

Ifa literary corpus: A philosophical exposition of economic sustainability in Yoruba society

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ABSTRACT: Ifá is a religion brought to the world by Ọ̀rúnmilà, who is a custodian of the deity and who is also regarded as a compendium of wisdom and knowledge. This paper examines Ifá Literary Corpus, both as a complete Yorùbá philosophy and creation for the sustainability of the economy in the society. The paper also goes further to demonstrate the philosophical relevance of the Ifá literary corpus and the relevance of Yorùbá tradition in the development of the economy of the society to reveal the Yorùbá concept of trading, business, profit, wealth and the aspects of life that relate to money. The methodology adopted was based on personal interviews with Ifá priests while the study of earlier writers on Ifá poems known as Odù Ifá verses were translated into English. The paper shows that Ifá Oracle, which touches every aspect of Yorùbá life, can be used to develop the economy of the people for business advantage of the community and the society at large. The paper concludes that Ifá is a well-organised traditional religion which plays a vital role in demonstrating practically various elements of Yorùbá traditional cultural aspects in transmitting a statistically positive effect on economic growth and development to the people of the society.

Keywords: Culture, economy, Ifá corpus, Orunmila.

INTRODUCTION

Yorùbá people believe in the existence of ọ̀rúnmilà and other outstanding dieties (òrisà) like Ọ̀gún, Sàngó, ọ̀ya, Obàtálá, ọ̀sun, Ọ̀risà òlórún, Olókun, Èsù, Yemoja, ọ̀sanyìn, Ajé, to mention few. The Ifá literary corpus called Odù consists of 256 parts sub-divided into verses called eṣe-ìfá, while each of these 256 Odù has its specific divination. Those Ifá verses were written in a way to show that Ifá is the native knowledge and belief system of the Yorùbá, where they have very sound knowledge of discovering the hope to influence the interaction of their relationship with gods and their ancestors. Traditionally, Yorùbás believe that ọ̀rúnmilà is one of the earliest Yorùbá deities and the most popular deity endowed with special wisdom from Olódùmarè, who possesses an intimate knowledge of problems affecting human destiny. Yorùbá people believe that ọ̀rúnmilà have adequate knowledge and understanding of matters both on earth and heaven. They also believe that he is the historian of Ifẹ̀land (Ọ̀pìtàn Ilẹ̀-Ifẹ̀). Apart from this, Ifá is regarded as the most important

personality among other deities who is conversant with adequate knowledge of humans' day-to-day activities and can also stand for an independent financial adviser that will assist one for the best deal in any business by moving beyond individual barriers in the society.

Ifa's viewpoint

Ifá refers to the system of divination and the verses of the literary corpus known as Odù Ifá. Ifá divination is a way of communicating and getting in contact with ọ̀rúnmilà in the spiritual realm by revealing what is the source of a person's problem and converting evil things to good. Abimbola (1968) concentrates on the collection and compilation of the sixteen Odùs and their verses. Awolalu (1979, p.123) identifies that the most important objects in Ifá divination are the sixteen specially selected palm nuts called ikin, the ọ̀pón ifá (the divination tray which may be rectangular,

semi-circle or circular), the *iyèròsùn* (the divination power), the *ìròfá* (a conical bell which is made of horn, ivory or wood) which is used in tapping on the divining tray at intervals to invoke the oracular spirit and *ìbò* (lots) consisting of various objects. *Ògúnléyẹ* (2008:38) states the Yorùbá belief on *Òrúnmìlà*, who was in attendance when human destiny was sealed. Based on the above information, *Òrúnmìlà* is regarded as *Elèrìí Ìpín* - the witness or advocate of destiny. Being a witness, he is believed to be capable of giving advice in any situation. According to *Adégbindín* (2014:77), *Ifá* as an epistle comprises 16 principles and 256 derivative *Odù* (chapters). The principal ones are known as *Ojú Odù*, while the derivative ones are known as *Omọ Odù* or *àmúù odù*. The sixteen principal *odù* are strictly arranged in hierarchical order. The first and most senior *odù* is *Èjiogbè* followed by *oyeku meji*, *iwori meji*, *odi meji*, *irosun meji*, *owonran meji*, *obara meji*, *ose meji*, *okanran meji*, *ogunda meji*, *osa meji*, *ika meji*, *oturupon meji*, *otua meji*, *irete meji*, *ose meji*, and *ofun meji*. Each of these *Odù* has a symbol used to indicate a message coded in the *Ifá* literary corpus.

