

# **The Relevance of the Practice of Ifá Divination in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame***

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## **Abstract**

The custom of Ifá divination is common among the Yorùbá of Western Nigeria, and among Africans generally. This paper attempts an evaluation of the relevance of the practice of Ifá divination in the selected play of Ola Rotimi to Yorùbá culture and metaphysics. This is purposely to attain a greater and more profound awareness of its role as a symbol of communal and cultural identicalness. Using *The God Are Not to Blame* (1975) as illustration, the paper contends, in a poignant manner, that the elements of Yorùbá Ifá divination, through oracular devices, well manifested in the structuring principles of Rotimi's work. This is analyzed from spiritual and mythological angles. The paper posits, with an overwhelming lucidity, that actions in the play influenced by an assumption that any collective catastrophe or adversities are the outcome of a disharmony between disparate cosmos. The aforementioned includes a detailed interrogation of the rationality and logic of these beliefs as Rotimi presents them. Through the ambience of the various events in the play, the paper establishes that the practice of Ifá divination in Yorùbá land is not only a way of life but it has also transcended traditional, Christian and Muslim beliefs. Finally, while recognizing the enduring popularity and artistic forte of Rotimi's magnum opus, the paper broadens spasmodically our perception of the pervasiveness and practical relevance of the practice of Ifá divination as

means for rectifying evil destiny, regulating what the future holds and resolving problems of existence in Yorùbá culture and metaphysics.

**Keywords:** Yoruba Culture, Ifá Oracle, Divination, Metaphysics, Ola Rotimi

## Introduction: The Concept of Divination

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, divination is “the act of finding out and saying what will happen in the future”. F.B Jevons (1898:612) defines divination as a “supernatural method by which man gains fore-knowledge of the future from a supernatural source e.g. by inspiration, possession, or direct interrogation of the divine will”. It is translated “from the Hebrew word *qusem* from the root *qusam*, which” (Boaheng&Asibu-Dadzle) (2020) means, “to practice divination”. The Arabic word, *qusamic* means “to cut” or “to split” (S.H Horn, 1960:275). The Hebrew used it perhaps, to describe divination because most divination practice by the people around them involved cutting open animal entrails.

Similarly, according to D.E. Aune (1988:971), divination is the “art or science of deducing the future or the unknown through the observation of and interpretation of some facts of nature or human life, ordinarily of an unpredictable and trivial character”. In the religion of man, divination is a universal phenomenon. It seeks to discover or unravel the cause of a problem or what the future holds. It presupposes a form of cosmic harmony whereby the diverse elements and aspects of the material and spiritual universe form an interrelated whole. The idea of divination is replete in ancient Greek, Roman, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Arab, Babylonia, and Yorùbá traditions while they sought to understand “the future through technical means strictly through skilled personnel who monopolized the field” (D.E. Aune, 1988:971).

Among the Mesopotamians, Babylonians, and other nations around the Jews, D.E Aune (1988:971) identified about ten forms of divination practices, such as Oneiromancy, the art, and science of interpreting dreams; Cleromancy, whereby lots are cast and interpreted; Belomancy that involves the use of arrow; Hydromancy or Lecanomancy, the use of water or divination; Hepastocopy. The art of inspecting the liver for divination; Rhabdomancy, which entails the use of staff or rod to divination; Necromancy, consulting with the dead; Astromancy or Astrology, which involves the observation of heavenly bodies and; Teraphim, the art of consulting cultic image that was practiced in Israel in the days of the Judges. Interestingly, all except one are common practices in Yorùbáland.

Thus, the task of this paper is to argue that Rotimi invests the universe of his play with Yoruba cosmological and cultural elements of Ifá divination

which function as structural markers in unmistakable terms. Some would arguably react to this frame of thinking by saying that it is not new, this paper avers that the imitation of that practice has been somewhat fraudulent, whereby our so called folklore scholars and cultural researchers in cassocks and turbans are afraid, careful and wary of ritual contamination at the groves of African gods and ancestors (Nelson O. Fashina, 2010:240). There has been little investiture of scientific and empirical faith and sincerity in the discoveries and inscriptions of African esoteric in the imaginative literature of most academic African writers.

In the main, the paper explores the relevance of the practice of Ifá divination in selected play of Ola Rotimi to Yoruba culture and metaphysics. The selected play is *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (hereinafter called *The Gods*). This is purposely to attain a greater and more profound awareness of its role as a symbol of social and cultural identity. There is a sense that intimately divination bound up with Yorùbá life, in other words, Ifá divination considered to be in itself the style of living of the Yorùbá race.

### **Divination in African (Yoruba) Religious Practices**

In African traditional religions, divination is extensively practiced but in a modified form from those described above. In traditional religions, the diviner carry out his work through the manipulation of divinatory objects like seeds, cowry shells, strings of beads, bones, palm nuts, boards, sand etc. Andrew Igenozu (1982:131–2), identifies three ideas in the African divinatory systems which are: spirit possession of a-would-be diviner, scrutinizing the days gone by and time to come, and thirdly the knowledge and application of sacred tradition.

However, in Yorùbáland, the practice of divination is widespread. However, the number of diviners and level of patronage vary from place to place. In fact, Yorùbá divination practice perceived as somewhat similar to the prophetic practices of the Old Testament. This might be the reason why a few orthodox Christians and devoted Muslims alike hitherto turn to clairvoyants in Yorùbá land. The Yorùbá people are hesitant or averse to begin any enterprise unless they firstly seek advice from Òrúnmìlà, the oracular deity of wisdom. In this vein, Idowu (1963:77, 78) opines:

Before a betrothal, before a marriage, before a child is born, at the birth of a child, at successive stages in a man's life. Before a king is appointed, before a chief is made, before anyone is appointed to a civic office, before a journey is made, in times of crisis, in times of sickness, at all times, Ifá is consulted for guidance and assurance.

