hand side of the universe (Abimbola 1976, "Man and the Supernatural Powers," pp. 151–194). These two forces are eternally set against each other in a relentless struggle, which forms the subject matter of many stories of *Ifá*. The supernatural powers of the left are known as *ajogun*, while those of the right are the *Òrìṣà* and the human beings themselves. We may, broadly speaking, characterize the *ajogun* as malevolent and the *Òrìṣà* as benevolent. *Èṣù*, the Yoruba trickster divinity makes possible the occurrence of order and peace in the universe because he belongs to both camps. He is able to do this by offering sacrifice to any of the forces of the universe (both benevolent as well as malevolent) who may require it for restoration of peace, in the universe, even though that peace is not a permanent condition.

Women as *àjé* or *eníyàn* are found on the left-hand side of the universe, but as humans (*enìyàn*) they are to be counted along with man

as fellow human beings on the right hand side of the universe. When she acts as *àjé* a woman therefore becomes a member of both sides of the universe. She becomes something more than human and moves into a higher and supernatural plane of existence.

The simple sketch below shows the divided Universe of the Yoruba.



As *ènìyàn* (humans), a woman shares all the qualities of other humans. A woman while functioning at this level, is a friend, a lover, a sister, a mother, a queen, a market woman and a wife. But as *eníyán*, she becomes *àjé*—a blood-sucking, wicked, dreadful cannibal who transforms herself into a bird at night and flies to distant places, to hold nocturnal meetings with her fellow witches who belong to a society which excludes all men.

The story of woman as *eníyán* or *àjé* is best preserved in the tenth *Odù* of *Ifá* known as *Òsá Èlẹyẹ*.^a *Èlẹyẹ* is another name for the *àjé* which is derived from their ability to transform themselves into birds. The word *ẹyẹ* in Yoruba means a bird; *ẹlẹyẹ* can therefore be roughly translated as the owner of a bird or birds, or the bird-people. The name of the witches' bird is *ẹburù*. *Òsá Èlẹyẹ* and other stories of *Ifá* tell us that the *àjé* acquired their supernatural powers from heaven, when the first humans were created by *Olódùmarè* and sent to the earth. In other words, the *àjé* got their power *directly* from *Olódùmarè* which explains why ordinary human beings have no powers against them.

Women as liminal humans are therefore endowed with certain supernatural powers which they can use negatively or positively at will, according to their own whims and caprices. This is why one sometimes hears of a benevolent *àjé*. In a sense, all powers both good and evil derive from woman because of her special powers of giving birth to all other human beings. For this simple reason, all other powers and principalities of this earth must bow down before them. That is why you have the image of birds representing the special powers of women on all Yoruba images of power such as crowns, ritual objects as *òsùn* (staffs used by *Ifá* priests). All humans who aspire to positions of power, or who have already been vested with powers and authority must honor, salute, and pay homage to the *àjé* who are fondly remembered as *ìyàmi*—"my mother." All the positive and negative powers of this earth flow from the *ìyàmi* whose praise names are:

^a *Òsá Èlẹyẹ* refers to the tenth *Odù* of *Ifá* whose real name is *Òsá Mèjì*.

Apanimọwàágún,
 Olókikí òru
 Ajẹdọ tútù mọ bì.
 Obìnrin kúkúrú rẹgí rẹgí
 Èyí tí í lọ nígbà ọjà bá tú

(Abimbọla 1975, pp. 242–243)

She who kills and eats fellow humans
 Famous person at night
 She who eats raw liver without vomiting.
 The short and shapely woman
 Who goes about when the market is deserted.

WOMAN AS MOTHER

In the literature of *Ifá*, the image of woman as mother is another very powerful image (FIG. 1). So many Yoruba works of art depict images of a kneeling woman sometimes holding a bowl containing sacrifice. In some objects, the bowl is carved in the image of a rooster. The image of a kneeling woman can also be found on *ìrọkẹ*, an *Ifá* art object held by *Ifá* priests. *Ìrọkẹ* is often carved of wood but can also be made of ivory or beads.

What is the meaning of this kneeling posture of woman on Yoruba art objects (Abiodun 1975)? The kneeling posture is known as *ìkúnlẹ abiyamọ* (the kneeling down posture of woman in labor). The Yoruba believe that if a woman begs another human being in that posture, and utters the words “*mo fi ikúnlẹ abiyamọ bẹ ọ*” (I beg you with *ìkúnlẹ abiyamọ*) only a hard-hearted person would say no. When we see the image of a woman kneeling down in that posture on an art object, it is a powerful symbol of pleading with the powers that be in the universe to answer our prayers or to accept our sacrifices. It is only women who experience *ìkúnlẹ abiyamọ* because it is only a woman who can carry a fetus in her womb and bring it forth as a child. What a woman experiences during labor, can never be shared by a man. Furthermore, *ìkúnlẹ abiyamọ* is an act of creation which a woman shares with our creator during labor.

