

Book Review

Ifá Divination. Knowledge, Power, and Performance. By Olupona, Jacob K. and Rowland O. Abiodun. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780253018823 (cloth); 9780253018908 (pbk); 9780253018960 (e-book). Pp. 472. £34.00

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The Ifá divination system is important in the life of the Yoruba people in West Africa and in the diaspora. All ceremonies and ritual performances involve the consultation of Ifá. The Yoruba people believe that Orunmila, the divinity sent by the Almighty to guide human beings, established the system of divination, with the most important part based on sixteen basic and two hundred and fifty six derivative figures (*odu*) obtained either by the configuration of sixteen palm nuts (*ikin*), or by the pattern from tossing a chain (*opele*) of eight half seed shells. Further, each of the 256 chapters have up to a thousand different sub-chapters. The position of prominence in which the Yoruba place Ifá makes it usual for it to be consulted before any action is undertaken. The response is revealed through the arcane verses of the Ifá corpus. The chapters (*odu*) of Ifá are relevant to human beings because they represent the sixteen components of human existence, according to Yoruba belief. In spite of the significance of Ifá, only a few major studies have been conducted and fewer books published on the philosophy and practice of Ifá. The major works include William Russell Bascom's 1969 *Ifá Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*; and his 1980 follow-up, *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World*. Wande Abimbola's several publications are also important.

The editors of *Ifá Divination: Knowledge, Power, and Performance* probably recognised the lack of accessible credible materials on Ifá, hence the collection of essays from the three-day conference on Ifá at the Harvard

University in 2008. The editors, Jacob Olupona and Rowland Abiodun, are scholars of African philosophy and religion, and have written and interrogated discourses on Ifá. With a foreword by Ooni of Ife Okunade Sijuwade, the custodian of Ile-Ife, the place acknowledged as the origin of the Yoruba people, the book attempts to analyse Ifá's multidimensionality and to chart Ifá scholarship as well as present contemporary research of Ifá, to open up avenues for future investigation on the subject. In exploring Ifá divination and that practices, many of the essays advance ideas, theories, and practical performances of the rich traditions of Ifá in arts, aesthetics, rituals, science, religion, and philosophy.

In the Introduction, the editors highlight the interest in the collection, transcription, translation, and interpretation of the Ifá divination corpus, which informed the volume. Following an interdisciplinary approach, the studies project Ifá beyond religion and philosophy to performance and cultural studies. The book is divided into four parts: Ifá Orature: Its Interpretation and Translation; Ifá as Knowledge: Theoretical Questions and Concerns; Ifá in the Afro-Atlantic; and Sacred Art in Ifá. The four parts consist of twenty-four essays on Ifá divination, knowledge and practice in West Africa and across the Atlantic in North America, South America and the Caribbean islands. And they are written from different interdisciplinary perspectives. Ifá is popular in that part of the world as a result of the Trans-Atlantic slave heritage. Several of the essays deal with performance and the performance of Ifá, but one particular chapter stands out for that focus: Akintunde Akinyemi's "Art, Culture and Creativity: The Representation of Ifá in Yoruba Video Films" looks at the performance of divination practices in Yoruba video films. Akinyemi challenges the artistic license exploited by the filmmakers who sometimes invalidates Ifá divination in their reproduction for films on the basis that the arcane corpus is too complex and inaccessible to the film patrons.

The compilation is nonetheless focused on exploring new areas of knowledge of Ifá, by applying Ifá's theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and the distinction between belief and the position of scholars, in particular, to questions of modern day living in this age of globalisation. The book creates awareness about rendering Ifá accessible to different aspects of disciplinary studies in an increasing interweaving cultural experience in the world.

Ifá Divination clarifies previous studies and views on Ifá, as some of the contributors indeed are scholars who have written volumes and essays inter alia on Ifá, such as Wande Abimbola, Andrew Apter and Rowland Abiodun, who is one of the editors of this volume. Significantly, the book reveals that the performativity of Ifá is linked to philosophical practices, religions and cultures from the rest of the world. This is a book that

renews the interest of scholars and practitioners of Ifá, and introduces new readers to the curious and remarkable world of Ifá, especially its discourse with traditions from the Yoruba diaspora and its relationship with contemporary Yoruba cultures.