

Cowrie Shell divination

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Ifá

| Sixteen Principal Odu | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|----|
| Name | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Ogbe | I | I | I | I |
| Oyeku | II | II | II | II |
| Iwori | II | I | I | II |
| Odi | I | II | II | I |
| Irosun | I | I | II | II |
| Iwònrin | II | II | I | I |
| Ọbara | I | II | II | II |
| Ọkanran | II | II | II | I |
| Ogunda | I | I | I | II |
| Ọsa | II | I | I | I |
| Ika | II | I | II | II |
| Oturupọn | II | II | I | II |
| Otura | I | II | I | I |
| Ireṭe | I | I | II | I |
| Ọse | I | II | I | II |
| Ofun | II | I | II | I |
| Sixteen Principal Afa-du (Yeveh Vodou) | | | | |
| Name | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Gbe-Meji | I | I | I | I |
| Yeku-Meji | II | II | II | II |
| Woli-Meji | II | I | I | II |
| Di-Meji | I | II | II | I |
| Abla-Meji | I | II | II | II |
| Akla-Meji | II | II | II | I |
| Loso-Meji | I | I | II | II |
| Wele-Meji | II | II | I | I |
| Guda-Meji | I | I | I | II |
| Sa-Meji | II | I | I | I |
| Lete-Meji | I | I | II | I |
| Tula-Meji | I | II | I | I |
| Turukpe-Meji | II | II | I | II |
| ka-Maji | II | I | II | II |
| Ce-Meji | I | II | I | II |

| | | | | |
|------------|----|---|----|---|
| Ose orogbe | II | I | II | I |
| Fu-Meji | II | I | II | I |

In traditional Yoruba culture, **Ifá** refers to a system of divination and the verses of the literary corpus known as the Odú Ifá. Orunmila is the deity associated with Ifa divination. In some instances, the name Orunmila is used interchangeably with the word Ifa. Orunmila is claimed to have brought Ifa divination to the world.

This article sometimes uses the word "Yoruba" to refer to a system of traditional spiritual practices, as well as modern day practitioners. This use does not refer to the Yoruba people. Not all Yoruba people practice this system, although the tradition originates from their culture. The best descriptor would be "Ifa/Orisha tradition."

Ifá originated in West Africa among the Yourba groups as a form of traditional African medicine. It is also practiced among believers in Lucumi, (sometimes referred to as Santería), Candomblé, West African & Diaspora Vodou, and similarly transplanted Orisa'Ifa lineages in the New World. In Togo, it is known as Afa, where the Vodou deities come through and speak. In many of their Egbes, it is *Alaundje* who is honored as the first Bokono to have been taught how to divine the destiny of humans using the holy system of Afa. The Ifa Divination system was added in 2005 by UNESCO to its list of "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity".

The Yoruba divination system enabled diviners to invoke the teachings of Orunmila, the Yoruba deity of wisdom, prophecy and ethics. Esu (Eshu), who is seen as being in charge of justice and the transportation of ebos, is said to lend his authority (*ase*) to the oracle to clarify the issues and provide direction. Ifa divination rites are claimed to provide an avenue of communication to the spirit world.