In the opinion of Awolalu (1979:121), people practice divination because “they are anxious to know the behest of Deity and also the future with regards to themselves and those close to them”. The Ifa divination corpus, the oracle is consulted from time to time in Yorubaland. Their common adage, “*Bíonitiri, olakiiri bee; ni ó n je ki Babalawo difa oro-orun*”. “Since each day has its peculiar problems, the Babalawo (Ifá priest) has to divine (daily)” (Awolalu, 1979:121). In other words, frequent divination could enable one to prevent many problems or resolve the existing ones. Some other reasons why people consult diviners in Yorubaland may be to know what the future holds or to resolve present crises of an individual, a family, or an entire community, or for protection against the devil and his agents since we dwell in a cosmos filled with evil spirits and evil practices that brings evil occurrences.

To the Yoruba, the Supreme Being (Olódùmarè) has preordained a human being's accomplishment in the world. Consequently, they are generally concerned about what the future holds. It is believed that *orí* (head) determines one's achievements in life. *Orí* might choose good or bad, prosperity or poverty. Among the Yorubas, whatever happens to a person, *ori* has chosen it from heaven. Idowu (1962:173-4) graphically states this fact clearly:

It is believed that a person obtains his destiny from Olódùmarè in one of the three ways. The Yoruba have a trimorphous conception of destiny, the sustaining motif of which is that the person who is coming into the world must kneel before the High Authority who is Olódùmarè for its conferment. The first way is called ‘*À-kúnlè-yàn*’ which, literally translated means ‘That which- is chosen-kneeling’. The second known as ‘*À-kúnlè-gbà*’ means that which-is received-kneeling’. The third ‘*Àyànmó*’, which means ‘That-which-is affixed-to-one’. Although it is generally believed that destiny is brought from heaven, the Yorubá also believe that with the aid of ritual and sacrifice, a bad destiny can be altered.

This can be determined through divination whose predictions can be made through oracular devices. In his own analysis, Ogungbile (1992:3) pointed out that “the theology of *ori* led to the idea of prognostication. The eagerness to know what will happen in the future and rectify evil destiny led them into prying to the future by consulting diviners”. Thus, it can be argued that divination practices in Yorubaland originated primarily as a way of resolving problems that may be embedded in a cloudy future, which only the diviner can identify.

In Yorubaland, seeking the cause of an event may be another reason why people consult diviners. To a typical Yoruba person, unusual happenings or events believed to have evil omens elicit questions such as: why did this happen? Why did it occur in that manner and at that time? Why did it take place

where it did? In the words of Ogungbile (1992:3), “the Yorùbá people do not concern themselves with the “logicality” of a phenomenon rather they seek divine intervention for every occurrence, especially the calamitous ones”.

It is instructive to note that divination is as old as the beginning of existence in Yorùbá beliefs. This takes place through various methods such as: *DídaObi* (casting of kolanuts) where a kolanuts of the cola acuminate specie with four lobes is used for divination; *Eérindínlógún*, where sixteen cowry shells are shaken with both fists and cast for divination purposes. This is commonly used by Sango worshippers; *Òpèlè* is a divination string in which eight half-pods or halpf-nuts are affixed or strung together like a chain about three or four feet long and is used to divine (for details, on the four methods of divination, see Awolalu (1979:122-6); *Mystical Water in Sacred Pot*, is used by the priestesses of the river goddesses to do their divination. After shaking her *Sere* (a special gourd that makes rhythmic sound when shaken), the problem of the client will be revealed in the water. In most cases by the priestess only who will later tell her client and; **Osanyin** in which involves a small statue that speaks and reveals the problem and solution after the priest must have shaken the *Sere* (Alofe, 2005:76).

### **Ifá Divination and Yoruba Worldview**

“Ifá is a Yorùbá oracle, the medium of **Òrúnmìlà** (Yorùbá Deity of Wisdom and Omniscience). Ifa is the philosophy, knowledge, and acts of **Òrúnmìlà** while on earth, and it constitutes a rather all-embracing, comprehensive, and uniquely pervasive system.”<sup>1</sup> Ifá divination is a geomantic type of divination. It is the most frequently used and important divination technique. The Yoruba people attribute great wisdom and power to **Òrúnmìlà** the prophetic deity of wisdom, who is among *Olodumare*’s main delegates in the world. “He is”, according to Maduakor (1981: XII) “the presiding spirit of those capable of a prescient probing into the unknown, the unanticipated”, also connected with the *Orunmila* cult is Ifa divination. One single explanation stated for his intimate wisdom of affairs touching man’s fate is that **Òrúnmìlà** is in attendance when God created man and sealed his destiny. In the words of Idowu, (1962:76-77):

**Òrúnmìlà** can predict what is coming to pass or prescribe remedies against any eventuality. As such, he is called *eleriiipin* (The witness or advocate, of destiny, or lot”, or the one who witnessed the determination of man’s destiny in heaven), *Okìrìbitì-a-jí-pa-ojó-ikú-dà-* (The great changer, who alters the date of death).

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In fact, Idowu (1962:77) acquiesces why a man should adopt *Òrúnmìlà* as his divinity: “either to make sure that his happy lot is preserved or in order that an unhappy lot may be rectified.

Wole Soyinka “sees Ifá as separate from *Òrúnmìlà*.” *Òrúnmìlà* is for him “the essence of wisdom, while Ifá is the god of divination and order” (Idanre and other Poems, 1967:37). In the epic poem, “Idanre,” the two gods are regarded as two separate deities.

The investigation of the relevance of the practice of Ifá divination in selected play of Rotimi to Yoruba culture consequently considers that *Òrúnmìlà* and Ifá are one and selfsame god. This article holds this opinion having observed almost all Yoruba intellectuals, nonetheless, conceptualize Orunmila and Ifa as one and selfsame god. “The above expositions become relevant in view of the fact that *Òrúnmìlà* is an oracle often consulted in the Yoruba setting to reveal secret things to the people. This explains why the Babaláwo’s (Ifá Priests) are usually consulted for necessary guidance during the time of important decision.”<sup>2</sup> In agreement with the same vein of reasoning, Farrow (1926:71) opines:

Ifa or the philosophy, knowledge, and acts of *Òrúnmìlà* while on earth, constitute a rather all embracing, comprehensive and uniquely pervasive system. This fact alone makes the system understandably large, of many parts, and with numerous components, covering all aspects of man’s life... Orunmila, as the deity of Wisdom, embodies all knowledge and wisdom of the world: it takes, in consequence, two hundred and fifty-six (256) of his original and foundation disciples to transmit and preserve the wholeness of his primordial wisdom for the world.

