

A METAPHYSICO-NORMATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF DISEASES IN YORÙBÁ THOUGHT: IFÁ AS A COMPLEMENTARY DIAGNOSTIC SYSTEM

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the nature of diseases from the Yorùbá perspective, as it is argued that the Yorùbá Ifá divination, as a gnostic and diagnostic system, can complement the modern medical system. The causes of diseases or illness may be explained from two different perspectives in Yorùbá thought. First, a disease is understood to be a being itself. Second, it can be provoked by certain normative lapses or moral shortcomings on the part of an individual or a community. Again, the diagnosis and treatment of diseases are approached from the physical and non-physical dimensions, so as to ascertain the main cause(s) and restore a holistic balance. This is not the case in modern medical system, as it is incapable of exploring the esoteric dimension of diseases. The recent sudden outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, makes the need for complementary or alternative medical systems imperative. Since the Ifá system is capable of exploring both the physical and non-physical aspects of diseases and making prescriptions based on the nature of illness, it is contended that the trado-medical diagnostic system of divination, if further developed, can go a long way in complementing the modern medical system. I aim to establish the above views by engaging certain verses of Ifá on the metaphysical nature and normative causes of diseases, using the methods of analysis and critical argumentation.

Keywords: Diseases, Diagnosis; Understanding; Trado-Medicine; Yorùbá Ifa Divination.

Introduction

There are different cultural explanations, conceptions, and understandings of the reality of illness in the world. This is not at all surprising: there are different cultural civilisations in the world with their different worldviews on what, in fact, constitutes reality. Consequently, there are different cultural explanations for the ontology, nature, diagnosis, and treatment of diseases. Using the words illness and diseases interchangeably, I shall examine, in this paper, the worldview of the Yorùbá on the phenomenon of illness and their explanation of the ontology of disease, which is a very crucial and urgent reality in their thought system. I shall also discuss how the Yorùbá Ifá divination, which serves both as a gnostic and diagnostic system, if further developed, can complement the Western medical system, thereby promoting a

more reliable, and by extension, a holistic approach to the management of human health globally.

Apart from the introductory and the concluding sections, the paper is structured into five different but interconnected sections. In the first section, I present a brief information about the identity of the Yorùbá and the position of *Ifá* divination in their thought system. Here, I present different meanings and uses of the word *Ifá*, identifiable in Yorùbá thought. The second section presents an analysis of *Ifá* both as a system of knowing or discovering and as a system of divination. In the third section, I present a metaphysical understanding of the nature of diseases in Yorùbá thought, citing examples from relevant oral and written texts. The fourth section articulates a normative understanding of the nature of diseases, with relevant examples from oral and written texts, and the fifth section discusses the limits of modern medical and diagnostic systems and canvases arguments for how *Ifá* divination and Yorùbá trado-medical systems can serve as its complement.

The Yorùbá: *Ifá* in their Thought System

The Yorùbá can be found in the Southwestern region of Nigeria, which comprises six major states, namely: Ògùn, Òsun, Èkìtì, Òndó, and *Lagos* (*Èkó*). They can also be found in two North-central states, Kwara and Kogi. Besides, they are found elsewhere in the diaspora. This owes to the historical fact that they were dispersed all over the world through migration and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, brought about by the need to explore in order to find greener pastures and colonialism, respectively. For instance, a huge number of Yorùbá people are in countries like Cuba, Brazil, Togo, Benin Republic, and in many other countries of the world. Nonetheless, one fascinating thing about the Yorùbá nation both in the diaspora and at home is that they seem to be united by shared cultural practices and a common sense of identity, despite the fact that they have been parted by the wave of the slave trade and migration for several decades. There seems to be a continuation of the Yorùbá cultural heritage wherever the Yorùbá are found. Consequently, the practice of Yorùbá traditional religion, which sees *Ifá* as the major backdrop of the traditional body of knowledge, is prominent among the Yorùbá. This gives room to a wider propagation of the *Ifá* divinatory system and Yorùbá religion even in the diaspora. Against this background, Kólá Abímbólá contends that *Orìṣà* tradition and culture, otherwise known as Yorùbá religion, is practised by about 100 million people all over the world.³¹

Ifá occupies a very prominent position in the Yorùbá thought system. There are several interpretations of the meaning of the word “*Ifá*,” and its roles in Yorùbá thought. First, the word refers to the entire paraphernalia of divination, used for investigation and all manner of inquiries, whether of physical, non-physical, natural, or supernatural.³² In this wise, it is used as an instrument of

³¹ Kólá Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham: Írókò Academic Publishers, 2006: 24 -25.

³² Wándé Abímbólá, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá*. Ìbàdàn: University Press Plc, 2015: 3.

inquiry or diagnosis because it is believed to have insights into any issue, whatever its nature. Accordingly, whenever any matter gets to the height of obfuscation, the Yorùbá say: *bí ó bá rú ni ló jú, àá bi lè lèrè* (when it becomes obscure, then we divine.)

