What does it mean to approach Orature in its own right? An interdisciplinary exploration of the oral Ifá Corpus and two transcriptions

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An interdisciplinary exploration of the oral Ifá Corpus and two transcriptions.

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Preface

The focus of this thesis is orality because of a very personal question. Growing up in Nigeria, but being instructed in accordance with the British system, learning to read and write was paramount in school. Writing and words have always come naturally to me and reading even more so. However, as a Yorùbá child, the importance of song and dance in our knowledge and information sharing customs and rituals was ubiquitous. I cannot forget the many of the stories I heard growing up, about Ijápà and other characters from Yorùbá mythology that were only ever shared with me orally by teachers and other adults in my life.

It wasn't until I was about eight that I read my first book about Yorùbá mythos. This culture clash between what I experienced and the way I have been academically trained spurred my interest in orality. Ultimately, these questions and my attempt to find answers resulted in this thesis, which began as a heuristic for various methods of transcribing oral works in general, using an oral culture I already have personal knowledge of a case study. What was initially intended as an investigation into examples of oral works (and only peripherally, cultures) in abstract, necessarily became a more detailed and intimate journey into the particular beliefs, ideas, practice, and performance of one oral work in a very specific context.

Introduction

Throughout my Book and Digital Media Studies course, I have realised certain precepts and epistemological consequences that have followed from the affordances of the written (and printed) word. This realisation made me start to question if and why oral cultures such as those in Africa placed comparably lesser import on writing our myths and pre-colonial stories. Why is/was the oral method still deferred to? The aim of this thesis is to explore and understand features or aspects of orality in its own right. In an effort to analyse orality in its own right, this thesis will attempt to approach analysis from a novel angle; one that does not cast orality as a pre-cursor to the written word. The reason for doing this is to enlighten book-historian, philological, and textual scholars in general – researchers and academics whose remit of study is the written word; its creation, transmission, and consumption among other things – as to the myriad of assumptions they may make when approaching oral cultures, that they do not realise skew and obscure their efforts to understand the subject. In this introduction, I use the term oral cultures along with oral 'works' or 'texts' because, as I hope to make clear in the following discussions, oral works are oftentimes inextricably intertwined with the traditions and practices of a culture, in such a manner that can be difficult for a textual scholar to initially appreciate.

The forms and functions of oral cultures/works are, after centuries of writing and printing, deeply alien to most of us. This is not to say we have no familiarity whatsoever with orality – orality, like writing is but a method of communication and as we shall see, even primarily oral cultures may use writing in some way. However, it is to say that by the time most of us are five years old, whether we realise it or not, our engagement with language and communication is inescapably tethered to the idea of writing and thus coloured by certain assumptions about what communication means and does, as well as how it works.

One example I have realised is in humanities research itself. Although the humanities are concerned with interpreting expressions of human experiences and as such, it is second nature for most scholars to approach any kind of investigation or study from a so-called 'objective' or 'analytical'' standpoint.[1] Questions of this kind tend to focus not on what the cultures believe, but on meta questions of why they

[1] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Brittanica, 'Humanities', *Encyclopaedia Brittanica* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/humanities> [accessed 22 December 2021].

believed what they did, and how this belief shaped the experiences/actions of those in the culture compared to others. While these are deeply relevant questions, I would argue that this belief in the importance above all of 'objective' analysis is itself arguably a consequence of our textual experience. Of course, scholars are aware that it is not possible to achieve a truly objective analysis and that one's perspective and biases will always inform their work. However, I would still argue that the pursuit of objectivity even as an aspirational, if impossible, aim is still evidence of the deeply internalised belief that understanding comes from abstracting elements that make up the human experience. As I hope to demonstrate, coherence and consistency can be mutually exclusive, and textual ideas of 'study' and 'criticism', the former defined by American cultural historian Walter J. Ong as 'extended sequential analysis' and the latter defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as the 'practice of analysing, evaluating, and commenting on the qualities and character of something' are relevant only to a point with oral texts, works, etc.[2]

The initial aim of this thesis was to explore different examples of specific 'internationally relevant' oral works across multiple cultures to discover a kind of oral blueprint that would better clarify oral works and perhaps even provide a method of effectively transcribing the core of their message in a loss-minimising manner. However, I realised something important during the research and investigative process of selecting (and what should have been distilling) these oral works into simple abstract blueprints that could be easily applied to oral works in general. It became clear to me that this was not only a fool's errand, it was fundamentally misleading in the case of some oral works, which could be separated from the rich and complex cultures that created and sustained them, but only if a researcher was comfortable with the end result being no more informative than a crude caricature of the real thing. To explore approaches to oral cultures/works**,** I consider a specific case study; the Ifá corpus of the Yorùbá peoples in West Africa. Of the many examples of Yorùbá oral works and performances I chose to focus on the Ifá corpus as a case-study because it is a well-known and respected religion/philosophy from Western Africa that has already been the subject of investigation. The Ifá corpus is an example of a collection of moral, philosophical, mythological, and even pseudo-

[2] W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (Place: Routledge, 2013), p. 9; 'Criticism, n.', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press) <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/44598> (accessed 17 October 2022].

historical tales that are treasured by the Yorùbá people as evergreen wisdom and ancestral knowledge and respected by Yorùbá scholars as an example of Yorùbá peoples' contribution to creative culture. Historically, the entire corpus was learned, performed, and preserved orally and this is largely still the case for adherents of Ifá in the present day. It was my expectation that if writing were to be relevant or prevalent in any context it would be with the Ifá corpus, because it seemed to me that such an important cultural and religious text would more likely be recognised as needing preservation and more importantly, preservation with a view to accuracy. Instead, I discovered that the Ifá Verses are an example of how differently an oral culture can approach and deal with concerns around consistency and truth-telling.

This is not to say that textual ideas of historicity, epistemology and knowledge are not relevant at all when considering oral cultures. What society does not attempt to explain – and often justify – why they are the way they are, or why and how they do things the way they do it? Many cultures have oral traditions that are the culmination of intentional efforts to chronicle the history of themselves and the ancestors that came before them (such as the Izibongo tradition of Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele (and other) peoples in Southern Africa).[3] Commenting on the qualities or character of something is a natural human position. However, this does not mean we can necessarily assume that all oral cultures (of which there are innumerable) utilise orality in the same way, for the same purposes. My discussion of the Ifá Verses will demonstrate an example of how the Ifá Verses acknowledge differences and inconsistencies in practise without desiring to establish a standard history as such. Such an approach has generally been considered illogical and 'primitive' by missionaries and other Western European researchers engaging with oral cultures through a colonial lens. However, moving forward it is important that any scholarly analysis of oral works are not grounded in textual ideas of complexity and analysis. Rather it must be grounded in the oral culture's explanation of their worldview and norms regarding knowledge. As such, if we are to understand these communities and their oral works, we need to better understand their primary means of communication and how they utilised this method to carry out social, spiritual, and pedagogical, development in their communities.

[3] K. Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias., 'Introduction', in *Discourse and Its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Place: University of Birmingham, Centre of West African Studies, 1989), pp. 1-9.

Importantly, it must be said that this work is of course a written analysis, from the perspective of a thoroughly text-based researcher. This means that, like many students, scholars, and general individuals of today, the foundation of the way I conceptualise and think of 'text' is subconsciously based on writing. As the focus of this thesis is highlighting assumptions derived from studying written works that could obfuscate and distort research efforts, the conclusions I reach are guidelines at most. As such, this work does not purport to establish a new method or theorem for the analysis and greater understanding of oral texts and their place, if any, within textual scholarship. Rather, this is an exploration of orature as a discipline, and the concept of oral texts, with the aim of answering the question:

> ***'How can textual scholars develop a scholarly approach to oral textual culture in its own right'***

For textual scholars in particular, how can one analyse and understand an oral textual culture without conflating unique features with concepts they are familiar with? As such, chapter 1 explores existing literature on orality and text, taking a necessarily interdisciplinary approach. I will consider terms, attitudes, and approaches across the board to try and illuminate what assumptions textual scholars may take for granted when dealing with written works, and how those assumptions reveal a writing culture that underpins the majority of our understandings about information sharing, retrieval, and organisation. Following which, I will attempt to identify a general pattern, if any can be found, that could inform our understanding of how *not* to approach the same topics in oral cultures. After the literature review in chapter 1, I will apply the analytical framework formulated from my inter-disciplinary literature review on two written analyses of the Ifá Verses to practically test how robust it is, and the quality of the analysis that arises from utilising it. The third chapter will focus on exploring some important cultural context about Yorùbá history and philosophy. The final chapter will discuss the Ifá verses, and the practices and paraphernalia associated with the cultural elements of the corpus in detail, before reconsidering the analysis of the two scholarly works examined in chapter 2, reflecting on the framework and the impact of contextual understanding on the richness of analysis. These examples will be considered in light of a mini-ethnographic study done by the author with Ifá priests in Ìjèbú-Ode, Ògún State,

Nigeria. The conclusion will attempt to evaluate how, if at all, we can translate any of the rich cultural complexity of oral culture into writing and finish with closing analytical remarks and suggestions on how to approach oral culture in future research.

Chapter 1: Relevant Theoretical Approaches to Oral Works

1.1 Introduction

This work aims to be inter-disciplinary in its approach, and, hopefully, to conclude by offering suggestions and insights that are also inter-disciplinary and useful to all who are interested in orality, though the target audience is textual scholars. As such, we begin by exploring different perspectives of orality, textuality and how the written word interacts with the spoken word. There are many scholars interested in this field, and much ground to cover. I shall be focusing on perspectives from anthropology, textual scholarship, and translation (in brief) in our exploration of what exactly most of us assume about 'texts' due to our literate backgrounds, and how these assumptions can obscure oracy research. As we shall see in the following chapter, the notion of 'orality' is difficult to pin down, never mind explain, in academic language so shaped by writing as it is. Indeed, the lack of consensus on the definition of 'oral texts' within wider academia exhibits this difficulty, and to minimise confusion this introduction uses the term in its most general sense. In the body of this section, the specific meanings adopted by each discipline will be considered and evaluated with regard to clarity, accuracy and comprehensiveness.

1.2 Orality – An Anthropological Perspective

Oral cultures and orality have been studied in depth by many anthropologists, the most cited of whom is Ruth Finnegan. Known for her popular monograph '*Oral Literature in Africa*', Finnegan has written much on the existence of 'oral literature'.[4] She argues that the term literature can be applied to oral performances/works because we need only expand our conception of what 'literature' can entail. Finnegan argues in her provocatively titled 1974 article, 'How Oral is Oral Literature', that often oral literature is not actually produced or experienced in a wholly 'traditional' society – traditional often coded to mean a spiritual, 'primitive' society.[5] She argues that the interplay between the written and the spoken word is taken for granted and mentions the influence of Arabic and Roman Christian religious

[4] R. Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa,* (Place: Open Book Publishers, 2012) <http://archive.org/details/OralLiteratureInAfrica> [accessed 16 June 2022].
[5] R. Finnegan, 'How Oral Is Oral Literature?', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 37.1 (1974), pp. 52–64 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X00094842>.

practices in African and medieval European societies that had strong oral cultures beside literate cultures in varying degrees of strength.[6] Importantly, Finnegan notes that it is unhelpful to overly concern oneself with the idea of a 'traditional' oral community with no experience of writing whatsoever. As she reminds us, even if such communities existed in the past, they do not exist in the same way today – if they exist at all – and we know next to nothing about the culture and practices of so long ago because of the difficulty in verifying any information. As such, it is important to approach orality and 'oral literature' from a modern perspective, with a view to understanding the oral cultures that persist today. Cultures that would absolutely be familiar with writing.[7] She posits some interesting criteria for ascertaining whether literature qualifies as 'oral', given the likelihood of interaction in some way with the written word. The four criteria she posits are: mode of composition, mode of transmission, actualization in performance and sources.[8] She argues that classifying literature as oral based on oral sources is 'highly speculative' and generally falls in with oral transmission, and thus declines to comment on this criterion in detail.

In brief, we shall consider Finnegan's criterion in her own words. Firstly, literature that is 'oral' due to its composition being so. Finnegan discusses the approach of a scholar named Lord, who argues, based on his study of 'narrative poetry in Yugoslavia [sic]' in the 1930s, that this kind of oral composition is so because the composition and performance acts are intertwined.[9] However, this definition has in mind works that are composed orally in isolation; such is the practice of Netsilik Eskimo [sic] poets, where an individual seeks solitude to craft their song, creating both words and melody from scratch.[10] This, Finnegan acknowledges, raises questions about whether merely thinking up a work without writing makes a piece of literature oral. She gives the example of a literate poet who composes in his head before fixing the poem on paper. Is this oral literature?

Following oral composition, another criterion Finnegan posits is the mode of transmission. This is generally the criterion most scholars and individuals consider to be the basis for classifying a work as 'oral literature'. Finnegan argues that this criterion, much like the oral source justification, tends to rely on speculative

[6] Finnegan, 'How Oral is Oral Literature?', p. 54.
[7] Finnegan, 'How Oral is Oral Literature?', p. 57.
[8] Finnegan, 'How Oral is Oral Literature?', p. 60.
[9] Idem.
[10] Finnegan, 'How Oral is Oral Literature', p. 61.

evidence.[11] This criterion, she argues, is particularly guilty of being besieged by 'romantic' notions of folk traditions that have survived intact through the ages. Finally, she considers 'actualization in performance', that is, the literature becoming 'real' or 'as the author intended' in performance. This raises questions about whether written works intended for oral delivery are thus oral literature, as well as what constitutes oral delivery – is it merely reading a work aloud? Is an audience necessary?[12]

In her article in the volume 'Discourse and its disguises', Elizabeth Tonkin comments on Finnegan's work, acknowledging it as seminal, but taking issue with her decision to co-opt the term literature and 'expand' its definition to include oral works.[13] Tonkin argues that Finnegan's reliance on the conventional concept of literature inadvertently centres writing, as the very definition of the word takes writing for granted.[14] A similar charge is levied by Walter J. Ong in his 2013 monograph, as he analyses the etymological roots of the word literature to reveal that it is fundamentally based on the concept of writing; the Latin *literature* from *litera*, meaning letter of the alphabet.[15] Though these charges have merit and could be argued to reveal the extent to which the literate mind must be careful of applying *litera* based concepts to oral works, it could also be argued that Finnegan is using this term knowingly to attach normative ideas of literacy to orality. As Finnegan notes repeatedly in her work, the approach of many scholars engaging with orality and oral cultures unduly focuses on the fantasy of the exoticized 'traditional' community, which results in many scholars and individuals viewing orality and oral culture as being 'primitive' or 'simple' compared to written culture. It is my opinion that Finnegan thus uses the term 'oral literature' normatively, to signal to scholars and readers alike that they should expect from the examples and subjects she discusses the same amount of complexity, richness and intricacy one would expect in a written work.

In regard to Finnegan's criteria for classifying works as 'oral' Tonkin makes an assertion in her article commenting on the difficulty of accurately noting oracy and

[11] Finnegan, p. 62.
[12] Finnegan, p. 63.
[13] E. Tonkin, 'Oracy and the Disguises of Literacy', in *Discourse and Its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Place: University of Birmingham, Centre of West African Studies, 1989), pp. 34-43.
[14] E. Tonkin, 'Oracy and the Disguises of Literacy', pp 34-43.
[15] Ong, *Orality and Literacy,* pp. 10-13.

oral practices because, ‘Literacy’s triumph has been to make itself the vehicle as well as object of analysis’.[16] This relates to Finnegan’s criteria more generally, and the criterion of actualization in performance especially, because it emphasises the importance of the medium and its effect on the message. Importantly, deciding whether a work is indeed ‘actualized’ by performance, and separately whether the author intended this to be the case or not is a critical choice that cannot be made objectively. Ascertaining whether a work is actualized in performance based on authorial intention could be argued to be another speculative endeavour, as the pre-supposition of some intention on the author’s part to consider other mediums and settle on orality purposefully is arguably as difficult as investigating whether a work is originally borne from oral sources. If we remove the notion of authorial intention entirely from the question of actualisation in performance, we are still left with the question of how to decide when a work is ‘realised’ by oral performance. Do plays, intentionally written to be performed, qualify as oral works under this criterion?