Abimbola (1976:3) offers a well-heeled assemblage of authentic Ifa wisdom for anyone desiring to appreciate the immense meaning of amassed Ifa wisdom and its systematic grouping. The corpus are broken down into volumes (ODU), added up to 156, together with chapters (Ese), whose digits is so extensive and boundless that it is challenging to decide accurately.

The Yorùbá divinatory system also arose from the fact that they are essentially homo-religious. In their cosmology, “a man is believed to consist of the physical and the spiritual aspects. ‘The body is the physical’ while ‘the spirit is the immaterial and the moral part of a man’. Ori inu (inner head) is perceived as the social force of man’s behavior” (Ogungbile, 1992:20). Consequently, one ought to consult Ifa who understands how to elucidate matters regarding the current and time to come. It is in tandem with this perspective that Idowu (1962:5) explains:

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2 <https://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.0510003>www.arcjournals.org.

Through all the circumstances of life, through all its changing scenes, it joys and troubles, it is deity who is in control. Before a child is born, the oracle is consulted and due rites observed; when the child is born, the oracle gives directions about it; at every stage of life-puberty, betrothal, marriage, taking up a career, building a house, going on a journey and in fact, the thousand and one things which make up human existence here on earth-man is in the hands of the deity whose dictate is law, who is waiting on the other side of this life to render to him as he deserves.

Olatunji (1984:10) asserts:

Ifá is consulted by all Yorùbá irrespective of religion, age or level of education, and when there is a major crisis, the Western educated, Christian or Muslim Yoruba, go secretly to the Babaláwo (Ifa priest - diviner) to know what should be done.

Bascom (1969:3-5, 13-25) graphically states that:

Ifa divination is practiced beyond Yorubaland. Apart from the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin, formerly Dahomey, The Edo of Bendel State, of Nigeria, the Fon of the Republic of Benin who call it Fa, and the Ewe of Togo who knew it as Afa, consult Ifa. It is also practiced by descendants of the Yoruba in Cuba and Brazil.

Bascom (1969:11) further presents the fact clearly:

Of all the methods of divination employed by the Yoruba, Ifá is regarded as the most important and the most reliable. The honesty or knowledge of individual Babaláwo may be questioned, but most are highly esteemed, and the system itself is rarely doubted. The number of Babaláwo is a reflection of the patronage they receive and a measure of the influence they wield.

Ifa is the sole effective representative of Yoruba traditional religion across-the-board. It is the belief of the Yoruba people that in the absence of Ifa, the significance of other gods in the Yoruba pantheon would dwindle. Ifa functions as an emissary betwixt the other deities and human beings, betwixt human beings and their forebears, and betwixt the departed and the living. In accord with one Yoruba saying: *Òrìṣà tin kóni "ba to bo Orisa miran"* (Ifá is the only divinity that teaches one, how to worship other divinities). Consequently, as a voice, Ifá manages to promote the other deities. In addition, assuming that a man is being chastened by the other deities, he can only be aware of this by asking Ifá.

Odù (volume) and Ese (chapter) are the two principal components in Ifa literary corpus. The corpus is broken down into two hundred and fifty-six (256) volumes named Odù out of which sixteen are the major ones called Ojú-Odù. Others that derive from the sixteen are called AmuluOdu or OmoOdù. Each of the Odù, has 1680 myths attached to it. Olu-Osayomi (2017:56-66) remarked thus:

The Odu corpus is a body of recitals which belongs to the intricate system of divination connected with the cult of Òrúnmìlà. They are believed to be the responses vouchsafed by the oracle through the priests to devout enquirers and suppliants, and constitute, in a systematic way, the religious philosophy of the Yoruba, which Odù is sub-divided into numerous chapters called Ese (<https://ijllc.eu/index.php>).

In Yorubaland, Babaláwo is the father of confidential matters or diviner. He discharges functions varying from forecasting to curative or healing. According to Alofe (2005:77) “one can become a Babaláwo in one of the following ways: inheritance from father, through apprenticeship and prescription by a priest during a divinatory event. In any case, one must necessarily undergo vigorous training for a number of years. He will perform stipulated rituals in the course of training to qualify for the job.” Wande Abimbola (1976) is quoted by Andrew Igenozia (1982:187) that:

It is a very rigorous training. Because of its complexities, the trainee has to start his apprenticeship early in life. An extraordinary phenomenon is the claim that whirlwinds (aja) carries someone away for years and is taught Ifa divination and other medicinal practices. Sometimes it last up to seven years. Such individuals usually possess extraordinary powers (D.O. Ogungbile, 1992:188). Other training could be longer as much as twelve years. During the apprenticeship, the trainee learns a vast store of technical and oral poem called Odù.

As has already been indicated in this paper, clients for various reasons consult these diviners. The diviner then manipulates the divination nuts or chains or makes marks on the Ìyèròsùn (a powder-like substance) spread on a divination board and records his findings. He will then recite the appropriate Odù that corresponds to the stroke. This will reveal the client’s mystery. Once Babaláwo performs his divinatory act, the secret of the client’s problem revealed as expected. The Yoruba repose great confidence in Babaláwo that their words are esteemed as that of Olódùmarè (God). In addition, since Babaláwo trained to perceive what Ifá reveals, he cannot make mistakes. Because of



the ability of Babaláwo to find solutions to the current problem(s) and sometimes predict the future of an individual in his divination according to Alofe (2005:77), he is esteemed as the Bible Prophet of Old Testament. Similarly, Simpson (1980:73) explains:

In learning Ifaodu, one starts with Opele, a divination chain to which eight half nuts are fastened. When the Opele is thrown on the ground, one can tell which odu is indicated by the combination of nut segments which fall “up” (inner side up) and which fall “down” (inner side down). The diviner then quotes from the passages in the odu which he knows or which he thinks are appropriate to the occasion or to the question he has been asked and gives his interpretation of this odu in somewhat the same way that that a Christian minister might interpret a verse or chapter of the Bible or a lawyer might give an explanation of a article or section of the Constitution.