Based on the above previous works, it is apparent to note that this paper attempts to analyse the relevance of *Ifá* literary corpus in the economy of the society.

Theoretical framework

The aim of this study is to develop a value system indigenous to Africa via *Ifá* lore. The study finds Sam Ukala's Folkism Theory very handy as its conceptual framework. In 1993, Sam Ukala redefined 'folkism' from an African perspective as the tendency to base literary plays on indigenous history and culture and to compose and perform them in accordance with the aesthetics of African folktale composition and performance. Sam Ukala defines Folkism as: an indigenous aesthetic principle which may derive from the use of African literary theatre of folk-linguistic structural and performance style. It is an attempt to depict traditional African performances on the modern stage (par 1). The study finds the theory relevant to its projected target in the adaptation of *Ifá* lore for entertainment and cultural education. *Ifá* lore has a unique advantage for this project because its narrative is rendered in parable format. Characters in *Ifá* narration include animate and inanimate objects often interacting freely in stories. This, in a way, is a potential that *Ifá* lore has for animation films. Film animation is a veritable vehicle for children's 'edutainment'

PHILOSOPHICAL EXPOSITION OF ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY OF IFÁ LITERARY CORPUS IN YORUBA SOCIETY

Before Western education and civilisation, the Yorùbá people of south-western Nigeria had their own system on how to run their businesses, which gave room for the traditional system's focus on the basis of goods, services

and work in which they are influenced by traditions and beliefs. Before setting out to embark on any business, the people do approach *Ifá* for advice and guidance. In Yorùbá society, there is hardly anything the people will do without proper consultation of *Ifá* to seek support and approval before the commencement. Almost everyone in Yorùbá-land realised the importance of *Ifá* in all aspects of their life and how to live comfortably in their day-to-day activities for their sustainability, continuity and development. Even the economic stability to boost the development in the society and issues relating to human success are not left out in *Ifá* literary corpus.

Economic prospect in Ifá corpus

The concept for this study is the economic relevance of *Ifá* which focuses mainly on the individual survival to develop their personal economic growth in the society for societal continuity and sustainability as illustrated in *Ifá* literary corpus. The economy is the source of wealth of Yorùbá and anybody who wants to be recognised anywhere must be engaged in any kind of work. The business and trade have a good sphere in the *Ifá* literary corpus in which the structure of the economy is based on selling and buying. *Ifá* encourages economic struggle in order to get money and wealth for individual care as stated below in *Ifá* corpus:

Excerpt 1:

Emi koroju aperemo pete
Emi koroju aperemo pete
Emi koroju aperemo pete
A díá fún *Òrúnmìlà*
Ifá n sòwò epo relé llawẹ...
Gbogbo ará llawẹ niyí, ikà niwọn
Bí àwọn ará llawẹ ti fojú kan *òrúnmìlà*
Ni wọn bá dide si
Elòmíràn mú gbóngbó
Elòmíràn mú kúmọ
Ní wọn bá ló ku ibi tí *Òrúnmìlà* ó wọ
Ni Èsù bá di atẹgùn
Ó tẹlé *Òrúnmìlà*
O ní kí *Òrúnmìlà* ó má ẹe bá wọn jà (Abimbólá, 1976:19)

(I have no time for nonsense
I have no time for unseriousness
I have no time for frivolities
It divines for Orunmila
Ifa is on palm-oil business
Trip to llawe
llawe people are very wicked
Immediately llawe people set their eyes on *Òrúnmìlà*
They all rose up against him
Some took the root
Some took club
Disallowed *Òrúnmìlà* from entering
Devil transformed to breeze
He followed *Òrúnmìlà*
He cautioned *Òrúnmìlà* not to fight them)

