Qui Séra-Séra: Yorùbá Epistemological Representation of Destiny in Ifá Corpus

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Abstract:
Among the Yorùbá people of West Africa there are certain ideas explicit in the interaction of different element which in turn act as an instrument of social change and control. With which different cultural beliefs are held. Among these beliefs is destiny which connotes the idea of person among the Yorùbá through the conception of ori, orí-àyànmọ understood by them as bearer of personality and destiny. In this study the epistemological representation of destiny stance of Ifá corpus is employ to drive home a rational belief in àyànmọ and argue that the concept is epistemological with positive implication to fill the gap created by some African scholars who have argued that ori in Yorùbá only signifies nothing other than the literary meaning. The study have been able to reveal in very simple unambiguous language Ifá concept of destiny as Yorùbá (African) epistemological system ori-àyànmọ as bearer of personality and anchor of destiny.

Keywords: concept of person, epistemology, Ifá corpus, ori/àyànmọ, Yorùbá.

Introduction
Yorùbá people like many other people of the world who have attempted to solve life perennial problems by tracking it to myths legends and fates. The history of the Yorùbá can only be glossed through by their mythologies and historical facts and legends. This is why scholars and historian differs on the actual historical origin of this unique but culturally sophisticated people. The Yorùbá from West African constitute an imagined community (Anderson, 1991) that derives from long historical process whose roots touch the rise and fall of the Òyò and Ile-Ife’s secondly the history of Yorùbá according to Samuel Johnson, the geographical space of the Yorùbá;

…was probably first known from the north through to explores of northern and central Africa for in old records the Hausa and Fùlùnì; names are used for the country and its capital; thus we see in Webster Gazettee “YARRIBA” west Africa, east of Dabonem, area 70,000sq miles population
The focus of this paper is Ifá, a Yorùbá divination created their own myth of creation. Because the details. According to the Yorùbá; narrate the Yoruba creation myth in some and epistemological system, it is important to eventually, man. In the same vein, the Yorùbá broke forth and created certain elements and through a drop of milk from which Doondari example narrate that the world was created the origin of the Yorùbá, Johnson went into great details to trace the origin of the Yorùbá by recounting several accounts derived from oral tradition and blended this with traceable events in the life of the people. Regarding the popular narrative that the Yoruba are descendant of a certain character called Lámùrùdù and that Lámùrùdù’s son, Odùduwà was a Mecca prince who wanted to convert the state to idolatry and that he was Odùduwà and his converts were defeated and chased out of Mecca and in their sojourn settled at Ile-Ife, the unanimously agreed cradle of their civilization, Johnson submits that;

Traces of error are very apparent on the face of this tradition. The Yorùbá are certainly not of the Arabian family, and could not have come from Mecca- that is to say the Mecca universally known in history, and no such accounts as the above are to be found in the records of Arabian writers of any kings of Mecca; an event of such importance could hardly have passed unnoticed by their historians. (5)

Since orality preceded literacy, and since every group of people have their creation stories shrouded in mystery, the specific account of how the Yorùbá came to be is not known. Further, just as the Jews created their myth of creation by tracing the origin of the world to Adam and Eve¹, the Chinese to the egg containing the YIN and Yang (representing male and female) through which Pan Gu² broke forth to separate chaos into many opposite including Earth and Sky, (khanacademy.org) and the Hindu tracing the origin of the world to Brahma³. On the African continent, every tribe or nation has its origin of the world to Brahma³. On the African continent, every tribe or nation has its own creation myth or story. The Fúlàní, for example narrate that the world was created through a drop of milk from which Doondari broke forth and created certain elements and eventually, man.⁴ In the same vein, the Yorùbá created their own myth of creation. Because the focus of this paper is Ifá, a Yorùbá divination and epistemological system, it is important to narrate the Yoruba creation myth in some details. According to the Yorùbá;

In the beginning, there was only the sky above, water and marshland below.

The chief god Olorun ruled the sky, and the goddess Olukun ruled what was below. Obatálá, another god, reflected upon this situation, then went to Olorun for permission to create dry land for all kinds of living creatures to inhabit. He was given permission, so he sought advice from Orunmila, oldest son of Olorun and the god of prophecy. He was told he would need a gold chain long enough to reach below, a snail’s shell filled with sand, a white hen, a black cat, and a palm nut, all of which he was to carry in a bag. All the gods contributed what gold they had, and Orunmila supplied the articles for the bag. When all was ready, Obatálá hung the chain from a corner of the sky, placed the bag over his shoulder, and started the downward climb. When he reached the end of the chain he saw he still had some distance to go. From above, he heard Orunmila instruct him to pour the sand from the snail’s shell, …and also immediately release the white hen. He did as he was told, whereupon the hen landing on the sand began scratching and scattering it about. Wherever the sand landed it formed dry land, the bigger piles becoming hills and the smaller piles valleys. Obatálá jumped to a hill and named the place Ife.