On this matter, Tonkin notes that when trying to make these choices about degree of oral composition, method of transmission, actualization of performance and more generally textual ideas of authorship, intention, etc there are ‘expectations we must unlearn [… and] features we must train ourselves to notice’.[17] It is this charge that is the theoretical heart of this thesis, and it is in the effort to highlight the things we must unlearn and features we must train ourselves to notice that the benefit of anthropology for the study of orality and oral works is most evident.

1.3.1 Textual Scholarship

The purpose of textual scholarship, as it has been understood historically in academia is two-fold: lower criticism, meaning the investigation of the reliability, accuracy, and usefulness of the text as a source; and higher criticism, which introduces a hermeneutic element – that is, commenting on the historical contexts in which ‘reliable’ texts were created, which includes aesthetics analysis as well as commenting on the actual content of a text.[18] Though the content (the actual text) is

[16] Tonkin, ‘Oracy and the Disguises of Literacy’, p. 36.
[17] Tonkin, 'Oracy and the Disguises of Literacy', p. 35.
[18] D.C. Greetham, ‘A History of Textual Scholarship’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Textual Scholarship*, ed. by Julia Flanders and Neil Fraistat, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 16–41 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139044073.002>.

relevant for the textual scholar, it is but one of many important factors to be investigated, with questions of process - meaning the historical stages of production and transmission - often playing a more decisive role in lower criticism investigation especially.[19] Designating questions of process as 'lower criticism' seems to imply that the subject matter is analytically shallow as it is arguably more concerned with fact-finding than analysis and evaluation.

However, Greetham cogently argues that the distinction between higher and lower criticism has diminished in recent history due to the acknowledgment that textual scholarship has an inevitably 'critical' component even when engaging in work that was previously considered 'lower criticism'.[20] This argument better considers the underlying element of judgment that is ever present in analysing the historical stages of production, recognising that interpretative choices are made when deciding which edition/version of a work is to be considered the 'authoritative' version, as the textual scholar inevitably makes judgments about what they think the original or 'fair copy' of the work would look like. As Greetham notes, the notion of a 'fair copy'; that is, the most recent version worked on by the author, with the intention that it would be published or otherwise shared with a public audience, is itself subject to argumentation.[21] Questions of discernible intention, arguments about what constitutes a bona-fide version compared to a discarded one or merely externalised thought scribbles, etc; all of these issues have existed since the antiquity, and in order to ascertain the answers to these questions, critical judgments must be made. Selecting an 'authoritative' text then depends to a large degree on who is selecting the text, based on what specific criteria, and for what purpose. This is difficult when analysing texts that are not contemporary with the researchers, and as such rely on a number of secondary sources to inform one's understanding of what a 'fair copy' could or would have looked like. Thus, given the often-incomplete nature of the sources textual scholars must deal with and the nature of humanities research, it is unavoidable that decisions made as to the validity or relevance of certain titles or phenomena are inherently judgement-based, rather than fact finding.

With an oral work, the idea that an 'authoritative' version could be ascertained fails to be convincing if one considers the immense impracticality of attempting to do

[19] Greetham, 'A History of Textual Scholarship', p. 16.
[20] Idem.
[21] Greetham, 'A History of Textual Scholarship', p. 19.

so even if a human author is alluded to. Establishing a timeline to clarify which version of an oral work precedes another is arguably an even more difficult endeavour than ascertaining a potential 'original' author. In primarily oral cultures, oral record-keeping has historically been the responsibility of a specific individual or class of individuals. However, many cultures that would have observed these practices have either transitioned to writing or, in cases where the practice remains, have lost important links in the chain of knowledge due to the effects of colonialism and imperialism. At this point, it is clear that the notion of selecting or finding the 'authoritative' version of a text does not really apply to 'oral texts', as it is almost impossible to reasonably declare who the author of an oral work is and, in some cases, the author is either of no consequence to the culture that holds the text in high regard, or the text is attributed to a deity.

The incompatibility between traditional textual scholarship and orality lies in the strict philological approach. However, arguments by scholars such as J. J. McGann, Bernard Ceruquiglini and Paul Zumthor introduce new approaches within textual scholarship that are arguably more compatible with oral works and orality studies in general.[22] These approaches acknowledge the possibility that a text may have multiple legitimate variants. In his '*Critique of Modern Textual Criticism'*, McGann makes the case for diversity of copy for modern texts. He notes that historical approaches to textual criticism that focused on authorial intention often did so because scholars were attempting to 'find and remove the contaminations inadvertently produced by those textual transmitters [scribes]', but argues that modern textual scholars are working with texts produced in materially different conditions because unlike classical and medieval texts, modern texts (18th century onwards) tend to have evidence of documentation and version history that is recoverable.[23] As such, he argues that modern textual criticism focuses too much on the assumed autonomy of the authorial process, and the myth of the 'ideal text'.[24] On the first point, McGann avers that 'the production of books, in the later modern periods especially, sometimes involves a close working relationship between the

[22]J. J. McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Place: Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1992) <http://archive.org/details/critiqueofmodern00mcga> [accessed 10 January 2023]; B. Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology*, Parallax 081437293 (Place: Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); P. Zumthor, *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*, Theory and History of Literature, 860370534 (Place: Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1990), LXX.
[23] McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism,* p. 35.
[24] McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism,* p. 56.

author and various editorial and publishing professionals associated with the institutions which serve to transmit literary works to the public.'[25] McGann argues here that the publication of a manuscript is ultimately a collaborative process and final authority belongs neither to the author nor their editor, publisher, or printer. It is collaborative and rests 'in the actual structure of the agreements' made by these entities.[26] This argument undermines the assumption that the author creates autonomously and consequently, the justification for focusing on the author's intention. McGann concedes that this critique is mostly empirical and introduces his second point; underpinning the focus on final intentions is (in his opinion) another erroneous assumption, that there is an 'ideal' or 'finally intended' version of the text.[27]

The notion of an ideal text in this case is held by McGann to be another approach used by classical philologists and uncritically applied to more modern texts. The notion of an ideal or finally intended text assumes a 'lost original' and operates as a heuristic tool/abstraction that does not exist but functions 'as a focussing [sic] device for studying the extant documents' and identifying possible aberrations.[28] However, because modern textual critics generally have records and versions of the text from inception or close to it, the notion of the lost original is pure abstraction outside of historical fact. Ultimately, this notion is born from the aim of the modern textual scholar to choose a copy-text and wrongly focuses on variations as 'corruptions'.[29] Importantly, the conclusion McGann comes to here is that variations of modern textual works are more likely to be 'achieved result of an actual literary production [in that] typically the forms represent divergent patterns of varying purposes and intentions rather than an ancestral series'.[30] As such, the work of a modern textual critic is to 'distinguish and choose between textual versions'.[31]

McGann's arguments convincingly make the case for accepting variations of modern texts by highlighting the impact and influence of various socio-economic forces that shape the creation of texts in relevant ways. Given McGann's emphasis on modern texts, it could be argued that the variation he speaks of are not in the

[25] McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, p. 34.
[26] McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism,* p. 54.
[27] McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism,* pp. 56-57.
[28] McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, pp. 56-57.
[29] Idem.
[30] McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, pp. 62-63.
[31] Idem.

same vein as the variation one is likely to encounter with oral works. Indeed, in his own argument McGann consistently contrasts the ambiguity of classical/medieval book history with the generally stable and identifiable book history of modern texts. However, a core tenet of his argument, that authors are not autonomous creators is extremely relevant in regard to orature. For oral works, as mentioned above, the author has little importance and authorial intention even less so. More relevant is the context of the time and culture the work is composed in, and the subsequent context of the community utilising it. In regard to the notion of the lost original, McGann believes that its function as a heuristic tool fails to be relevant for modern texts but seems to acknowledge its use in the classical context for finding, amongst others, scribal errors. This line of reasoning does not necessarily translate for oral works. This is because the assumption that orature's comparative instability would make errors more likely to occur, and the subsequent conclusion that deviations should be standardised in line with a lost original could obscure intentional deviations that are culturally relevant to different ethnic and sub-ethnic groups.

1.3.2 Oral Textual Scholarship

The issue of the applicability of traditional textual scholarship to oral practices is considered in more detail by John D. Niles in his contribution to the Cambridge Companion to Textual Scholarship. He immediately states that the focus of oral textual scholarship cannot be that of investigating the auctorial authority of an 'original' text, because oral art forms exist 'only in variants'.[32] His definition of 'oral texts' seems largely to refer to written transcriptions of works that originated as oral transmissions, or oral compositions, and differs from their 'oral art forms', that term being the specific one he uses to refer to the original utterance/performance of the work.[33] Referencing Ong's comments in his monograph '*Orality and Literacy'* Niles affirms his argument that the term 'oral literature' is an inaccuracy, with the term 'oral text' being similarly ill-fitting as a reference to oral expressions/discourse in their original oral/aural form. Text, Ong allows, is a less etymologically loaded word, as its root meaning refers to weaving which has been and can be used to describe oral

[32] J. D. Niles, 'Orality', in *The Cambridge Companion to Textual Scholarship*, ed. by Julia Flanders and Neil Fraistat, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 205–23 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139044073.010>.
[33] Niles, 'Orality', p. 211.

works without necessarily referencing the written word. However, Ong concludes that the modern-day literate's conception of text is inherently skewed towards writing, and thus unavoidably results in what he describes as a 'back-formation', that inadvertently characterises the oral work as a 'non-literate' version of a written work.[34] Niles briefly mentions Ong's arguments before building on them with his own arguments about the inherent impossibility of reproducing all the aspects of an oral 'performance' such as gesture, facial expression, intonation, etc with the written word.[35] Nevertheless, Niles concludes that the written word plays a valuable role in 'displaying and disseminating oral-derived texts'.[36] As such, his argument is that textual scholarship can contribute relevant discussion and ideas to the study and analysis of oral texts, that is, transcribed written works based on oral performances or 'transmissions'. He argues that such texts are hybrid in nature and as such, 'neither fully literary nor fully oral in nature', which means that they inhabit a 'third space' between the oral and the written.[37]

The features of this 'third space', he argues, are relevant to a textual scholar's understanding of how to transcribe the oral into the written for editing purposes, and through analysis and study of these oral texts, one may be able to identify and better treat aspects of a work previously attributed to scribal error that could instead be the result of an oral composition. Niles provides the example of 'The Song of Roland', which is preserved in six different versions, each in a dialect of Old French.[38] Most textual scholars over the years have approached these differing versions with the intent to establish an authoritative version of the work.[39] However, the most relevant approach for our purposes is the theory of '*mouvance'* conceived by Paul Zumthor.[40] *Mouvance* refers to the 'textual mobility' Zumthor noticed when studying medieval vernacular texts.[41] Compared to 'works' which were often official or formal in nature, Zumthor argues that vernacular 'texts' of this time were not often considered to be the work of one identifiable author.

[34] Ong, *Orality and Literacy,* pp. 10-13.
[35] Niles, 'Orality', p. 211.
[36] Idem.
[37] Niles, 'Orality', p. 212.
[38] Niles, 'Orality', p. 214.
[39] Niles, 'Orality', pp. 214-15.
[40] Niles, 'Orality', p. 215.
[41] Wessex Parallel Web Texts, 'What Is 'Mouvance'?', 2014 <http://wpwt.soton.ac.uk/mouvance/mouvance.htm> [accessed 16 June 2022].

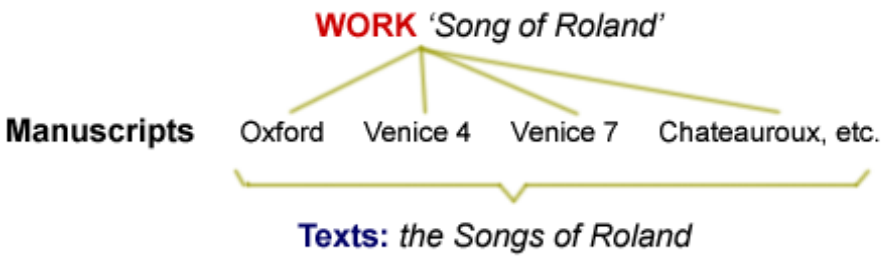

Figure 1

Credit: Wessex Parallel Web Texts http://wpwt.soton.ac.uk/mouvance/mouvance.htm

Rather, the texts would be more accurately described as being products of the traditions that vernacular group associated with or created around The Song of Roland.[42] Zumthor's concept is particularly relevant because he explains *mouvance* as being influenced by the oral culture of the Middle Ages, as literacy was a skill possessed by a select elite few. As such, most individuals received information through conversation or dictation by a literate member of the society.[43]

This begs a new question, one that Ong refers to obliquely and that Niles explicitly states.[44] Is an oral text (written transcription of an oral work) simply a written copy of the words spoken? As explained by Niles and Ong, any written transcription of an oral work is in fact a completely new work authored by the translator, editor and/or scribe, and inspired by the original speaker. Exempla are arguably a great example of this, as written illustrations of the moral point of a priest's sermon. While the exempla is likely to include literal transcriptions of points of the sermon, it is unlikely that the sermon is captured word for word.[45] This is an important distinction to make, and one that highlights the relevance of McGann's arguments that texts are not solely produced by authors in a vacuum. The aims – cultural and social – of the scribe, editor and/or translator fundamentally alter the 'oral text' that is ultimately produced.

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[42] 'What Is 'Mouvance'?'
[43] Niles, 'Orality', p. 212.
[44] Ong, *Orality and Literacy,* p. 14 ; Niles, 'Orality' p. 211 .
[45] 'Exemplum', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 2010) <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662624.001.0001/acref-9780198662624-e-2087> [accessed 17 November 2022]; 'Redefining the Exemplum: Narrative, Ideology, and Subjectivity', in *Narrative, Authority and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*, ed. by Larry Scanlon, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature (Place: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 27–36 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511553011.002>.

Ultimately, Niles' co-opting of the term 'oral text' to mean written transcription of an oral performance and his description of oral texts as being 'third entities' aptly encapsulates the gap between oral culture and literary culture. Better understanding of oral culture cannot be achieved by ignorant conflation or attempts to directly translate oral works into written counterparts without acknowledging fundamental differences in function and context, as well as form. However, as a textual scholar, Niles falls prey to the mindset that editing these oral texts accurately is the main concern of this 'third entity' approach. While it is certainly an important focus, much like Zumthor's acknowledgment of the 'tradition-authored' nature of vernacular medieval texts, attempts to understand how written transcription captures and inadvertently alters oral performance would be improved by a focus on the unique oral context of these performances and the deeply social and communal contexts that shape their creation.

1.4 Cultural Translation

A fruitful approach to adopt in regard to 'third entities', is to conceive of them as translations and not mere transcriptions. As well as the likely need for a translation as between the original language and the language of publication, it is important for scholars who are writing about oral works to understand that writing itself is not a simple act of recording the work as they experienced it. Rather, they are transforming the work and engaging in what Burke refers to as a 'negotiation', which involves a 'complex exchange of ideas and consequent modification of meanings.'[46] In general, Translation Studies as a discipline has moved away from more 'mechanical' conceptions of translation, as merely a process of 'linguistic substitution'.[47] Now, and since the 80s, the general understanding is that translation occurs not between two (or more) languages, but between two (or more) cultures, with language operating as the carrier through which expressions of culture are conveyed.

[46] P. Burke, 'Cultures of Translation in Early Modern Europe', in *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by P. Burke and R. Po-chia Hsia, 1st edn (Place: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 7–38 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511497193.002>.
[47] H. Trivedi, 'Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation', in *Benjamins Translation Library*, ed. by P. St-Pierre and P. C. Kar (Place: Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), LXXI, 277–87 <https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.71.27tri>.

Arguably, this complicates translation even more because the translator needs to not only understand and convey the meaning of the actual words they are translating, they are somehow also charged with understanding and conveying the subtext and cultural context in loaded words and phrases. Indeed, it seems as though a translator must also be a mini ethnographer. How then does a translator translate something like poetry, which can be obscure and loaded even in one's native language?

