The Interface Between the Written and the Oral in Ifá Corpus

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Abstract

While the modernists in the field of African philosophy embrace writing as a precondition for philosophy and forcefully maintain the need to cast philosophy in the image of science, the traditionalists insist that African philosophy is essentially a philosophical reflection on African oral traditions, morals, and religious practices. This essay argues that the intransigent relationship between the modernists and the traditionalists persists because the two dominant schools have failed to recognize the need to furnish a paradigm of interaction between their projects. From the standpoint of Ifá, therefore, this paper rejects the written-oral dichotomy that is central to both the modernist and the traditionalist orientations, occasioned by their parochial and provincial conceptions of philosophy respectively. The paper shows how Ifá as a complete philosophy puts a premium on the need to bring individual views in oral and written cultures together to enhance a wider human vision in matters bordering on the intellectual configuration of our human society.

Key Words: Ifá, African philosophy, orality, literacy, writing, traditionalists, modernists

Introduction

Before Placide Tempels's *La Philosophie Bantoue* (Bantu Philosophy), the dogma of philosophy as essentially Western had already reached an unimaginable apogee, in part because the polygenetic theses of such personages as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Hegel, and Lucien Levy-Bruhl, to mention a few, had in the last two centuries become indispensible research materials for early

anthropologists and white missionaries. The Eurocentric theses and the rise of modern science thus gave rise to the imperious notion of Occidental superiority in philosophy. These also augment the racial hypothesis of seeing the African as the "other," the hypothesis which thrived, first in the writings of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Hegel, as a veritable paradigm in most writings in Europe. To extricate the African from the status of the "other," African intellectuals and particularly African philosophers embarked on an intellectual decolonization of Africans and published several volumes of remonstrative reportage. The published volumes reveal, in part, that writings on race earned such popularity around the world at that time because African cultures were significantly oral in character. In the period preceding colonialism and during the colonial era, therefore, Western intellectualism saw writing as a precondition for philosophy and, by extension, history and science.

Tempels's *Bantu Philosophy* no doubt marked the inauguration of African philosophy. Since its publication, several books and articles have been written, by Africans and non-Africans, either criticizing or complementing the work. African philosophy has been variously defined as the logic of African oral tradition, a collection of texts produced by African philosophers and philosophical writings on Africa, the dispute between traditionalists and modernists.[1] As the logic of oral tradition, African philosophy is "the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act or speak in different situations of life."[2] This paper gives preference to the definition of African philosophy as the dispute between traditionalists and modernists because the outcome of the dispute between these two dominant schools in the field of African philosophy has, more than the first or the second definition, generated exponential reactions from scholars in the field. In simple terms, the traditionalists are those who argue that authentic African philosophy is sought in the past of traditional Africa without the influence of foreign ideas and cultures. This is related to the first definition which implies that African philosophy is essentially a philosophical reflection on African oral traditions and moral and religious practices. The modernists, for their part, advocate the need to embrace science and technology and argue that traditional African society was erroneously guided by religiosity, superstition, and authoritarianism. The disagreement between the two schools goes much deeper: while the modernists inherited the Eurocentric dogma of seeing philosophy as requiring a writing tradition since it is (erroneously) believed that ideas can only be preserved and exchanged in books and journals, the

1. Olúṣégun Ọládipọ̀, *The Idea of African Philosophy: A Critical Study of the Major Orientations in Contemporary African Philosophy*, Third Edition (Ìbàdàn: Hope Publications, 2000), 20–72.

2. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 2.

traditionalist program seems to be forged against the ascendancy of Western intellectualism and its writing culture.

This paper employs the hermeneutic narrative approach which holds that an adequate understanding of a text requires a transition from the manifest to the latent meaning, that is, the discursive to the subtextual. This method therefore seeks to articulate African cultures as expressed in African languages, beliefs, and such oral media as myths, proverbs, systems of divination, songs, and so on. With a hermeneutic approach to Ifá as a complete philosophy, the paper addresses the mistaken assumptions in the claim that, without writing, there can be no philosophy, a people cannot have history, and there is no possibility of science. It rejects the provincial sentiments of the traditionalists and shows how the traditionalist project forecloses the desirability of an accessible knowledge pool from which the entire human family can benefit.

Perspectives on Oral/Written Dichotomy

The importance of literacy in society is eulogized in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, when Ramatoulaye, the heroine of the book, declares:

> The power of books, this marvelous invention of astute human intelligence. Various signs associated with sound: different sounds that form the word. Thought, History, Science, Life. Sole instrument of interrelationships and of culture, unparalleled means of giving and receiving. Books knit generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress.[3]

Jack Goody, an eminent social anthropologist, conveys Ramatoulaye's opinion when he asserts that writing, "indeed any form of visual transcription of oral linguistic elements, had important consequences for the accumulation, development and nature of human knowledge."[4] These claims by Goody and Ba's Ramatoulaye are true; after all, it appears that their claims do not overtly suggest "that intellectualism is absent in non-literate cultures."[5] Also, in the contemporary time, the success of science which gained its hegemony through writing is a pointer to the huge importance of writing or literacy in society. But the claims by Goody and Ba's Ramatoulaye would become contentious if they were indeed a valorization of writing at the expense of orality. As a

3. Mariama Ba, *So Long a Letter* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), 32.

4. Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 78.