According to this story, Obatálá, the god of physical creation got bored and decided to create man while he called on Olódùmarè to breathe life into them. And Olódùmarè did.

This creation story, for many, may seem fantastical. However, it is no less fantastical than the creation myth of the Jews as narrated in the Christian bible. I need to harp on this for clarity; no creation story or myth is historical, factual or scientific. They are all fictions created by different groups of people in their attempts to give meaning to their existence. Myth, whether written or oral is NOT real. It is an attempt to explain reality. Also, we must understand that a particular myth such as the Jewish creation myth is not superior to any other one, including the Yorùbá creation myth just because one is written and the other is oral. This is because orality preceded literacy. We must also understand, as

two millions capital KATUNGA. These are Hausa terms for Yorùbá and for Òyó.
Bowra (1) noted that ‘though man has existed for something like a million years, only the last five thousand years provide records of his speech, and for the larger part of this period they are pitifully meagre and uninformative. So, if we understand that every group began to communicate orally and that they have been seeking knowledge of their origin, we must accept that they must, necessarily, seek knowledge about their day-to-day lives to help them apprehend the circumstances of their lives. At this juncture, therefore, let us move to what epistemology means, the various types of epistemology and finally, Ifa as the primordial Yorùbá epistemological system.

Conceptual Clarification

What is epistemology?
The term ‘epistemology’ comes from the Greek words ‘episteme’ and ‘logos’. Episteme can be translated as ‘knowledge’ while ‘logos’ is translated as ‘account’, or ‘argument’ or ‘reason’. This, according to Ozumba, J.O (2001), in Azeez, O. (2022) gave rise to epistemology as ‘the study or theory of knowledge’. Some philosophers have argued that although the field of epistemology is just a couple of centuries old, epistemology or the quest to know is as old as man himself. This is because it is believed that man, since his arrival on the planet has been seeking knowledge of physical and metaphysical phenomenon and particularly knowledge about how he arrived on the planet. For instance, man was awed or ‘wowed’ at what he saw when he first came into the world; the high mountains and their wonderous shapes, the oceans that stretched far beyond what the eyes could see, the many animals, trees, birds, the seasons. The ontological question is what led to the various myths of creation as narrated above. Let me add that epistemology doesn’t just deal with knowledge but also about the process of knowing. For the African, since that is our focus, there are several ways of knowing. These ways of knowing also leads us to the types or forms of knowledge. According to Ndubisi, J.O. (2014) the various types of knowledge are; perceptual knowledge, common sense knowledge, old age knowledge, inferential knowledge, mystical knowledge, oral tradition, holistic knowledge. Let me note here that while these are forms of knowledge in many African cultures, they are not accepted in Western cultures as knowledge. This is not the place to go into an elaborate discussion of western epistemological thoughts. From the above, we note that the type of knowledge contained in Ifa is mystical knowledge. What then is Ifa and how is it valued in Yorùbá culture?

Ifá: The Divinity

The Yorùbá are a very religious and spiritual people with a very rich pantheon. In fact, it has been said that this people are animists who believe that everything in the universe has life. It not a surprise, therefore, when we see these people worshiping natural phenomena such as trees, rivers, mountains, and dedicating certain animals to certain gods. Yorùbá gods are classified into primordial gods and deified gods. Primordial gods are those gods that the Yorùbá believe were with Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being at creation while deified gods are mortals who became gods. Some primordial gods include, Obalá (the god of that moulds humans with clay and calls on Olódùmarè to breathe life into them), Ògún (the god of iron) Yemoja (the goddess of the sea) Òṣù (the police of the gods) and Òrunmila (the god of wisdom). Example of deified gods, on the other hand is Sango, the god lighting and thunder, Òba (the goddess of a river with that name-Ọba) and Ọsun (the goddess of river Ọsun). Of these gods, Òrunmila, the god of wisdom holds a place of pride. According to Abimbọlá, W. (1976), these gods or divinities came from heaven (Ọrun) to planet earth as mentioned in the myth above. This is why Ile-Ife is regarded not just as the cradle of the Yorùbá but the cradle of humanity in general. Ile-Ife is therefore regarded not only as the cradle of the Yorùbá people but also the cradle of humanity. Each of the divinities who landed at Ile-Ife carried a specific assignment from Olódùmarè, the Yorùbá High God. Ifa was charged with the duty of moulding the young earth by the use of his profound wisdom and
understanding. Ògûn, the iron divinity was charged with using his extraordinary physical power, bravery and prowess to tackle all problems of heroism and warfare; Òrîsà-ńjí, the creation divinity was charged with the duty of moulding beings in the shape in which we now know ourselves; Òsù, the trickster god, was responsible for keeping àṣè, the divine and potent power with which the divinities performed supernatural powers. From the above, we can see that as the god of wisdom and understanding, Òrùnmílå is the one with the wisdom and knowledge of all things past, present and future. His knowledge transcends time and space. Most times, Òrùnmílå is used synonymously with Ifá while some believe that Ifá is the divination instrument of Òrùnmílå. Ifá is a principal divinity in Yorùbá religion, culture and belief system it is the repository of all wisdom and the controller of life and death hence his description as;

