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**On Indigenous African Epistemology:  
Mythographic Representations  
of the Witchcraft Phenomenon in the Ifá Text**

**Abstract**

*In the minds of those who strongly support the hegemony of science over practices in oral cultures, witchcraft belongs to the realm of macabre fantasies, in part because witchcraft practices fall within the domain of the occult and become extremely difficult to explain empirically. This positivistic attitude and Western condescension towards the phenomenon of witchcraft convey the impression that such practices as magic and witchcraft, ingrained in oral cultures, are theoretical presuppositions and irrational. Of interest to this paper, therefore, is Geoffrey Parrinder's perceived misconception that Africans relied not on "written records" but only on mnemonic genius in terms of their history, their philosophy, their cosmology, and so on. With witchcraft at the back of his mind, Parrinder claims that there are no reliable records to back the existence of witches in Africa. By "reliable records", it is clear that Parrinder valorizes writing at the expense of orality and is, therefore, oblivious of the fact that, for the Yorùbá, Ifá could produce scribal discourses in respect of their mythical/religious conceptions, worldviews and lived ritual practices. This paper shows, on the one hand, that our misuse of the term "writing" or "literacy" is mostly clustered with many ambiguities which often debar us from admitting, for example, the inscriptive nature of the Ifá system into our writing history. On the other hand, the paper presents Ifá as a corpus of reliable records and draws from the systematized graphic translations of two Ifá verses, namely Ȫrosùn-Ȫsé and Ȫsá-Méjì, to answer salient questions bordering on the admission of the existence of witches, whether witchcraft and sorcery can be used interchangeably, the activities of witches towards kinsmen or members of their family and the position of witches in the hierarchy of beings, and so on.*

**Keywords**

African epistemology, mythography, witchcraft, Ifá, Geoffrey Parrinder

**Introduction**

In most minds, especially in the minds of those who strongly support the hegemony of science over practices in oral cultures, the witchcraft phenomenon assumes a pejorative image and attracts extremely negative characterizations. This no doubt brings to mind the question of rationality in all traditional or the so-called primitive thoughts and reminds us of the popular claim in most anthropological writings in Europe that such practices as magic and witchcraft are theoretical presuppositions and irrational. As a matter of fact, such scholars as Edward E. Evans-Pritchard and Martin Hollis hold tenaciously to the opinion that science is the only legitimate standard by which the rationality of any particular belief can be assessed. Evans-Pritchard, for instance, claims that "witchcraft is an imaginary offence because it is impossible" and adds that "A

witch cannot do what he is supposed to do and has in fact no real existence”.<sup>1</sup> J. R. Crawford demonstrates similar scientific mode of thought when he states that “witchcraft is essentially a psychic act and is, objectively speaking, impossible”.<sup>2</sup> This positivistic attitude is one of the reasons why the application of witchcraft in Africa is used to convey the impression that Africans are barbaric and uncivilized and induce feelings of a pre-logical mentality, to use the words of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. Thus, witchcraft is believed to be immune to objective investigation, and James L. Brain points out that the phenomenon “to most Westerners seems arcane, archaic or even comic”.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this clear Western condescension towards the phenomenon of witchcraft, however, several volumes of literature exist today to show the limitations of such assumptions. We have those who argue that most anthropologists depict African belief systems as irrational or mere theoretical presuppositions simply because they cannot adequately justify most of these belief systems. On his part, Peter Winch cautions us against the use of such notions as “existence” and “reality” outside our differing cultural contexts and argues that it is wrong to put a premium on science as the only standard of assessing reality; for him, our language is the best standard of assessing reality. For Winch, therefore, our language determines what is real and what is not real. He contends further to say that there are different types of “objective” reality and that science provides us with one of these which is empirical reality. He fortifies his position by identifying scientific reality and metaphysical or religious reality. In short, Winch is of the opinion that it is “illegitimate” to assess issues like magic, rituals, witchcraft, and so on, on the paradigm of science. Following this line of thought, Brain stresses that the belief in witchcraft would have been “arcane, archaic, or... comic” if it is the case that “we lived in a rational world”.<sup>4</sup> He adds more succinctly:

“The scientific explanation may provide the *how* but not the *why*. Science can tell how malaria or trypanosomiasis is carried but not why one person is bitten and infected and not another. The problem of the presence of evil in the world is one which humans have wrestled with since time immemorial. A belief in witchcraft is part of an attempt to solve that problem.”<sup>5</sup>

This paper therefore engages the two rival positions that we have identified above and, relying on the mythographic representations of witchcraft in the *Ifá* corpus, it will illuminate the fact that “to Africans of every category, witchcraft is an urgent reality”.<sup>6</sup>