Moreover, *Ifá*, in Yorùbá thought, is another name for *Orúnmilà*, the highly revered Yorùbá deity of wisdom, knowledge, and anything having epistemic worth. Hence, *Orúnmilà* and *Ifá* are used interchangeably.³³ *Orúnmilà* is considered to be highly knowledgeable, and he is believed to have existed on earth as a being at a particular time.³⁴ Following this understanding, *Ifá* has a personified attribute in that it is used interchangeably with the legendary deity, reputed for knowledge and wisdom, and who is believed, in Yorùbá thought, to be supreme to Olódùmarè, strictly functionally (not existentially) on matters relating to knowledge, wisdom, and understanding.³⁵ Accordingly, he is referred to as *akéréfinúsogbón* (the small one with a mind full of wisdom)³⁶ Furthermore, the word “*Ifá*” refers to a talisman or charm, which may serve both positive and negative purposes.³⁷ This can easily be discerned from the use of Yorùbá language. For instance, when the Yorùbá say: *Wọ́n se Ifá fún un* (they prepared *Ifá* for him/her), it means a protective substance was made for the person. However, when they say: *Wọ́n sa Ifá sii* (they incited *Ifá* against him/her), it means something delicate or harmful was invoked against the person.

Apart from the above, Kólá Abímbolá contends that the term *Ifá* also refers to the entire books or chapters of *Ifá* as a scripture.³⁸ However, this is closely related to the divinatory system itself, almost in an inextricable sense. Hence, it can be explained together with the entire paraphernalia of *Ifá* system. The reason for this is that whenever the tools of divination are manipulated by *Ifá* priests or priestesses, one of the chapters of *Ifá*, also known as *Odù*, surfaces on the divination tray. It is in the light of the revealed *Odù* and the relevant poems that are connected to it that the diviner can diagnose the problem and devise appropriate measures for it.

Nevertheless, all these interpretations of the meaning of the word “*Ifá*” are, as will be unveiled in the subsequent sections, significant for our purpose here.

³³ Omotádé Adégbindin, *Ifá in Yorùbá Thought System*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2014: 57; Wándé Abímbolá, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá*. Ìbàdàn: University Press Plc, 2015: 3; Wándé Abímbolá, *An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus*. Ìbàdàn: Oxford University Press, 1976: 3-4.

³⁴ Sophie B. Oluwolé, *Socrates and Orúnmilà: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*. Lagos: Ark Publishers, 2017: 43-47.

³⁵ Abidemi I. Ogunyomi, “An Existential Interpretation of Evil: A Critique of Kazeem Fayemi and ebun Oduwole on the Philosophical Problem of Evil in Yoruba Thought,” *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, 47(1), 2024: 91-92. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378634378>.

³⁶ Abímbolá, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá*, 3.

³⁷ Kólá Abímbolá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham: Írókò Academic Publishers, 2006: 47.

³⁸ Abímbolá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 47.

Various explanations surrounding how *Ifá* is used in the different ways explained above can be found in some verses of *Ifá*. However, what can be deduced from all these usages is that they revolve, in a very unimaginable way, around divination, gnosis, and diagnosis of problems, prescriptions, medications, and treatments. These, nonetheless, are not all there is to the *Ifá* system. This is because *Ifá*, being the bedrock of Yorùbá thought, also addresses other subject matters which are of fundamental concern to human beings. Let us briefly explore the diagnostic function of *Ifá* and its significance for human well-being.

***Ifá* Divination as a Gnostic and Diagnosis System**

Divination is the attempt to enquire into the hidden knowledge of the unknown by exploring the non-physical world through the manipulation of certain physical instruments or tools. There are different forms of divination that are observable all over the world. However, among the Yorùbá, *Ifá* divination is the commonest and most prominent. William Bascom contends that: “of all the methods of divination employed by the Yorùbá, *Ifá* is regarded as the most important and the most reliable.³⁹ There are problems and inconveniences that human beings grapple with in existence and to which they constantly make efforts to alleviate. Besides, human beings, because they are naturally constituted to be curious, always want to have the knowledge of everything around them, about themselves, the future, their environment, and even about the unknown. *Ifá* is seen as a channel through which hidden information about reality, having certain fundamental implications for human beings, their existential problems, and how those problems can be resolved, is obtained.

Ifá divination is therefore “essential in assisting human beings find solutions to the trepidation and uncertainties associated with one’s sojourn in the world.”⁴⁰ It is generally seen as a diagnostic system for all problems. This is so because *Ifá* is believed to embrace a vast range of human knowledge, ranging from epistemological, religious, medical, astrological, metaphysical, and ethical knowledge. It addresses issues arising from each of the mentioned fields of human intellectual endeavours. That is why Wándé Abímbolá maintains that “even until today, *Ifá* is recognised by the Yorùbá as a repository for Yorùbá traditional body of knowledge, embracing history, philosophy, medicine and folklore.”⁴¹ Consequently, *Ifá*, for the Yorùbá, is the channel through which all the secrets about reality and solutions to all the existential problems of human beings can be revealed.

There is a belief in the interpenetration of reality in Africa. This belief gives credence to the view that, though there are physical and non-physical

³⁹ William R. Bascom, *Ifá Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1969: 11.

⁴⁰ Délé Jégédé, “Convergence and Spirituality: *Èṣù* in Lagos,” *Èṣù: Yorùbá God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*, Tóyin Fálolá (ed). Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2013, 164.