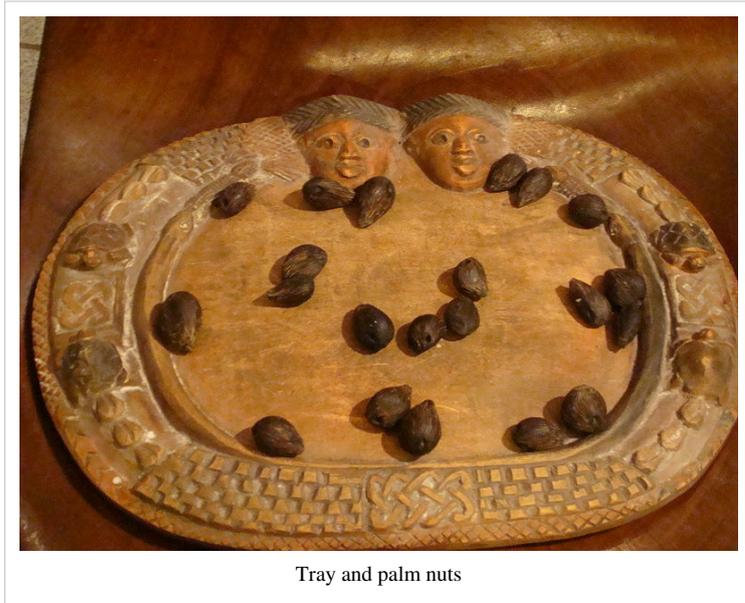
Performing Ifa divination is called idafa (or dida owo and ounte ale). Idafa is performed by a Babalawo or Iyanifa (an initiated priest or priestess). *Babalawo* can be translated as "father of the secrets" while "Iyanifa" means "mother that has Ifa(i.e. its blessing)". The babalawo or iyanifa provides insights about the current circumstances impacting the life of a person requesting this information and provides any necessary information to aid the individual. Awo is a reference for devotees in Orisa worship. It includes Babalawos, Iyanifas, Babalorishas, Iyalorishas and even uninitiated devotees.

Initiation into Ifa requires rigorous study. An aspiring Babalawo must learn AT LEAST four verses from each of the 256 chapters (Odu) of Ifa. The minimum of four verses will of necessity include ebos and ooguns (medicine) that are embedded and relevant to each of the verses, plus other issues that complement divination. An accomplished Babalawo must know about ten verses of each of the 256 chapters of Ifa (256 Odu Ifa). Regardless of gender, whoever aspires to practice Ifa must have this qualification. In essence, Ifa practice does not preclude a woman provided such woman acquires the required qualification. Odu—a special Orisa—can only be received by a Babalawo who decides to perform the special initiation that will allow him access to Odu. In essence, initiation into Ifa is the first step towards initiation into Odu. A woman cannot be initiated into Odu. Character Traits of a Awo: Orunmila demands humility from his priests and priestesses, therefore, a Babalawo should be an embodiment of patience, good character, honesty, and humility. Apetebi is the term for a Babalawo's wife. No initiation is required for apetebi title because it comes with being married to a Babalawo. Iyanifa is a title and not the opposite term of Babalawo.

Divination process

Special instruments are used to assist in the divination to transcribe Orunmila's wisdom through the diviner. The items used for divination include:

- a group of sixteen Ikin, commonly known as palm nuts, which are used to create binary data
- Dust from the Irosun tree (Iyerosun)
- a vessel for the seeds (Ajere Ifa)
- a divination tray (*opon Ifa*).
- a tapper instrument (*iroke Ifa*)
- a fly whisk (Irukere Ifa)
- beaded belts for the *babalawolijanifa* to wear (this is not required)
- another form of divination is with the Opele, though Ikin is considered superior



Tray and palm nuts

The (*opon Ifa*) or tray and (*iroke Ifa*) or tapper are used in Ifa divination, a central ritual within Ifa tradition. This tray, adorned with carved images and dusted with powder, serves as the template on which sacred signs (*odu*) related to the personal concerns of a diviner's client are traced as the point of departure for analysis. In contrast to those transitory signs, the more permanent backdrop of the carved motifs on the tapper and tray constitutes an artistic exegesis of the forces that shape human experience and the universal needs fulfilled by such quests for enlightenment.

To initiate the ritual, the *babalawolijanifa* places the tray in front of him and taps rhythmically on it with the pointed end of the tapper, invoking the presence of Orunmila, past diviners, and other Orisa.

There are a variety of palm nuts that are available, but only specific kinds may be used for Ifa divination and must have at least 3 "eyes" or more. The palm nuts are grouped in one hand, then the diviner attempts to shift them all to his/her other hand at once, and counts the remaining Ikin left, hopefully to discover that either one or two remain. (*Odu*, which are the foundation of the binary data, can only be marked with either one or two palm nuts, remaining in the diviner's original hand. As this process goes on, the diviner marks single or double marks in wood powder spread on his divination tray until he or she has created one of the 256 *odus* that are available.