A helpful practical guide to translating Yorùbá 'oral poetry' is offered by Olabiyi Yai, a Dahomean-Yorùbá literary scholar with an expertise in the oral history and culture of Bénin.[48]In his article, Yai seems to echo the sentiment of Lord, describing oral poetry – this is the word he uses to describe the oral performance, not transcriptions of it – as being unique in its uninterrupted production, and challenges textual scholars' attempts to engage with oral poetry critically.[49] He asserts that textual criticism fails to accurately engage with oral poetry because the 'foundational' understanding of text belies its reliance on writing/the written word.[50] As such, Yai posits that for an external translator attempting to effectively analyse an oral work, some best practices he recommends are: '

1. The translator must first be immersed in the culture of the source language
2. Search for viable and orally acceptable equivalent forms in the target language
3. Extensive experimentation in oral rendition is required, with a written text merely relegated to a visual aid
4. Performance is non-mediated'[51]

As we can see, any efforts to translate (meaning from one language to another) an oral performance is, in the opinion of Yai, best achieved through oral composition of an equivalent work, with written text being an accommodation akin to alternative text for visually impaired individuals. Can such an approach be applied to oral texts (meaning written transcriptions of oral works) ubiquitously? The first suggestion, though logical, is likely more familiar to anthropologists like Yai than textual scholars.

[48] O. Babalola Yai, 'THE HERSKOVITS LEGACY IN AFRICAN ORAL NARRATIVE ANALYSIS AND BEYOND', ed. by J. Glassman, Jane I Guyer, and M. F. E. Ebeling, Program of African Studies Working Papers, 5 (Place: Northwestern University, 1999).
[49] O. Yai, 'Issues in Oral Poetry: Criticism, Teaching and Translation', in *Discourse and Its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Place: Birmingham, University of Birmingham, Centre of West African Studies, 1989).
[50] Yai, 'Issues in Oral Poetry: Criticism, Teaching and Translation'.
[51] Yai, 'Issues in Oral Poetry: Criticism, Teaching and Translation'.

However, as discussed above, traditional textual scholarship benefits from the adoption of interdisciplinary approaches and practices, such as the sociological approach described by McGann. In the case of oral works and oral cultures, it is even more imperative that the scholar or researcher immerse themselves in the culture of the source language, as many aspects of language are likely to play key contextual roles in meaning building. The second suggestion is similarly logical, and though it appears simple, it requires the first suggestion to have been carried out. Finding an equivalent (form/words) in the target language can aid analysis by analogy, by providing scholars with a parallel. However, finding an equivalent is not merely creating or investigating a similar oral performance, it requires a knowledge of the form ***and*** function of the oral original, as well as knowledge of particular oral features of the original performance that may not be directly translatable in the target language or indeed, into written word. Importantly, the second suggestion indicates what the third suggestion makes plain and raises a seminal question for any scholars attempting to analyse oracy: how does one accurately describe oral works and their characteristics as a literate scholar, without inadvertently centring literate assumptions about authorship, authorial intention, creativity, application of skill, and form – and its relationship to function, or indeed lack thereof? This is especially difficult to answer considering the reliance of all literate scholars, including myself, on the written word as a medium to share their research.

1.5 Conclusion

When it comes to transcription and written analysis, as argued by Niles, any written analysis or transcription of an oral work should be considered a 'third entity', and the product of interpretation by the scribe/researcher, the oral composer/performer, and where applicable, the translator. This is not controversial; however, it is also important to recognise than textualizing the oral work into the written form alters the features and function of the work, as well as the form. As such, researchers must clearly disclaimer their transcription as being for specific aims and not as a copy of the original work. In fact, it may be helpful to think of these third entity transcriptions as one of the many variants of the work. As variants, McGann's approach can be used to consider the creation and analysis of these third entity texts. His emphasis on the impact of social forces can be understood in this context as recognising the impact of the researcher writing the oral work down, as well as any translations or

other changes. Furthermore, considering any third entity texts as variants gives scholars the latitude to conduct region specific research and describe practices/works as they experienced them, without feeling the need to standardise or establish an archetype. Variations in findings can be identified, highlighted, and appreciated instead of considered aberrations obscuring the original.

This is a major assumption textual scholars need to be wary of that is particularly difficult to grapple with. Even in communities and groups that share established beliefs, regional variations abound and for each sub-group, their variation is just as valid to them as the established belief. As such, it is entirely possible that some conclusions drawn at the end of this work may conflict with conclusions drawn in a separate work discussing the same supra-belief of a different sub-group. The instinct to classify these variations in a hierarchical form or establish a 'unified' homogenous version of some of the more similar oral works must be checked. With oral works, and the regional cultural variations that arise, differing groups likely have differing viewpoints on the desirability of such endeavours. As such, insisting on such an effort can often run directly in contravention of the preferences of the group one is engaging with, which is problematic in terms of gaining the trust of one's guides/informers and runs the risk of being disrespectful. It could also lead to warped, even syncretic conclusions. This is an especially sensitive concern due to the fact that most transcribers are individuals outside the culture of the community that they are observing and describing, which means that localisations, approximations in meaning, etc would likely obscure not only the content of the work they are attempting to transcribe, but the contexts in which the oral works are applied by the community.

For the scholar attempting to study oral works in their oral form, carrying out primary research of the cultures that they belong to is unavoidable. In this way, the anthropological approach is the most ideal method of investigation. Furthermore, the scholar should also discuss with the learned members of the oral culture they are researching how best to describe in written form the phenomena they are attempting to, so that their transcription best suits the aim they are trying to achieve. The emphasis the discipline places on specific cultural knowledge is paramount when investigating oral works. It is extremely important for all scholars involved in orality research to start with Tonkin's warnings in mind and approach the work without pre-conceptions. They should attempt to study the specifics of the cultural and social

interplay and their effect on the specific oral work they are investigating, rather than attempting to generalise or discover general trends based on their previous experience with written texts. It is my hope that this thesis will begin to uncover some specific examples that can be of use to researchers, in reconfiguring their approaches and mindsets.

Though it could be said that immersion is a difficult thing to achieve given the amount of time it would take to familiarise oneself with the culture/language they are interested in; it is my opinion that the first two guidelines set out by Olabiyi Yai, set out an unambiguous and effective approach for literate and foreign scholars attempting to study oracy. Granted, it seems like this approach is likely to be time, labour, and energy intensive with a limited scope of information gathered, which also brings into question the efficacy of this approach. However, remembering Tonkin's salient advice to unlearn assumptions and train oneself to notice features, I contend that such a mentality encapsulates a number of assumptions literate scholars must unlearn when approaching the study of oral works.

Chapter 2: First Look at the Verse Transcriptions

2.1 Introduction

In order to demonstrate the importance of context and the added value of the interdisciplinary approach I have described, section 2 will be an analysis of two written studies of Ifá Divination by William Bascom and Professor Wándé Abímbọ́lá.[52] Both transcriptions will be analysed at face value according to the interdisciplinary framework above.

Perhaps the most visible of Western African oral works, the Ifá verses hold a special place in Yorùbá culture in particular, but Ifá as term refers to the verses, the divination system, and the god that the verses are associated with – Ọ̀rúnmìlà, the god of wisdom and knowledge in the Yorùbá pantheon. One explanation for how he gained this title offered by an Ifá high priest in interview is that Ọ̀rúnmìlà was supposedly beside *Olódùmarè* as he was creating the world.[53] Irrespective of how the god is said to have gained his wisdom, it is accepted by all adherents that Ifá is indeed set apart from the rest of the pantheon and directed by Olódùmarè to 'use his profound wisdom to put the earth in order.'[54] In his fulfilling of this role, Ifá operates as a middleman, providing wisdom and knowledge from the gods and ancestors through Ifá priests who train in order to convey Ifá's guidance to mortals.[55] Different ethnic groups, ethnic sub-groups and diasporas unsurprisingly give rise to variations in terms and ritual practices, but the corpus is considered by adherents to be direct communications from Ọ̀rúnmìlà himself. As such, the belief is that in spite of cultural variations, the core values and messages of the corpus remain unchanged throughout time and place.[56]

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[52] Please note that Prof. Abímbọ́lá is referred to with this title throughout this dissertation as a sign of respect in line with Yorùbá tradition. Bascom is referred to by his last name alone in line with Western academic practise.

[53] The story of Ọ̀rúnmìlà being beside Olódùmarè was told to me by an the Olúwo (Ifá high priest) of Ijebu-Ode in an interview conducted by the author with the aid of her translator Folashodun Adebisi Shonubi; A. Adéèkọ́, "'Writing' and 'Reference' in Ifá', in *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, ed. by Jacob K. Olupona and Rowland O. Abiodun (Indiana University Press, 2016), pp. 66–88 <https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/stable/j.ctt1b7x4sw.10> [accessed 13 July 2022].

[54] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 9.

[55] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 9.; Also said by the Olúwo of Ijbu-Ode in interview.

[56] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 20; W. Abímbọ́lá, 'Continuity and Change in the Verbal, Artistic, Ritualistic, and Performance Traditions of Ifá Divination', in *Ifá Divination,*

Ifá divination has been written about by many interested scholars since 1853. Initially, much of this interest was supplementary to Christian conversion efforts carried out by believers, and the focus of these individuals was to learn and write about Yorùbá indigenous religion, so as to 'expose' the inadequacies of pagan belief compared to Christianity and better equip other evangelists to convert believers of the traditional faith.[57] This was the motivation of, for example, Reverend James Johnson in his 1899 book '*Yorùbá Heathenism*'.[58] Rev. Johnson explains some finer details of the divination process and more generally of the experience required to become and practice as an Ifá priest. Written from the perspective of a devout reverend, it must be said that some of Johnson's description suffers from a lack of clarity, focusing commentary instead on the wrongness or sinfulness of the practices he is describing.[59] Nevertheless, Johnson's descriptions are important because of its status as one of the first books about Ifá divination written by a Yorùbá author, with information received from a former priest.

There are books written before Rev. Johnson's that attempt to describe Ifá divination from a more academic perspective. William R. Bascom discusses most, if not all, of the works written about Ifá divination prior to his own.[60] Bascom was an American anthropologist who specialised in West African culture, folk mythology, and philosophy. He wrote various works about the Yorùbá people and in his book about Ifá Divination, he gives a brief overview of previous studies of Ifá, in which he shows that previous studies of Ifá created a body of knowledge that is of mixed quality; some studies being fairly accurate given the information is generally attained through observation by researchers with limited contextual knowledge (compared to a genuine former priest) of the religion or practices. Bascom's work is the first text of the two I will be spotlighting in this thesis. Published in 1969, the text is one of the first attempts (by a scholar) to transcribe the oral verses that form the foundation of

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Knowledge, Power, and Performance, ed. by J. K. Olupona and R. O. Abiodun (Place: Indiana University Press, 2016), pp. 32–42 <https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/stable/j.ctt1b7x4sw.7> [accessed 17 August 2022].

[57] A. Adéẹ̀kọ́, "Writing' and 'Reference' in Ifá', in *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, ed. by J. K. Olupona and Rowland O. Abiodun (Place: Indiana University Press, 2016), pp. 66–88 <https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/stable/j.ctt1b7x4sw.10> [accessed 13 July 2022].

[58] J. Johnson, *Yoruba Heathenism.* (Place: Exeter; London, James Townsend & Son, 1899, 1899).

[59] Johnson, *Yoruba Heathenism,* p. 50-52.

[60] W. R. Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Place: Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1969) <https://login.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/login?URL=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=11000&site=ehost-live> [accessed 20 September 2022].

Ifá Divination, and the Yorùbá indigenous belief more generally. Based in Ifẹ́, Bascom's transcription and translation efforts were aided by practicing babalawos (high priests of Ifá) who agreed to share excerpts of the oral verses with him.[61] The second text, published in 1976, is Prof. Abímbọ́lá's seminal work on Ifá verses, and is another of the few studies available on Ifá Divination that transcribes and translates some excerpts from the corpus of oral verses that underpin the entire religion. As a practicing priest himself, Prof. Abímbọ́lá's contribution to the literature is undoubtedly extremely illuminating. The aim of this chapter is to apply the framework formulated above to test its applicability and whether it yields any useful analysis.

2.2 Bascom's Transcription

Published by Indiana University Press in 1969, William Bascom's *'Ifá Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa'* was written as a result of the scholar's own keen interest in Yorùbá culture and society throughout his academic career.[62] Bascom notes that most of the data referenced in his monograph was gathered in 1937-1938 on a pre-doctoral fellowship, the rest of which was gathered during later visits in the 1950s and 1960s. The focus of this edition is set out rather clearly to be a? study of Yorùbá peoples' practise of Ifá divination – and the Ifá corpus as a key part of that practise – as opposed to a focus on the theology of Ifá as a belief system in general, or the intricacies of the social role Ifá occupies in Yorùbá culture.[63] From the very beginning, Bascom's approach assumes a level of familiarity with Yorùbá culture, or at least cultural studies in general, on an academic level. He begins the monograph with a discussion of previous studies carried out and evaluates their accuracy.[64] He describes Ifá as being comparable to 'other' Yorùbá cults and focuses the first part of his discussion on describing aspects of divination in scientific detail. Bascom is descriptive in his discussion of Yorùbá Ifá practices, but not explicative. Arguably, this approach is consistent with traditional aims of textual scholarship. The discussion of previous works Bascom starts with could be seen as a kind of detailed enumerative bibliography detailing past works that are similar in

[61] Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa,* p. 120.
[62] Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, Preface.
[63] Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, Preface.
[64] Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, pp. 13-25.

subject, and the details given of other transcriptions or versions of verses could be seen as similar to analytical bibliography. Importantly, he tells the audience what terms mean but does not relate them to concepts within the Yorùbá cultural context. He provides genus and species names in pursuit of scientific accuracy, without explaining the relevance of one plant over another – if there is any.
In the second part of the monograph, we find his transcription of the Ifá Verses. In transcribing the verses, Bascom opts for a prose format. He writes the Yorùbá original first and in his own words,

> [has] departed from convention, for example giving 'n(i) igba ti' as 'at time that' in the inter linear translation rather than ''nigbati' as ''when.' Parentheses enclose elided sounds; and hyphens join parts of Yorùbá compound words and their English equivalents. When two or more English words are required to translate one Yorùbá word, they are joined by colons, as in 'be:able' for 'le .[65]

In this section, he details the original Yorùbá verse on one page, with a literal translation under each line of Yorùbá – much in the vein of what Trivedi describes as mechanical linguistic substitution.[66] However, he follows this up with a more natural translation, entirely in English that attempts to express the contents of the verse more smoothly. This second translation benefits from detailed footnotes that contextualise names, specific events mentioned, plants, animals and where relevant, notes on how the story was explained to him by his informants and the meaning.[67] Footnotes can be verbose and confusing, but Bascom's use of footnotes throughout the verse transcription is truly an example of best practice, in that the footnotes are concise, clear, and always used to add relevant supporting information. This relates to his general approach throughout the monograph. Bascom seems to be writing for, if not other interested scholars, at least other interested readers who have some familiarity of the Yorùbá and ethnographic study in general. Such an audience is likely to appreciate concise, scientific language and dense, informative footnotes focused on historical and scientific facts and findings. The focus seems to be on highlighting the abstract reasonings that, for Bascom and other scholars like him,

[65] Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa,* 'Preface'.
[66] Trivedi, 'Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation, LXXI.
[67] Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 147.

logically underpin the metaphor-rich and complex language used in these verses. In Bascom's monograph, it seems that he considers the verses to be texts like any other, and ultimately separable from the people uttering the words if only accompanied by enough detail and background context.

2.3 Abímbọ́lá's Transcription

Published in Ibadan by Oxford University Press, Prof. Wándé Abímbọ́lá's '*Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus'* is based in large part on his Ph.D. thesis, and data he collected between 1963 – 1965.[68] He divides the monograph into 3 main sections: the first deals with some cultural context behind Ifá divination practise, and describes divination paraphernalia, as well as the training and initiation processes priests go through. The second section is a linguistic analysis of the literary style and structure of the Ifá verses. The third and final section deals more closely with the actual content of the verses and is the more obviously expository section.