⁴¹ Abímbolá, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá*, 27.

dimensions of reality, both dimensions of reality are interconnected in some ways. Besides, there is a belief that physical actions can attract non-physical reactions and that non-physical actions can attract physical consequences. However, human knowledge is essentially limited, especially when it comes to understanding the non-physical dimension of reality. Since *Ifá* is seen as a repository of knowledge – the view which Akin Makinde also vehemently upholds,⁴² it is believed to have the power to explore the non-physical realm and reveal the secrets of the unknown world. *Ifá* divination is therefore a means through which the Yorùbá access the esoteric world. Nevertheless, the Yorùbá consult *Ifá* whenever there is any problem at all, whether spiritual or non-spiritual.

Ifá is consulted to know the destinies of children and even adults. Adegboyega Oyekunle underscores this view when he contends that an individual's destiny or portion in existence and how to go about it, can be revealed to him/her if he/she consults *Ifá*.⁴³ This is because *Ifá* is referred to as *eléríi ipsis* (the witness of fate/destiny).⁴⁴ For instance, when a child is born, the parents, through divination, enquire from *Ifá* the type of destiny that is in store for the child, the kind of things which the child should avoid, the type of work that the child can do, and so on. In addition, when someone wants to start a trade or business, such a person makes an enquiry to *Ifá* the type of business he/she can do and whether it will bring good or bad luck eventually. This, in fact, is the point Olufemi Táiwò stresses when he explains that *Ifá* is consulted in the process of divination when an individual wants to venture into a particular endeavour to know whether or not it will be profitable.⁴⁵ He adds that people consult *Ifá* when things are not normal – that is, when things are not going on appropriately the way they should.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, this view conveys the impression that *Ifá* is only consulted when negative things happen. However, this is not the case. *Ifá* is also consulted for direction and guidance regarding positive things like marriage, naming, trade, occupation, and travelling. This is reflective in Yoruba saying that: *ohun tó dára náà nífẹ́ àmójútó* (what is already going on well also needs attention).

The Yorùbá also consults *Ifá* for specific reasons. One of those reasons is uncertainty about the future. There is a saying in Yorùbá that: *bí òní se rí, ọ̀la*

⁴² Akin M. Makinde, *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy*. Ilé-Ifé: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 2007: 68-74.

⁴³ Oyekunle O. Adegboyega, "The Metaphysical and Epistemological Relevance of *Ifá* Corpus," *International Journal of History and Philosophical Research*, 5(1.) 2017: 32, www.eajournals.org.

⁴⁴ C. L. Adéoyé, *Igbàgbó àti Èsín Yorùbá*. Ìbàdàn: Evans Brothers Nigeria Publishers Ltd, 1985: 176.

⁴⁵ Olufemi Táiwò, "*Ifá*: An Account of a Divination System and some Concluding Epistemological Questions," *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Wiredu Kwasi (ed). Australia: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004: 306.

⁴⁶ Táiwò, "*Ifá*: An Account of a Divination System and some Concluding Epistemological Questions," 306.

lè má rí bę́ę́, ló muń baba aláwo difá ojoojúmoń (the thought that tomorrow may not be like today compels the diviner to divine every day). The belief that no one is sure of what will happen in the next minute, hour, or day due to the contingency of existential happenings, also informs why the Yorùbá consult *Ifá* regularly. Accordingly, whether or not things are going on well, consultation of *Ifá* is a natural thing which anyone should do at any given time for the Yorùbá. The reason for this is clear: no one can tell for sure when things will go wrong, even if everything has been going perfectly. *Ifá* consultation reveals the tendency of things going wrong in the future, and when this is discovered, necessary measures are put in place to forestall it.

Diseases in Yorùbá Thought: A Metaphysical Explanation

The Yorùbá, due to their holistic conception of reality, which also has a teleological twist,⁴⁷ hold the view that diseases are beings of a certain sort, whose presence or appearance is not in any way haphazard or contingent. Accordingly, whether a disease is natural or supernatural, its presence at all has a causal undertone.

The reason for the above view is not far-fetched: the Yorùbá worldview blurs out the barricade between physical and non-physical worlds. This view gives credence to the belief in the interpenetration of reality. Consequently, physical happenings are believed to have non-physical explanations, while non-physical happenings are believed to have physical manifestations. However, the belief in higher forces of either quasi-invisible or invisible characters further substantiates the blurring of the dividing lines between non-physical and physical entities.

The view that beliefs in supernatural entities are common in almost all African societies is no news. This is because their insight into spiritual realities, whether absolute or apparent, according to John Mbiti, is extremely sharp.⁴⁸ However, this view attracts a preferential recapitulation as a result of the continued interest of scholars in the area of African worldviews and thought systems. Accordingly, re-interpretation of, and reinvestigation into, African thought system is beginning to emerge. African supernatural worlds are believed to be the habitations of pantheons of divinities, deities, or gods. This is because the supernatural beings in African spiritual worlds are enormous in number. This, in fact, is the point John Mbiti emphasizes when he maintains that:

The spiritual world of African peoples is very densely populated with spiritual beings, spirits, and the living-dead...To understand their religious ethos and philosophical perceptions, it is essential to consider their

⁴⁷ Abidemi I. Ogunyomi, "The Environment in Yorùbá Collaborative Ontology," *African Philosophy and Deep Ecology*, Kenneth Uyi Abudu, Kevin Gary Behrens, and Elvis Imafidon (eds). London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2026: 29.