A second important image of woman in the *Ifá* literary corpus is her status as a mother. One of the most prominent images of woman as mother is that of *Ọṣun*, the mythical wife of *Ṣàngó*. *Ọṣun* is fondly remembered as *Oore Yèyè* (the generous mother). Up till today when one mentions the name of *Ọṣun* among the Yoruba, people salute her with a shout of “*Oore yèyè o!*” The generosity of *Ọṣun* arises from the fact that she endows her devotees with material things. She also gives them children. All women who desire to have children therefore cling to *Ọṣun*, who is perhaps the most important symbol of motherhood



FIGURE 1 Seated figure of a nursing mother. Yoruba, 20th century.
(Collection of National Museum, Lagos. Photograph courtesy of National Museum, Lagos.)

among the Yoruba. That is why a verse from *Òdí Méjì*, the fourth *Odù* of *Ifá* says:

Bọ bá ẹ pe iyáà mi ni.
Awẹde awẹmọ
Òtòòrò Ẹfọn.
Ọsun Ẹwùjì ni wọn bọ nbẹ
Bo ba bí ni.

(Abimbola 1968b, pp. 51–52)

If it is my mother,
She washes brass
She washes children
She is known as Òtòòrò Ẹfọn.
Ọsun Ẹwùjì should be propitiated.
If she is responsible for one's birth.

Ọsun is believed to have produced so many children to the extent that she had no space in her house to sit down; so, she was always found standing up. The place where she was always found standing up because she had no place to sit is known as *Òòró* which in Yoruba language means "to stand up in an erect position." The town of *Òòró* is an important place in the Kwara State of Nigeria.

The *Odù* of *Ifá* which tells the above quoted myth is from *Ìwòrì Méjì*, the third *Odù* of *Ifá*. The relevant verse of *Ifá* which deals with the above is quoted below:

Ayááá mọ ní fùú,
Àfọn balẹ ró ki.
A díá F'Awóyemí ọmọbìnrin Òró.
Wọn ní ó rúbọ nítorí ọmọ.
Ó gbọ rírú ẹbọ,
Ó rú.
Ó gbọ èrù àtùkẹ̀şù,
Ó tù . . .
Ó ní ilé Ọsun ò gbàyè.
Ilé Ọsun ò gbàyè.
Òòró la bá Ọsun o.
Ilé Ọsun ò gbàyè.

(Abimbola 1968b, p. 45)

The quick person who rises up swiftly,
When *afọn* fruit drops down, it makes
a deep sound.
Ifá divination was performed for *Awóyemí*,
the young girl of *Òró*.
She was told to make sacrifice in order
to have many children.
She listened to the prescribed sacrifice,

And made the sacrifice.
 She was told to offer sacrifice to *Èṣù*,
 She offered it . . .
 She said, "The house of *Ọṣun* had not
 enough space (for all her children),
Ọṣun was found standing erect
 The house of *Ọṣun* did not have enough
 space (for all her children).

WOMAN AS WIFE

Many verses of *Ifá* also tell stories about women as wives. Some of these women are wives of ordinary men while others are wives of *Ọrisha*. We will characterize women here by the different roles they play in the stories.

Ọrúnmìlà is believed to have married many women. One of the best known wives of *Ọrúnmìlà* was *Ààbò* who was a citizen of *Ìjẹrò*. In the story quoted below, *Ààbò* (which in English translation means "Protection") was the one who saved her husband one day when *Ọrúnmìlà* received three strangers in his home. *Ọrúnmìlà* did not have anything in the house with which he could entertain his strange guests. *Ààbò*, the wife of *Ọrúnmìlà*, stood up to the occasion, gathered some of her husband's belongings, and took them to the market to sell. After selling the materials, she bought food in the market for her visitors to eat. The strangers later turned out to be *Ikú* (death), *Àrùn* (disease), and *Èṣù*. If *Ààbò* had not assisted her husband, he would certainly have been afflicted by Disease, or killed by Death, two of the most ferocious *ajogun* who followed *Èṣù*, their master to the home of *Ọrúnmìlà*.

The above story tells of the good and noble role which a woman should play in her husband's home. She should assist the husband to take care of visitors all the time. By so doing, she would be a major source of support and protection for her husband.