Despite being based on his doctoral thesis, Prof. Abímbọ́lá's monograph is couched in very accessible, straightforward language. He uses very descriptive language and focuses on explaining the 'why' of Ifá divination and practices as well as the 'what'. Interestingly, he provides a very similar description of the practice and paraphernalia of Ifá priests, and he does this in a similar tone to Bascom.[69] However, there are slight differences in his layout and approach that remind us Prof. Abímbọ́lá is an adherent speaking from the position of an initiate.

[68] W. Bascom, review of *Review of Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus, Wande Abimbọla; Ifa Divination Poetry, Wande Abimbọla*, by Wande Abimbọla, *Research in African Literatures*, 10.2 (1979), 285–87.
[69] W. Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus* (Place: Ibadan, Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976).

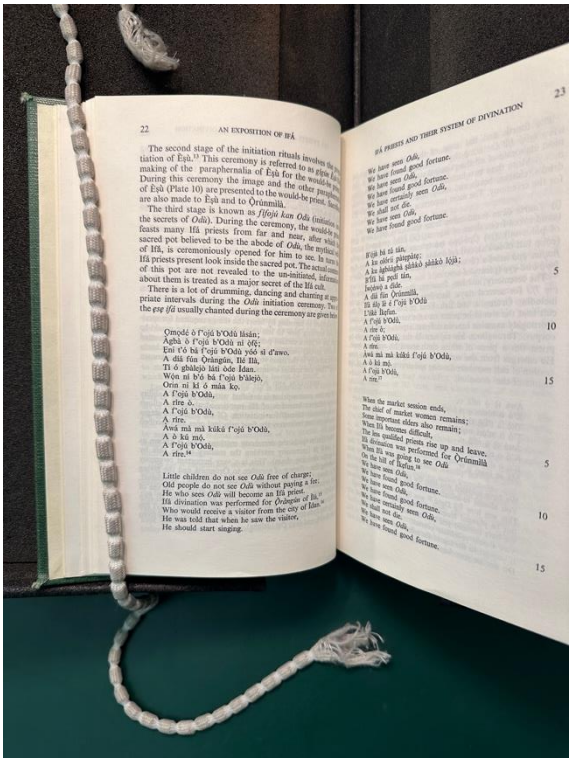

Figure 2
First example of an embedded excerpt from the Ifá verses in the text of Prof. Abímbọ́lá's analysis.
Credit: Picture taken by author

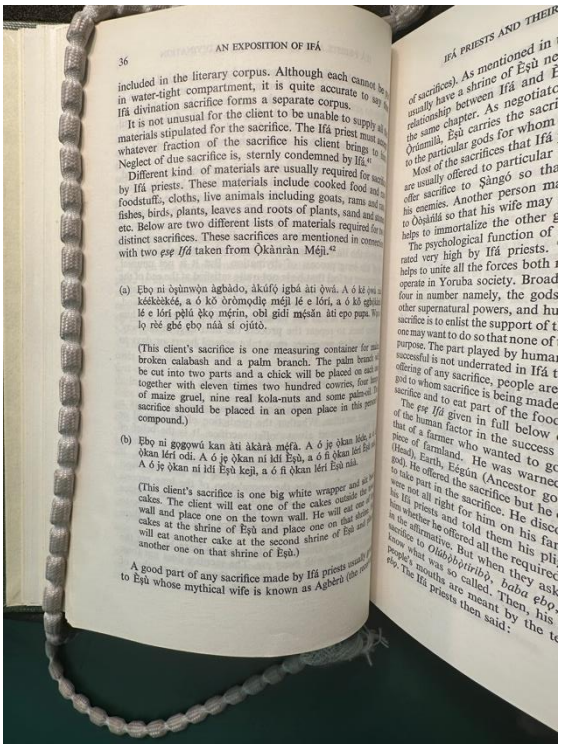

Figure 3
Second example of and embedded excerpt from the Ifá Verses in Prof. Abímbọ́lá's analysis.
Credit: Picture taken by author.

One example of this unique approach is the fact that Abímbọ́lá consistently sprinkles examples and excerpts of various ẹsẹ Ifá throughout his monograph, each used to expand or explain the specific theme/feature he is describing. Where used, he cites his source in the notes at the end of the monograph and not in text or in footnotes. Some of these are collected from other priests, unattributed to a specific odù and transcribed without reference to a given verse number.[70] Whereas Bascom separates the verse transcriptions from the background information, Abímbọ́lá uses the verses themselves to evidence his explanation in a manner that could be criticised as tautological but seems to be genuine. Although both scholars endeavour to provide background and context before focusing on the content of the ẹsẹ Ifá, Bascom focuses more on mechanical transcription intentionally writing down what was recited for him and clarifying the exact words spoken. Abímbọ́lá focuses on explaining *meanings* as well as diligently reproducing ẹsẹ Ifá in writing.

Further evidence of this is the fact that Abímbọ́lá not only uses of embedded quotations and excerpts, he also organises the complete transcriptions he makes according to theme. Prof. Abímbọ́lá divides the final section dealing with the content of the ẹsẹ Ifá into three themes: 'Orí and Man's Choice of Destiny', 'Man and the

[70] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 22.

Supernatural Powers', and 'Nature'.[71] When examining the content of the ẹsẹ Ifá in detail, Abímbọ́lá uses the selected Ifá verses to discuss the cultural perspective of the Yorùbá in relation to each theme; how they understand it, how that understanding shapes behaviour, and given the opacity of Yorùbá metaphor, how the language shapes the meaning of these verses. He does not analyse them a-contextually; he provides initial context in the form of general discussion, before recounting an excerpt of verse and then providing a verse-specific explanation of key themes and Yorùbá ideas encapsulated by the verse. This is important because Prof. Abímbọ́lá does take time to discuss some more mechanical aspects of the content in the ẹsẹ Ifá, but he does this specifically in the second section called 'Language and Style of the Ẹsẹ Ifá', where he lifts couplets and verse excerpts to demonstrate the linguistic idiosyncrasies of the Ifá verses.

2.4 Conclusion

Ultimately, both works appear very similar prima facie. Descriptions of practices and paraphernalia in particular are corresponding between both works, and the approach when it comes to explaining the odù in particular is also very similar between both works. Both of these works provide support for why an anthropological method of investigation is so well-suited to oral research. In his presentation of his findings, Bascom's work can be seen as an example of written oral research that is an archetype of the third-entity oral textual variant because of his foundation in observation, detailed description of background context, and the extent to which he identifies the variations between the Yorùbá Ifá and other groups in the Western African region who also practise.

What Prof. Abímbọ́lá's transcription provides, is a culture specific element that is key for the wider understanding of how meaning is made and expressed in the oral form for Yorùbá practise of Ifá. While Bascom himself sees little difference in his transcriptions and Prof. Abímbọ́lá's, I would advance that the difference is one of purpose and aim. As a Western scholar, Bascom demonstrates some methods of how one could more accurately approach oral study, but what he fails to identify that is at the heart of Prof. Abímbọ́lá's own approach is the notion that the narratives captured in the Ifá verses are but half of the full picture. In the third and final section

[71] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* pp. 72-111.

of Prof. Abímbọ́lá's work, he intentionally weaves in the history and epistemology of Yorùbá beliefs while transcribing excerpts of the Ifá Verses. Given the existence of booklets with excerpts from the Ifá Verses[72], sans explanation, I think Prof. Abímbọ́lá includes these detailed explanations and myths because he is aware of the audience for whom he is writing.

In Yorùbá culture, knowledge of snippets from the Ifá Verses (proverbs, parable-adjacent tales, etc) is common for the general public. However, any large-scale memorisation or even just familiarity with the verses is left in the purview of the Ifá priests, or babalawos. I believe that this is indicative of a cultural norm that informs the lack of interest in transcribing Ifá verses en masse for the Ìjẹ̀bú priests, which should be considered by any scholars interested in transcribing them (or other oral works) in future. For some of the Yorùbá, the Ifá verses are specialty knowledge, the benefit of which is difficult or even nonsensical to try and reap without the expert priests. Because of the way Ifá is sometimes understood and practised in Yorùbáland, transcriptions are likely to have a very limited relevance within the Ifá cult, and perhaps even less relevance outside of it.

For adherents there is pride in memorisation, and for Yorùbá non-believers who have converted to Christian or Islamic faiths, the knowledge is generally seen as blasphemous. Thus, when writing for an ignorant but interested audience, Prof. Abímbọ́lá takes pains to fill in the cultural gap that is present by explicating why the verses would touch on certain topics and briefly touching on how that knowledge would have been conveyed and understood. His detailed explanation of Yorùbá history is in my opinion relevant and necessary, as I found I better understood the ways in which form and function interacted and informed each other in the case of Yorùbá Ifá verses, the more I explored and learned Yorùbá history. What I found was that the orality of the verses is a cultural aspect that is as much a result of Yorùbá practices as it is an example of those practices.

[72] 'W. Abimbọla, *Ìjìnlẹ̀ Ohùn Ẹnu Ifá: Apá Kìíní*, Yoruba Classics, 2, 1st edn, 4 vols (Place: Glasgow: Wm. Collins, Sons and Co. Ltd., 1968), I; 'W. Abimbọla, *Ìjìnlẹ̀ Ohùn Ẹnu Ifá: Apá Kejì*, Yoruba Classics, 4, 1st edn, 4 vols (Place: Glasgow: Wm. Collins, Sons and Co. Ltd., 1969), II.

Chapter 3: Overview on Yorùbá History and Beliefs

3.1 Introduction

This realisation became extremely clear to me halfway through the research process when I was fortunate enough to acquire an audience with three Ifá priests based in Ìjèbú-Ode, Ògún State, Nigeria. Very graciously, the priests agreed to grant me an interview and answer my questions about their specific oral work and their philosophy of knowledge in general. It was during this interview that one of the priests gave the response that made me completely re-think my entire approach to the specific oral work I wanted to analyse, and then orality in general. In response to my query as to whether it would be possible to create a codified master corpus that all Ifá practitioners worldwide collaborated on, one Olúwo simply answered that it is possible, but there are different names for phenomena used in different regions and these names are important, so there is no need to change them because they matter to the people who use them.[73] It was this sentiment shifted my perspective on Ifá, and ultimately orality as a whole. For these priests, it seemed that the verses they recited, learned, and utilised in their roles as oracles were not themselves objective facts that must be standardised and recorded to the minutest of details. Rather, the verses were seen as truth, universal and identifiable despite cultural quirks. And the cultural quirks in question treated not as obstacles in the way of achieving a simplified abstraction, but relevant and respected aspects of tradition worthy of preserving.

Given the focus of this thesis on Ifá Verses in particular, I knew that continuing my initial aim of comparing the corpus with Western examples of oral works to extract a generalisable rubric for analysing such works would be unadvisable. Not only was my approach at odds with the philosophy of the community I was basing my research on, it also became clear to me that approaching orality and oral works from a distanced position of abstract rules largely based on written texts that could be applied generally was unlikely to yield any truly accurate or intuitive results. As mentioned in the literature review section, I realised that oral cultures and the works they produce are unique as a matter of fact because

[73] Original Yorùbá reads, 'O le ṣe. O le ṣe but [...] emi le ṣọ pe alẹ́lẹ́lẹ́ wọn o ṣọ pojumọmọ ta ba ṣọ pe nígbà tojumọmọ elè sùn la le [...] (see 19:30 of recording)' Transcribed and translated by the author.

they are likely inextricably linked to the specific cultural customs of the specific group. Indeed, as we shall see in the final chapter of this thesis, even the philosophy shared with me by the Ìjẹ̀bú-Ode priests is not necessarily shared by all practitioners of Ifá all over the world.

In this chapter, I will first set out important contextual background of the chosen oral case study, Ifá verses, and Yorùbá history, mythology, and philosophy and how this shapes meaning with regard to the corpus. As we will see, culture has an inescapable influence on the form and function of the Ifá verses in particular, such that it would be ruinous to attempt to transcribe and analyse any of the corpus without the expert knowledge of the priests to help account for and explain cultural nuances. This section aims to introduce readers to a general explanation of the way Ifá came to be, and the role it plays in Nigerian Yorùbá culture specifically. Although the Ifá divination system also exists in other ethnic groups and regions such as the Igbo, Nupe and Gwari peoples of Nigeria, and the Yorùbá peoples in Brazil, Cuba, Togo, etc.[74]

3.2 Historical Context

The Yorùbá people are perhaps one of the most populous ethnic groups in Africa. Yorùbá people make up about 21% of Nigeria's population, with an overall population of more than 47 million people spread across the African continent. Countries such as the Republic of Benin, Togo, Ghana, etc have large communities of Yorùbá people and this excludes the more than a hundred thousand peoples outside the continent.[75] Though 'Yorùbá' is now used as a collective term for the people and language, Yorùbá people are actually made up of a number of smaller sub-ethnic groups, each with their own dialects and geographic specific customs. Just a few examples include the 'Ọ̀yọ́, Awori, Owo, Ìjẹ̀bú, Ekiti, Ìjẹ̀ṣà, Ifẹ̀, Ondo, and Àkókó'. [76] It seems that the term 'Yorùbá' was not widely used to refer to a collective identity before the nineteenth century, when Yorùbá pioneer elite adopted the term

[74] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 1.
[75] 'Yoruba People', *Wikipedia*, 2022 <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Yoruba_people&oldid=1110027851> [accessed 15 September 2022].
[76] 'Geography and Society', in *The Yoruba from Prehistory to the Present*, ed. by A. Usman and T. Falola (Place: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 1–28 <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107587656.001>.

from Christian missionaries.[77] Perhaps unsurprisingly given the amount of distinct sub-group identities, historically 'the Yorùbá nation was not one geographical entity governed by one leader.'[78] The largest kingdom was the kingdom of Ọ̀yọ́, which, at its height covered the majority of the Yorùbá-speaking people, and up to the banks of the River Niger (see Fig. 4).[79]

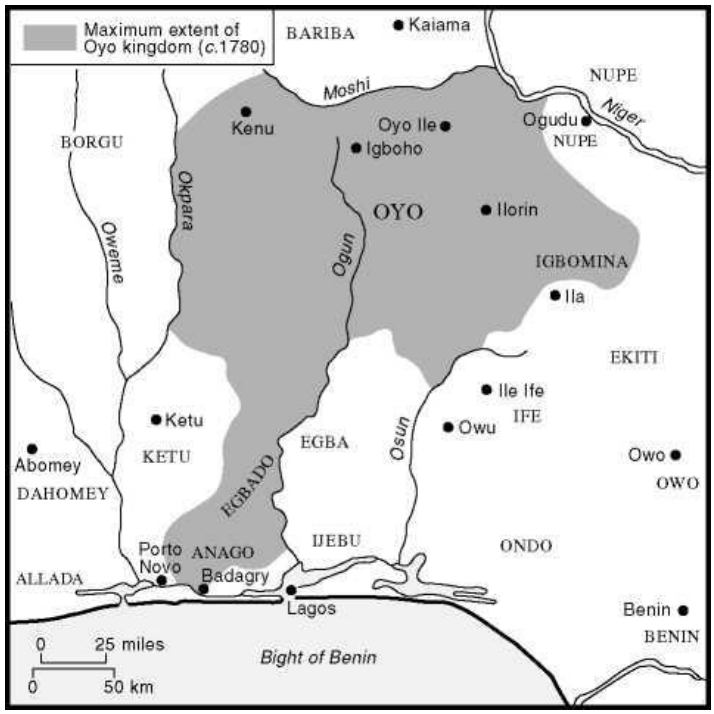

Figure 4
Yorubaland, fifteenth-eighteenth centuries
Credit: Modupeolu Faseke, http://www.worldhistory.biz/sundries/37576-yoruba-speaking-peoples.html