⁴⁸ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1969: 75.

concepts of the spiritual world in addition to concepts of God. We have repeatedly emphasized that the spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinction or separate them.⁴⁹

The above is especially applicable to the Yorùbá. For them, there are numerous beings in the non-physical world. Mbiti corroborates this again when he observes that: “the Yorùbá have one thousand and seven hundred divinities (*òrìṣ à*)”; “this, he continues, “being the largest collection of divinities in a single African people.”⁵⁰ Mbiti’s observation about the Yorùbá is not in any way mistaken. Nevertheless, in the supernatural world of the Yorùbá, these beings can be categorised into two different camps, namely: the left and the right. This division is substantiated by Bólájí Ìdòwú, when he explains that *Ifá* priests usually pay homage to the left-right divinities during invocations in the following way:

Ìbà (Irínwó) irún-’malè ojúkótún;
 Ìbà igba-’malè ojúkòsì;
 Ìbà ọtà-lé-ń-’irún irún-’malè
 Tí ó já àtárí ọnà ọrún gbangba.

Worship to the four hundred divinities of the right hand;
 Worship to the two hundred divinities of the left hand;
 Worship to four-hundred and sixty divinities
 Who actually line up the very road of heaven.⁵¹

Kólá Abímbólá also substantiates the left-right division when he says the divinities are:

Irínwó o mólè ojúkótún;
 Igba mólè ojúkòsì.

Four hundred primordial supernatural powers of the right;
 Two hundred primordial supernatural powers of the left.⁵²

While the deities on the right-hand side are believed to be benevolent in that they serve the interest of *Olódùmarè*, the apex being on the ladder of reality, and the interests of human beings, those on the left-hand side are believed to be irredeemably malevolent in that they are always after the downfall of the benevolent deities and the ruination of humankind.⁵³ This situation positions the benevolent and the malevolent camps eternally against each other.

⁴⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 75.

⁵⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 76.

⁵¹ Bólájí E. Ìdòwú, *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*. Great Britain: Longman, 1962: 67.

⁵² Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 49.

⁵³ Abímbólá, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá*, 29-30.

Benevolent deities are also known as *Orìṣ à*. They are believed to be about four-hundred in number. The notable ones among them are: *Orúnmilà*, *Ògún*, *Obàtálah Èṣ ù*, and so on. However, malevolent forces are generally described as *Ajogun* (warriors against human beings). They are about two-hundred in number, with eight prominent warlords. These warlords are: *Ikú* (Death), *Òfò* (Loss), *Èṣ e* (Affliction), *Ègbà* (Paralysis), *Èwòṇ* (Imprisonment), *Oràn* (Big Trouble), *Èpè* (Curse), and *Àrùn* (Disease).

Disease (*Àrùn*) is believed to be a malevolent being itself in the Yorùbá thought system, which has the ability to attack human beings. That the reality of such a being has a fundamental implication for human well-being, especially on the issue of health, is undeniable. In addition, the attack of these malevolent beings takes a spiritual dimension as the said malevolent forces perpetrate their actions invisibly. However, one will be totally oblivious of the attack of these forces without *Ifá* divination, as it would be difficult to explore the esoteric terrain in order to know whether or not anything is going wrong concerning one's health or well-being. This emphasizes the prominent role *Ifá* divination plays in the lives of Yorùbá people. Not only that, it makes it imperative for the holistic well-being of human beings, as we are usually blocked off from esoteric happenings. Meanwhile, the foregoing explanations do not automatically rule out the fact that the attack of malevolent forces can also have some physical reflections or manifestations.

Although there is the view that diseases are beings in Yorùbá thought, illness can be a natural phenomenon. This occurs whenever there is any breakdown or degeneration in human biological organs. This is exactly where Kólá Abímbólá's explanation on the nature of disease becomes very instructive. Abímbólá explains that:

In addition to *Àrùn* (Disease) as an evil supernatural force, the word “àrùn” also means illness or disease. *Àrùn*, as a biological defect in human beings, can be caused by natural causes, or by *Àrùn* (the malevolent supernatural force). This explains why divination and sacrifice are important in Yorùbá medicine.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, it can hardly be explained whether diseases are naturally or supernaturally informed except through *Ifá* divination. This is because both senses have a causal undertone. Abímbólá provides a more lucid explanation of this view when he contends that:

It is only through divination that a medical practitioner can determine whether the cause of an illness is natural or supernatural. Illnesses caused by natural causes require herbal and pharmacological remedies. But illnesses caused by supernatural forces require the offering of sacrifices, the use of talismans and amulets, or the recitation of incantations. The practice of medicine in

⁵⁴ Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 82.

Yorùbá society is, therefore, not merely homeopathic in the sense that it relies only on physical wholeness; it is also interested in spiritual balance.⁵⁵

The above emphasizes why *Ifá* divination is important as a system of diagnosis in the Yorùbá thought system. Apart from this, there is another fundamental point raised by Kólá Abímbólá. This is the distinction between Western traditional and modern (alternative) medicine on the one hand and modern medicine and African traditional medicine on the other. This will be discussed in a separate section in order to bring out the difference between the two systems of medication. Meanwhile, it is imperative to first explore the normative perspective on the explanation of illness in Yorùbá thought before venturing into a comparative exercise between Western medical practice and the Yorùbá divinatory cum trado-medical system.