However, prediction is just an aspect of a Babaláwo job. His work includes medicinal healing, fighting witchcraft, guidance for the ruler of a community, restoration of the estranged to his community and many others.

### **Evaluation of Ifá Divination Practice in Ola Rotimi’s Play**

The Yorùbá on whose culture Rotimi bases *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (hereinafter called *The Gods*) have a deep belief in mythological gods or mythical deities and in their powers. On the surface, this Yoruba oracular god of wisdom and knowledge, the all-knowing, all seeing, Òrúnmìlà occupies and shapes Rotimi’s creative canvas in *The Gods*. There is a powerful influence of Òrúnmìlà in this play and the lines betray the deep-rooted belief of the people in the god and his pronouncements.

One aspect of *The Gods*’ foundation in indigenous culture is the use of Ifá divination chants as a rhetorical and thematic element. Ifa divination is a means of resolving problems of existence in Yoruba cosmology. “It takes many years of learning to master the Ifá divination and the enormous text necessary to interpret the god’s answers, and so, being the authorized channel of communication with Òrúnmìlà, an Ifá priest is considered a repository of wisdom.”<sup>3</sup> Kacke Gotrick (2009:333) opines: “To use Ifa creatively and for the benefit of everybody is equal to making good use of the traditional knowledge and wisdom acquired by the Yoruba peoples over centuries.”

The diviner illuminates a client’s problem through the corpus of Ifá (Odù) that appears on the divination board. Whatever the nature of the problem, it

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3 <https://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.0510003www.arcjournals.org>.

usually has antecedent within the vast scope of Ifa epistemology that is rendered through the priest's chants. The chant becomes a means of understanding the problem as well as the appropriate solution. Rotimi uses Orunmila and Ifa literature in his play like a god of premonition which perchance be employed paradigmatically to attend to experiential social situations. The Ifa divination corpus, the oracle is consulted from time to time and the blind seer, Baba Fakunle, has the ear of the gods like his counterpart, the blind Teiresias in *Oedipus Rex*. The excerpts below justify this in the play<sup>4</sup>:

- PRIEST:** We have sent Aderopo to Ile-Ife, the land of Orunmila, to ask the all-seeing god why we are in pain. (*The Gods*, 12)
- ADEROPO:** The oracle of Ifa at the shrine of Orunmila has found the cause of the sickness and deaths now in our midst, and it has told me what the people can do so that there may be peace of mind again in every home.  
(*The Gods*, 19)
- ODEWALE:** There is plague in this land, and Orunmila tells us from Ile-Ife that the cause of this suffering is the presence of a murderer... Pray, tell, who is this murderer?  
(*The Gods*, 26)

The effect of the extramundane forces, especially Orunmila, is apparent in evidently every phase of the advancement of the storyline of Ola Rotimi's *The Gods*. The drama starts alongside a prelude. A storyteller presents a description of how a son is born to the king and queen of Kutuje: Adetusa and Ojuola, along with the joyousness and merriment that come after. As revealed by the Ifa oracle, the presence of the extramundane forces is noticed again, especially the announcement of a malediction of Odewale. The Ifa priest reveals that the baby will kill his dad and marry his mum. The storyteller tells the audience of the anguish, the despondency that naturally attends the dreadful prophecy on the calling of the doomed child. For the sake of blocking the desire of the deities, the conspiracy to stall the life assignment of the newborn is swiftly devised by the king and queen through a messenger, Gbonka, who is given the onerous task of disposing of the child into the wilds there he can pass on as immolation.

Fate, however, takes over the rest of the story. The deities are absolutely in control as the conspiracy is aborted in an unusual and questionable manner. Motivated with pity for the newborn, the messenger entrusts him to a huntsman who raises the doomed boy as his. The consequently arranged phase for

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4 See further *The Gods*, pp. 2, 3, 18, 20, 21, 25, 27, 28, 29

the grave clash betwixt King Adetusa, the father, and the son, Odewale, accelerates the binary criminality of parricide and matricide and the accompanying aftermaths. Until Odewale's drunken uncle informs him that he is a "butterfly calling himself a bird" (*The Gods*), Odewale as might be expected and rationally accepts that Ogundele, the hunter, and Mobike, his wife are his progenitors. His uncle sees the possibility of Odewale acquiring the enormous affluence of Ogundele, the hunter, and Mobike, his wife. Odewale's inability to get a satisfactory answer when he confronts his 'parents' drives him to search for his accurate self-identity. Thus, he asks Ifa oracle who additionally consulates his circumstance by playing tongue-tied on certain facets of Odewale's destiny. Although the oracle informs Odewale that he will murder his dad and get married to his mum, the oracle fails to tell Odewale that Ogundele, the hunter, is not his actual father. Odewale departs the house of his caregivers. The 'gap' or 'silences' in the response of Orunmila, the Ifa 'deity' influences and directs Odewale's decision. The god(s) therefore control from the background the destiny of the protagonist in the play. As an accursed person, he consummates the malediction on himself accordingly when he carelessly kills his actual dad in the course of his wandering. His wandering again takes him to the town of Kutuje, where the throne is vacuous.

Again, it can be argued that it is the background powers of Òrúnmìlà, in concert with other divinities who direct the path of Odewale to Kutuje. Why one may ask should his wanderings take him to the place of his real ancestry, without his knowledge, if the gods are not the background forces controlling the actions of the play? This singular "coincidence" is an indication that although Òrúnmìlà and other divinities are not physically present as characters in the play, they are definitely present as background forces, and the controller of the characters, particularly Odewale's destiny in the play.

Taking over from the narrator, Odewale arrives at the scene. To arrive at Kutuje land; Odewale tells the gathering of the extremely long trip he has undertaken; how he successfully stirs up the soul of the community to considerable extents so greatly that the people are able to conquer their adversaries from Ikolu (the attackers, in the Yoruba language), and in gratitude, he is pronounced ruler even though against culture. He followed tradition by getting married to the bereaved empress. Similarly, according to Dasylyva, (2004: 39):

Then, finally made King. No doubt, Odewale's new status as King finally brings him to the terminus of one favored by the gods ironically, it also completes his accursed earthly mission of patricide and incest.