Each of these *odus* is associated with a traditional set of *Ese* (verses), often relating to Yoruba mythology, which explain their divinatory meaning. These verses represent thousands of years of observation and are filled with predictions, and both mundane and spiritual prescriptions that resolve issues found in that *Odu*. Within Ifa, Believers find all the knowledge of the world past, present, and future.

After obtaining the *Odu* that governs a situation or event, the diviner then determines whether the *Odu* comes with *Ire* (which is poorly translated to mean good luck) or *Ibi* (which could be viewed as obstacles or impediments to success). After this process the diviner now determines appropriate offerings, spiritual disciplines and/or behavioral changes necessary to bring, keep or compel success for the person receiving divinatory counsel.

Odù Ifá

There are sixteen major Odu ('books') in the Odù Ifá ^[1] literary corpus. When combined there are total of 256 Odu believed to reference all situations, circumstances, actions and consequences in life based on the uncountable ese (poetic recitations) attached to the 256 Odu coding. These form the basis of traditional Yoruba spiritual knowledge and are the foundation of all Yoruba divination systems.

Where I is an odd count or a "heads" result, and II is an even count or a "tails" result, the sixteen basic patterns and their Yoruba names are set forth in the sidebar (please note this is only one way of ordering them, this changes depending on area within Nigeria, or the diaspora. An alternative order used in Ibadan, and Cuba is: Ejiogbe, Oyekun meji, Iwori Meji, Idi Meji, Irosun Meji, Oworin Meji, Obara Meji, Okanran Meji, Ogunda Meji, Osa Meji, Ika Meji, Oturupon Meji, Otura Meji, Irete Meji, Oshe Meji, Ofun Meji. Heepa Odu! This is important to note as it changes the outcomes of certain parts of the reading).

The *babalawo* recites a series of poems with proverbs and stories from the Ifa poetry that go with that choice. The final interpretation is made by the person seeking guidance, who decides how the verses that the *babalawo* has recited should be applied to the problem at hand. (This may be one style, however other schools of thought with Ifa have the Diviner interpreting what Ifa says and not simply chanting and leaving it to the client) Though the number of symbols is different, the Chinese I Ching divination system also bears some resemblance to Ifa divination. Like the I Ching, Ifa combines a large body of wisdom literature with a system for selecting the appropriate passages from it. Unlike the I Ching, however, Ifa poetry is not written down but passed down orally from one *babalawo* to another. Today, there are many texts that are designed to help Babalawos to learn and retain the huge corpus of knowledge. Additionally, Odu Ifa is different from iChing in that it is considered to come from a specific divinity and only trained, initiated priests are allowed to divine and interpret within this system. Finally, I Ching has a total of 64 (8x8 trigrams, or 4³) possible permutations, while Odu's 16 books form a total of 256 (16², or 4⁴).

Vocabulary

- Babalawo or Awo Ifa. Male Ifa Priest
- Awo Alatese ^[2]. This group of Awo have their own specialization within Ifa, mastering the aspects of Ifa preparations ^[2] and cures etc
- Bokono/Bokonon. (male/female) Priest of Afa/Vodoun
- Obomila.(male) priest of Iha/Ifain Benin
- Ohen.(male or female)Diviner and Priest
- Amengansie. Female oracle priest of Afa/Vodoun (matrilineally inherited).
- Akapo. Contrary to common diasporan belief, this is NOT another name for a Babalawo. Rather, it refers to a Babalawo's apprentice who carries the bag (apo in yoruba) containing the Babalawo's divining instruments and related materials.
- Iyanifa. Female Ifa Priest, can also be a title within an Ifa community or temple, can also be used to identify a woman proficient in the use of 16 cowrie divintion (Ifa) of Osun or Olokun, thus Iya ni Ifa, mother who has the knowledge of Ifa, she may also know how to recite Ifa even as a child video seen here ^[3]
- Dida Obi. casting kola nuts of 4 or more pieces.
- Dida Owo. casting cowrie shells.
- Ifa Dida ^[1]. (meaning Ifa Divination), casting of Ifa on Opon Ifa
- Ohunte Ale. Inscribing or marking Odu on the Opon Ifa
- Opon Ifa. Divining tray of Ifa, used by a Babalawo
- Oròrò Ifá ^[4]. Narration or declaration during the divination ^[4] or during the advisement following divination
- Ifa Rere. Moral Character - Ethics within Ifa
- Ifa Pele. Gentle Character - Ethics within Ifa