Disease in Yorùbá Thought: A Normative Perspective

In Yorùbá thought, it is believed that moral lapses or normative shortcomings, especially a stark refusal to follow instructions or do the needful when one is required to do so, automatically attracts punishments or sanctions either from the spiritual forces or from nature. These sanctions or punishments may come in the form of death, misfortune, diseases, or other forms of unpleasant situations and calamitous circumstances that can ever befall human beings in existence.

Anyone making an enquiry from *Ifá* may be given specific instructions even about other matters that are unrelated to the immediate enquiries he or she is making. However, the failure of such a person to adhere to those instructions may be read as a normative default on the part of the person. This may, however, attract unpleasant experiences into the life of a person, a group of persons, or a community, as the case may be. For instance, a person may be told to avoid certain things like food, sex, clothes, soup, and so on, or refrain totally from performing certain acts like going out at night, drinking palm wine, and so on, for a specific period of time. In addition, some things may be read out as *èèwò* (taboo) for a person who, probably, is initially oblivious of them and has previously indulged in them.

In Yoruba thought, if someone flouts a taboo, the person is already deviating from the traditional norms. The failure of such a person to heed the warning appropriately may attract certain punishments, which may include illness, especially from spiritual beings. This is the point which Lagunju emphasizes when he maintains that the interaction of the people with the deities in Africa is guided by a set of beliefs and norms that are enforced by the cult of the deity concerned, the infringement of which can provoke the displeasure of the deity, which may inflict punishment on the individual, the clan, or the community. Such punishment, for him, may range from bad luck, illness, and

⁵⁵ Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 82.

death to drought, flooding, and wars.⁵⁶ For instance, when one flouts the instruction of the diviner to offer sacrifice to a particular deity, one is believed to have insulted the diviner and the deity involved, and by extension, one is, in effect, belittling the sense of the sacred in one's tradition or culture. That is why it is often said of anyone who disregards the instruction to offer sacrifice that:

Ó pawo lékèé,
 Ó pÈs ù lólè,
 Ó kotí ọgboin sébò,
 Ó wòrun yànyan-àn-yàn
 Bí eni tí kò ní kú mò láyé.⁵⁷

S/he calls the diviner a liar,
 S/she says *Ès* ù is a thief,
 S/she turns a deaf ear to sacrifice,
 And thinks of heaven contemptuously
 As he/she who will never die again.

A verse in the chapter of *Òfún Méjì* explains how *Órúnmìlà* himself was a culprit of normative omission when he refused to heed the instructions of his priests by not offering the sacrifice which was prescribed for him. The verse goes thus:

Arø bøwó pǿnpø;
 Arø bøsø pǿnpø;
 A diá fún Órúnmìlà,
 Nígbà tí òun Órø-hùnùhùnù jø ní sòré.
 Wøn ní ó kákí Mølè,
 Ó jàre,
 Ebø ni o § e

Ó pawo lékèé,
 Ó pÈs ù lólè,
 Ó wòrun yànyan-àn-yàn
 Bí eni tí kò ní kú mò láyé;
 Ó wáá kotí ọgboin sébò...⁵⁸

Arø bøwó pǿnpø;
 Arø bøsø pǿnpø;
 Both undertook a divination for *Órúnmìlà*
 When he made *Órø-hùnùhùnù* his friend.
 They advised him to feed the divinities

⁵⁶ A. Lagunju, *The African in the Mirror: A Critical Appraisal of the Past and Present Role of Africans and African Religiosity in the Development Crisis of the Sub-Saharan Africa*. Ibadan: Tomio Publishing House, 2005: 105.

⁵⁷ Wàndé Abímbòlá, *Ìjìnlè Ohùn Ènu Ifá, Apá Kejì*, Second Impression. Ìbàdàn: University Press Plc, 2014b: 61, 98.

⁵⁸ Abímbòlá, *Ìjìnlè Ohùn Ènu Ifá, Apá Kejì*, 87.

Anyway
And offer a sacrifice.

He called his priests liars;
He said *Èṣù* was a thief;
He thought of heaven contemptuously;
As someone who would never die;
He then turned a deaf ear to the prescribed sacrifice...

The abode of *Orúnmilà*, therefore, became an attractive centre to various diseases while he was far away because of his stout refusal to heed the instructions of his priests. Meanwhile, these maladies were unleashed on his household by his close friend, *Orò-hùnùhùnù*. *Orò-hùnùhùnù*, being certain that *Orúnmilà* was away from home, devised a malicious way to harm his family. He acted like an imbecile, roughening himself with dirt, with saliva and mucus dripping down from his mouth and nostrils respectively. He headed straight to the compound of *Orúnmilà* for the strict purpose of catching scapegoats! The family of *Orúnmilà* began to laugh when they sighted him. Unknown to them, however, *Orò-hùnùhùnù* brought out a small evil gourd from his pocket and laced the entire compound with poison. Immediately, all manner of diseases and illnesses invaded the compound of *Orúnmilà*. A portion of the verse says of the family of *Orúnmilà* that:

Elòmíràñ nkú wáápá;
Elòmíràñ ní sínwín;
Elòmíràñ ní se bí alákó aágànná;
Inú ní run elòmíràñ;
Orí ní fó elòmíràñ;
Òtútù ò jé kí elòmíràñ ó gbádùn;
Ikú wá fí ilé *Orúnmilà* ṣ e òde,
Àrún fí ilée rẹ ṣ e ọdèdè.⁵⁹

Some of them became epileptic;
Some were running insane;
Some were practically insane;
Some were tormented by stomach upset;
Some were plagued by headache;
Some were disturbed by the cold;
Orúnmilà's compound therefore became attractive to death
And diseases resided in his abode.