The excerpt containing the story of *Ààbò* as told above is taken from a verse of *Èjì Ogbè* which is presented below:

Ọdà-owó, awo Kóro.
 Ààbò, obinrin rẹ,
 Ọmọ ọwọ òkè Ìjẹrò.
 Bí ọdà owó ti n dá mí.
 Bẹẹ ni Ààbò mí n bò mí.
 A díá fúu Ọrúnmìlà
 Níjọ tí olojò mẹta
 Ó wọ sílẹe haba
 Ifá ò sì ní ní oókan à á yọọ ná.
 Ni Ọrúnmìlà bá pe Ààbò, obinrin rẹ

Pé kí ó kó àwọn nnkan ìní òun
 Lọ sọjà lọ tà . . .
 Ní Ààbò bá tà àwọn ọjà nàà ní ìtākutà
 Ló bá mówó ra ọ̀nẹ wálé.
 Àwọn olojò mètẹ̀tẹ̀ta nàà,
 Ikú, Àrùn, ati Èṣù jẹ
 Wọn si yó

(Abimbola 1968b, p. 21)

The translation is as follows:

Scarcity of money, *Ifá* priest of *Kóro*.
 Protection, his wife,
 Their daughter at *Ijèrò*.
Ààbò, my dear wife, protects me.
Ifá divination was performed for *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*
 On the day three strange men would sojourn in his home.
 But *Ifá* did not have any money at home.
Ọ̀rúnmìlà therefore called *Ààbò*, his wife,
 To take all his belongings to the market to sell.
Ààbò sold the materials at give-away prices.
 She then used the money to bring food home.
 The three visitors,
 Death, Disease, and *Èṣù*, ate the food
 To their satisfaction.

The good role played by *Ààbò* in the story told above is completely different from the one played by *Olójòngbòdú*, the wife of *Ikú* (Death). In a story preserved in *Ọ̀yẹ̀kú Mèjì*, *Olójòngbòdú* betrayed her husband when she told the enemies of her husband all those things which were forbidden for her husband to eat. As a result, Death fell down from the top of an *ayùnré* tree and greatly wounded himself. A brief version of the story is as follows:

Obìnrin lèké
 Obìnrin lẹ̀dàlẹ̀.
 Kéèyàn mọ̀ finú hàn fòbinrin.
 A díá fún Olójòngbòdú,
 Obìnrin Ikú.
 Wọn pè é lóòórọ̀ kùtùkùtù.
 Wọn ní kín níkú ọkọọ rẹ̀ ọ̀ gbodọ̀ jẹ
 Tó fí n pọ̀mọ̀ ọlómọ̀ kiri.
 Ó ní kín ní wọn ó fun òun?
 Ó ní òun ó gba igba ọ̀kẹ̀ lẹ̀wọ̀ wọn.
 Igba tó gba igba ọ̀kẹ̀ tán,
 O ní ikú ọkọ òun o gbodọ̀ jeku.
 Wọn ní bó bá jeku n kọ?
 Ó ní ọwọ̀ ikú a maa wá iróróró iróróró.
 Ó ní Ikú ọkọ òun ọ̀ gbodọ̀ jẹja.

Wọn ní bó bá jeja n kọ.
 Ó ní ẹsẹ ikú a máa gbọn iririri iririri.
 Ó ní Ikú ọkọ òun ò gbọdọ jẹyin pẹpẹyẹ.
 Wọn ní bó bá jẹyin pẹpẹyẹ n kọ?
 Ó ní Ikú a máa bi igòròrò igòròrò.
 Ó ní Ikú ọkọ òun ò gbọdọ jelébutẹ.
 Wọn ní bó bá jelébutẹ n kọ.
 Ó ní gbogbo ara Ikú á maa hù ibùtẹ ibùtẹ
 Wọn fúnkú léku,
 Ó jeku tán,
 Gbogbo ọwọ Ikú n wá ìróróró ìróróró.
 Wọn fúnkú lẹja,
 Ó jeja tán,
 Gbogbo ẹsẹ Ikú n gbọn iririri iririri.
 Wọn fúnkú lẹyin pẹpẹyẹ.
 Ó jẹyin pẹpẹyẹ tán,
 Ikú n bi igòròrò igòròrò.
 Wọn fúnkú lelébutẹ.
 Ó jelébutẹ tán,
 Gbogbo ara Ikú n hù ibùtẹ ibùtẹ.
 Ikú té orí ayùnrẹ.
 Ayùnrẹ yerí bẹsẹ.
 Ikú wáá di ghiràmù nìlẹ.
 Ikú wáá figẹ sálẹ.
 Ó wáá fariwo ta sáále sáále.
 Ọrúnmilà ló dọyẹyẹ mi, ọyẹyẹ.
 Ọótọ níkú yẹ lórí awo.
 Ọyẹyẹ.
 Mo jáwé olúyẹẹrẹ o.
 Ọyẹyẹ.
 Ẹyin ò mò wí pé ikú yẹ lórí awo
 Ọyẹyẹ.