- Orunmila. Prophet that developed and spread Ifa divination system. Orunmila is second only to Olodumare/Olorun (God, Supreme Being), and is without earthly lineage. He embodies the principles of Ifa.
- Orisa. Primordial energies from which all living things emanate; The Deities that represent various manifestations of God, Olodumare.
- Iya Nla. Ìyá àgbà, The bearded woman, the Womb of Creation, Womb of existence, the fearful power, the Mother of the closed calabash, the Mother of the gourd, who teach humankind through Awon Iya Wa how to acquire the cosmic knowledge to understand life, balance and the harmony on their life.
- Irunmole. The Primordial deities, first sent to earth to make the world habitable for humankind, also the full spectrum of deities (Orisa) created by Olodumare (the Creator) for worship and veneration numbering 400+1 as an infinite number of natures manifestation and recreation, also differs from Orisa yet some Irunmole are Orisa as explained here ^[5]
- Dafa. means to cast Ikin Ifa (sacred holy palm kernel) for divination purpose and divine direction in life
- Apetebii. is the wife of a Babalawo AND / OR the wife of a Babalawo Ikin Ifa, she is one of the few titled positions within the Yoruba tradition and holds an important position within the tradition and culture, she will assist her husband in the worship and appeasement of his Ifa, and help to teach children the fundamentals of worshipping Ifa as a philosophy. This is not simply a title, but has accompanying initiations that must be performed to hold this title. Can also be referred to as Iyanifa interchangeably.
- Ayafa. very similar to the Apetebi and can also be Apetebi, but this wife is often "married" to the Ifa of a Babalawo and can also be married to another man, or even a female child before marriage age or the girl child of a Babalawo who by "marrying" to Ifa, this is a symbolic ceremony and will convey certain blessing and protection to the female.
- Itefa or Itelodu. is the ritual process of performing ones initiation rites of passage, to determine ones purpose or destiny. It is important to note that performing Itefa alone does not make one to be considered Babalawo nor Iyanifa, Itefa is one of many steps of apprenticeship to become a Babalawo (diviner/healer/counsellor)
- Ifá. Another name for the orisa (deity) Orunmila. Orunmila / Ifá is the orisa of wisdom and knowledge, and so during the ritual of divination a 'client' is said to 'consult Ifá'. 'Ifá' is also the name of the divination ritual itself and of the specific verses in the Odu Ifá (the sacred texts in the Yoruba literary corpus) given to the priest by the palm nuts in divination.

Names

Ifa priests and worshippers among the Yoruba people or those who believe in Ifa bear names related with Ifa, typically, but not necessarily, begin with the word, 'Ifa', like Ifadairo, Ifabiyi, Ifadare, Ifabunmi, etc. The first "I" in these names may be omitted to form Fadairo, Fabiyi, Fadare, Fabunmi, Falola, etc. The prefix "Awo" is also used in names ascribing Ifa or its priesthood - Awolalu, Awodele, Awolowo, Awosika, etc.