As explained above, the failure of *Orúnmilà* to offer the sacrifice prescribed for him exposed his family to unpleasant situations. Nevertheless, he was able to discover what transpired in his compound while he was away through the

⁵⁹ Abímbólá, *Jìnlé Ohùn Ènu Ifá, Apá Kejì*, 88.

divinatory system. He then rushed back home immediately to fix the pestilential quagmire consuming his home.⁶⁰

Sacrifice, generally, is seen as a way of distancing oneself from evil of any sort, thereby ensuring a life of comfort, well-being, and good health.⁶¹ When one offers sacrifice, one is, in effect, feeding other creatures and benevolent deities, especially *Èṣù*, who is believed to have the power to avert evil occurrences and prevent human beings from the machinations of other evil forces.⁶² That is why the Yorùbá say: *rírú ẹbø níí gbe ni, àírú kíí gbèyàn* (offering of sacrifice brings blessings to the offerer; refusing to do so, spells disaster).⁶³

This brings us to the relationship between divination and sacrifice. It is incontrovertible and evident that there is a kind of connection between *Ifá* divination and sacrifice. It is often said that *Ifá kíí balè kó má yan ẹbø* (It is rare to divine without prescribing sacrifice.) One interpretation that may be given to this is that it is rare for a divination to be carried out without any sacrifice being prescribed. Accordingly, Awolalu, while describing the relationship between *Ifá* divination and sacrifice, contends that:

Ifá divination is freely used to determine the problem confronting an enquirer and to secure a favourable solution to the problem, while sacrifice is used to ensure that predictions of good fortunes come to pass, and those of ill fortune averted. Thus, both divination and sacrifice are inseparably linked. The former suggests a theoretical solution to the problem presented before the diviner, and the latter, a practical response to the directive of the oracle.⁶⁴

Awolalu, through the expression “the problem presented before the diviner, seems to communicate the impression that diviners usually have a full knowledge of the problems to be addressed before divining. This is not the case – and this needs to be clarified. Most of the problems are diagnosed during the process of divination, and enquiring clients are asked to confirm or refute the diagnosis, as the case may be, based on their personal experiences or what they have noticed or observed over a long period of time in relation to the diagnosis at hand. The relationship between divination and sacrifice, therefore, is that while divination is the channel through which problems are diagnosed and through which prescriptions are made, sacrifice(s) are the prescriptions, which

⁶⁰ Abímbolá, *Ìjìnlé Ohùn Ènu Ifá, Apá Kejì*, 89-92.

⁶¹ Abidemi I. Ogunyomi, “The Existential Implications of Evil Suppressing Measures in Yoruba Philosophy,” *Caribbean Journal of Philosophy*, 14(1) 2022: 111. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365925642>.

⁶² Abímbolá, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá*, 22-24; Abímbolá, *Àwón Ojú Odù Mérèrèndínlògún*, xxi-xxvi

⁶³ J. O. Awolalu, *Yorùbá Belief and Sacrificial Rites*. United Kingdom: Longman Group Limited, 1979: 131.

⁶⁴ Awolalu, *Yorùbá Belief and Sacrificial Rites*, 132.

are made through the channel of divination and which, if ignored, bring misfortune and misery to one's way. Consequently, anyone who ignores sacrifice is said to have defaulted normatively.

The Limits of Modern Diagnostics: *Ifá* Divination as a Complement

Western conception of illness is different from the kind of conception that is obtainable in African cultures, especially in Yorùbá thought. I have discussed how this is the case in some of the sections above. More so, the Western diagnostic system is different from the African diagnostic system. This is also the case with medication and the treatment of diseases. The reason for this is not far-fetched: each of these diagnostic systems or cultural heritages operates within different conceptual schemes.