Even with the kingdom of Ọ̀yọ́'s domination, other Yorùbá speaking kingdoms that chose to remain independent retained full autonomy and a strong sense of pride towards their specific sub-group identity; for example, the Ìjèbú people prided themselves on their business acumen and efforts to build a trade empire, rather than a political one (and still do to this day).[80] Though the term 'Yorùbá' is used globally to refer to the geographical area, language and the collective of people, there is

[77] T. Falola, 'The Yorùbá Nation', in *Yorùbá Identity and Power Politics*, ed. by A. Genova and T. Falola (Boydell & Brewer, 2006), pp. 29–48 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/yoruba-identity-and-power-politics/yoruba-nation/C306461CC9ABF9D5754B6C3D1D10148B> [accessed 15 September 2022].
[78] Falola, 'The Yorùbá Nation', p. 30.
[79] Falola, 'The Yorùbá Nation', p. 30; 'Geography and Society', in *The Yoruba from Prehistory to the Present*, ed. by Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 1–28 <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107587656.001>.
[80] Falola, 'The Yorùbá Nation', p. 31.

arguably still a strong sense of 'subnationalism' that belies the historically disparate and autonomous kingdoms within the larger umbrella of what we now refer to as 'Yorùbáland'.[81]

Given the multiplicity of sub-groups within the larger Yorùbá ethnic group, there is sometimes debate as to whether all the Yorùbá subgroups are indeed Yorùbá at all. Many Yorùbá individuals in Nigeria still identify themselves as their sub-group primarily, and Yorùbá second. Some Yorùbá scholars, such as Akinwunmi and Asiwaju, have identified commonalities that they believe are shared by all Yorùbá people:

i) They claim that their ancestor was Odùduwà
ii) They regard Ile-Ifẹ̀ as their cradle
iii) They have praise songs, cognomens or oríkì about themselves
iv) Their greetings commence with *'E ku', 'Aku' or 'Okun o'*
v) They were traditionally agrarian
vi) They form monarchical governments
vii) They are highly urbanized people
viii) They believe in Ifá or Ogun deities and the concept of destiny or órí
ix) They dress differently from other non-Yorùbá speaking people
x) They practice customs specific to the Yoruba people, such as the way they greet elders by prostration and kneeling and the way they conduct weddings and burials.
xi) The lands occupied by the different Yoruba-speaking groups are geographically contiguous.[82]

As helpful as this list is, it is important for researchers to approach it as a general description and not an objective checklist. As Karin Barber notes in her study of Oríkì,

> Scholars of Yoruba culture and society have always had to deal with the fact that there is *no such thing as a 'representative'* social unit. The concept seems inapplicable, in a place where there is, first, such regional diversity, and second, so many levels of organisation. It is not just that Yoruba are divided into recognised 'sub-groups' such as Ìjẹ̀bú, Ìjẹ̀ṣà, Ọ̀yọ́ or Ekiti, each of which has distinctive social and cultural features while possessing a common language and sharing fundamental social and cultural principles; but that even within any such Yoruba 'sub-group', different towns have

[81] Falola, 'The Yorùbá Nation', p. 31.
[82] Usman and Falola, 'Geography and Society'; T. Akinwunmi, 'Ifa and the Northern Factor in Okun-Yoruba's Choice of Red Burial Cloth Tradition', in *Northeast Yorubaland: Studies in the History and Culture of a Frontier Zone*, ed. by A Olukoju, Z.O. Apata, and O. Akinwunmi (Place: Ibadan, Rex Charles Publication, 2003), pp. 85–104; A Asiwaju, 'Dynamics of Yoruba Studies', in *Studies in Yoruba History and Culture: Essays in Honour of Professor S. O. Biobaku*, ed. by G.O. Olusanya (Place: Ibadan, University Press Limited, 1983), pp. 26–41.

> different cultural traditions; different gods are prominent and different art forms are emphasised from one place to the next.[83] (emphasis added)

Thus, cautiously taking the list provided, we will briefly expand on some of the elements posited by Akinwunmi and Asiwaju and explore them to better familiarise ourselves with a generalised sense of Yorùbá culture, customs, and ways of thinking.

The first and second items on the list refer to the creation myth believed by Yorùbá people, that the almighty creator God, known as Olódùmarè, sent Odùduwà down from heaven to create land and the human race.[84] Variations of this myth exist, and some groups believe Odùduwà landed elsewhere before migrating to Ile-Ifẹ̀.[85] However, the most common version recounted is the version in which Odùduwà is believed to have landed in Ile-Ifẹ̀. Regardless of whether it was his location of first landing or not, by virtue of the fact that all myths have Ile-Ifẹ̀ as Odùduwà's settlement site, it is considered by most Yorùbás to be the 'cradle of the Yorùbá', and Odùduwà considered the first ancestor.[86]

[83] K. Barber, 'Anthropology, Text and Town', in *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town*, ed. by Karin Barber (Place: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 6 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/i-could-speak-until-tomorrow/anthropology-text-and-town/F5B4B5C3690055B9AA94C49866685FBD> [accessed 16 September 2022].
[84] Usman and Falola, 'Geography and Society'; 'THE FOUNDERS OF THE YORUBA NATION', in *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*, ed. by O. Johnson and S. Johnson, Cambridge Library Collection - African Studies (Place: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 143–54 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511702617.014>.
[85] Usman and Falola, 'Geography and Society', p. 1.
[86] Idem.

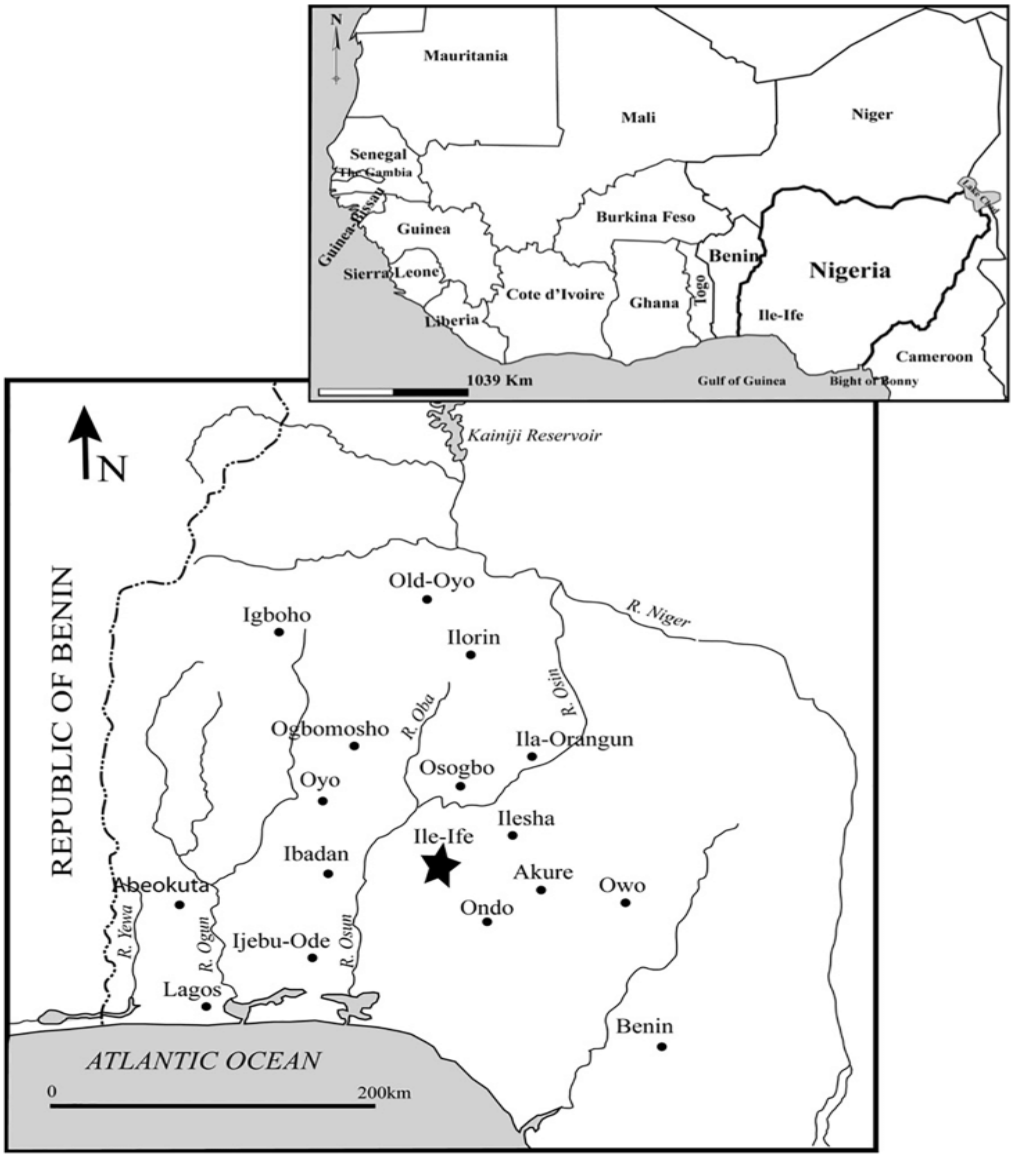

Figure 5

Location of Ile-Ifẹ̀ and other major towns and cities in Southwest Nigeria.

Credit: Babalola, Abidemi. (2017). Ancient History of Technology in West Africa: The Indigenous Glass/Glass Bead Industry and the Society in Early Ile-Ife, Southwest Nigeria. Journal of Black Studies. 48. 501-527. 10.1177/0021934717701915.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317775780_Ancient_History_of_Technology_in_West_Africa_The_Indigenous_GlassGlass_Bead_Industry_and_the_Society_in_Early_Ile-

3.3. Yorùbá beliefs and philosophy

By claiming a deity as their ancestor, Yorùbá people establish a closeness to the divine. Though this closeness could be viewed as a pretension, I would argue that it is the result – and expression – of a worldview that traditionally focuses on the spiritual to the same extent as the physical. The Yorùbá believe in two main realms – the visible world of the living (ayé) and the invisible spiritual realm (ọ̀run). To this point, another name the Yorùbá use to refer to Olódùmarè is 'Ọlọrun', which translates as 'Lord of the heavens'.[87] The many names used by the Yorùbá people to refer to Olódùmarè speak to the Yorùbá understanding of his role in the world and the powers he possesses.[88] Olódùmarè is translated as 'The King or Chief unique who holds the sceptre, wields authority and has the quality which is superlative in worth, and he is at the same time permanent, unchanging and reliable'.[89] Unlike Abrahamic faiths, the Yorùbá belief in one almighty creator God does not preclude belief in multiple lesser gods. These lesser gods are known as the orișa and function almost like delegates of Olódùmarè; they are closer to the mortal plane and serve more specific functions in the daily life of humans.

The Yorùbá believe that the two realms are connected, though in ọ̀run, the realm is inhabited by spirits, the unborn, deities and all other incorporeal entities.[90] Ayé, as the physical realm, is populated by living things and corporeal consciousnesses. Importantly, although the realm of ọ̀run is only accessible to spiritual beings, the realms are not 'hermetically sealed off' from each other.[91] Spirits and other incorporeal entities are able to influence events occurring in the physical realm and communicate with those in the physical realm. This communication is mediated by Ọ̀rúnmìlà, who is the Yorùbá orișa of wisdom and knowledge.[92]

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[87] 'Religion and World View', in *The Yoruba from Prehistory to the Present*, ed. by A. Usman and T. Falola (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 271 <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107587656.012>; 'RELIGION', in *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*, ed. by Obadiah Johnson and Samuel Johnson, Cambridge Library Collection - African Studies (Place: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 26 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511702617.008>.
[88] Usman and Falola, 'Religion and World View', p. 272.
[89] J. O. Awolalu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Place: Ibadan, Onibonoje Press & Book Industries, 1979), p. 38-39.
[90] Ọlásopé O. Oyèláràn, 'Èṣù and Ethics in the Yorùbá World View', *Africa*, 90.2 (2020), 377–407 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972019001098>.
[91] Oyèláràn, 'Èṣù and Ethics in the Yorùbá World View', p. 385.
[92] Usman and Falola, 'Religion and World View', p. 274.

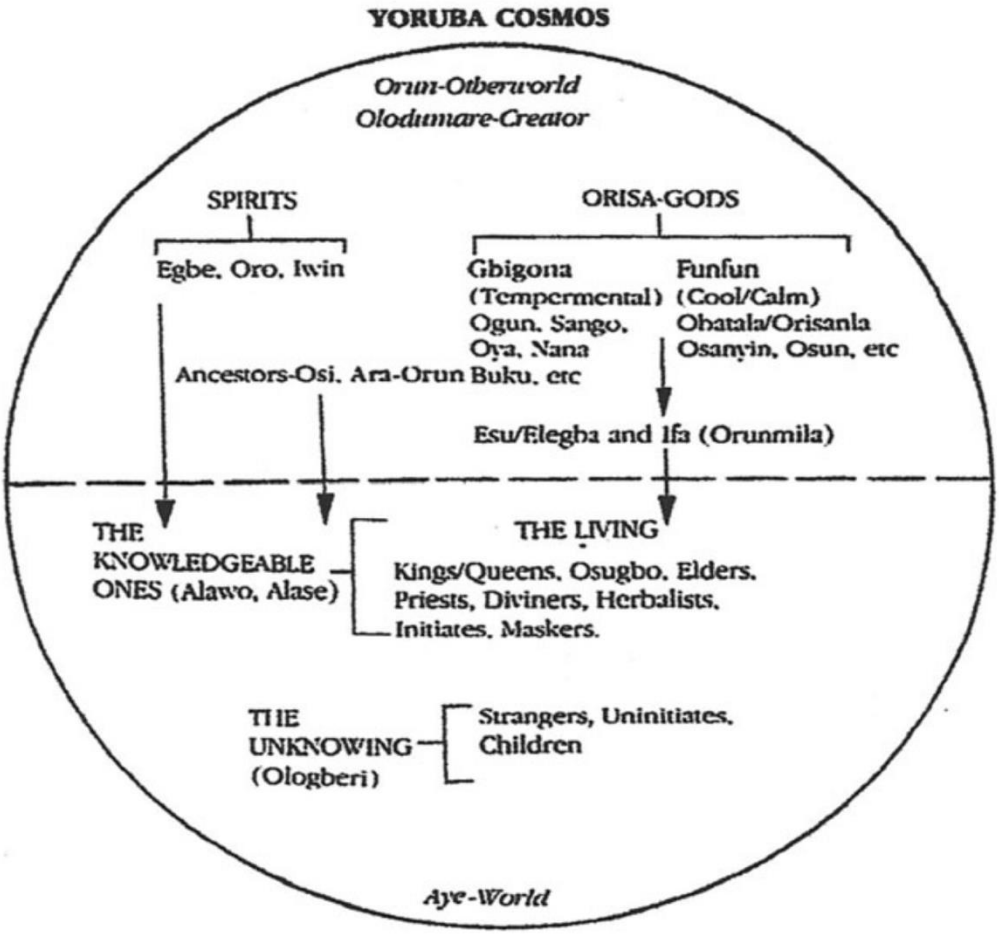

Figure 6
Yorùbá Cosmos
Credit: Oyèláràn, Ọlásopé O. 2020. 'Èṣù and Ethics in the Yorùbá World View,' Africa, 90.2 (Cambridge University Press): 377–407
http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0001972019001098

The orișas worshipped by Yorùbá people vary between sub-groups and geographical region are difficult to number conclusively. Estimates range between 201 and 1,700.[93] However, for ease of understanding the orișa can be placed in three categories; primordial divinities, believed to be the divinities that were present when Olódùmarè created the universe and are usually considered to have partaken in creation under his direction. Orișa-nla (or Ọbatalá) is the arch-divinity directly

[93] Awolalu, *West African Traditional Religion*, p. 74.