Translation:
The tiny embodiment of wisdom
The wizard who turns
The corpse of yester night
Into a living being
The Èlù of isode
One who teaches one wisely
Like one’s kinsman

According to Èlêbuibon, Y. (2004) mere listening to this type of descriptive epithet foregrounds the opportunity of knowing the greatness of this all impart of key divinity. In Yorùbá system of thought Ifá is all embracing, he is the mouth piece of all other divinities. He is generally belief among the Yorùbá people as the custodian of destiny one who is specially assigned by Olódùmarè (the Almighty God) to be the great counselor and redeemer of all other divinities in Yorùbá religion nothing on earth was created in His absence. Since Ifá literary corpus is claimed to be the encyclopedia of Yorùbá knowledge, it is therefore becomes the rightful authority to which we can result for any form of knowledge.

Theoretical Underpinning
This study is anchored on cultural theory defined by Taylor, E.B. (1971) as complex whole which include knowledge, belief, morals, law customs habits and any capabilities acquired by man as a member of a society. In the same vein Linton, R. (1945) affirm that culture is social heredity which is transmitted from one generation to another with accumulation of individual experiences. This point is given clear expression by Thompson, R. (1991) who asserts that;

Culture is the distinctive way of society at a given point in time; it embraces a particular people’s way of thinking, believing and behaving and the system of related technologies and material goods that allow a given society to adjust to the society’s physical, social and spiritual environment. Culturally Yorùbá belief system created their myth of creation, life and death around destiny, that our existence and whatever we become in life has been pre-destined and orchestrated according to one’s ori. The Yorùbá anthropological (i.e thought about men see the human being as made by ara, body, ̀èmì (breath/soul/life element) orí (head/reception of destiny and personality) and ọkan (heart conceived as bearer of intelligence and knowledge. However, it culturally believed that it is the head that received particular attention and it is regarded as key element in the issue of ̀ayánmọ destiny, the sole bearer of destiny and personnel deity (Balógún A.O, 2007).

Methodology
The methodology preferred to be employed by the researchers form purpose of analysis is textual analysis method by understanding the meaning and by reading between the lines in order to explore the second layer of meaning this
analysis is significant concerning the narrative initiated in the text in terms of cultural belief system, the analysis will expatiate in the roles and relevance of Ifá corpus as the purveyor of human destiny and personality. It also aim at driving home against the points motion that orí in Yorùbá signifying nothing other than the literary meaning.

Results and Discussions

Orí, Àyànmo and Ifá Corpus (Head, destiny and Ifá Corpus) In Yorùbá system of thought two heads abounds. Orí inú and orí ọdè (inner self and literary head) in Ifá, orí inú is a concept that refers to inner self or inner consciousness of an individual, it is believed to be the seat of an individual destiny, characters and personal power, it is the source of an individual intuition, creativity and spiritual power. According to Ifá teaching, orí inú is the connection between an individual physical body and spiritual essence. According to Folorunso, A.O (1998) in Yorùbá system of thought orí (inner self) is destiny (ayánnọ), when they say, ọpin aisé ni yóò pa alorọ, (It is the destiny of the innocent that will kill a talebearer) what we refers to as destiny is what each individual close with humility and whatever each individual chose is final.

After this request will be stamped terrestrial beings, that is why it always difficult to change what an individual has chosen for his or herself. Yorùbá belief that nobody remembers what they have chosen when the born into the world, but every individual is always eager to be successful without remembering the part they have chosen. This foregrounds the saying that;

Énì tí ó bá yan orí rere
Nílé Àjálá
Bó bá delè ayé tán
Ó dì kí o maa ri se
Kí o máa kóle múle
Kí ó máa fágbọ̀là kanta
Irú eni bẹ̀ẹ̀ ló n jèrè ọ̀títí báàṣa àjé.