Activity proceeds ‘usually’ for a substantial duration until an epidemic hits the kingdom. Odewale is now crowned head of Kutuje, as well as the groom of Queen Ojuola, the bride of the dead King Adetusa. He haughtily flaunts the youngsters’ Queen Ojuola bears for him. In fact, the disgrace and contamination of Odewale’s acts are slowly operating in the direction of his annihilation. Sophocles transmits the disposition when he narrates the circumstance in *Oedipus Rex*: “There passed some fifteen years of seeming prosperity. But beneath the deceptive surface a hideous depth of shame and incest lay concealed” (1954:24). “The happiness of the royal household” according to Dasylyva (2004:133) “is not to last, however. The playwright again, effectively uses doubling; also the dancers through chants and dances enact the war which Odewale successfully wages against the Ikolu attackers”. The play actually unfolds with a few unusual epidemics tormenting Kutuje land. The crowd thronged to the palace to ask for King Odewale’s assistance in explanation to the uncommon affliction. King Odewale was introduced as a pragmatic man. He is a good leader of the people, a devoted and caring King.

To the Yorùbá, Ilé-Ife is the source and the home of Òrúnmìlà, the molder and the symbol of knowledge and wisdom of humanity. Whenever there is a problem or disharmony, Òrúnmìlà intervenes and the tragic action is resolved. This is why Aderopo sent to Ile-Ife, “the land of Òrúnmìlà, to ask the all-seeing god why we are in pain”, (*The Gods*, 12). Ifa oracle discloses that Kutuje land has been contaminated by the acts of a murderer whose name is not alluded to. Immediately the source of the plague divulged, and Odewale swears to try hard to expose the murderer of Adetusa, the departed king. Odewale’s offense is dual: patricide and an incestuous relationship, which is heinous and carries contagious effects. In response, he cloyes out his sole eyes and proceeds on voluntary banishment stating:

Let no one stop us and let no one come with us or I shall curse him... when the wood-insect gathers sticks, on its head it carries them. (*The Gods*, 72).

In the play, the earliest experience with the notion of fate (destiny) is during the birth of Odewale to King Adetusa. The Ifa priest is very decisive during his proclamation: “This boy, he will kill his father and marry his mother” (*The Gods*, 3). Eghagha (1996:118) opines:

Although it is the boy’s fate, it is cursed one which must not be allowed to take its course and bring disaster on the human community. The Narrator says: ‘The bad future must not happen’. This suggests that the people believe that what has been destined can be averted. The baby is adorned with sacrificial ornaments. The Narrator tells us that the priest of Ogun.

'ties boy's feet with a string of cowries meaning sacrifice to the gods who have sent the boy down to this Earth' (*The Gods*, 3). This also, is the first fight against fate.

Odewale's parents tries to circumvent the prophecy by delivering the infant as a beneficence one as to protect them from taboo. Kutuje, the fictional society in the play, consequently accepts the fate perchance known from child-birth, there is joy, on the condition that it is going to be certain. Yet, certain rituals are performed if the contrary is the case. The contest to control his destiny begins once Odewale gains consciousness of his environment:

The audience is appalled as the play progresses through the strong force of fatalism which pulls Odewale towards his destiny. The ruthless force behind his actions to avert disaster overwhelms one with dread and raises the question whether man has any say in the drama of his life (Eghagha, 1996:119).

It jogs one's memory of Shakespeare's statement in *King Lear* where he opines that "the gods kill us for sport". Utilizing the prologue to inculcate definite details in the consciousness, the playwright maintains his irony which runs through the play.

Orunmila poses a riddle that Baba Fakunle meant to resolve through divination. The double odious offense perpetrated hitherto when the first act opens. Similar to *Oedipus*, Odewale's mission, is to free himself of the incomprehension that has ruled his existence. It is likewise a time whereby he must compensate for his crimes. The audience is presented with the pictorial demonstration of how Odewale assassinated his father through the flashback technique. The deed is depicted at such a spot in the play that it intensifies the audience's compassion for Odewale.

Actually, it is in the course of the sojourn of Alaka, the humorous, Ijekun-Yemoja citizen who bears the 'good news' of the demise of one of the 'parents' of Odewale that the veracity starts to open out. The death of Ogundele is 'good news' in the sense that it reassures Odewale that the Oracle was mistaken in predicting that he is fated to murder his father and get hitched to his mother- the information that induced him to run away from Ijekun-Yemoja. There exists impending apprehension, the King having indicted his chiefs of traitorous conspiracy. Odewale himself is in the calefaction of annoyance.

Òrúnmílà, the Yoruba deity of wisdom is a staunch believer in the sense of occasion. He chooses when to speak, and abhors and avoids shouting matches. Arching from Baba Fakunle's snide remark at him, Odewale treats with rudeness and irreverence the sacred institution of Ifa and its representative. In his

resolution to assist his community, he rushes to a conclusion by accusing the old man of corruption instead of handling Baba Fakunle with discretion for his abnormal conduct. He suspects the elderly man to have taken a bribe from the presumed murderer of the former king. When Baba Fakunle talks, he yells at Odewale the 'accursed murderer'. The queen is perturbed. Alaka enters with his measured and cautious manners. "The humor, which Alaka's appearance and loquacity brings, alleviates the tragic intensity of the doom threatening to engulf Odewale" (Ezeigbo, 1984:180).

However, not long afterward, Odewale informs Alaka that he, on one occasion, killed an adult male. At this stage, there exists a flashback and the audience comes eye to eye with Odewale murdering his father, and drowning in the ocean of annihilation dug for him by the deities. What beats one, is the haughtiness, the hurting irony that the 'tribe' that he murders for is not in fact his. Attached to this is the suspicion of the stern inescapability of fate which sways all his deeds.