under Olódùmarè tasked with creating earth and humanity. Some tellings of the Yorùbá creation myth cite Ọbatalá as the creator of the earth and not Odùduwà, while others claim that the responsibility given to Ọbatalá was stolen by Odùduwà when he was drunk. The other primordial orișa are Ọ̀rúnmìlà (also known as Ifá) who was previously mentioned to be the god of wisdom and knowledge, Ògún and Èșù. Ògún is the god of iron and war, while Èșù is a powerful god that fulfils the role of 'Inspector General', so to speak.[94] His common designation as a 'trickster' god is due to the fact that he does not act in the interests of anyone but Olódùmarè, as other orișa do. His benevolence towards humanity and other orișa depends to a large extent on whether the individual has correctly completed prescribed sacrificial rituals.[95] The second category is deified ancestors who are believed to have been extraordinary humans that lived on earth and achieved impressive feats.[96] As a result of these extraordinary acts, after their death they are deified and worshipped. The most popular example of this type of orișa is Ṣàngó, the Yorùbá god of thunder and lightning who is said to have been an early king of the Ọ̀yọ́ kingdom.[97]
The final category of orișa is the divinities that are personifications of natural forces and features. The spirits associated with mountains, caves, rivers, etc are referred to by the place they make their home, and these abodes are considered sacred places where people can worship and offer sacrifices.[98]

One more important orișa that does not quite fit into either of the three categories is the Orí. Literally meaning 'inner head', the Orí is believed to be the spiritual manifestation of the destiny of an entity.[99] Humans, orișa and other entities (such as witches) all have orí, and it is believed that a person's destiny depends to a large extent on the type of orí he chose in heaven. The Orí is considered a personal god that has the ultimate influence over an individual's life. It is believed that without the approval of an individual's Orí, no other orișa can grant the individual's wish.[100] As such, the Orí must be always appeased. When issues arise in an individual's life, they should engage the services of an Ifá priest who can commune with their Orí through Ọ̀rúnmìlà. They can then ascertain what actions they must take to appease

[94] Awolalu, *West African Traditional Religion,* p. 82.
[95] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 152.
[96] Usman and Falola, 'Religion and World View', p. 273.
[97] Awolalu, *West African Traditional Religion,* p. 84.
[98] Awolalu, *West African Traditional Religion,* p. 73.
[99] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 114.
[100] Idem.

their Orí and change their fortunes.[101]As the Orí is the sole determinant of an individual's fortunes on earth, it is especially important to be able to communicate with and satisfy it, so as to ensure a good life. Orí can be good or bad, and individuals with bad Orí are doomed to suffer bad fortunes no matter how much effort they expend to change their fortunes. To 'mend' a bad Orí, one would need to perform a sufficient sacrifice, as prescribed by an Ifá priest.[102] For individuals with good Orí, though they are in better positions than those in the opposite situation, they must still expend effort to achieve their good fortune.

The role of the orișa and belief in predestination bring important considerations about Yorùbá ethics and how they differ from Western notions of morality to the fore. Most obviously, this conception of destiny and the relative powerlessness of individuals to change their fortunes on earth is diametrically opposed to some medieval notions of morality and poverty, which held that illness and poverty were the result of sin, or divine retribution for misdeeds.[103] Also striking, but perhaps unsurprising, is the importance of practical actions and accountability for one's actions, compared to the more abstract Western philosophical notions of 'goodness' and 'evil'.[104] Yorùbá religion does of course believe in good actors and bad actors; indeed, many Ifá verses focus on how to protect oneself from the Ajogun or enemies of man.[105] However, there is also a widespread acknowledgement and acceptance in Yorùbá traditional beliefs that bad things can and do happen to individuals that may simply be unfortunate, weak, or ignorant. It seems that Yorùbá moral philosophy does not view religion as a tool to cultivate a moral rectitude that is otherwise unachievable. Instead, the emphasis is on character (iwa). Some of the virtues that evidence good character are chastity, hospitality, unselfishness, kindness and generosity, truth, respecting elders/others, fairness, family togetherness, hard work, co-operation, obedience, and gratitude. Universal as these virtues are, they are explained in the specific Yorùbá context by Lawal et. al as evidence of the Yorùbá 'emphasis on their ethical systems […] to order a peaceful

[101] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 115.
[102] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 148.
[103] N. G. Siraisi, 'The Formation of Western European Medicine', in *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Place: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 1–16 <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.01534> [accessed 19 April 2022].
[104] N. Lawal, M. N. O. Sadiku, and P. A. Dopamu, *Understanding Yoruba Life and Culture* (Place: Trenton, NJ, Africa World Press, 2004), p. 156.
[105] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 111.

and happy co-existence'.[106] Thus we see that while moral behaviour is important to please God, it is also important to facilitate living in harmony with one's community and enjoying a good life on earth. Nevertheless, we do have to answer to God for our behaviour on earth, and some Yorùbás believe that there are two heavens; one where the conscientious people go ('Good Heaven') and one where the wicked go ('Heaven of Potsherds'). While it is not exactly clear what the condition of this 'Heaven of Potsherds' is like, Yorùbá scholars argue that it is not like Abrahamic notions of hell, with eternal torment.[107]

In a culture where the inherent 'goodness' of a person is not the most important concern and right and wrong are far less fixed concepts, it is important to have an intermediary for not only the orișa and humans, but for all entities and their Orí. Ifá divination provides an almost direct line to commune with one's Orí or an orișa when they are facing difficulties in life. Through divination, an individual may rectify their situation.

[106] Lawal, Sadiku, and Dopamu, *Understanding Yorùbá Life and Culture,* p. 169.
[107] Lawal, Sadiku, and Dopamu, *Unnderstanding Yorùbá Life and Culture,* p. 170-171.

Chapter 4: Cultural Contextual Analysis of the Verses

4.1 Introduction

In the previous section, some epistemological and historical context of Yorùbá belief and culture was explored. Given what I hope to have been new illuminating information, the aim of this final section is to apply this knowledge to Prof. Abímbọ́lá, Bascom's and my own analyses of the corpus. The initial analysis in Chapter 2 was focused on the application of insights gained from the interdisciplinary literature review. Indeed, much is gained from interdisciplinary approaches, and I believe Chapter 2 has provided some valuable insights as to how transcriptions or 'oral texts' can be analysed in a way that recognises their identity as 'third-entity' creations that aim to maximise academic efficiency and considers cultural relevance in its explanations.

However, as noted above, exposition can be a key step in moving from knowledge to understanding. It is my belief that if scholars are ever to approach orature in its own right, they must do more than simply learn about oral works and the cultures that inform them. They must attempt to understand the motivations and mindset of the cultures in question, because it is this understanding that forms the basis of understanding the way form and function interact in the specific context of orature.

4.2 Ifá Divination

The following sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 will be spent discussing the tools used by Ifá priests when carrying out a divination and specifics about how the divination is performed. This level of detail is needed because though the Ifá verses are the oral culture I am focusing on, they are not commonly consulted outside of the divination setting (except in a few specific circumstances, one of which is described in 4.2.2). This means that the tools, the settings, and the rituals all have a material effect on how the verses are shared with clients, and highlights the inextricability in this case of context, culture, and oral text. Unlike the Song of Roland or the Homeric Epics, both of which are considered to be composed orally before written down at a later point in time, the Ifá Verses do not have literary character that is separable from the context in which the verses are spoken. They obviously have the potential for literary analysis as works in their own right, but this can be difficult given the opacity of

expression often found in the verses. Though fragments and written excerpts exist, not much is confirmed about the period they are from. Furthermore, they are generally found in brief collections of verses authored by converted adherents attempting to compare the wisdom of the corpus with that of the Bible.[108] They are difficult to read and understand, and this is even without considering how difficult it is to source, transcribe, and translate these excerpts. Some written excerpts are a mystery to Ifá priests themselves, as they refer to events or individuals through dense metaphor, the meaning of which has been lost. The opacity of the metaphors used are themselves an intentional characteristic of the verses, likely because they were never intended to be accessible and shared with the wider public on their own. The Ifá Verses, and the knowledge within them, have always been the domain of a specific cult, one in which priests and adherents devote their lives to continually learning and practicing.

[108] A. Adéẹ̀kọ́, ‘‘Writing’ and ‘Reference’ in Ifá’, in *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, ed. by Jacob K. Olupona and Rowland O. Abiodun (Indiana University Press, 2016), pp. 66–88 <https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/stable/j.ctt1b7x4sw.10> [accessed 13 July 2022].

4.2.1 Divination Tools

Figure 7

An Ifá priest sits with his paraphernalia.

Directly in front of the priest is the divining tray, with the ritual powder (iyẹrosùn). To the right of the diving tray is the irò Ifá, and to the left is a cloth that has on it the ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀ at bottom left, and at bottom right are cowrie shells and other lots which are collectively known as ìbò. Lastly on the top right are the ikin.

Credit: Image taken by author

Both Bascom and Abímbọ́lá begin their monographs by providing some description of the items used by Ifá priests to carry out divination. The main tools highlighted by both authors are the palm nuts (*ikin*), the divining chain (*ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀*), the divining tray, powder (*iyẹrosùn*) and what Bascom calls divining 'bells' referred to by Abímbọ́lá simply as tappers (*irò* Ifá).[109] The divining tray is where the babalawo pours the iyẹrosùn, which is a powder made from a tree sacred to Ifá practitioners. Bascom

[109] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 26; Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 11.

raises with Clarke's theory that the tree is likely the camwood tree, but notes that Dalziel found iyẹrosùn used to refer to the dust from both the Camwood and Barwood trees.[110] Prof. Abímbọ́lá says about the iyẹrosùn is that it is a wood dust from a sacred tree, that is used to mark the figures of the *odù* Ifá during divination.[111] The tapper is used to hit the divining tray before one starts the divining process, so as to call the attention of Ifá himself (the god). Bascom claims that this is because practitioners believe that each divination is supervised by Ifá himself.[112] The truth of this is difficult to ascertain, as Prof. Abímbọ́lá makes no mention of this, but my own informants did confirm that in each divination they carried out, they used the *irò* Ifá to call the god's attention before they began. The palm nuts and divining chain serve the same purpose, in that both are thrown and interpreted to identify which of the *odù* Ifá are to be recited for the client. Both authors note that the *ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀* is used more frequently than the *ikin*, because of its comparative ease of use. As Bascom handily explains,

> The divining chain, which is about three to four feet long, usually consists of eight halves of seed shells or pods joined together by short sections of chain three to four inches long. The middle section of the chain, by which it is held, is somewhat longer. The other sections are of equal length, so that when the chain is held in the middle, the four shells on the right and the four on the left hang down side by side. The chain is thrown with the right hand, which is said to be used consistently in Ifa divination, even by left handed individuals. It is tossed away from the diviner in such a way that the two open ends fall nearest to him and the two sides fall parallel. If the shells or pods do not fall side by side in straight lines so that the figures can be easily read, the chain may be adjusted by drawing the two ends toward the diviner, with care taken not to overturn any of the pods. Each half seed shell can fall with either the concave inner surface or the convex outer surface facing up. It is essential that the two surfaces of the shells, or of other materials used in place of them, can be distinguished.[113]

[110] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 34-35.
[111] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 12.
[112] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 36.
[113] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 29.

Figure 8
Ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀, The divining chain
Credit: © Wande Abímbọ́lá, UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage
https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ifa-divination-system-00146

If the concave inner surface if facing up, the priest marks a single line in the iyẹrosùn on the divining tray. If the convex outer surface is facing up, the priest marks two lines in the divining tray. For the *ikin*, sixteen 'ritually consecrated' palm nuts are used, and thrown between the hands of the priest, after which the priest attempts to grab as many palm nuts as possible with their right hand.[114] This continues until either one or two nuts remain in the left hand. If one is left in the palm, the babalawo marks two lines in the iyẹrosùn on the divining tray. If two are left in the palm, then one line is marked in the iyẹrosùn. In describing the Ifá paraphernalia, it is interesting

[114] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 28, 40.

to note that Bascom provides many details Prof. Abímbọ́lá does not; botanical specifics of the type of palm nut often used, offering specific details about the particular practices he witnessed as well as inquired about, and detailing more elaborated explanations of the equipment used, including mentioning items Prof. Abímbọ́lá declines to.[115] Indeed, throughout his entire description, Prof. Abímbọ́lá focuses on the practical uses of the tools. An example of an interesting practice Bascom observes (or is told about) is the claim that 'a diviner must have at least two sets of palm nuts'.[116] According to him, one set must be buried with the priest when they die and the other is inherited by the priest's son if he becomes a worshipper or diviner.[117] This leads us to question whether practices such as this, described by Bascom are specific to the group of priests he was observing for his anthropological research, or whether Prof. Abímbọ́lá simply declined to mention the custom. In regard to the latter, it is entirely possible that Prof. Abímbọ́lá intentionally declined to expand on a custom that may be meaningful to Ifá practitioners, as secrecy is an important tenet of the followers of Ifá.

4.2.2 Divination: Practice

Although the foundation of the oracular advice given to clients based on the verses, there is a mathematical system that scaffolds the Ifá divination. The combination of eight marks made by the practitioners in the iyẹrosùn forms a pattern that corresponds with one of the 256 figures that constitute the *odù* Ifá. Odù refers to the volumes within the corpus, while *ẹsẹ* is the term used to refer to specific verses within the chapters. The 256 Odù in the Ifá corpus are divided into two categories: the 16 major Odù (the *Ojú Odù*) and the 240 minor ones (*Ọmọ Odù*). The *Ojú Odù* are more important than the minor Odù because they contain the most important ẹsẹ Ifá. All *odù* signs are made up of two halves: the right half being 'more powerful' than the left. As such, when marking and identifying a sign in a divination, the priests write and read from right to left.[118] The *odù* have a hierarchy they are arranged in, though the specific arrangement can change between regions. Bascom notes two versions of arrangement; one in prevalent in Ifẹ̀, the other in Southwestern Yorùbáland, where

[115] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 32.
[116] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 27.
[117] Idem.
[118] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 40.

the Ìjẹ̀bú-Ode priests I spoke to are from. The order of the basic Ifá signs are in the southwestern region of Yorùbáland is: ‘

1. Ogbe – indicated by four single marks (1111)
2. Oyeku – 2222
3. Iwori – 2112
4. Edi – 1221
5. Irosun – 1122
6. Owonrin – 2211
7. Obara – 1222
8. Okanran – 2221
9. Ogunda – 1112
10. Osa – 2111
11. Ika – 2122
12. Oturupon
13. Otura – 1211
14. Irete – 1121
15. Ose – 1212
16. Ofun – 2121

In Ifẹ̀, Obara is 5th, Okanran is 6th, Irosun is 7th, Owonrin is 8th, Irete is 11th, Otura ia 12th and Oturupon is 13th, and Ika is 14th.’[119] The 16 major *odù* are doubles of each of the basic sign; Eji Ogbe, Eji Oyeku, etc (eji meaning two).[120] After the *ojú odù* the hierarchy follows the order of the basic signs in each possible combination, i.e. Ogbe Oyeku, Ogbe Iwori, …., Oyeku Ogbe, Oyeku Iwori … and so on.[121]

Becoming a diviner of Ifá requires a long and intellectually challenging apprenticeship, followed by initiation trials (Bascom refers to two, while Abímbọ́lá refers to four) each shrouded in varying levels of secrecy.[122] Training historically began very young – between seven and twelve years old – likely because as noted by Bascom above divination could often be a generational occupation or family legacy. The minimum apprenticeship period is generally said to be 7 years, a figure that seems consistent between Bascom, Abímbọ́lá and my own informants, and the apprentice generally lives with their master, learning at their feet. The apprentice need not pay a fee for their education, but as they live with the master, they are expected to take on household tasks for the master, such as running errands or procuring items from the market, whether for divination or otherwise.[123] The training ‘program’ so-to-speak begins with learning the *ojú odù* (major. Instruction occurs

[119] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 48.
[120] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 30; Bascom, p. 44.
[121] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 50.
[122] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 25; Bascom, p. 81.
[123] Bascom, p. 85; Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 18.

through a mix of observation and recitation. The initiate must learn the names and signs for all 16 major *odù* before they may even begin learning the actual verses that accompany them.