The above excerpt depicts that the Ifá deity encourages trading. Also, it is revealed in the same excerpt that Ifá was going on a business trip to a town called llawe. Ifá embarked on business trips to other towns in order to boost his financial capability. As a result of this, a trader can go as far as to sell any of the products that can bring money to make both ends meet economically. Therefore, Ifá encourages his adherents to follow in his footsteps in economic matters in order to meet up with their economic responsibilities in their different domains. Based on the negative reactions of llawẹ people against Ifá wishes to trade in their vicinity, this simply made it known in ẹṣẹ-ifá that no business is easy to do but one needs to be focussed. Apart from this, ifá reveals that staying indoors without any struggle cannot bring changes to your development if you want to succeed in life.

Excerpt 2:

Òsòwò sòwò ẹfọ òun ètò itòjú ara
Gbogbo ẹ
Gbogbo ẹ
Ajé òun ifòkànbalẹ nàà ló jásí
Àselura okòwò ò basẹ jẹ
Ọnà ẹnu se kókó
E jẹ a sisẹ ajé nítorí ẹnu (Ifárẹmí, 2018)

(A trader is farming and healing people.
They are all about
They are all about
The money and peace of mind
Mixture of business does not spoil work
Feeding is very important
Let us work to get money because of mouth)

The foregoing reveals that it is good to combine two trades. Like what happens above, the trader is combining two different businesses, namely: farming and healing. He did this to boost his financial capability i.e. healing and farming put together, will bring more income than only one trade. This excerpt shows that Youbá traders are not known to be traders of a single stuff of goods. They are good marketers and also sell anything sellable and buyable to boost the socio-economic development of their different communities. What this ẹṣẹ-ifá is saying in essence is that combining two trades will financially buoyant the economic activities of that trader and the society at large.

Excerpt 3:

Wọn fíí párá
Ó ba párá jẹ
Ádíá fún aáyán
Eléyíí ó lọ rẹé ra adiyẹ
Aáyán n lọ rẹé radiyẹ lẹrú
Ó wá lọ dáfá
Wọn wá sọ fún pé
Kó má dáwóle
Súgbón aáyán kò gbó

Ó lọ rẹé radiyẹ lẹrú
Nígbà tó gbée délé tán
Báyíí ni adiyẹ se tako aáyán
Tó sì pa aáyán olówó rẹ jẹ (Ifágbẹmí, 2024)

(It was put on raised elevation
It destroyed it
Cast divination to cockroach
Which contemplating to buy cock as a slave
The cockroach was contemplating
To buy and enslave a cock
It went for ifá divination
Cockroach was told not to embark
On its intention and not to consider doing it
But the cockroach refused
To listen to the instruction
And went on his way to enslave a cock
Cockroach purchased the cock
And brought it home as a slave
When it brought it home
The cock started to counter and confronted
The cockroach and killed its owner)

This particular verse of ẹṣẹ-ifá shows that trading is very prominent in the economic structure of any community. As all the people engaged themselves in many lucrative trades to show the societal way of making money with their sweat, they must always be careful with what they will embark upon to do. The above excerpt reveals that whatever anybody intends to do, one must be very patient and be selective. It is expected that people should do businesses that they are conversant with so as not to kill themselves in the process of doing business. One must be wise enough and listen to wise saying of wise people because one must apply enough wisdom and common sense. The reason is that a wise man gains and a foolish person loses. Apart from this, a life can easily be cut short due to the wrong decision of setting bad business. In order to avoid calamity, one should try as much as possible to do away with the bad trading.

Excerpt 4:

Bí a bá n bá ẹni tógbón tayò pọ
ẹni tógbón a máa ẹe bíí ẹni jẹ juni lọ
Ádíá'fún ọrúnmilà
Baba n lọ rẹé bá olókun tayò ọlà
Mo bólókun tayò mo dọba
Mo bólókun tayò ó làmí
Mo bólókun tayò mo dọba (Ifárẹmí, 2024)

(When a game is played with a wise one
The wise one behaves like the highest gamer
Divine for ọrúnmilà
He went to play a wealthy game with the River goddess
I played a game with the River goddess
I became a king
I played a game with the River goddess)

I made it
I played a game with the River goddess
I became a king)