5. Oyèkàn Owómóyèlá, "With Friends Like These ... A Critique of Pervasive Anti-Africanisms in Current African Studies, Epistemology and Methodology," *African Studies Review* 37, no. 3 (1994): 80.

matter of fact, the written/oral dichotomy has been an issue central to the Eurocentric discourse on writing. Thus:

> The idea that writing plays a special role in human development is one that has permeated European thinking, from Condorcet to Popper. The latter, for instance, distinguishes between three Worlds: World 1, the physical world; World 2, the world of our conscious experience; and World 3, the world of the logical content of books, libraries, computer memories, and so forth. World 3 is the world of theories and intellectual discoveries, in other words, of critical thinking.[6]

This excerpt seems to lend credence to the assumption that lack of writing necessarily hampers individual cognitive development. In fact, it is argued in many quarters that the oral mind is pre-scientific and that oral people "are unable to go beyond the Piagetian concrete operational stage ... because oral language is an instrument of limited power to explore ideas."[7] This view is corroborated by Karl Popper and Walter Ong. While the former, adopting the Hegelian spirit, contends that full consciousness of self can never be realized without writing or literacy,[8] the latter believes that writing is "indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials."[9] Ong stresses his point further by directing his barb at oral people. He maintains that:

> We know that all philosophy depends on writing because all elaborate, linear, so-called "logical" explanation depends on writing. Oral persons can be as wise, as wise as anyone, and they can of course, give some explanation for things. But the elaborate, intricate, seemingly endless but exact cause-effect sequences required by what we call philosophy and by extended scientific thinking are unknown by oral people.[10]

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6. Ama Mazama, "The Eurocentric Discourse on Writing: An Exercise in Self Glorification," *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 1 (1998): 4.

7. David Olson, "From Utterance to Text: The Bias of Language in Speech and Writing," *Harvard Educational Review* 47 (1977): 278. Jean Piaget was a Swiss psychologist whose work has had great impact on the study of the development of thought processes. He claimed that children acquire intellectual and logical abilities only through experience and interaction with the world around them.

8. Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 74.

9. Walter Ong, "Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought: The Written Word," in *Literacy in Transition*, ed. Gerd Bauman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 25.

10. Ibid., 43.

In Ong's assertion we see, on the one hand, a repeat of the epistemological assumption that relegates all forms of fideism by placing a premium on the "unrestricted and rather naïve faith in reason."[11] On the other hand, we notice a reaffirmation of one of the features of the modernist notion of philosophy, that philosophy in the real sense of the word "requires a writing tradition in that ideas are preserved and exchanged in books and journals."[12] In the enterprise of African philosophy, the oral/written dichotomy was inherited by such philosophers as Hountondji, Wiredu, and, to some extent, Bọ̀ṣdúnrìn.[13] For Hountondji, philosophy "begins at the precise moment of transcription."[14] Henry Louis Gates, an African-American, also reflects the intellectual sentiments of Hountondji and company when he embraces the Eurocentric sentiment of Hegel's and argues that philosophy essentially has to do with a written language, without which "there could be no ordered repetition or memory, there could be no history."[15] In short, Gates and Hountondji are of the view that only through writing is it possible for us "to store linguistic material in an exact form over long periods, in principle to infinity."[16] Looked at very closely, three major points can be distilled from the views of Hountondji, Gates, and other insistent champions of literacy: that without writing there can be no philosophy, a people cannot have history, and there is no possibility of science. The first point, we must admit, has been dealt with by a number of scholars in the field of African philosophy; nevertheless, it is not frivolous for us to repeat the errors in these points from the standpoint of Ifá as a Yorùbá oral text. Perhaps the second and the third points deserve great attention since history and scientific advances are often tied to literacy, which forms the basis of the declaration that science and history are inconceivable without writing.[17]

11. Mazama, "Eurocentric Discourse on Writing," 4.

12. Polycarp Ikuenobe, "The Parochial, Universalist Conception of 'Philosophy' and 'African Philosophy'," *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 2 (1997): 201.

13. Peter O. Bọ̀ṣdúnrìn, "The Question of African Philosophy," *Philosophy* 56, no. 216 (1981): 13. Though Bọ́dúnrìn concedes that writing is not a precondition for philosophy, he goes on to eulogize writing as necessary in the creation of a philosophical tradition.

14. Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 106.

15. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Introduction: On Bearing Witness," in *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 7.

16. Goody, 193.

17. Michael Stubbs, *Language and Literacy: the Sociolinguistics of Reading and Writing* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 193.

Ifá on the Possibility of Philosophy, History, and Science in Oral Cultures

Taking the first point, we would recall that many scholars have insisted that the alphabet was an invention of the Greeks[18] and this has served as the basis for many people to claim that literacy began in Greece as an exigent foundation for the enterprise of philosophy to flourish. But an insightful study of the chronology of Greek literacy would reveal that "writing was not a significant cultural factor before Plato."[19] Paulin Hountondji, one would suspect, was aware of this historical fact and this explains why he insists that philosophy started with Socrates because the latter's disciples committed his discourse to writing.[20] Thus "one would conclude ... that Hountondji does not recognize the Pre-Socratics as philosophers, inasmuch as no one is sure that Thales wrote anything ..., nor Heraclitus, or Pythagoras for that matter ... It appears that in this regard Hountondji is not in tune with the European philosophers he holds as his models."[21] The point to stress is that the history of philosophy is not complete without evident recognition of the "oral" contribution of the Pre-Socratics to the enterprise. Though one must not overlook the fact that writing engenders a "comparatively permanent and reliable storage of information outside fallible human memory,"[22] it is also true that writing itself cannot create thought. Creation of thought is clearly congenial to the formation of ideas which may not necessarily have to be fixed or documented before they are made available to philosophy or reflection. "If ideas are capable of transmission from one mind to another without the intermediary of documentation," Owómóyèlá asserts, "then the receptive mind can be a reflective mind."[23] Here, again, we should take seriously Socrates' warning that anyone