Translation:

(Ògúnníran, L.(1977)
Translation:

Whoever that chose good head  
At Àjàlá’s house  
Will live a prosperous life  
On earth.

Opposite is the case for those who chose bad head because success and accomplishment will be far from them. What such people can do is to consult Ò̀rùnmi (Ifá) who is a witness of myth of creation. According to Abimbọ̀la, W. (1977): “It only Ò̀rùnmi that can do this through atonement because he is the one that can remould a bad head. When one now chose a good head, it left for legs to the journey of success in man’s life. One of Yorùbá proverb says:

Kí ojú má rì í ibi  
Eṣè ni oogun rè

For eyes not to  
See evil,  
Legs is the antidote

One of Ifá corpus verse confirms this:

Òpèhẹ̀ mọ mọ dè o  
Awo ẹ́ẹ̀  
Enìkan kí i gbìmọ̀ràn  
Kọ̀ yọ tẹ̀sé lè.

Òpèhẹ̀ arrive at the right time  
The cult of legs  
Nobody plans  
Without involving the legs

Whatever what one plans to be in this if one did not relent in making efforts, the desires will come to fulfillment. One of Yorùbá ẹ̀wọ̀rẹ̀ (supplication says, “ibi ń ori eni yoo ba ti gbẹ̀ sunwọn, kí ṣe sin ni de ihẹ̀” where one would be successful, may one’s leg accompany one there. In Yorùbá epistemology, head is very crucial in man’s life both physical head and inner head (Ori ẹ̀tà ẹ̀tò orí inú) let us consider the importance of outers head in our body not to talk of inner head which is inner self that is spiritual and personal. Head is compassionate it is the only compassion who stays with man all the time regardless of the conditions. An Ògúndà Mējì says:

...Ifá ni ori  
Ori nikan ló tó  
Alààsàn bá ròkun  
Bí mo bá lówó ọ̀wọ̀  
Ori ni ì o rù jùn  
Ori ń ọ̀ wọ̀ ni  
Bí mo bá bùmọ lèyè  
Ori ni ì o rù jùn  
Kọ̀ sóọ̀ tì i  
Dàní gbẹ̀ léyìn  
Ori eni.

Translation:

Head is Ifá Corpus  
It is only head that is  
Capable of accompany Alaasan  
To the journey of sea  
If I am rich  
It is head I will tell  
My head it is you  
If I give birth to children  
In this world
It head I will tell
There is no deity
That uphold one like head.

Here this corpus is explaining to us that even the deities that were specially created cannot support one like ones head. In another verse in same Ògùndà corpus.

Ọrúnmìlà ní bi babaláwo bá kù
Won a ní e lo ru ità re dàsi ko to
Bi adósi, sàngó bá kù
Won a ní e kò sàngó rẹ dànn
Bi akepo Òbatale bá kù
Won a ní e kò gbe gbe ìnikan, e tò o
Ọrúnmìlà ní ijo ti eṣiyan ti i kù
Ta ni won ge orí rẹ, è lẹ?
Orí, eni níi bá ni lo sàbè.

Translation:
Ọrúnmìlà says if the diviner dies
They’ll say go and bury his oracle
If sàngó worshippers dies
They’ll say go and throw away his stuff
If Òbatale curator die they’ll
Say bury him with all his stuff
Ọrúnmìlà say when human being dies.
Who did they cut down his head?
It is our head that will
Accompany us to the grave

The clarification of the above text is that each individual head is the insignia of personality, for identification, representation and protection. Some Yorùbá indigenous poetry also explains the importance of head and it relationship with destiny. These systems of thought depicts human as destiny and head as the implementer and actualize and actualize of the chosen destiny.

In Yorùbá culture, when a bride is being bequeathed to his husband during the bridal chants (Eke n Iyawo) the bride will say:

Bẹẹ legun ile yìí o sin mi
Yòò sinmi, yòò pada leyin mi
Bẹẹ loṣa ile yìí, o sinmi
Yòò sinmi, yòò pada leyin mi
Bẹẹ ba ni kori mi o sin mi
Yòò sin mi ko ni pada leyin mi
Nitori orí onọ ni sin onọ délẹ oko
Ire, ire, ire orí mi ajire.