The bloody encounter between Odewale and the ruler of Kutuje who afterward rolls out to be his biotic dad is through a piece of ground, a farmstead. Following his flight from the house of his assumed parents, he sets up farmland at a location "where three footpaths meet". Odewale was defrauded by Kakalu, son of Atiki by auctioning a piece of ground owned by King Adetusa. According to Odewale, he met a man whose slaves dubbed him a robber; the last goading was when the elderly man ridiculed his tribe. Ethnical proclivity in the two of King Adetusa and Odewale prevented amicable resolution of the misinterpretation arising from the authentic proprietorship of the land. Odewale bears direct testimony:

That is the end, I can bear insults to myself, brother, but to call my tribe bush, and then summon riff raff to mock my mother tongue. I will die first (*The Gods*, 46).

Despite the animated endeavors to avert what apparently is a calamitous deed, one sees the grasp of fate spurring Odewale to cataclysm. By killing the old man, his dad, he consequently accomplishes the initial task of the deities. He battles with the external forces that appear to control his destiny and the daily vicissitudes of sorrow or joy which are part of living. Thereafter, when the puzzle is disclosed, "his speech shows that he is indeed a doomed man, a man whose very fight against fate leads to the fulfillment of that fate" (Egh-*gha*, 1996:122).

During the time Odewale tries to avoid his fate, the gods manifest as apathetic beings, devoted to the annihilation of the brave man. For instance, "when a man referred to him as a 'butterfly calling himself a bird', he went to

the oracle to inquire about himself. It is a question of the identity of his place in the world so that he can chart a course for himself. He runs into a wall of stone” (Eghagha, 1996:122). This line of argument is substantiated by the revelations of the voice Odewale hears during his meeting with an Ifa priest:

- ODEWALE:** I went to a priest of Ifa. I asked him:  
‘Am I not who I am?’
- VOICE:** You have a curse on you, son.
- ODEWALE:** What kind of curse, Old one?
- VOICE:** You cannot run away from it, the gods have willed that you will kill your father and then marry your mother!
- ODEWALE:** Me! Kill my own father, and marry my own mother?
- VOICE:** It has been willed.
- ODEWALE:** What must I do then not to carry out this will of the gods?
- VOICE:** Nothing. To run away would be foolish. The snail may try, but it cannot cast off its shell. Just stay where you are...stay where you are.... (*The Gods*, 60)

The stage direction gives instruction to relay Odewale’s voice from the past and the voice of the oracle telling him of his evil destiny in a very awesome tone. Three things are revealed to Odewale by this dialogue. The authentic prediction about parricide and the heinous crime of incest came to pass. Secondly, it becomes clear to him that his fate had been sealed, even at his birth. Also, it is evident that the oracle eschews him to run from his fate. Even if he had remained where he was, he absolutely would assassinate his father, or the gods would have found some other means to bring about his ruin; he would disobey the oracle if he escaped from the land. Obviously, this contradicts logic and reason. Grabbed in this deterministic prediction, Odewale chooses not to stay in the terra firma and perform a forbidden deed.

Odewale is informed that to do something of his evil destiny is to endure. His predicament intensifies the friction which had been announced immediately after his delivery. Odewale turns powerless and defenseless as the actions move inexorably toward the terrible revelations that are the result of this persistent inquiry into the mystery of his birth. Grossvogel (1987) opines:

The tragic nature of man derives from the fact that his absolute vision is tied to an impotent expression. That vision frustrates the visionary who is grounded forever and forever doomed to hope for more than he can attain, to see more than he can grasp, to feel more than he can explain, to fear more than he can control. Until the vision is cancelled out at last without

ever having been achieved, the finite part of man pursues it in vain along an exasperating and vicious circle.

Odewale's frantic exploration and the doom threatening to engulf him is a contemplation of the calamitous essence of man. At long last, man realizes that he has been captured in a calamitous mesh.

The next segment of the prediction is accomplished when Odewale weds his birth mother. The decision of Kutuje society willingly crown him a king among an alien people, in recognition of his immense contribution bears him an unswerving connection with Ojuola, his mother, who as well had kids with him. According to Dasylyva (2004:40), "this well-intended gesture turns out to be the last straw that seals his fate to the degree that it serves as a catalyst to his fulfillment of the gods' final mission for him, the heinous crime of incest". Odewale proudly confesses:

For eleven years now, I Odewale the son of Ogundele have ruled Kutuje and have taken for wife as custom wishes Ojuola, motherly Queen of the former King Adetusa she is bearer of all my four seeds (*The Gods*, 7-8)

This depraved deed exasperates the metaphysical values of the people. For eleven years, Odewale dwells in this condition prior to the effect of his despicable acts overtaking him. Throughout this time, albeit undisclosed to the 'common eye' Odewale is anathema. His actions have breached the congenial accord connecting the community and the world of ancestors. The land would need purification. Eghagha (1996:127) explains:

The first step towards purification is 'discovery'. This refers to how he discovers the state of rituals pollution which he had been in. Ojuola commits suicide. Odewale gorges out his eyes and goes into exile. These actions are symbolic of purification. When Oedipus plucks his eyes, he explains that he cannot face his parents with his eyes open. He also explains that his eyes have not been able to redeem him from ignorance. Odewale takes his four children with him into exile perhaps signifying that all the characters touched by pollution have left the land.

One of the most dramatic moments of the play is the apprehension insinuated by Alaka's relaxed disparagement of Odewale's lineage. Alaka is the elderly man who bears the seemingly favorable message of the demise of Odewale's 'parents' to him, and inadvertently divulges the abominable truth. He is a half joker, half philosopher, somebody of pastoral sagacity, who discloses the accurate essence of the King's parentage through conduct that is



tantalizingly gradual. There is awe and stillness when Alaka reveals that Odewale has no kinship with his so-called parents after all:

The hunter Ogundele and his wife Mobike-you think they gave your life? Anyway, let us not bring that up now. (*The Gods*, 61)

Weighted with irony, this tension accumulates until the breathtaking inquiry by Odewale:

(*in a frantic scream*). I said who gave me b-i-r-t-h!

and the Ogun priest replies:

She. The woman who has just gone into the bedroom. Bearer of your four children. She too is your... mother! (*The Gods*, 68).