18. See, for instance, Ignace I. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). Gelb argues that the Greeks invented a complete alphabetic system consisting of consonants and vowels, an improvement upon the Western Semitic invention of the consonantal alphabet. However, Jack Goody and Ian Watt point out that, although the term 'alphabet' is "appropriate only to the Greek script, which provided signs for consonants and vowels," the term is not appropriate to "the parent script that represented consonants alone." See Goody, 62; Jack Goody and Ian Watt. "The Consequences of Literacy." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 3 (1963): 304–45.

19. John Halverson, "Havelock on Greek Orality and Literacy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 1 (1992): 161.

20. Oyèkàn Owómóyèlá, "Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration," *African Studies Review* 30, no. 1 (1987): 88.

21. Ibid., 89.

22. Halverson, 160.

23. Owómóyèlá, "Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy," 88.

who relies heavily on writing as that which will provide something reliable "must be exceedingly simple-minded."[24] As a matter of fact:

> All alphabetic writing can do is record what people think and say; it cannot itself create thought. Western Europe had its excellent alphabet throughout the six or seven hundred years of its Dark Ages without any notable intellectual progress or even innovation. Indeed intellectual progress and innovation were not much in evidence in the Roman Empire despite widespread literacy and a large reading public, nor in the earlier Byzantine empire.[25]

It makes sense to posit here that the emphasis on oral/written dichotomy, inherited by the votaries of analytic school in African philosophy, is responsible for the intransigent relationship between them and the traditionalists. In other words, this intransigent relationship persists in the enterprise of African philosophy because the two dominant schools have failed to recognize the need to have a paradigm of interaction or dialogue between their projects (that is, oral and written projects). The position of Ifá on the oral/written dichotomy will perhaps help to show a way out of this problem. In Ogbè-rẹtẹ̀, Ifá says:

> *Báà rọ́tí a à bọ́gún*
> *Báà róbì a à bọ̀rìṣà*
> *Báà bá róbìnrin a à leè bímọ*
> *A díá fọ́kànlérínwó irúnmalẹ̀*
> *Wọ́n ń lọ f'Èdè ọmọ Olódùmarè ṣobìnrin*
> *Wọ́n ní wọn ó kára ńlẹ̀*
> *Ẹbọ ni wọ́n ó ṣe*
> *Ọ̀rúnmìlà nikàn ló gbẹ́bọ níbẹ̀ tí ń rúbọ ...* [26]
>
> Without wine, we cannot appease the ancestor
> Without kolanut, we cannot appease the gods
> Without a woman, a man cannot procreate
> Thus divination was undertaken for the 401 gods
> As they fought over Èdè, Olódùmarè's daughter;
> They were told to offer sacrifice
> But only Ọ̀rúnmìlà heeded the divine warning ...

24. Reginald Hackforth, trans., *Plato's Phaedrus.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 275C.

25. Halverson, 162.

26. Sourced from Chief Fákáyọ̀dé Ọlánipẹ̀kun, a practising Ifá priest in Ìbàdàn, Nigeria; hence Oral Source I. "Èdè" in the excerpt literally means "language."

The story is related in Ogbè-rẹtẹ̀ that, once upon a time, Ọ̀rúnmìlà and other Yorùbá divinities were competing to take Èdè, the daughter of Olódùmarè, as wife. Each of the divinities consulted a diviner on what to do to be able to emerge as Èdè's suitor and was advised to offer certain sacrifice in order to be victorious. Alas, all the divinities except Ọ̀rúnmìlà did not offer the sacrifice and at the end Ọ̀rúnmìlà emerged as Èdè's suitor. When approached by friends and well-wishers to relate the secret of his success, Ọ̀rúnmìlà started to sing saying:

Ká tó mọ̀ ọ́n gbọ́, ká tó mọ̀ ọ́n fọ̀
Àtimèdè ọ̀pẹ̀ ló ṣòro;
Ká tó mọ̀ ọ́n dá, ká tó mọ̀ ọ́n tẹ̀
Àtimèdè ọ̀pẹ̀ ló ṣòro;
Ká tó mọ̀ ọ́n rú, ká tó mọ̀ ọ́n tù
Àtimèdè ọ̀pẹ̀ ló ṣòro ... [27]

To learn, to teach
All can be sought in Ifá;
To cast, to write
All can be sought in Ifá;
To apply, to decipher
All can be sought in Ifá ...