The verses in question are learnt almost entirely through recitation and memorisation; at first led by the master, after which the initiate is expected to find time to go over it themselves. This is not to say that the master does not take an active and participatory role in the education of their initiate. Bascom describes a process in which the master takes time to listen to the progress of their apprentice, correct mistakes, and test retention of the names and verses of the *odù*.[124] Importantly, Abímbọ́lá notes that chanting the verses (the *ẹsẹ*) is taught to the initiate after they learn the content of the ẹsẹ.[125] The difference between chanting and reciting the *ẹsẹ* is difficult to explain in writing, but Abímbọ́lá analyses the language and style of the *ẹsẹ* Ifá in great detail in chapter four of the monograph. Unfortunately, the detail of this cannot be reproduced here, but in brief, he explains that when chanting *ẹsẹ* Ifá, rhythm bears little or no relation to the sentence because 'the basic rhythm unit of *ẹsẹ* Ifá is a *line*' (emphasis added). A line is defined in this context as 'a group of utterances between one breath pause and the next'. [126] Essentially, Abímbọ́lá explains that when listening to ẹsẹ Ifá being chanted, one cannot assume that the pauses they are hearing have any relevance to the sentence structure. Because of the tonal workings of Yorùbá as a language, chanting may well sound rhythmic and melodious, but this rhythm cannot necessarily be attached to any specific sentence structure; it is a feature of the language. Moreover, Abímbọ́lá notes early on in the monograph that there exists a special ritual called the *iyẹ̀rẹ̀* ritual, in which priests gather together to chant verses from the corpus in choral form. It is led by a good chanter, and the leader chants verses which, if chanted correctly, are met with confirmation from the other priests which is usually '*han-in*' (literally meaning 'it is so').[127] This ritual highlights an important aspect of the orality of the Ifá verses, and illuminates one way in which an oral culture has dealt with concerns around consistency and accuracy of the oral works prized in the community without writing the work down.

[124] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 85.
[125] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 20.
[126] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 64.
[127] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 15.

The distinction Abímbọ́lá makes between chanting and reciting the ẹsẹ Ifá speaks to what Barber describes as entextualisation, which she defines as the process of separating a given instance of discourse from its local context, such that it becomes 'text' that is not context-specific and transmittable over time and space.[128] Indeed, given that diviners and worshipers of Ifá believe that the verses began as utterances and observations made by Ifá himself, the specificity and formality of the chanting is perhaps unsurprising, as it functions as a symbol, indicating the specific redeployment of these wisdoms in the context of divination. The utility of this method of entextualisation is particularly clear in the case of a tonal language such as Yorùbá, especially since the intonation of the words can and do change the meaning of the word drastically. Although intonation can be represented graphically with accents and other symbols, it is not an exact, intuitive, and sometimes, even accurate method of learning how to pronounce the sounds obliquely referenced by letters on a page.

When the master feels the trainee has sufficiently learned chanting, using the palm nuts or divination chain, and the separate rituals around sacrifice the initiate is allowed to present himself for the first initiation. It is less clear what the steps are between each subsequent level of initiation, but one thing that is clear is that babalawo are never finished learning. As explained to me by my informants, and echoed by both Abímbọ́lá and Bascom, most if not all priests continue studying Ifá and learning from colleagues until they pass.[129] After the first initiation, when a new initiate has just completed their apprenticeship, a new diviner may begin to divine for clients, the process of which generally starts with the client seated before the diviner. Upon sitting, the client is given the priest's divining chain or palm nuts, which they whisper their reason for need advice to (making sure that the priest cannot hear). The client returns the items to the priest, following which he chants praises to Olódùmarè and/or Ọ̀rúnmìlà. Then the priest begins to cast either the *ikin* or the *ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀* to ascertain which *odù* contains the ẹsẹ that Ifá has indicated is most relevant for the client's issue.[130]

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[128] K. Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond*, New Departures in Anthropology (Place: Cambridge University Press, 2007) <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511619656>.
[129] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 86; Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 27.
[130] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* pp. 32-35.

Importantly, at this point we have a small diversion between the two accounts offered by Bascom and Abímbọ́lá. Abímbọ́lá avers that the priest, upon identifying the *odù* Ifà that is revealed by the casting:[131]

- Starts to chant the ẹsẹ that are most representative of the *odù* sign.
- After which they give general information to the client about what the ẹsẹ generally means.
- They then give the client *ìbò*, which are lots – cowrie shells and bone – the former indicating 'Yes' and the latter 'No'.
- The client then asks yes or no questions that priest is not allowed to hear to the lots.
- The client drops the tokens, the priest picks them up and uses them to touch the *ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀* or *ikin*.
- The client picks up both tokens and puts one in each hand
- The priest throws the chain/palm nuts to the ground twice. If the first *odù* is senior to the second, the client produces the lot in their right hand. If the second *odù* is senior, then they produce the token in their left hand. The answer to the client's question is based on which *ìbò* is in their right hand; the cowries indicating the answer to the question is yes, and the bone indicating it is no. This continues until the client is satisfied with the answers they have received.
- Only after this does the client tell the priest the actual problem they have brought before Ifá.
- The client's problem is thus discussed and the Ifá priest helps by further analysing the meanings of the different ẹsẹ chanted.

By contrast, Bascom describes that after the relevant *odù* is revealed by the casting, the babalawo simply recites all the verses they have memorised for the specific *odù,* and that it is the client who 'selects the verse' that they believe is most applicable to their issue. As such, in Bascom's description, it seems clear that the client finds their own answer, minimising the mysticism of Ifá divination, at least in the region he carried out his study.[132] Bascom himself notes that the Ifá divination practices in the Dahomey region are very different; in this region the client is expected to be 'completely frank' with the diviner 'so that he is able to get at the facts in a given case to an extent which an ordinary adviser would find impossible.'[133] Bascom also describes the *ìbò* process, though he calls it 'Specific Alternatives'. The main difference here is that while Prof. Abímbọ́lá describes the process as being just another stage in the Ifá divination, Bascom seems to indicate that it is a supplementary action, that may or may not be carried out.[134]

[131] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* pp. 32-35.
[132] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 69.
[133] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 68.
[134] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 51.

For those not believing of Ifá, Bascom and Prof. Abímbọ́lá's descriptions of the actual divination seem less mystical and more probabilistic. The verses, which are the foundation of the divining results, are seemingly chosen by random or, if one wants to ascribe ill-intent to a priest, through manipulation. However, it would be a mistake to attribute continued belief in the power of Ifá and his diviners to ignorance on the part of the clients and practitioners. Bascom defends the system, arguing that it is not a fraud, and citing an Afro-Brazilian priestess of a Yorùbá-derived cult in Recife who described the divination as a projective technique comparable to the Rorschach Test.[135] Prof. Abímbọ́lá's account of the divination process holds that the diviner selects the correct verse, the belief here being that the clients *orí* will influence the divining to indicate what the root of the issue in the client's life is and that Ifá learns this when the diviner uses their chain/palm nuts to touch the tokens, which then influences the two (or more) *odù* cast to get 'Yes' or 'No' answers.[136] Whether or not one believes the more spiritual aspects of the explanation, an important thing to recognise is how Yorùbá culture and belief shapes the role of Ifá divination in the community. The point of Ifá divination, and the verses more generally, is not to establish spiritual truths and justify the Yorùbá belief system. Rather the purpose and function of the Ifá verses are multifaceted; chronicling events that are purported to have happened in the past, providing advice and wisdom that transcends time, and providing an avenue for humans to commune with gods and spirits in the other world, *orùn*. As mentioned, when detailing the background context of Yorùbá beliefs, the spiritual is ever-present and undeniable in the Yorùbá belief system. Unlike general Abrahamic ethos, the separation between God and man is not a hurdle to overcome, but a natural separation. The bad things that happen are usually directly attributable to one's actions, the actions of the enemies of humankind, or an unhappy orí. The power of Olódùmarè and his delegates are accepted, and the follies of character humans display are similar natural facts, the effects of which can be mitigated by following the values and virtues required to live in line with the wishes of Olódùmarè and one's orí, and when that fails, following advice from a babalawo. The values are taught at birth and as we

[135] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 69.
[136] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 35.

have seen, universal and intuitive. The verses offer counsel, not edicts when their own wisdom has been exhausted, or when they need help making decisive action.

The amount of trust put in a babalawo may seem undue or dangerous, as if one believes that they are a direct line to the gods, or one's orí, their words have personal and societal weight. However, the Ifá tradition has interesting internal processes of accountability. The aspect of community accountability is extremely present in Ifá divination, and not only in specific rituals, but also more generally when priests divine for clients in the day-to-day. It is not uncommon for other diviners or apprentices to be present when the client visits a particular babalawo.[137] Apart from this practical method of regulating the verses and practice, there is also the impact of devoutness in keeping the corpus consistent. Abímbọ́lá notes that ẹsẹ is memorised with 'reverence and it is considered sacrilegious to for anybody to add or subtract anything from the corpus.'[138] Of course, untrustworthy practitioners are an issue devout priests are aware – and wary – of, but it is likely that part of the utility of such close-contact and extended apprenticeships is that a master can confirm, monitor (or shape) the character of the initiate and likely intervene where they fear the apprentice is veering off the wrong path or if need be, dismiss the initiate altogether. Abímbọ́lá describes the aim of training as giving a 'disciplined attitude' to the incumbent initiates.[139] This sentiment is echoed by my own informants, who described the apprenticeship process as years of training to learn not only the *odù* and ẹsẹ Ifá, but also learning how to interpret the verses and attune themselves to the wisdom of Ifá himself.[140]

Unfortunately, dishonest individuals do become diviners, or pretend to, and clients are encouraged to be sceptical of priests they believe are dishonest or ignorant. Built into the divination process is a safeguard to mitigate clients being taken advantage of; they do not tell the diviner their problem when they sit down in front of him, they whisper the issue to his instruments, which Ifá then intervenes with, ensuring they fall in the pattern that corresponds with the verse most relevant to their issue.[141] Furthermore, the nature of consulting a babalawo is entirely voluntary; the

[137] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, pp. 76-79.
[138] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 20.
[139] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 18.
[140] 13:23 & 13:50-14:00 of áudio.
[141] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 77; Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 32.

client can decide not to follow the directions of the priest and share their bad experience with the community. Without being able to manually check a proof/ copy of the Ifá corpus or even a written record of advice that has been given by a diviner, I believe it is these social, practical, and spiritual checks that individuals rely on instead. And while it would be easy and to assume that these checks are wholly inadequate and likely to lead to extensive corruption, but as Bascom strongly asserts in his monograph that, at least at the time of his writing, 'There is no question in my own mind, on the basis of my experience, that most babalawo are honest, as both diviners and clients assert'.[142]

[142] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 79.

4.3 Bascom and Abímbọ́lá reconsidered

As emphasised in chapter 1, my conclusions and analysis are unlikely to be generalisable for all oral cultures, or even the practice of Ifá in Cuba or Brazil. In this chapter, I will carry out a second look analysis on the texts previously considered in chapter 2. The aim of this is to flesh out the understanding of elements previously identified and considered by delving deeper on the details of the cultural context, applying the specifics of what I learned in my research on Yorùbá history and philosophy.

The framework formulated in chapter 1 and applied in chapter 2 is still a relevant and useful heuristic for scholars beginning their study of oral works, particularly as a review tool or aide when consulting oral texts (that is, written transcriptions of oral works). Hopefully it will help scholars be more aware of and sensitive to certain text-based assumptions that may have been made in the transcription process, which would have shaped the format of the transcription and thus inform our understanding of the oral work.

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that the framework, though useful in this way, can only provide half of the story because it is limited to helping a scholar organise and review their knowledge, without necessarily yielding understanding. As mentioned earlier, the difference between knowledge and understanding is key to appreciating orature in its own right, because it better equips the scholar to understand the details of how form and function interact for an oral work. In general, because speech is a more instinctive and ubiquitous method of communication than writing, it can be hard for one to understand what makes certain speech special, in the way that the Ifá Verses are set apart from regular speech. Barber's notion of entextualisation is particularly helpful here, and I would argue that understanding the mindset and motivations of a culture is key to beginning to understand how cultural practices are likely to function as a method of entextualisation. This is because the method of entextualisation, especially in an orature context, is likely to be informed by the function that oral work serves in the specific community, which is more accurately grasped if one understands the mindset and motivations that would inform the aims and subsequent approach of a culture to specific issues.

Thus, this chapter applies the deeper understanding gained in my research of Yorùbá history and philosophy to the same texts, as an evaluation Bascom's and Prof. Abímbọ́lá's analyses.

4.3.1 The Ẹsẹ Ifá

The Ifá verses are held as a seminal example of Yorùbá oral poetry, mythology, and possibly history.[143] Their importance is appreciated outside of the scope of divination in addition to their import in that context. Considering the sheer number of proposed verses, one may assume that the Ifá verses are all generally short, as long narratives are undoubtedly more difficult to remember. This would be inaccurate. The varied topics dealt with in the Ifá corpus naturally lend themselves to verses of different lengths. Some verses are extremely short, running for a few lines, while others are extremely long, running for a number of pages.[144] How then do we distinguish ẹsẹ Ifá from other Yorùbá myths, proverbs, sayings, etc? According to both Bascom and Prof. Abímbọ́lá, most *ẹsẹ* Ifá have a specific structure that can be used to identify them. Bascom describes a three-part structure constituting: firstly, 'the statement of the mythological case which serves as precedent'; secondly 'the resolution or outcome of this case' and thirdly, 'its application to the client'.[145] Prof. Abímbọ́lá describes an eight-part structure that contains the elements described by Bascom, but groups them in a different way:[146]

I. The first part is where the names of Ifá priest(s) involved in a past divination are stated.
II. Next the name of the client is stated
III. The reason the client came for divination
IV. Instructions given by the Ifá priest(s) to the client
V. Whether or not the client complied with the instructions
VI. The result of the client's compliance/non-compliance
VII. The reaction of the client to their circumstances after following/not following the instructions

[143] For more on the importance of the ẹsẹ Ifá outside of just divination see *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance* (Place: Indiana University Press, 2016) <https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/stable/j.ctt1b7x4sw> [accessed 9 November 2022].
[144] The 'ẸSẸ ẸKAÀRÚN' in ÒGÚNDÁ MÉJÌ is only about 9 lines long, see: 'W. Abimbọla, *Ìjìnlẹ̀ Ohùn Ẹnu Ifá: Apá Kìíní*, Yoruba Classics, 2, 1st edn, 4 vols (Place: Glasgow: Wm. Collins, Sons and Co. Ltd., 1968), I, P. 150.
A different and unnamed ẹsẹ Ifá also in Ògúndá Méjì is 110 lines, see: 'W. Abimbọla, *Ìjìnlẹ̀ Ohùn Ẹnu Ifá: Apá Kejì*, Yoruba Classics, 4, 1st edn, 4 vols (Place: Glasgow: Wm. Collins, Sons and Co. Ltd., 1969), II, P. 127.
[145] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 122.
[146] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 43.

VIII. Moral of the story

Importantly, the 'moral' of the story described above is not a prescriptive edict that all who hear it must obey rigidly; rather it is more accurately described as referring to a general precept, or axiom that illuminates a course of action that leads to desirable results. This sense of practicality and flexibility underpins almost all things about the corpus, except the number of *odù* and their order. Even the structure defined above, Prof. Abímbọ́lá describes as being the *maximum* number of parts that can be expected in an *ẹsẹ* Ifá. As such, we can think of structure as an interesting feature of many ẹsẹ Ifá instead of a necessary element that denotes whether an oral work is part of the Ifá corpus. This is of course related to the fact that, as both Prof. Abímbọ́lá and Bascom note again, the Ifá corpus contains excerpts that are believed to be historical, poetic, mythological, etc, meaning that the corpus contains more than one type of text and is thus unlikely to have a uniform structure throughout.