(Abimbola 1968b, pp. 33–34)

The translation is as follows:

Women are deceitful.
 Women are liars.
 Let no man open his mind for a woman to see.
 If divination was performed for *Olójòngbòdú*,
 the wife of Death.
 They (the enemies of Death) called her early in the morning.
 And asked from her what her husband
 must not eat
 Which gave him the strength to kill other
 peoples' children.
 She asked them what they would give her.
 She said she would take two hundred measures
 of cowries from them.

After taking the money,
 She said Death, her husband, must not
 eat rats.
 They asked, "What happens if he ate rats?"
 She said the hands of Death would shake
 persistently.
 She said that Death, her husband, must not eat fish.
 They asked, "What happens if he ate fish?"
 She said that the legs of Death would shake
 persistently.
 She said Death, her husband, must not eat
 duck's eggs.
 They asked, "What happens if he eats duck's eggs?"
 She said that Death would vomit persistently,
 She said that Death, her husband, must not eat
 elēbutē vegetables.
 They asked, "What happens if he ate
 elēbutē vegetables?"
 She said that Death's body would become
 very weak.
 They gave rat to Death.
 He ate rats.
 Both his hands started to shake persistently.
 They gave fish to Death.
 Death ate fish.
 Both his legs started to shake persistently.
 They gave duck's eggs to Death.
 He ate duck's eggs.
 He started to vomit persistently.
 They gave *elēbutē* vegetables to Death.
 He ate *elēbutē* vegetables.
 Death's body became very weak.
 Death went on top of *ayūnrē* tree.
Ayūnrē shifted his head to one side,
 Death fell down with a great force.
 He hit his chest on the ground.
 He cried aloud in great pain.
Ōrūnmilā said that we will shake off all
 evil things.
 It is true that Death has slipped away
 from the head of *Ifā* priest
Ōyēyē.
 I pluck the leaf of *olūyēéré*.
Ōyēyē.
 Don't you know that Death has slipped away
 from the head of *Ifā* priest.
Ōyēyē.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, these few examples of women in the *Ifá* literary corpus clearly demonstrate the ambivalent attitudes of Yoruba men to women and the powers women possess. There is a love-hate relationship in the attitude of Yoruba men to women. On the one hand, they rely on women for love, support, and protection, yet in contrast, they do not completely trust their women who they regard as deceitful. This love-hate attitude probably arose from the supernatural and financial/economic powers that women wield, since women alone can belong to the society of *àjé* from which all men are excluded.

There are many other images of women in the *Ifá* literary corpus which time and space do not permit us to examine. For example the image of woman in the marketplace in Yoruba culture. Every Yoruba market from ancient times to the present is controlled by women both in terms of their sheer numbers in the market and the day-to-day administration of the market which is under the authority of *Ìyálájé* (mother who keeps *Ajé*).^b More than seventy percent of people buying and selling in any Yoruba market are women.

Whether as human being endowed with supernatural powers, or as a mother, or as wives or as market women, the image of woman which one can see in the *Ifá* literary corpus is that of power and authority rather than helplessness and subservience which is the contemporary image which anthropologists tend to paint of African women. Even though Yoruba society is still largely dominated by men, the women folk have always held and are still holding their own. Yoruba men may have a love-and-hate attitude to their women. They may even secretly fear and envy their women because of the possibility that any woman may be an *àjé*, but no king, no noble man, no chief or village head can hold a successful council without authentic representatives of women, in order to sustain a balance in the universe and to maintain the all important connection with the supernatural.

On top of the crowns of Yoruba kings are found bird images in different and varying motifs (FIG. 2). At the apex of the *Òsùn* iron staff of the *babaláwo* we also have the image of a pigeon. The iron iconography of *Qsanyin* (divinity responsible for herbal medicine) contains a multitude of birds resting on the top. All these are images of women as *àjé*, with which persons in authority must make contacts, connections, and reference, even obeisance in order to legitimize their authority and in order to sustain the balance between the two halves of the universe.

^b *Ajé* is the Yoruba divinity responsible for wealth.



FIGURE 2 Qba William Adetona Ayeni, Orangun Ila, wearing the great crown called "Ologon" during the concluding rite in the festival for the Qba's crown, which is thought of as an *orisa*, that is, having divine power, Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, September 1984. (Photograph by John Pemberton III.)

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