Ọ̀rúnmìlà then told the people around him that he was victorious because he learned early enough that the individual can only excel in the world if he combines all the processes of cogent thought: understanding and good use of language; writing and interpretation. In the song, Ọ̀rúnmìlà maintains the complementarist stance and shows that both writing and orality will help the individual to excel in society. The other divinities lost Èdè to Ọ̀rúnmìlà because they were "non-literates" in the modern sense. Olódùmarè allowed Ọ̀rúnmìlà to take Èdè as wife because he was the only divinity who recognized that a man does not pride himself over oratory or writing alone, but by recognizing that there is no substantive division between the two. Also, as the above song is perceived to predate modern civilization due to its primordial nature, the lesson from it questions "the preconceived notion that African cultures are oral cultures in essence."[28] Jack Goody seems to reflect the coupling of oratory and writing when he says that "the problem of assigning a work to an oral or literate tradition is that ... there is a meaningful sense in which all

27. Oral Source I.

28. Soulaymane B. Diagne, "Toward an Intellectual History of West Africa: the Meaning of Timbuktu," in *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, eds. Shamil Jeppie and Soulaymane B. Diagne. (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008), 19.

'literate' forms are composed orally ... And there is also a meaningful sense in which all earlier oral works are known because they have been written down, usually by a literate member of ... society."[29]

Bearing the foregoing in mind, let us now draw from Ifá and examine the plausibility of, first, the claim that a people cannot have history without writing. We take "history" to mean an account of past events or a study of past events, especially of human affairs.

Here, David Newbury offers us a proviso that "while oral communication and historical sensitivities have been present in all human societies for all time, the Western profession was slow to mesh the two — slow to accept oral accounts as historical sources."[30] Among those who valorize writing at the expense of orality the assumption is that only writing could capture a people's history since history, in their view, is based on facts as opposed to myths. This group also emphasizes the European belief in objectivity "which can be obtained only through the separation of the knower and the known accompanied with the objectification of the latter."[31] Also, an emphasis on the objectification of the known presupposes "the idea that meaning is ever stable, given, objective, and conserved through the ages by writing."[32] In the Ifá system, the general assumption is that the ẹsẹ Ifá, rendered orally either in prose or poetic form, represent "an accurate account of what once happened or what has once been observed in the past."[33] Wándé Abímbọ́lá explains that:

> History is the language of Ifá divination and "histories make men wise". A man who goes to an Ifá priest to ask for advice on whether he should go on a journey is not told a straight answer. He is given a long story of people who have traveled in the same direction or for a similar purpose and he will be advised to make his decision from this list of precedents. At least this long list of precedents will serve as a warning to the intending traveller. In this way Ifá guides the people who believe in him from the rich experience of the past.[34]

Thus, to achieve what could pass as "historical objectivity," a diligent Ifá priest normally consults senior Ifá priests or "better-informed colleagues on various

29. Goody, 80.

30. David Newbury, "Contradictions at the Heart of the Canon: Jan Vansina and the Debate over Oral Historiography in Africa, 1960–1985," *History in Africa* 34 (2007): 213.

31. Mazama, 8.

32. Ibid.

33. Wándé Abímbọ́lá, "The Literature of the Ifá Cult," in *Sources of Yoruba History*, ed. S. O. Biobaku (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 46.

34. Wándé Abímbọ́lá, "The Place of Ifá in Yorùbá Traditional Religion," *African Notes* 2, no. 2 (1965): 4.

subjects beyond his knowledge."[35] Since meaning is the most elusive part of any language, Ifá priests often come together in seminar-like gatherings to exchange views on *ẹsẹ ifá* and ensure that the *ẹsẹ ifá* are intact as historical material. These seminar-like gatherings are also of great significance in ensuring that the subject-matter of *ẹsẹ ifá*, which is the whole range of Yorùbá thought and belief, is protected against multiple interpretation and reinterpretation. Though Abímbọ́lá[36] admits that there is a problem of change in *ẹsẹ ifá* due largely to the "process of oral dissemination" and "environmental conditions," his one point of interest to us is that there is historical evidence in the Ifá corpus. Abimbọla points out that there is historical evidence in the Ifá corpus from personal names and place names.[37] On the former, for instance, Abimbọla delves into Ìwòrì Méjì and shows the possibility that the cross-bow was not a fighting implement of medieval Europe alone, but also a widely used implement in traditional Yorùbá society for hunting and fighting. The lines in Ìwòrì Méjì read:

Pá-bí-ọsán-já;
Ọsán-já, awo wọn lode Ìtóri
Àkàtàǹpó-jákùn-ó-dòbìrí-kálẹ̀
A díá fún Ọ̀rúnmìlà,
Ifá ń lèé táyé Olúufẹ̀ orò sọ
Bí ẹni tí ń sọgbá
Ta ní ó wàá bá ni táyée wa wọ̀nyí sọ
Ewé ọ̀pẹ̀pẹ̀ tilẹ̀ sọ ... [38]

Sudden-as-the-snapping-of-leather-string;
Leather-string-snaps,
The Ifá priest for them in the city of Ìtóri;
Crossbow-loses-its-string-it-dances-all-over-the-ground;
Cast Ifá for Ọ̀rúnmìlà,
When Ifá was going to mend the life of the king of Ifẹ̀
As one mends broken calabash.
Who, then, will help us mend these our lives?
Palm-tree grows its leaves right from the ground.
It is Ọ̀rúnmìlà who will help us mend these our lives.
Palm-tree grows its leaves right from the ground.[39]

35. Abímbọ́lá, "The Literature of the Ifá Cult," 43.
36. Ibid., 49.
37. Ibid., 50–5.
38. Wándé Abímbọ́lá, Ìjìnlẹ̀ Ohùn Ẹnu Ifá, I (Glasgow: Collins, 1968), 48.
39. The translation of the verse is drawn from Abímbọ́lá, "The Literature of the Ifá Cult," 51.