Excerpt 4 shows the view of Ifá on how to apply wisdom and understanding in order to make gains. ọ̀rúnmílà was wondering how he could make it in life and become stinking rich. He was told to apply wisdom and be very wise because doing this will make wealth for him. Based on this advice, he packaged some shafts and coals and threw them inside the river. He continued doing this repeatedly to get the attention of the river goddess. The river goddess was wondering who could have been throwing packages of cowries into the river. Unknown to the river goddess that those packages were bags of shafts and coals. The young river goddess told their master that someone was trying to challenge them with wealth and show that he was richer than them. Then their master river goddess thought he was the richest because all wealth came from him. He instructed the young river goddess to start packaging much more cowries to the shore. With this wisdom, ọ̀rúnmílà became a wealthy man through his deep wisdom applied.

Below is another Ifá verse that reveals to us how to monitor your business by yourself if you want to succeed in any trade setup, thus:

Excerpt 5:

A kii fojú olójú sòwò ká jèrè
Ádíá fún Èjì-òkànràn
Tó fi irinwó sòwò
Tó fi pa òkànlénígba
Ó sòwò, ó sọ̀ọ̀tì (Awóniyì, 2023)

(There is no gain in having another eye
To watch over your business
Divine for Èjì- òkànràn
Who invest four hundred thousand in business
And able to realise only two hundred thousand)

The excerpt above is a metaphorical way of expression to encourage the traders to handle their business with care. This ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ifá is telling us about a man called òkànràn who does business but does not get his gains regularly because of his lackadaisical attitude towards it. He went to inquire why the business was going down. Ifa made it known to him that if he wanted to do business and make gains, he must do proper monitoring by himself because if someone else is placed in charge of your business, the profit will be taken away by them, and the owner of the business will not get appropriate returns on the business. Ifá encourages anyone planning to invest or do any business that he/she must monitor the business very well. The owner of the business must monitor the records and how they are handled, even if the condition warrants someone to be in charge. This is to say that if a business is monitored strictly by the owner, the profits will come out greatly.

Excerpt 6:

Another ẹ̀ṣẹ̀- ifá states that:
Ọ̀wọ̀n owó ni wọ̀n nàwó fúnni
Ọ̀wọ̀n jíjẹ làá pè níyàn
Ìgi tó wọ̀n làá pé ní ilẹ̀kẹ
Ìtākùn tó wẹ làá pè lókùn
Ádíá fún oníyọ̀wọ̀n
Tíí ẹ̀ ọ̀mọ ọ̀ba lẹ̀yìn Ajorí
È sàré wá o
È wá rájá ọ̀mọ ọ̀bá
È pọ̀ ẹ̀ṣẹ̀ wá o
È wá rájà oníyọ̀wọ̀n
È sàré wá o
È wá rájà ọ̀mọ ọ̀ba (Awófuntó, 2022)

(Scarcity of food intake is called famine
Tiny sticks are classified as shaves
Tiny webs are classified as rope
Casting divination to Oníyọ̀wọ̀n
A companion of the princess
Who advertised that
Rush here everybody
Come and buy the princess's goods
Rush here everybody
Come and buy the princess's goods)

Excerpt 6 reveals that Oníyọ̀wọ̀n is a princess and also a pretty trader. She only displays her pretty goods in the market square but only a few people get to buy from her. She then went to Ifá to enquire how to make the market move forward. Ifá told her to make a particular sacrifice, after that, she should start advertising her business so that more people will become aware of her business. This Ifá verse made us understand and teaches us that anybody who is handling a business must advertise his or her business so that people can be aware of the speciality of the goods and also patronize the business to make the business expand.