## The Idea of Witchcraft

Broadly, the term “witchcraft” is used to describe all sorts of evil employment of mystical powers in a secret fashion. In Arthur Hippler’s view, witchcraft is “the systematic belief in the capacity to harm people at a distance, often by the manipulation of objects symbolic of the individual, through a form of supernatural intervention and behaviour consistent with such beliefs”.<sup>7</sup> Mwizenge S. Tembo defines witchcraft as “an act or instance of employing sorcery especially with malevolent intent, a magical rite or technique; the exercise of supernatural powers, alleged intercourse with the devil”.<sup>8</sup> It is regarded as a spiritual skill of being able to carry on certain inimical activities in disembodied form.<sup>9</sup> Taking Hippler and Tembo’s definitions seriously, it is clear that most people often confuse witchcraft with magic or sorcery. It is important therefore to offer T. O. Beidelman’s definition with a view to distinguishing between witchcraft and sorcery or magic. According to Beidelman, magic is

the “the manipulation of persons and things through the use of objects, words and acts thought to give one access to supernatural powers for either good or evil purposes”, while sorcery is “the supernatural power to cause another person or that person’s possessions harm through the use of various substances or acts”. The “efficacy of sorcery”, he adds, “depends upon the nature of the acts performed rather than upon the moral character of the practitioner”.<sup>10</sup> He sees witchcraft as “the power to exert supernatural harm upon another person or his possessions, that power depending upon inherent evil qualities in the evil person (witch) himself/herself”.<sup>11</sup> Reputed to be one of the foremost authorities on witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard contends that “a witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines”,<sup>12</sup> whereas, in the words of Geoffrey Parrinder, “there are people who are believed to use evil medicine against their enemies, but these are properly called sorcerers”.<sup>13</sup> In some quarters, too, “witches are believed to be naturally that way as part of their genetic makeup, whereas sorcerers have achieved their evil powers by study”.<sup>14</sup> For Segun Ogungbemi, “men who are sorcerers use charms, medicines and magic to harm or kill their victims. Witchcraft is the activity of the soul and its preys are afflicted in a spiritual manner”.<sup>15</sup> What could be distilled from the foregoing, following Margaret Field, is that the distinctive feature of witchcraft “is that there is no palpable apparatus connected with it, no rites, no ceremonies, incantations, or invocations that the witch has to perform. It

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Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, “Witchcraft”, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 8 (1935) 4, pp. 417–422, p. 418, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3180590>.

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J. R. Crawford, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in Rhodesia*, Oxford University Press, London 1967, p. 40.

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James L. Brain, “Witchcraft and Development”, *African Affairs* 81 (1982) 324, pp. 371–384, p. 371 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a097432>.

4

Ibid.

5

Ibid.

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E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, SCM Press, Lagos 1971, p. 175.

7

Arthur Hippler, “Some Observations on Witchcraft: The Case of the Aivilik Eskimos”, *Arctic* 26 (1973) 3, pp. 198–207, p. 198, doi: <https://doi.org/10.14430/arctic2916>.

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Mwizenge S. Tembo, “The Witchdoctors are not Wrong: The Future Role and Impact of African Psychology on Individual Well-Being”, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the African Studies As-

sociation, held in Boston, December 4–7, 1993. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242553462\\_The\\_Witchdoctors\\_are\\_not\\_Wrong\\_The\\_Future\\_Role\\_and\\_Impact\\_of\\_African\\_Psychology\\_on\\_Individual\\_Well-Being](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242553462_The_Witchdoctors_are_not_Wrong_The_Future_Role_and_Impact_of_African_Psychology_on_Individual_Well-Being) (accessed on April 10, 2018).

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Sophie B. Oluwole, *Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God-head*, Excel Publishers, Lagos 1992, p. 1.

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Thomas O. Beidelman, *The Kaguru*, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, New York 1971, pp. 131–132.

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Ibid., p. 132.

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Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1937, p. 21.

13

E. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Witchcraft: European and African*, Faber and Faber Limited, London 1963, p. 133.