In the above *ẹsẹ ifá*, three names of Ifá priests (namely, Pá-bí-ọsán-já, Ọsán-já, Àkàtàńpó-jákùn-ó-dòbìírí-kálẹ̀) draw our attention to a possible historical evidence which relates the ancient tools used by the Yorùbá, though these tools "are either no longer in use nowadays or ... have a restricted application."[40] Concerning place names, Wándé Abímbọ́lá uses an empirically verifiable point to show that place names in Ifá are of historical significance: he draws on Ìká Méjì[41] to prove that Ìká, a town now standing "some forty miles north-west of present Ọ̀yọ́,"[42] actually existed. However, Abímbọ́lá believes that it could prove difficult to locate any particular place name due to frequent change in names and location.

Historical evidence in Ifá is not extracted from personal names and place names alone; Abimbọla shows that there is also evidence of *ẹsẹ ifá* that relate the histories of the foundation of particular towns and of an *ẹsẹ ifá* that recalls the conflict between Islam and Yorùbá traditional religion during the early propagation of Islam in Yorùbáland.[43] Interestingly, the present researcher learned as a child, a native of Ìbàdàn, that Ọ̀sẹ́ Méjì was the *odù* cast on the occasion of the foundation of Ìbàdàn. Despite the fact that the foregoing seems to lend credence to historical objectivity in Ifá, Abimbọla cautions that "there are problems involved in the use of Ifá divination poems as sources for historical evidence" which, according to him, result from "the difficulty of separating myths from actual fact."[44] Abimbọla's and G. I. Jones's definitions of myth constitute the same strand of the idea of myth as that which "one wants to believe about the past and is based on belief or emotion."[45] Looked at more closely, Jones's conception of myth evokes the question of whether it is possible for a people to have a purely factual history. One could be tempted here to admit that, since the Greeks are considered as the inventors of literacy and the literate basis of modern thought,[46] European history which supposedly started with the Greeks was fortified against myths as purveyor of historical objectivity. One might then think, squarely in line with the foregoing, that the fathers of European history (the Greeks) did not incorporate myth into the writing of their history. But, on the basis of the need to re-evaluate historical facts by succeeding generations, one might argue that "history is necessarily founded on value systems, without which there could be no selection

40. Ibid., 50.
41. Abímbọ́lá, *Ìjìnlẹ̀ Ohùn*, 121–24.
42. Abímbọ́lá, "The Literature of the Ifá Cult," 53.
43. Ibid., 55–59.
44. Ibid., 60.
45. G. I. Jones, "Oral Tradition and History," *African Notes*, 2, no. 2, (1965): 7.
46. Eric A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 82.

of facts."[47] Thus, hardly can a people's history be written without recourse to some myth. M. I. Finley underscores this point when he contends that "the atmosphere in which the Fathers of History set to work was saturated with myth. Without myth, indeed, they could never have begun their work. The past is an intractable, incomprehensible mass of uncounted and uncountable data. It can be rendered intelligible only if some selection is made, around some focus or foci."[48]

The above point by Finley no doubt amplifies the importance of the suggestion that Ifá divination poems can be taken as reliable historical sources inasmuch as the information they purport to give is corroborated by either written sources or other bodies of oral literature like *ìjálá*, *oríkì*, and *rárà*.[49]

Having shown the falsity of the claim that without writing a people cannot have history, let us examine the more pervasive claim that only literate cultures can have science. Perhaps it is in the area of science (and technology) that the power of Western epistemological ethnocentrism on the rivalry of writing and orality is most felt. In fact, the popular opinion in the intellectual sphere is that Africa was "backward" in the development of science and technology due to lack of a writing tradition. This opinion goes on to affirm "the usual opposition of the non-scientific, magical and superstitious traditional man and the scientific, pragmatic and rational Westerner."[50] The point to note here is that there exists among Eurocentric scholars the belief that literacy was the sole and principal cause for the evolution of logical modes of thinking which gave birth to science. In clear terms, therefore, the Eurocentric mind would not imagine that science could ever flourish in oral cultures. But the grandiose claim that only literate societies can lay claim to science and technology is mistaken; after all, science is understood as the system of behavior by which man acquires mastery over his environment. Even if science is understood in a formal sense as a systematic and formulated knowledge, the Yorùbá (Africans) cannot be relegated as a people without science. A look at

47. Roy Preiswerk and Dominique Perrot, *Ethnocentrism in History: Africa, Asia and Indian America in Western Textbooks* (New York: NOK Publishers, 1978), 123.

48. Moses I. Finley, "Myth, Memory, and History," *History and Theory* 4, no. 3 (1965): 283.

49. Abímbọ́lá, "The Literature of the Ifá Cult," 61. For a thorough understanding of this point, see S. A. Babalọlá, *The Content and Form of Yorùbá Ìjálá* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966); Bọ́láńlé Awẹ́, "Praise Poems and Historical Data: The Example of the Yorùbá Oríkì," *Africa* 44, no. 4 (1974): 331–349; Bádé Àjùwọ̀n, "The Preservation of Yoruba Tradition Through Hunters' Funeral Dirges," *Africa* 50, no. 1 (1980): 66–72; Karin Barber, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oríkì, Women and the Past in a Yorùbá Town* (London: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).