The shock of the disclosure is devastating. Odewale is distressed by the disclosure that he had accomplished what he had attempted to avert lifelong; "the accursed earthly mission of patricide and incest".

To the Yoruba, human being's doing on earth have been preordained by Olódùmarè. It is in accordance with this view that Idowu (1962:173-174) states:

According to the general conception, a person obtains his destiny from Olódùmarè is one of the three ways. The Yoruba have a trimorphous conception of destiny, the sustaining motif of which is that the person who is coming in to the world must kneel before the High Authority who is Olódùmarè for its conferment. The first way is called 'À-kúnlè-yàn' which, literally translated means 'That which-is chosen-kneeling'. The second known as 'À-kúnlè-gbà' means that which-is received-kneeling'. The third 'Àyànmó', which means 'That-which-is-affixed-to-one'. That is what the person goes into the world to fulfil.

Despite the fact that it is commonly accepted that destiny is brought from heaven, the Yorùbá also accept that with the assistance of sacrifice and ritual, an unpleasant destiny can be corrected. According to Eghagha (1996: 128):

The idea that fate is irreversible in *The Gods* 'creates the first major problem of Rotimi's play'. This idea of the immutability of fate found in *Oedipus Rex* is possible in a society where the capricious gods control fate and destiny arbitrarily. The Yoruba worldview is different. The gods can be pacified through the appropriate placatory ritual.

However, the dilemma of the dramatist is presented by Etherton (1982:127) in the following words:

Rotimi finds himself trapped both within the story and within the Greek moral order; if the gods or 'fate' are to blame and not Odewale, then the Yoruba milieu of the play disintegrates. If, on the other hand, Odewale's hot temper and, as he says tribalism, is to blame and not the Gods (sic) then the story of the prophecy has no rationale.

To a particular perspective that among the Yoruba fate is irreparable, Adejumo (1981:191-2) bears direct testimony:

It is against this background of an uncertain universe where 'life is a shadow of things and man a dream' that Sophocles depicted his Oedipus. But this world-view is almost an anti-thesis of Nigeria's traditional world view. The gods are believed to be just, loving and appeasable when angry, and both Christians and Muslims religious views tend to agree with this. Through divination and the worship of ancestors, the traditional Nigerian can always see ahead into this future and avoid pitfalls. He believes in fate and also the means of making it placable. So Ola Rotimi's transportation of Oedipus has not taken note of the crux of this world view. The play is an exercise in uncritical creative imagination which has given rise to a serious contradiction.

The incongruity touched on in the above quotation can hold because Rotimi misconstrues the nature and function of the divinities in the Yoruba community to which he transmutes the Oedipean tale. It might imply that in an attempt to modify the Oedipean tale to an African background, the dramatist missed the reality that, unlike the Grecian gods, the orders of Yorùbá divinities are not conclusive. The Yoruba gods are appeasable and peaceable through Ifa oracle, the medium of Orunmila, the godhead. Ritual is a device that can change the pronouncements of divinities.

In a case of this nature according to Bolaji Idowu (1962), Ifá divination corpus, (oracle) the medium of Òrúnmìlà which is the source of spiritual knowledge in Yorùbá culture serves:

As witness of all secrets connected with man's being and as one who is in a position to plead with Olódùmarè on behalf of man so that unhappy issues may be averted or rectified (77)

As to why a man must embrace Òrúnmilà as his deity, Idowu (1962) explains:

To make sure that his happy lot is preserved or in order that an unhappy lot be rectified. One of his (Òrúnmilà) appellations is smaller Òkìribìtì, a-ji-pa-ojó-ikú-dà "the great changer, who alters the date of death" (77).

In *The Gods*, deeds controlled by an assumption that all common catastrophes or adversities are the outcome of disharmony among the contrasting worlds. This explains the instantaneous confabulation with the Ifa oracle to ascertain the source of the epidemic in Kutuje. According to Dasylvia (2004: 135), "A consultation to Ifá is bound not only to reveal the source and nature of one's fate but also recommends the appropriate propitiation (Sacrifice) as solution". This indicates that the Yoruba persons admit that what he has been preordained can be forestalled. Kutuje, the fictional society in *The Gods*, accordingly admits that fate was discovered from childbirth, and assuming that it is coming to be constructive, there is jubilation. Yet if the opposite is the situation, certain rituals can be carried out.

In the opinion of Bolaji Idowu, it is possible to alter good fortune by some malevolent supernatural forces if Olódùmarè (*the chief-in-Heaven*) allows as instances abound. It is equally feasible to conserve good affluence or alter fate (or adversity), or bad portion to a good portion through the aid of Òrúnmilàdeity. Put differently, fate in this position is revocable. This is the belief of the Yoruba. Despite the fact that it is commonly accepted that destiny is elicited from heaven, the Yoruba too accepted that with the assistance of sacrifice and ritual, an atrocious destiny could be changed through the assistance of Òrúnmilà.

In the strict sense of Yoruba belief, the Olódùmarè (or Àjàlórùn) may also not permit the malevolent spiritual forces to prevail or change a "good lot" to a "bad lot" contrary to Idowu's submission. A good instance of this is:

In the Odu, which is called Ogbe-Ate, there is mentioned in this connection one Labode, omoOtunba: Labode the son of Otunba: Nwonnigbogbo a ma bu u ku; sugbon Ajalorun a ma bu kun u- "It is said that the whole world

will do their best to thwart him: but the chiefs-in-Heaven will keep blessing him” (Idowu, 1962:175)

This awareness and apprehension of cosmological forces that are competent of reversing human being’s destiny else *kádàrá* is not restricted to the Yorùbá race. It is present in the Biblical account of how God accepted the entreaty of Satan to handle Job as well as altered his destiny although God reversed it later. Apart from the reference to Jabesh’s parents who had at birth stricken him a bad portion just as his name pointed out, there is also the reverse of Jabesh’s fate to fortune which God carries out after his parents’ rigorous prayer and supplication to God.