Bascom's transcription of 186 verses is one of the largest efforts to transcribe and translate entire ẹsẹ Ifá; Prof. Abímbọ́lá reproduces and transcribes about 136 snippets of ẹsẹ Ifá as examples to demonstrate specific themes/features he describes in his *Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*.[147] Unfortunately, the 186 passages transcribed by Bascom do not amount to an example from each *odù* in the corpus, as there are 256 odù. Bascom notes that only 53 *odù* are represented within his sample.[148] Another important thing to note is that Bascom's order mimics the hierarchy favoured by diviners of Ifẹ̀, so he places Obara 5th, Okanran 6th, etc as he carried out his study in Ifẹ̀. As we shall see, Prof. Abímbọ́lá organises his transcriptions in a completely different way, such that it is not relevant which hierarchy arrangement he adheres to.[149]

4.3.2. A Thematic Evaluation of Bascom's Transcription

Bascom compares the ẹsẹ Ifá to medieval exempla, stating that their function is much like the 'tales used by priests during the Middle Ages as illustrations of their sermons'.[150] This comparison is apt, though a few issues arise in my mind. Firstly,

[147] According to a count I did myself.
[148] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 120.
[149] For the sake of clarity, Abímbọ́lá seems to follow the South-Western order set out earlier in this work, see p. 37.
[150] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p. 122.

the notion of exemplum itself has historically proven difficult to define in medieval scholarship circles. The exempla Bascom refers to, the sermon exemplum, is but one sub-genre in the wider scholarship.[151] It would be inaccurate to claim that the comparison to exemplum is completely spurious, but the ẹsẹ Ifá are often compared to sermon exemplum in particular, when the verses are more accurately described as a mix of sermon and public exempla. The ẹsẹ Ifá indeed relate examples of moral situations, but the stories of impressive or admirable ancestors and/or oríṣa are just as important. This slight nuance is important to highlight in my opinion because it relates to the difference in function between exempla and the Ifá verses. Sermon exemplum in particular are largely moral and didactic. While there are indeed some verses in the corpus that describe specific behavioural traits as desirable and display the benefits of behaving in such a manner the character of the ẹsẹ Ifá is not proscriptive, or even prescriptive. It would be better described as situational. Furthermore, exempla seem to be employed assuming the existence and knowledge of a more authoritative text. For adherents of Ifá, the verses are themselves the authoritative text. In the absence of a moral imperative, it would be more accurate to say that the authority of the verses, and the underlying link between all verses in the corpus is their cultural relevance to the Yorùbá people – **not** a specific message or set of moral rules.

The comparison to exempla, and its peripheral link to the Bible seems to have subconsciously influenced Bascom's approach. In organising the 186 verses he collected, Bascom transcribes them in what seems like chronological order, starting with verses in Eji Ogbe, then Ogbe Oyeku, Ogbe Iwori, etc. He numbers the ẹsẹ within each *odù*, which is also a logical decision in terms of order and reference, but confusing in terms of accuracy. Bascom does not indicate anywhere in the monograph whether he numbers the verses according to the order he collected them in, or whether he reproduced an order shared with him by the Ifẹ̀ diviner(s) that contributed to his efforts. Furthermore, it could be said that in terms of organising, a numbered list can be misleading for researchers who assume that the list indicates a fixed order. It is not certain that Bascom's first verse is *the* undisputable first verse in the way that Genesis 1:1 is unequivocally identifiable. It is undeniably part of the Eji

[151] 'Exemplum', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 2010) <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662624.001.0001/acref-9780198662624-e-2087> [accessed 17 November 2022].

Ogbe, but it is not reasonable to claim that every Ifá priest recognises or recites the same verse Bascom transcribes as the first verse in Eji Ogbe. Truthfully, the question of the 'first' verse is nonsensical in the first place because as we know, Ifá priests recite the corpus according to a client's need. As such, we can see that because of the context in which the verses are primarily used, chronological organising is largely irrelevant. Of course, for organisation's sake it may be that a numbered list is unavoidable. A simple note before the list explaining that it bears no hierarchical relevance and operates exclusively as a convenience suffices to minimise any confusion that could arise.

Similarly, Bascom's choice to include the literal translation under each corresponding line of the Yorùbá makes it harder to read, although, it could be that this is done to identify the words. The reason the literal translation would be needed to identify the Yorùbá words used relates to another issue with Bascom's transcription in this case. For some reason, Bascom decides to leave out the accents indicating high, low, and medium tones. This undermines the accuracy of his transcription because Yorùbá is a tonal language and tonal marks are used to indicate the way the words are meant to be pronounced, which is important because pronunciation changes the meaning of the word. This decision could be due to his unfamiliarity with the language or the translation practices of the day. Arguably, with the literal translation underneath each line, a fluent or native Yorùbá speaker may, with great effort, be able to ascertain what tonal marks should be present. For a complete novice or an individual unfamiliar with the language, however, the lack of tonal marks can be quite misleading, which is perhaps less of a concern for Bascom as he is writing for other scholars, who likely have little chance of understanding the Yorùbá at all.

Finally, Bascom's decision to transcribe the verses in prose format is understandable given the strong narrative elements of the ẹsẹ Ifá. However, it obscures the poetic features of the verses and distracts from the important rhythmic elements that are key to Yorùbá as a language and a culture. In his own review of Prof. Abímbọ́lá's monograph, Bascom notes that he did not notice the poetic structure of the verses because he did not have 'access to a tape recorder' in 1937 when he collected the verses. [152] Otherwise, he sees few major differences between

[152] Bascom, *Ifa Divination : Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*.

his transcription and Prof. Abímbọ́lá's. However, I shall demonstrate in the next section why I disagree with this conclusion.

4.3.2 Abímbọ́lá's Transcription

As already mentioned above, one of the bigger differences between Bascom and Prof. Abímbọ́lá's transcription is that he transcribes all the excerpts with tonal markers and more interestingly, in verse format and not prose. According to Prof. Abímbọ́lá, he does this in spite of the semi-narrative character of the verses and explains that this because the ẹsẹ Ifá are more akin to poetry. He defines poetry as, 'the art which uses both speech and song to reveal the realities that the senses record, the feelings salute, the mind perceives and the shaping imagination orders.'[153] This definition identifies what Prof. Abímbọ́lá refers to as the 'importance of balancement' in the style of Yorùbá found in the ẹsẹ Ifá.[154] As he explains, rhythm bears little or no relation to the sentence. The basic rhythm unit of ẹsẹ Ifá is the line, which is defined by him as a group of utterances between one breath pause and the next. He notes that breaks can be primary or secondary depending on its position within the syntactic unit concerned (referring to the eight-part structure described by Abímbọ́lá above).[155] Secondary pauses are generally before the end of the syntactic unit, while primary pauses are at the very end of the sentence, phrase or clause. In this way, one can see how important the performance is to the form of the ẹsẹ Ifá and how complex transcription would be. The fact that basic rhythm unit is not the sentence means that line breaks do not correspond to complete sentences, and it would take a practitioner or at least a native speaker of Yorùbá to identify where a line break is appropriate. In a similar vein, Prof. Abímbọ́lá describes a number of techniques in the ẹsẹ Ifá specifically used to shape meaning.[156] I would advance that these techniques – word play, tonal word play, onomatopoeia, repetition, personification, figures of speech and special vocabulary – likely function as a method of entextualisation that elevates the content of the ẹsẹ Ifá above everyday speech. The special vocabulary in particular adds an extra layer of meaning that highlights the importance of the verses, as it means that even fluent Yorùbá

[153] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 65.
[154] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 66.
[155] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus,* p. 65.
[156] Abímbọ́lá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*.

speakers cannot just learn and understand the verses. This highlights their prestige as a separate body of work outside of regular utterances and emphasises the need for practitioner cooperation in any transcription efforts.

However, Prof. Abímbọ́lá does infrequently note in his explanations, that some rituals or verses cannot be fully explained or revealed due to vows of secrecy kept by initiates of the cult. Indeed, it is important to note that the literal meaning of babalawo in Yorùbá directly translates to 'father of secrets.' This raises interesting ethical concerns around documenting Ifá traditions and possibly the oral corpus. Of course, no cult wants to divulge their secrets, but there is often a compelling academic or humanitarian reason for doing so. However, it is important to balance this conflict in the most respectful manner possible. It is already common practice in most, if not all, anthropological studies to gain some form of consent from the subjects being observed, and in regard to my own findings, I made sure to clearly explain my aim and the intended use of the information that was shared with me.

4.4 Prof. Abímbọ́lá and Bascom conclusion

The key question explored, and hopefully answered in this section is whether thorough understanding is achievable through analysis of the work alone, or whether is it necessary to learn the practices of the culture that composed it to fully appreciate its function and meaning. In revisiting the transcriptions of both Bascom and Prof. Abímbọ́lá, I hope to have demonstrated how deeper cultural context enriches understanding of function and aim in the example of the Ifá corpus, especially with the example of the function of the rhythm unit the importance of balancement. Ultimately, this deeper context is helpful in informing researchers' approaches to layout and organisation when transcribing the corpus, as well as providing a salient example of Barber's notion of entextualisation and the benefit cultural understanding provides in not only understanding how entextualisation may be applied, but also what it may practically sound like in a specific oral culture.

Conclusion

As has hopefully been demonstrated, the assumptions many textual scholars make when we approach oral cultures and the works produced by them, and the layout and presentation decisions we then subsequently make, can result in overly simplistic research conclusions that fail to accurately capture the uniqueness and originality of the cultures in question. For example, it would seem for textual scholars that the importance of dissemination and copies seems to be instinctive – what group would not aim to spread (or share) their culture? This has led to a focus on efficiency and accuracy, as scholars contend with various versions of works and attempt to locate the original text and the general message intended to be shared.[157] The first assumptions that underpin this mindset are that a culture aimed to share their beliefs and cultural practices with external parties at all, and secondly that a motivation for dissemination would be to convert or recruit more believers. However, as has been shown, some oral cultures may have little interest in dissemination to outsiders, either because their own practices are extremely tolerant of other cultures, because they are protective of their own culture and thus wary of sharing, or even simply because they are disinterested in the practices of other cultural groups. This is not to say that adherents of Ifá are all esoteric or non-combative; the Yorùbá were a military power with a view to expansion. However, it *is* to say that the Yorùbá Ifá practice, and perhaps many other oral cultures, are deeply practical in such a way that disseminating beliefs/cultures for the 'betterment of all men' (regardless of what those men prefer) or disseminating ideas in abstract intellectual pursuit is an unlikely or irrelevant goal.

Another major assumption textual scholars need to be wary of applying to oral cultures and the works they produce is the assumption that perfect/identical replicability is necessarily important or even relevant. This misunderstanding may be what has led previous scholars to assume ill-intent in diviners and overestimate the oppressive control available to this class of individuals within Yorùbá society. Furthermore, it leads to over-generalisation, where regional differences are ignored completely or erroneously merged together to form an inaccurate and syncretic picture of Ifá beliefs. Of course, the regional variation is, as emphasised throughout this work, a feature and not a defect, which is another assumption that is rooted in

[157] As discussed above in the overview of traditional textual scholarship.

textual ideas of objectivity and the importance of standardisation. As seen with the case of the Ifá corpus, accuracy and consistency in content can be achieved alongside a tolerance for cultural regional differences.

As well as being wary of making assumptions, it is hopefully clear by now that approaching any transcription of an oral work, without first engaging in detailed study of the culture that produced that work is extremely unadvisable. Without extensive research into the traditions, beliefs, and history of the Yorùbá, this study on Ifá would have been severely limited to secondary sources and likely produced an analysis that approached the corpus from a position assuming that supremacy and uniformity was a natural goal of any religious text, when this is not true of Ifá as a faith or the ese Ifá as a body of work.

Assuming extensive anthropological/cultural study has been carried out, textual scholars looking for guidance on how to mentally position their transcriptions can find useful and intuitive guidance in the approaches of Niles, Zumthor, and McGann. If philologists can accept variation in classical and medieval works, then textual scholars can consider oral works as variants in their most extreme form. Of course, the approaches of textual scholars, even the new philologists, assume written variants already exist. This is unlikely to be the case with oral works. But Finnegan makes a compelling point in her argument that exclusively oral communities are either so far back as to be irrelevant or completely unhistorical depictions. As such, some written examples of an oral work may be in existence and available to researchers as a source. As with Bascom and Prof. Abímbọ́lá's work, as long as researchers take care to discharge their textual assumptions and communicate with representatives/informants from the culture in study, textual scholars may find that analysis of these third entity texts can be enriched by embracing the flexibility inherent in oracy and displaying this flexibility in further transcriptions.

I now turn to the question asked at the beginning of this dissertation: *How can modern textual scholars develop a scholarly approach to oral textual culture in its own right?* It would be easy to consider that thinking about what an ideal scholarly edition of the Ifá corpus would look like could help us answer this question, and in some ways this is true. Using Bascom as an example, his approach as an anthropologist is to focus on and centre the specific culture he observes. This allows

for a more detailed and accurate discussion of an oral work and is certainly compatible with Zumthor's *mouvance.* For book scholars, understanding oral texts as referring to the third entities Niles describes facilitates more flexibility into any scholarly approach to oral works and the unique position texts transcribed from them hold. Paired with Bascom's anthropological specificity, and the recognition of community composed texts, one could easily carve out a general approach to oral works and oral texts that actively focuses on the cultural and social contexts that shaped their creation. However, as also shown from the analysis above, simply utilising these approaches is not always enough to effectively divorce scholars trained in the written tradition of their scholarly assumptions.

What Prof. Abímbọ́lá's account shows, and indeed what was confirmed from my own fieldwork, is that the corpus itself is kept living through its adherents in both a practical and procedural way. Of course, the babalawos I spoke to were extremely aware of the benefits of writing some verses of the corpus; the ability to keep knowledge alive as their rituals are dying out was definitely relevant for the priests I spoke to, but ultimately, they maintained that the knowledge preserved by writing could only ever be a small part of the wisdom captured in the verses. Whether or not one believes in the mysticism of the Ifá cult, the fact remains that the verses are by and large extremely difficult to understand and interpret without an expert, and by virtue of their oral nature contain passages in old Yorùbá with obscure meanings lost to time. As such, any attempts to transcribe the Ifá corpus must be extremely focused as to the aim of such a transcription, which would of course inform the manner in which one were to transcribe it. The influence of culture and context of course key to understanding the corpus, but it must be realised by scholars that academic analysis of the Ifá corpus is always doomed to be limited in some way because of the extent to which practitioners embody the corpus, and more than that, the fact that they believe the corpus' value to be in its living/shared characteristic. As static verses on a page, the corpus is more likely to last of course, but to what end? Fixed on a page as it were, the *iyẹ̀rẹ̀* ritual would cease to be necessary in some ways – and it is rituals such as these that are so characteristic of the history of the Ifá religion in Yorùbáland.

Of course, as I have so often repeated, this conclusion is quite limited and based specifically on information gathered from Ìjẹ̀bú informants who are somewhat

unconcerned with questions of Ifá worship outside of its application in their own communities. In the course of my research, I was privileged to speak to Prof. Abímbọ́lá over the phone and interview him about the Ifá corpus and the role writing could play in the future preservation of the body of work. As a renowned scholar on the topic, who has also researched Ifá variants such as Santería in Cuba, it is perhaps unsurprising that he more willingly supports the notion of mass transcription efforts to preserve the verses. Truthfully, it is my opinion that Ifá verses should be transcribed by scholars, if only in an effort to preserve them so that they are not lost to history and time as they are wont to be currently. However, transcription done for this reason carries with it many important questions scholars must ask themselves and more importantly expert informants within the culture. A particularly important questions is: 'Am I preserving the lyricism and linguistic art of the oral work? Or am I attempting to preserve cultural heritage?'. It is my opinion that transcription efforts are more suited to the former, and in such a case the work is possibly best transcribed as verse poetry, with a view to linguistic and literary analysis. In the latter case, I would argue that follow-up questions must be asked if the work is to be considered whole by its own merits, such as whether an academic approach is the best method of explaining the cultural importance of the work, and the culture it comes from. For example, given the importance of the divination process, it could be that preservation of cultural heritage is better achieved through audio-visual recordings and/or promoting or supporting practical preservation on the ground. By asking these questions, hopefully scholars can begin to approach oral works as works worthy of consideration in their own right, and genuinely consider the ramifications of transcription as well as better create and treat third-entity oral texts.

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