50. Owómóyèlá, "Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy," 90.

traditional Yorùbá society and its contribution to the scientific configuration of our global human society will, from the standpoint of Ifá, be illuminating.

Among the Yorùbá there is the widely-held belief that it is through Ifá oral texts that an inquirer can understand the influence or "achievement" of other Yorùbá gods in society. This is not to say that Ifá should be regarded as superior to other gods in the Yorùbá pantheon; it only attests to the role of Ifá as the encyclopedia of Yorùbá history, belief, and philosophy. Thus, it is not surprising that Ifá in Ògúndá Méjì eulogizes Ògún as the founder of ironworking or, in modern parlance, metallurgy which today is considered as "the backbone of our civilization."[51] In Ògúndá Méjì, Ifá reveals that:

Ògún ló dá irin wọnran-wọnran sílé ayé
Ògún ló dá bàbà wọnràn-wọnràn sílẹ̀ẹ Sòkòrì
Ògún ló dá idẹ wọnran-wọnran s'óde Ìjùmù
Ògún náà ló rọrin tí-tíí-tí
Tó fi dó'de òrun,
Níbi tí Àjàgunmàlè gbé tẹ Ọ̀rúnmìlà ní'fá.[52]

It was Ògún who introduced iron with a ringing sound to the world
It was Ògún who introduced bronze with a ringing sound to the land of Sòkòrì
It was Ògún who introduced brass with a ringing sound to the town of Ìjùmú
It was Ògún who forged iron continuously
Till he reached the expanse of heaven,
Where Àjàgunmàlè initiated Ọ̀rúnmìlà in the casting of Ifá.[53]

The Yorùbá, especially the devotees of Ògún, rely on the above verse to support the claim that ironworking started with Ògún, who is variously described as "the god of war," "the god of iron," "the patron of the smiths," and so on. For as Ògún is a primordial deity and ironworking associated with him, for the Yorùbá no dates can be assigned to the beginning of the science of ironworking. As expected, non-Africans — especially European anthropologists and archeologists — would not condone the Yorùbá idea that the origin

51. A. S. Cohan, "Metallurgy," in *The Encyclopedia Americana* (Dansbury: Grolier Incorporated, 1997), 764.

52. David Adéníji and Robert G. Armstrong, *Isẹ́ Irin Wíwà àti Sísun ní Ilẹ̀ẹ Yorùbá (Iron Mining and Smelting in Yorùbáland).* (Ibadan: Occasional Publication, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 1977), 4.

53. Ibid., 5.

of ironworking is not datable;[54] these researchers do not see any connection between the material and the spiritual. They do not believe in any primordial history that sources its material from mythology. But it is noteworthy that the views of these anthropologists and archeologists are stimulatingly conflicting as to the dates and origin of ironworking technology. We have among these researchers those who contend that ironworking technology originated in Africa and that Europe borrowed it from Africa. Another opinion shared by other researchers is that ironworking technology was imported into Africa from the Middle East. Yet another opinion is that the technology originated in India.[55] Of the three opinions enumerated, only the first opinion is placatory to Africans — for it traces the origin of ironworking to Africa. However, the first opinion, like the other two opinions, fails to acknowledge the Yorùbá belief that the ancestry of this material culture is traceable to the divine. It is expected therefore that those who hold the opinions enumerated above would not embrace the view that ironworking technology first emerged from Ògún's primordial industry. But one is easily struck by what could be gleaned from a Yorùbá mythological narrative concerning the origin of ironworking and its basic technological knowledge.

According to the narrative,[56] Ògún in the faraway past was ordered by his community to go forth in war and conquer the neighboring towns. Before going to war, Ògún made a resolve to forge weapons that would be "stronger than cudgels torn from the armpits of baobab, durable as green grass by the riverside, swift as Èṣù, more deadly than the elephant." He then embarked on the painstaking task of extracting ore from "rich layers of gravelly laterite." He manufactured charcoal by burning logs of wood and later fetched "a quantity of moist clay sufficient for the construction of a furnace." The narrative explains that "with his old stone chisel, he drove a wedge into a tree stump, ripped out of the heartwood and lined the cavity with hot coals ... Then ... Ògún slept out the course of the sun." The narrative continues, describing Ògún's final task:

> Arising at nightfall from his bed of stone, Ògún went first to the burned out tree stump. Fitting a trimmed branch as pestle to this mortar, he began to pulverize the warm ore one handful at a time. He sifted the powder in a reed basket, washed the heavier particles in

54. The discovery of metals appears to have begun in the sixth millennium and to have been reasonably well advanced by 2000 B.C. See Theodore A. Wertime, "Man's First Encounter with Metallurgy," *Science* (New Series) 146.3642 (1964): 1257–1267.

55. A. B. A. Adande, "'Traditional' Iron Metallurgy in Africa," in *Endogenous Knowledge: Research Trails*, ed. Paulin Hountondji (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997), 68.

56. See Judith Gleason, *Òrìshà: The Gods of Yorùbáland* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 45–46 (quotations are from this source).

> pure spring water, and set them to dry in hollowed log troughs. Then he went into his cave to prepare for the arrogant transformation.