14

J. L. Brain, “Witchcraft and Development”, p. 373.

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Segun Ogungbemi, *Philosophy and Development*, Hope Publications, Ibadan 2007, p. 129.

is simply projected at will from the mind of the witch”.<sup>16</sup> The words of John Middleton and E. H. Winter are also useful here. According to them:

“Witchcraft is part of an individual’s being, a part of his innermost self while sorcery is merely a technique which a person utilizes. Thus, in some societies, a person’s witchcraft can operate at times without his being consciously aware of the fact that it is doing so. This can never be the case with sorcery; recourse to it must always be on a deliberate, conscious, voluntary basis.”<sup>17</sup>

These distinguishing features are acknowledged by most ethno-linguistic units in Africa. In clear terms, therefore:

“... a witch has an inherent and intangible power for harming others. While a witch projects her evil thought directly from her mind, invisibly, and without cursing and invoking, a sorcerer manipulates some tangible materials to carry out his devilish ‘business’.”<sup>18</sup>

Consequent upon this, John Mbiti is wrong to say that:

“African societies do not often draw the rather academic distinction between witchcraft, sorcery, evil magic, evil eye and other ways of employing mystical power to do harm to someone or his belongings.”<sup>19</sup>

The belief in witchcraft is not confined to Africa; as a matter of fact

“... virtually everywhere outside the industrialised countries people not only believe in witches but frequently fall sick and die from what they believe to be the activities of witches.”<sup>20</sup>

In the same vein, Parrinder avers that:

“Belief in witchcraft is one of the great fears from which mankind has suffered. It has taken its toll literally in blood. The belief has appeared in many parts of the world, in one form or another. It became particularly prominent and developed in Europe, in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance periods. Still in modern Africa belief in witchcraft is a great tyranny spreading panic and death.”<sup>21</sup>

Thus, for Parrinder, “the clearest and most frequent manifestations of witchcraft beliefs seem to have occurred in Europe and in Africa”<sup>22</sup> Somewhere Parrinder maintains that “European and African witchcraft beliefs are easily comparable, since certain ideas found in both continents are similar”<sup>23</sup> In his attempt to combine a survey of European witchcraft with an account of African witchcraft, Parrinder goes further:

“... in the interpretation of witchcraft today European and African beliefs are often cited together. The witch-cult theory in Europe is often said to have African parallels, and so the truths about African witchcraft need to be made plain. On the other hand, Africans often say that witchcraft must be true since Europeans believed in it once.”<sup>24</sup>

This attempt to draw a meeting point between European and African witchcraft beliefs is questioned by some scholars. For instance, Barry Hallen and J. O. Sodipo believe that the idea of witchcraft in Africa would be more illuminating if the phenomenon is defined in African cultural context. In other words, they are wary that such attempts might distort the real understanding of what witchcraft is and how a witch operates in African society. In their words:

“There is no reason to assume that witchcraft in Africa *is* the same as was witchcraft in Europe, anymore than there was reason to assume that the English-language concept ‘witchcraft’ may serve as an accurate translation of its supposed African-language equivalents. Whatever is translated as being ‘witchcraft’ in Africa (or even in one place in Africa) may well be a very different thing from whatever it is elsewhere in the world and history.”<sup>25</sup>

The import of Hallen and Sodipo’s position is that witchcraft in Africa cannot be used to understand and explain what witchcraft was in the West,

thereby jettisoning also that the ideas of witchcraft in Africa and Europe “have a family likeness because they are of almost universal occurrence”.<sup>26</sup> Hallen and Sodipo express their displeasure further that

“... there would appear to be some inconsistency in maintaining that one does not understand one phenomenon (Western witchcraft), and at the same time maintaining that that phenomenon is effectively the same as another phenomenon (African witchcraft).”<sup>27</sup>

We must state here that, despite Hallen and Sodipo’s contention, one thing that is clear is that witchcraft – be it European witchcraft or African witchcraft – involves the use of supernatural powers, magic, and could be used to do good or harm. Munyaradzi Mawere corroborates this unifying feature of European witchcraft and African witchcraft in the sense that:

“Both apply supernatural powers, involve the use of charm or magic, are connected to the cosmological world and most importantly can be employed to do both good and harm depending on the motivation of the individual involved (healers or witch).”<sup>28</sup>

Earlier we have shown that witchcraft is regarded by some scholars of European origin as a psychic act and, since witches by definition are not visible entities, “witchcraft activities are extraordinary in the sense that they violate the laws of nature”.<sup>29</sup> Sogolo explicates that witchcraft beliefs in Africa have the following features:

1. Witches are capable of turning themselves into other bodily forms; they can change into animals (birds, leopards, snakes, etc.).
2. Witches can fly at night in their various incarnate (in some cultures, their mode of locomotion is not specified); they can travel great distances instantaneously.

16 Margaret J. Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People*, Oxford University Press, New York 1937, p. 166.

17 John Middleton, E. H. Winter, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1963, p. 12.

18 Omosade J. Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, Longman, London 1979, pp. 80–81.

19 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, London 1969, p. 202.

20 J. L. Brain, “Witchcraft and Development”, p. 372.

21 E. G. Parrinder, *Witchcraft*, p. 9.

22 E. George Parrinder, “African Ideas of Witchcraft”, *Folklore* 67 (1956) 3, pp. 142–150, p. 142, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587x.1956.9717545>.