Kólá Abímbólá lucidly characterises these conceptual schemes when he explains the difference between Orthodox and alternative medicine in Western thought on the one hand, and the similarity between Western alternative medicine and Yorùbá traditional medicine on the other. For him, while Western Orthodox medicine is allopathic because it is based on “the contrary principle” which treats diseases with chemical agents producing contrary effects, thereby focusing basically on the elimination of symptoms, Western alternative medicine is homeopathic in the sense that it adopts “the similarity principle” which treats like with like, thereby identifying the causes of illness and restoring balance.⁶⁵

Furthermore, comparing the Western alternative medicine with Yorùbá traditional medicine, Kólá Abímbólá explains that Yorùbá traditional medicine is homeopathic because:

It is not just interested in getting rid of the symptoms; it is interested in identifying and removing the causes of illness, just as much as it is interested in maintaining holistic balance. But there is also a spiritual dimension to the treatment...So, in their efforts to restore holistic balance in the patient, the *Onísègún* (the medicine maker) will also be interested in finding the spiritual causes of illness (if there are any), just as much as s/he will be interested in restoring spiritual balance in the patient (if necessary).⁶⁶

While the above explanation draws out the similarity between Western alternative medicine and Yorùbá traditional medicine on the basis that both are homeopathic in nature, it also strongly under-scores the point that the diagnostic system in Western alternative medicine is limited and restrictive in some ways. This limitation lies in the fact that it can neither explore the spiritual aspects of diseases, diagnose the kind of defectiveness occurring in that terrain, nor make prescriptions on that esoteric lane like the Yorùbá

⁶⁵ Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 78-79.

⁶⁶ Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 78-79.

traditional diagnostic system. Consequently, while Western alternative medicine is less effective when it comes to restoring holistic balance despite the fact that it is homeopathic, Yorùbá trado-medical system, based on its ability to diagnose the non-physical dimension of diseases through divination, is more effective in addition to being homeopathic. This is the position that Richard Oyelakin vehemently underscores.⁶⁷

New existential and health challenges confronting the global communities are beginning to suggest – and, in fact, to reiterate the need for intercultural interactions, collaborative efforts, and complementary interventions among human beings all over the world if they ever hope to survive. An ample epitome of these existential problems is the pertinacious Covid-19 virus, which recently shook and threw the whole world into an unexpected pandemonium.

The worrisome dilemma unleashed on the world by the sudden outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic tossed the entire world into confusion. Not only that, the challenge that this deadly virus poses for scientists concerning the issue of vaccination makes the need to consider other cultural medication systems imperative. This is because there are different ways by which each cultural civilisation managed illnesses and diseases in traditional times and till date. However, the domination of the Western medical paradigm over other indigenous medical alternatives is an appendage of the conquests made by the West through colonialism and neocolonialism of other cultural civilisations. As a result, concepts such as modernism were introduced to envelop and suppress other indigenous medical systems, forgetting the fact that the Western medical system is as traditional as other medical systems.

Assuming scientists, after a long period of research and brainstorming, were not able to come up with any preventive vaccine for the virus, it means human beings are inescapably caught up in the web of this contagious disease because of their mono-dimensional attitude to medication over the years. The situation, however, despite the discovery of the vaccine, has not been totally remedied, for different waves are still being observed in different parts of the world. Apart from that, contingencies, emergencies, and surprises cannot be entirely ruled out of human existence. Accordingly, human beings just have to be well prepared for any eventuality against future occurrences.

Ifá divination is an example of a cultural diagnostic cum medication system that can help to complement the Western alternative diagnostic and medication system. Akinmayowa Akin-Otiko also emphasizes the importance of integrating the Yoruba and Western medicines.⁶⁸ Yoruba medical practitioners

⁶⁷ Richard Taye Oyelakin, “The Dominance of Homeopathic Medicine in Yoruba Healthcare Delivery,” *Yoruba Studies Review*, 8(1), 2023: 89-103.

⁶⁸ Akinmayowa Akin-Otiko, “Making a Case for Integrative Medicine in Yoruba and Western Health Care Paradigms,” *Lagos Notes and Records*, 29(1), 2023: 1-16.

have two approaches towards medication. First, in the Yorùbá trado-medical system, *agbo* (herbs) could be prescribed for a victim of a disease through divination, especially when such a disease indicates no familiar or known symptoms. It is through divination that relevant preventive herbs are navigated. Again, in a case where the symptoms are familiar or known, herbs could be prescribed by a diviner based on the symptom(s) of the disease in question. For instance, *agbo* (herbs) can be effective in the treatment of some symptoms such as high fever, diarrhea, headache, cough, and so on, which Covid-19 is said to display. This is a view that Williams Akinlabi also emphasises.⁶⁹ These herbs are a combination of roots, backs of trees, and leaves (animals or bones of animals and other materials are also included in some cases)

However, some leaves are called different names due to the fact that they have the capacity to serve different purposes. The purpose for which such leaves are plucked, therefore, determines the names they would be called. In addition, some patients may be required (if the case calls for it) to bathe with a certain talisman (liquid or solid) made from such leaves while uttering certain words at the same time. This is where the role of incantation comes up in the Yorùbá trado-medical healing system. It is believed in Yorùbá thought that words are potent and significant in their own right. Accordingly, in addition to a prepared talisman mixed with soap or poured in water, whatever is affirmed, requested, or rejected based on a patient's *àníyàñ* (inner disposition or wish) in relation to the illness in question through incantation, according to the directive of the medicine man/woman during the healing process, takes effect. Again, if there are forces behind the attack, it is also discoverable through *Ifá* divination. In addition, appropriate prescriptions or recommendations are made through divination. This may take the form of sacrifice, anyway. In some cases, imminent diseases, usually called *ajákále* *àrùn* (contagious/ravenous diseases), are also prognosticated and forestalled through sacrifice or according to the recommendation(s) derived through divination. For instance, a disease that affects a whole village, city, country, or world like Covid-19 is known as *ajákále* *àrùn* in Yorùbá thought. The first step towards the prevention of such a disease is to ascertain its nature, cause, or source, whether natural or non-natural, through divination. This is not surprising: the Yorùbá worldview has some teleological colouration as earlier mentioned. It is after this has been done that subsequent steps concerning prescription, medication, and curation are taken. The first step gives an epistemic clue or direction on the nature of the disease before further steps, having to do with prescription and medication, are taken after the nature or cause has been discovered.