The "arrogant transformation" is related thus:

> Ògún ... created tools of iron. First he fashioned tools for himself — shaft hammers, a billet, an adze and tongs. Then he forged implements of war — swords, knives both stabbing and throwing, cutlasses, iron tips for arrows and materials for clearing paths.[57]

The above narrative underscores the Yorùbá belief that knowledge of material relationships and causality is a representation of spiritual truth. More importantly, the narrative furnishes us with the idea that this "primordial" technology grew out of a series of cogent thoughts, affirming the intellectual significance of myth and showing that, if metallurgy is science, myth does not impoverish scientific thought as some modern-day Eurocentric scholars might think. The strength of this claim lies in the fact that, though the recitations of its rigorous processes are not frozen in the pages of a manuscript, ironworking has become the heritage of the Yorùbá smiths. That is, ironworking among the Yorùbá did not result from any evident cultural diffusion from outside the Yorùbá kingdom, nor was it a direct achievement of some non-African technicians and other experts present in Africa; the Yorùbá smiths owe this technology to the word-for-word mastery of the processes involved in Ògún's primordial industry through oral transmission. We can from this end be lured to argue that the much-vaunted Enlightenment of Europe could have flourished without written texts. Granted this, Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and Rene Descartes, considered the founders of modern science, could still formulate "a new scientific paradigm ... a material world which functions like a machine"[58] through some mnemonic genius. This stresses the point that mnemonic activities could also bring about prodigious feats in science and technology.

From the foregoing, we can infer that there is a possibility of science in oral cultures and that science "is not European in origin."[59] Here, however, a critic might argue that what we term as Yorùbá (prototypical African) science, as we have presented it through the industry of Ògún, is crude, suggesting that it cannot be compared in any way to Western science and technology. One point couched, almost a century now, by Clarence E. Ayres against the

57. Ibid., 48–49.

58. Bertus Haverkort, Katrien van 't Hooft, and Wim Hiemstra, eds. *Ancient Roots, New Shoots: Endogenous Development in Practice* (London: Zed Books, 2003), 17.

59. Charles C. Verharen, "Afrocentrism and Accentrism: A Marriage of Science and Philosophy," *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 1 (1995): 73.

seeming hegemony of science is useful here. To see science as being European in origin, in Ayres's view, represents a crude positivistic attitude on the part of Eurocentric scholars. He then draws our attention to a negative aspect of Western science and technology. According to him, "the prime mover in our recent developments is not that galaxy of noble truths which we call science, but the thoroughly mundane and immensely potent driving force of mechanical technology. Science is the handsome Doctor Jeckyll; machinery is Mr. Hyde—powerful and rather sinister."[60]

The tone of the above assertion of Ayre's is directed to the attitude of today's philosophers who are only infatuated with applied science without considering the incalculable curse that Western science has brought upon humankind.[61] The threat of the atomic bomb is a good example. Nevertheless, there is wisdom in the assertion that intellectual heritage changes with each generation and that "fresh analysis carves new facets, new intellectual tools reveal new speculations in its structure."[62]

On the Coupling of Written and Oral Cultures

The above points are in consonance with the need to incorporate the contributions of both the oral and written cultures in order to understand the complete intellectual configuration of our human society. Though many African intellectuals are still reacting to the traumatic experiences of precolonial Africa and are not really receptive to the modernist approach to African thought systems, the foregoing underscores the desirability of an accessible knowledge pool from which the entire human family can benefit. In other words, there is the need to bring individual views in oral and written cultures together to enhance a wider human vision in the area of science and technology. Thus, in a tone reminiscent of this recommendation, Ifá advocates in Òtúúrúpọ̀n Méjì that:

Pẹ́sẹ́-pẹ́sẹ́ lobìnrin ń lọ̀'kuru;
Wọ̀ìn-wọ̀ìn lọkùnrin ń l'ọ̀gì
Ògì tí ò kúnná lẹlẹ́dẹ̀ ń bù sán
Ìgúnnungún ab'ojú-láńtóró-bí-omi-agbada
Ọmú-nífà-obìnrin, ọmú-nífà-ọkùnrin
A díá fún Elébùtéé, awo ayé

60. Clarence E. Ayres, *Science: The False Messiah* (Indianapolis: The Bobs-Merrill Co., 1927), 19.

61. Owómóyèlá, "Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy," 91.

62. Theodore Spencer, "Review: Lovejoy's Essays in the History of Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 9, no. 4 (1948): 439.

A bù fún Odùkẹ̀kẹ̀, awo òde ọ̀run
Níjó tí wọ́n ń lọ rèé tún Òtufẹ̀ ṣe
Ifá Elébùtéé ṣẹ, t'Odùkẹ̀kẹ̀ náà sì ṣẹ
A fọwọ́ wẹ̀wọ́, ọwọ́ wa ti mọ́
Àwa ti d'ọlọgbọ́n méjì awo òde ọ̀run.[63]

A woman grinds bean-meal softly,
A man grinds the corn hastily,
The seedy corn-meal is food for the pigs;
Vulture with eyes as clear as water in a clay bowl,
Women-benefit-from-breasts, Men-benefit-from-breasts,
Cast Ifá for Elébùtéé, the earthly priest,
For Odùkẹ̀kẹ̀, the heavenly priest,
On their way to redeem Ifẹ̀.
Elébùtéé's divination thrived, so did Odùkẹ̀kẹ̀'s.
We rubbed our hands together and they are clean
We thus become two wise men of divine gifts.