Audio & Video

- EkoFa Podcast ^[6] also an iTunes podcast
- Babalawo in Nigeria performing traditional Ibofa-appeasement rites ^[7] video
- Entertainment music of Ifa ^[8]
- Performing Iwefa - cleansing rites ^[9] video

Resources

- Chief FAMA *Fundamentals of the Yoruba Religion (Orisa Worship)* ISBN 0971494908
- Chief FAMA *Practitioners' Handbook for the Ifa Professional* ISBN 0971494932
- Chief FAMA *Fundamentos de la Religion Yoruba (Adorando Orisa)* ISBN 0971494967
- Chief FAMA *Sixteen Mythological Stories of Ifa (Itan Ifa Merindinlogun)* ISBN 096442472X
- Chief FAMA *FAMA'S EDE AWO (Orisa Yoruba Dictionary)* ISBN 0964424789
- Chief FAMA *The Rituals (novela)* ISBN 0964424770
- Chief S. Solagbade Popoola & Fakunle Oyesanya, Ikunle Abiyamo: *The ASE of Motherhood* ^[10] 2007. ISBN 978-09810013-0-2
- Chief S. Solagbade Popoola Library, INC *Ifa Dida Volume One (EjiOgbe - Orangun Meji)* ^[11] ISBN 978-0-9810013-1-9
- Chief S. Solagbade Popoola Library, INC *Ifa Dida Volume Two (OgbeYeku - OgbeFun)* ^[11] ISBN
- Chief S. Solagbade Popoola Library, INC *Ifa Dida Volume Three (OyekuOgbe - OyekuFun)* ^[11] ISBN
- Awo Fasina Falade *Ifa: The Key to Its Understanding* ISBN 0966313232
- Chief Adedoya Aluko *The Sixteen (16) Major Odu Ifa from Ile-Ife* ISBN 978373766X
- Chief Hounon-Amengansie, Mama Zogbé (Vivian Hunter Hindrew) *Mami Wata: Africa's Ancient God/dess Unveiled Vol. I* ISBN 09716244542
- C. Osamaro Ibie *Ifism the Complete Works of Orunmila* ISBN 1890157058
- Charles Spencer King "Natures Ancient Religion" ISBN 978-1440417337
- William R. Bascom: *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa* ISBN 0253206383
- William R. Bascom: *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World* ISBN 0253208475
- Awo Fa'Lokun Fatunmbi Awo: *Ifa & the Theology of Orisha Divination* ISBN 0942272242
- Iyanifa Ileana S. Alcamo "The Challenge growing within the Orisa Community" ISBN 1890157317
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- Awoyinfa Ifaloju writing on "Ifa Speaks ^[13]" published articles on Ifa ideology, philosophy & cosmology

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- [1] http://alawoye.com/Ifa_Orunmila_%3A_Alawoye/Ifa_Book_News_%26_Reviews/Ifa_Book_News_%26_Reviews.html
- [2] <http://ifaspeaks.blogspot.com/2008/03/professional-aspects-of-ifa.html>
- [3] <http://youtube.com/watch?v=hLNWvGwKIWI>
- [4] <http://ifaspeaks.blogspot.com/2010/09/ororo-ifa-narrator-within-ifa-context.html>
- [5] http://www.alawoye.com/Ifa_Orunmila_%3A_Alawoye/EkoFa_Podcast/Entries/2007/9/23_Eko'Fa_Podcast_3_Irunmole_2_of_2.html
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- [7] <http://youtube.com/watch?v=-TNgwNWboN8>
- [8] <http://youtube.com/watch?v=bbN-dllxaw4>
- [9] <http://youtube.com/watch?v=sIldMQ2WVDw>
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Merindinlogun

Merindinlogun is the number 16 in the Yoruba language and literally means "twenty less four" or "four taken from twenty". The number sixteen holds important significance in Yoruba mythology as it was the purported number of original divinities that established life on earth.

The term also designates a cowrie-shell divination method practiced in the Yoruba religion, and of several Afro-American religions derived from it, that uses sixteen cowrie shells.

The same 16 Odus are used in every single divination system used by the Yoruba. In the merindilogun, the number of shells up is associated with a certain odu (ex: five shells up represent "Oshe" and eight shells up represent "Ogbe"). This system of divination is used when consulting the Orishas, as opposed to the ikin or opele which are only used to consult Ifa.



A throw of *merindinlogun*, resulting in four "open" shells (*odu irosun*).

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