Therefore, the matter of the dramatist’s deficiency to empower Òrúnmìlà to resolve King Odewale’s fate-dilemma does not nullify the submission that the dramatist is aware of the roles of Òrúnmìlà in *The Gods*. The way he handles the issue of pre-destination looks fickle and insignificant from the Yoruba point of view. The aforementioned is among the difficulties one has alongside Rotimi’s modification. Dasylyva (2004) bears direct testimony to this particular level of enforced shrinkage:

Since there is no clue suggesting that King Odewale is responsible for the choice of parricide and incest in his pre-life existence, and since there are enough reasons pointing to the fact that it is an imposed curse by the gods (or some malevolent supernatural forces), it is sheer vendetta, fate, and therefore alterable. It is un-Yoruba to suggest that Orunmila cannot proffer solutions to King Odewale’s problem. However, if king Odewale’s fate is consequent upon his own personal choice of an unfavorable destiny in his pre-life existence, then, Rotimi is right to have incapacitated Orunmila. But there are no grounds to suspect this (137-8).

Rotimi (1971:62-63) argues:

Traditional Nigerian religions also acknowledge the power of pre-destination. Our religions appreciate the wisdom in personal submission-submission not only to the gods of the land, but also to the memory of departed ancestors.

In traditional religion, it is as well essential to amplify that, the god-world is a prolongation of the man-world. The aperture between the two worlds is not as frightening and as expansive as indeed operates in Greek cosmogony which cautioned man to understand, that the “chiefest part of happiness is wisdom and to hold the gods in awe” (Sophocles, 1954:69). In the view of

Soyinka (1975:13), “Yoruba deities are measured in human terms and such gods are placed under an eternal obligation of some practical form of penance which compensates humanity”.

Ifa is a source of knowledge about different aspects of Yoruba culture. According to Wande Abimbola (1975), Ifa literary corpus, is the most important of the numerous categories of Yoruba orature, and the unwritten textbook of Yorùbá culture in its true historical and philosophical perspective, and to the coaching of Ifá priests along with the manner of transmitting their repository as an astonishing illustration of an autochthonous African atavistic scholarly method. The religious view of the Yorùbá gives them a peculiar and unique identity. This view of the Yoruba universe is in agreement with most scholars such as Lucas (1948:62); Idowu (1962:71-77); Bascom (1969:11); Olatunji (1984:110) and Euba (1991:118-119, 121-122). If they are right that the Yoruba people regard the corpus as “the great authority on their mythology, history and philosophy” (Euba, 1990:119), it is all the more surprising that Rotimi does not systematically empower it in his attempt to solve Odewale’s problem. This line of argument is substantiated by the revelations of the voice Odewale hears:

- ODEWALE:** Am I not who I am?  
**VOICE:** You have a curse on you, Son.  
**ODEWALE:** What kind of curse, Old one?  
**VOICE:** You cannot run away from it, the gods have willed that you will kill your father, and then marry your mother!  
**ODEWALE:** Me! Kill my own father, and marry my own mother?  
**VOICE:** It has been willed.  
**ODEWALE:** What must I do then not to carry out this will of the gods?  
**VOICE:** Nothing. To run away would be foolish. The snail may try, but it cannot cast off its shell. Just stay where you are... stay where you are... (*The Gods*: 60).

Most importantly, however, is that “as a philosophical system itself, Ifa exposes the symbolic nature of much of the happenings contained in its ‘academic’ repertoire”, (Euba, 1990:120) which makes it impossible for a critic or playwright to take the fate and pre-destination versions of the corpus literally and argue that fate is irreversible in the play. For any given event, the comment of Ifa, where available, can really aid Rotimi in altering the fate of Odewale. There is no evidence to enable one argue that fate is irreversible in the play.

Again, one knows that a close relationship exists between Ifa and Yoruba kingship. In the same vein, Euba (1990:119) remarks:

For one thing, it is Ifa that has the last word in the selection of a Yoruba king. In Ile-Ife, the acknowledged home of Yoruba kingship, the most senior Ifa priests, headed by the Araba, are the king's own diviners. Indeed, the Yoruba kingship system is sustained by Ifa, and without Ifa there is no kingship.

Given the close relationship between the two systems, it is natural that Ifá (lore) oracle would be consulted before Odewale is crowned king of Kutuje. After his "supernatural feats": the killing of king Adetusa and his guards by a lone fleeing Odewale, the defeat of Kutuje's enemies, the Ikolus, the unusual favor that leads to defying the tradition in making him king. This unpardonable omission is certainly ominous. It may be argued that had the 'guardians' of the culture in Kutuje consulted the gods, the tragedy may have been averted. Ifá lore would be a most useful source for the Kutuje probing the childhood or the past of Odewale, especially when, by their very nature, a stranger is unlikely to be crowned king in Yorubaland. The obvious failure of the guardians of cultural heritage to fulfill an obligatory function may be the reason for the tragedy that subsequently affects the whole land and all characters in the play.

## Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the relevance of the practice of Ifa divination in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* to Yorùbá culture. In doing this, attention is drawn to what obtains in Yoruba cosmology as it affects Odewale, the protagonist of Rotimi's play. It has also proved that the Yorùbá divination practice is a highly sophisticated type. Though no written manual of practice exists, oral instructions have passed from generation to generation. One marvels at the level of their prognostication. The telepathic ability of Baba Fakunle, the blind seer in the play needs to be commended also. It revealed the ability of the diviners in a true Yoruba sense, to find solutions to most problems the clients take to them.

However, it has been clearly demonstrated that unlike the usual practice in Yorùbáland, the Ifa oracle was not consulted through divination before Odewale in the play is crowned King in Kutuje. It shows that the guardians of the culture in Kutuje consulted the Ifa oracle, to avert the tragedy. It is revealed that the obvious failure of the guardians of the cultural heritage to fulfill an obligatory function may be a result of the power of the gods to bring to fulfillment, against all odds, the prediction of Odewale's tragedy and the tragedy that subsequently affects the whole land and all characters in the play. In essence, the belief of the Yoruba in the benevolence of the gods especially Orunmila not given prominence by Rotimi in his play. Thus, the paper has

shown how Ifa divination can really help determine, alter, and pacify the gods through appropriate rituals. Hence, it serves in a profound manner in filling great gaps in our knowledge of the Yorùbá culture and metaphysics.

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