The above verses relate how, in the distant past, two Ifá priests of different orientations and outlooks came together and exchanged views in the bid to restore peace and development in Òtufẹ̀, an ancient town. In Òtufẹ̀, Elébùtéé and Odùkẹ̀kẹ̀ were the most famous and well-versed Ifá priests. But the two priests were sworn enemies, too, because each felt that he was superior to the other. As the two were now entangled in a war of rivalry, Òtufẹ̀ itself fell victim to constant bickering and strife. Social life was stifled and the natives became victims of all sorts of ailments. Gradually, Òtufẹ̀ became desolate and was almost on the brink of extinction as people were seeking refuge elsewhere. The situation became so unbearable that the king of the day had to summon the two priests to his court. In tears, he pleaded with them to bury the hatchet, and instead use their wisdom (as a knowledge pool) to improve the situation in Òtufẹ̀. Of course, the priests themselves had become victims of their own war: each had lost wives and children to the strife. They listened, humbled themselves before their king, and swore to improve the situation in Òtufẹ̀. Thereafter, the two priests dialogued and learned that the only way to redeem Òtufẹ̀ was hidden in a lengthy Ifá verse. Elébùtéé had only committed the beginning of the verse to memory and could not complete it. For his part, Odùkẹ̀kẹ̀ had long forgotten the beginning of the verse, but could assist Elébùtéé in completing it. The two priests then came together and interpreted

63. Sourced from Mr. Olúṣẹ́gun Ògúndélé, an Ifá priest in Ìbàdàn, Nigeria; hence Oral Source II.

the hidden meaning of the verse. In the end, the two were able to redeem Òtufẹ̀ from the brink of ruin.

With a sharp hermeneutic insight, one can admit that the above narrative is analogous to the need to ponder the way out of the problem oral traditions pose to the contemporary "letter-crazed" human family, underlining "that their preservation depends on the powers of memory of successive generations of human beings."[64] The narrative can also be understood as a cryptic emphasis on the need to syncretize both the oral and written projects, the need to rationalize and systematize largely mythological materials. This implies the imperativeness of static text, suggesting not that we valorize writing at the expense of orality, but rather evoking the fact that while writing is necessary in our civilization, it should only be seen as an addition, "not an alternative to oral transmission."[65] Interestingly, too, Ifá says in another canto of Òtúúrúpọ̀n Méjì that:

> *Ọlọ́gbọ́n ayé kan ò ta kókó omi m'étí aṣọ;*
> *Mọ̀rán-mọ̀rán kan ò mọye èèpẹ̀ ilẹ̀*
> *Arìnnàká kò dé ibi ọ̀nà gbé pẹ̀kun*
> *A díá fún Alábahun*
> *Tí ń kọ́gbọ́n r'orí ọ̀pẹ rèé kọ́ sí ...* [66]
>
> No wise man saves water in the hem of his tunic;
> No wise man knows the quantity of sand on earth;
> No traveller knows the edge of the earth
> Divination was undertaken for Tortoise
> On his way to hoard human wisdom ...

In his community, a long time ago, Tortoise claimed that he was the wisest and had successfully proved this on many occasions when contacted on any pressing problem. He claimed a monopoly on wisdom, and decided to hide all human wisdom inside a legendary gourd so that no other individual would have access to it. He had proposed to hang the gourd from the top of a palm tree. He finally got to the palm tree and decided to climb the tree. But he made several attempts to climb the tree without success and without knowledge of what was hindering him. He struggled to climb the tree, again and again ... He was still struggling to climb the tree when Snail, passing by sluggishly,

64. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 1.

65. Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 3 (1963): 345.

66. Oral Source II. *Alábahun* is literally "Tortoise," used in the excerpt to depict any individual.

caught him. Snail stood by for a while in great amusement, knowing why it would be impossible for Tortoise to succeed in his task. After a while, Snail called on Tortoise and told the latter that strapping the gourd against his chest would make it impossible for him to climb the tree; his task would be accomplished if he strapped the gourd on his back. Reluctantly though, Tortoise tried Snail's suggestion and found out that he would have been able to climb the tree had he strapped the gourd on his back. It dawned on him that he was wrong to claim possession of all wisdom in his community.

On the one hand, the above narrative stirs an appreciation of Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia's chronicling of Africa's intellectual history where, towards the end of the work, she remarks that "the study of literacy and its impact on Africa's history greatly contributes to our understanding of Africa's intellectual past."[67] On the other hand, it can be gleaned from the above narrative that the coming together of both oral and written civilizations will help the Yorùbá (Africans) to overcome in the area of science and technology (and other spheres of human intellectual endeavors) what Paulin Hountondji refers to as "scientific underdevelopment or, more exactly, scientific dependence."[68] Taking the complementarist stance, therefore, the point to stress is that Africa can borrow useful ideas from Europe, and also vice versa. More significantly, "we need a renewed, systematic reflection on the status, the mode of existence, the scope and limits and the perspectives of development of so-called traditional knowledge."[69]

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67. Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia, "Literacy and Decolonization of Africa's Intellectual History," *History in Africa* 38 (2011): 36.

68. Paulin Hountondji, "Producing Knowledge in Africa Today, the Second Bashorun MKO Abiola Distinguished Lecture," *African Studies Review* 38, no. 3 (1995): 4.

69. Ibid., 6.

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