Excerpt 7:

Şékúbe awo wọ̀n lóde Ìbàdán
Ádíá fún wọ̀n lóde Ìbàdán
Nígba tí wọ̀n ní fi omi ojú sọ̀gbèrè ire
Wọ̀n sì gbẹ̀bọ̀ lọ̀pọ̀lọ̀pọ̀
Wọ̀n rúbọ̀
Ire owó dé bá wọ̀n lóde Ìbàdán
Bí ẹ̀ni kò bá síşé
ẹ̀ni kii là (Awóşèké, 2024)

(Şékúbe the priest of Ìbàdán, Ìbàdán city
Divine for indigen of Ìbàdán
When they are crying of lack of wealth
They performed many rituals
And they achieved many wealth
If one is not working
The person can never be wealthy)

The ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-Ifé in excerpt 7 reveals that an idle man cannot

be wealthy if he is not working. This scenario happened to the people of Ìbàdàn when they were crying about not having money and profits. A great Ifá priest called Şèkúnbe made enquires to the gods for Ìbàdàn people, and Ifá made Şèkúnbe understand that Ìbàdàn people refused to work, and that is why they are still lacking. Ifá told them that if they wanted to have unlimited blessings and wealth, they must start working because anyone who does not work can never be wealthy. Since the Ìbàbàn people started working, they started making money and living a joyous life. This eṣe-Ifá teaches us to work very hard to overcome poverty. Work cannot kill someone, but idleness is a great disaster. That is to say, people should try to work with their hands to be able to care for their basic needs.

Excerpt 8:

Èrò má sùn ká
Èrò mòmò sùn ká bèbè
Á díá fún Ọrúnmilà
Níjò tíí n̄ ṣawo rélé Ìjèrò
Ọrúnmilà bá bèrè síí pajé
Ó lówó lówó
Àwọn tí wọn n̄ bẹ níbẹ n̄ pète pèrò
Wọn n̄ pé, láti inú ilú àwọn
Ni eléyíí yóò tí rí tajé ṣe
Yóò sí kó gbogbo rẹ lọ sí
òkè ìgbètì ilú baba rẹ
Wọn ló dáa
Wọn ó máa sọ ìgbà tí ó bá lọ
Ọrúnmilà wá sùn
Wọn ní bóo bá n̄ lọ
Máà dágbére fénikan
Èrò má sùn ká
Èrò mòmò sùn ká bèbè (Awóḍlápò, 2019)

(Visitor, stop sleeping all about
Visitor, stop sleeping everywhere
Cast divination for Ọrúnmilà
On the day he was venturing
Priesthood in the city of Ìjèrò
Ọrúnmilà was going to Ìjèrò city
They asked him to offer a sacrifice
When he got there
He started making money
He made so much money to the displeasure
Of some of the Ìjèrò people
The residents of the city of Ìjèrò started to observe
They said the man has made so much wealth
And he would cart all to his father's town
It is all right they concluded

Let's watch for the time of his departure
Ọrúnmilà then slept
His sleep was full of nightmares
And he was told that
Whenever he is living finally to his home,
He must not get anybody informed
About the exact date of leaving (Sàlámi, 2002;246)

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The paper has revealed that in the context of the above excerpts, according to the Ifá corpus, a trader of any type should be very conscious of his/her business. Apart from that, there is no friendship in business, no matter how close you are. One must try to keep his/her achievements from the people and never disclose one's movement concerning his/her business with people around or within them.

Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria are rich in oral tradition, which is the basis for their social development. Whether Ifá divination is still put in place or not in contemporary times, the fact remains that the contributions of Ifá literary corpus towards the success of economic development in Yorùbá society can never be underestimated because it is a major source of morality, guiding individual and the society at large for the sustainability of human development.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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LIST OF INFORMANTS' ORAL INTERVIEWS

S/N	Name	Age	Address	Occupation	Year
1.	Àgbà Awo Ifàrèní	67	16, Olómilágbalá street, Ilesa	Babaláwo	2023
2.	Babaláwo Ifágbèní	55	21, Agboolé, Ita baálẹ̀ Ibadan	Babaláwo	2024
3.	Babaláwo Awóníyí	62	11, Ìrédùmí street, Ilé-Ifẹ̀	Babaláwo	2024
4.	Àgbà awo Awófuntọ̀	71	4, kosobo, Oyo	Babaláwo	2024
5.	Babaláwo Awọ̀şẹ̀ké	64	91 Olorunsojá street, Ondo	Babaláwo	2022
6.	Àgbà awo Awódolápo	72	Agboolé Járógungbó, Ifẹ̀tẹ̀dó	Babaláwo	2023