Translation:
If you say home masquerade
Will accompany me, be will accompany me and go back
If you say home deity
Will accompany me,
Home deity will accompany
Me and go back
If you say my head will
Accompany me, head will
Accompany me and not
Go back
Because it is a child
Head that accompanies
Child to her husband house
Goodness, goodness, my head
Only goodness.

It is believed that as important as Yorùbá indigenous pantheon’s are, they cannot support one as one’s head Yorùbá believed that a man’s head is his deity and destiny, going for divination
is just to inquire what the inner self wants, other deities may not have time to support one like one’s inner head.

It only head that accompany one to the coast of glory in the journey of life no shortcut to success beyond ones inner self which is destiny. One of Yorùbá song says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Bó bá maa ko} & \le \text{le} \\
\text{Bere lówò orí e} \\
\text{Bó bá maa láya} \\
\text{Beere lówò orí yè yè o} \\
\text{Bó bá maa wàje} \\
\text{Bere lówò orí yè} \\
\text{Bó bá maa bìmo} \\
\text{Beere lówò orí yè yè o} \\
\text{Orí máa pàkàà dè o} \\
\text{Loò gè nu ní lọ o} \\
\text{Wà sàyè mi di rere} \\
\text{Orí wòbi iREGBE MI ŁO} \\
\text{Eṣè wòbi iREGBE MI YA}.
\end{align*}
\]

**Translation:**

If you want to build house
Inquire from your head
If you desire to have wife
Inquire from your head
If you want to look for job
Inquire from your head
If you want to have children
Inquire from your head
My head don’t shut door
Against me
To you I am coming
Make my destiny good
Head look for good time

To favour me
Legs look for good place
To take me to.

There is nothing Yorùbá would do that they would exclude the importance of inner head because they have the conviction that everything depends on one’s inner self symbolizes by outer head (orí). However Yorùbá anthropological conception sees head as one’s personal deity a solicitor if ones endeavor is not successful in the life the person will be asked to inquire from his or her head, it the inner head that will reveal what man will be in life.

This the reason why Yorùbá says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Èni to gbón} \\
\text{Orí yè lo pe ko gbón} \\
\text{Eniyan ti ko gbón} \\
\text{Orí e lo ni kó gò} \\
\text{Baa mewure nla soníghwó Ifá} \\
\text{Ifá ni gbewure} \\
\text{Baa mágün ‘án b’ọloju} \\
\text{Soníghwó opele} \\
\text{Opele lāa soníghwó jin} \\
\text{Kadará kan ko gba mnkan kan} \\
\text{À bá kúkú bori} \\
\text{Ká má wúle bọọgun} \\
\text{Nitori oogun lo ọloju kan} \\
\text{Iponjú orí agbè waye} \\
\text{Ló ọloju gbogbo}.
\end{align*}
\]

**Translation:**

The wise one
It is his head that made
Him wise
The foolish one
It is head that made him foolish
If we take big goat as anchor to Ifá
It is Ifá that takes goat
If we take big sheep as anchor to Oyele
It is Oyele that we are sponsoring
No destiny takes anything
We should atone the Head instead of atoning the charms
Because the charm only Own the sorrowful day
The head we brought to The world own all days.

When Yorùbá are successful in whatever they do in life, they atone their head and make supplicatory sacrifice. As other deity has insignia of worship, head too has insignia of worship, some of item used for atonement of the head is kolanut pigeon, and hen. Head is regarded as ones creator that shields the bearers from evil and calamities, and it is like the companion that lead the bearer to success.

At times divination could be performed for somebody to atone his parent’s heads for breakthrough. Despite the unavoidable incursion of modernity and foreign religion Yorùbás worldviews of head as pivoted of destiny and well being still stands.

Conclusion
From here we can advance towards a conclusion that allows bifurcating the interpretation on the concept or ori and ayámmọ, as a concept depps that mere literary meaning: (a) in a rather indigenous conservative worldview the Yorùbá think that the subject come in to the world with their destiny already preconceived, through a ritual that took place. In ‘’prun where Òlódùmarè via Ájálá seals the destiny chosen or assigned to the subject which will be up to her/him to fulfill it during her/his earthly experience and that it will be revealed to him/her through the Ifá corpus. This destiny will ne hard to change, and the only mission of rituals is potentiate its fulfillment. (b) destiny is an open manuscript, a script with which the subject manages her/his activities enhancing the positive factor, bypassing the negative ones according to the individual nature ìwò and determination, persistence and good nature are essential for constitution a good life which is expressed by a good ori/åyámmọ (ori rere/ ayámmọ rere). They are thus two sides of the same coin two interpretation of the reality of human becoming, success and failures.

References