As discussed in the previous sections, Yorùbá diagnostic system takes a dual-dimensional approach which explores both the physical and non-physical

⁶⁹ Williams Akinlabi, "Yoruba Traditional Medicine: A Panacea to Challenges to Global Pandemic (Covid-19)," *Nigerian Journal of African Studies*, 6 (1) 2024: 62-66.

aspects of illness for the purpose of ascertaining the root-cause and restoring a holistic balance. Monicca Bhuda contends that African Traditional Medicine is holistic in the sense that it addresses both body and mind, which is the essential component of the traditional healing system.⁷⁰ This is specifically the case with the Yorùbá medical system. Physical aspects of diseases are treated with relevant herbal mixtures, talisman, and incantations (if necessary) based on the prescriptions of the diviner, as explained above, while the non-physical aspects are treated or prevented with sacrifice and other relevant means according to the diviner's prescriptions. This is informed by the belief of the Yorùbá that sacrifice has the power to placate malevolent forces who are usually fingered as causes of non-natural diseases. In addition, it is believed that sacrifice has the power to avert imminent danger or harm, whatever its nature, when offered according to the prescriptions of the diviner.

This approach to the diagnosis and treatment of illness is lamentably absent in the Western alternative medical system, which lays claim to modernity and universality. One notable implication of this is that Yorùbá trado-medical and divinatory system is more encompassing and thorough in its approach to the diagnosis of diseases, prescription of preventive measures, and treatment of illnesses in that it ensures both physical and spiritual well-being. This is a stronger sense of the idea of holistic balance than the type obtainable in the Western system of medication.

However, the fore-going is, in no way, a sheer discreditation of the Western medical approach to the treatment of diseases but a case for the accommodation of other diagnostic and medical alternatives that can complement Western medicine for the effective management of human health globally. Of course, Western medicine also has its unparalleled values for human well-being. It has improved human health globally for decades with its employment of scientific and sophisticated technological equipment in the management of human health. Nevertheless, the addition or incorporation of the Yorùbá divinatory system to modern medical practices will only produce promising results. It is in the light of this that Godwin Sogolo contends that the combination of the African approach to the explanation of diseases and Western explanatory models provides a fuller and more comprehensive understanding than the exclusion of either. Accordingly, he submits that both are complementary and non-mutually exclusive.⁷¹ While my recommendation in this paper aligns with Sogolo's perspective, it is important to mention that the Yorùbá divinatory cum trado-medical system needs to be properly developed and given all the sophistication and methodological systematization

⁷⁰ Monicca Thulisile Bhuda, "African Traditional Medicine as a Covid-19 treatment and the South African Government response," *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 105(4), 2024: 1-16.

⁷¹ Godwin Sogolo, "The Concept of Cause in African Thought," *African philosophy Reader*, P. H. Coetzee & A. P. J. Roux (eds.) Second Edition. New York: Routledge, 2005: 229, 233-234.

it requires, so that it can be globally accessible to all as a legitimately complementary medical system to the thriving Western alternative medicine.

Conclusion

This paper examined the Yorùbá conception of diseases (*Àrùn*) by investigating it from two major points of view, namely: the metaphysical and the normative. Under the metaphysical aspect, I maintained in the paper that *Àrùn* (disease) itself, when viewed from the ontological perspective, is believed to be one of the eight prominent warlords of the malevolent wing called *Ajogun* (warriors against human beings) in Yorùbá thought. Accordingly, it is believed to be a being itself. From the normative point of view, I explained that illnesses are attracted by normative lapses, especially intentional refusal to heed warnings or instructions relating to forbidden things or taboos. I employed some relevant verses of *Ifá* to substantiate the two explanations on the reality of diseases.

The paper also discussed, reiterated, and explicated the gnostic and diagnostic functions of the *Ifá* divinatory system and how it can complement Western alternative medicine for effective management of human health globally. This is because it embraces a deeper approach to the diagnosis and treatment of diseases. This is predicated on its ability to explore and diagnose the spiritual dimension of diseases in addition to the physical aspects and make prescriptions based on the diagnosis.

The features discussed above are absent in the Western diagnostic cum medical system, despite the fact that it is homeopathic like the Yorùbá divinatory cum medical method. I therefore submitted that the Yorùbá divinatory system be adopted as a complementary alternative to the modern Western medicine in order to provide a fuller explanation and more reliable medication system, thereby improving and promoting human health, well-being, and stability globally. This recommendation is made due to the reason that both are non-mutually exclusive but rather complementary.

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***Note:** *I presented the first draft of this paper at the international conference, organised in honour of Emeritus Prof. Wande Abimbola by the Institute of Cultural Studies and the Department of Linguistics and African Languages, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife; which held from 12 to 15 July, 2023.*