23 E. G. Parrinder, *Witchcraft: European and African*, p. 10.

24 Ibid., p. 15.

25 Barry Hallen, J. Olubi Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1986, p. 96.

26 E. G. Parrinder, *Witchcraft*, p. 15.

27 B. Hallen, J. O. Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, p. 96.

28 Munyaradzi Mawere, “Possibilities of Cultivating African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs): Lessons from Selected Cases of Witchcraft in Zimbabwe”, *Journal of Research in Peace, Gender and Development* 1 (2011) 3, pp. 91–100, p. 92.

29 Godwin S. Sogolo, *Foundations of African Philosophy: A Definitive Analysis of Conceptual Issues in African Thought*, University of Ibadan Press, Ibadan 1993, p. 101.

3. Witches can turn themselves into disembodied spirit forms, able to kill or harm a victim while their bodies remain in bed.
4. The acts of witches are always evil and destructive; they cause the death of people, make men impotent and women barren, cause failure in all forms of human endeavor, etc.<sup>30</sup>

Sogolo's characterization of witchcraft is not quite different from Awolalu's. The elements that are missing in Sogolo's characterization can be borrowed from Awolalu's, and can be summarised and added to the above list as follows:

1. Witchcraft enjoins secrecy.
2. Women are believed to dominate the witches' secret cult (*àjò*); men are always in the minority.
3. It is acquired in different ways.<sup>31</sup>

From the above it can be inferred that, one, witches can affect their victims – that is, cause unusual death, impotence, barrenness, crop failure, and so on – from afar, implying that “the distinguishing feature of killing or harm by witchcraft is that it is wrought by silent, invisible, projection of influence from the witch”.<sup>32</sup> Two, a witch “hates being known or caught in the very act” and this is why, in the course of carrying out her act, “she disguises herself, using bird or animal familiars or dressing in a strange manner, for example, being draped in palm fronds rather than wearing normal dresses”.<sup>33</sup> Three, witches organize secret meetings called *àjò* in the night while, exhibiting a kind of disembodied existence, their physical bodies remain on their beds at home. Awolalu puts this in a broader perspective:

“They attend the meetings using various means of movement. Some (...) are said to turn upside down and walk with their feet in the air. Some somersault to increase speed, others fly naked after rubbing on their bodies some ointment which makes them invisible. Yet others walk to the meetings on spiders' webs; some ride on animals like cats, dogs, rats or on toads and even on human beings. Many others turn into owls and lizards and into insects and glow-worms. Meetings take place at the banks of rivers, at the foot or branches of big trees or at the road junctions or on mountains or hills. These meetings are held at different levels: local, divisional, regional, inter-regional, national and international. Communications are maintained between one level and the other.”<sup>34</sup>

Connected to this is the belief among the Yorùbá that, during their *àjò*, witches use their *àgógó* (mysterious beak) to suck the blood of their victims, while the victims in actual state suffer from one form of ailment to another. On the one hand, this attests to the belief in “a wandering or separable soul” and, on the other hand, draws our attention to the fact that “there is never any doubt in West Africa of belief in a spiritual part of man's nature, on the contrary the difficulty is to sort out the complex strands of this spiritual belief”.<sup>35</sup> Apart from the fact that the latter claim is essential to the theory of witchcraft, it also complements the thesis that the human person is not essentially a physico-chemical organism. At their meetings, witches are believed to eat a victim by sharing different parts of the victim's body. Here, however, Field, using the Ga belief system as foil, offers an explanation that eating a victim by sharing different parts of the victim's body is only a manner of speaking. According to Field:

“... it is the victim's (...) soul which is stolen and 'eaten'. The relatives of the victim agree that the physical body is never injured – except by the ravages of disease – and there is no evidence that it is ever disturbed after burial (...). Not only is the eating at these feasts not a physical eat-

ing, but the gathering is not a physical gathering. The witch's *kla* – which maintains breathing and physical life – remains with her on her bed and to ordinary eyes she is in normal sleep.”<sup>36</sup>

Four, it is common knowledge among the Yorùbá that witchcraft is innate, implying that some people are born witches. It is also sometimes regarded as hereditary, where a mother passes the act to her daughter, especially at the time of her death. George Simpson puts this more elaborately:

“The power may pass from mother to daughter, usually through medicine mixed with ordinary food without the daughter’s knowledge. It is not uncommon for a witch, shortly before her death, to transfer her ‘bird’ to someone, often a daughter. The witches themselves may decide to bring a woman into their association, giving her something to eat which will make her a witch. For example, a friend may give her a kola-nut which has been treated with medicine. Actually, what appeared to be a kola-nut may be a human finger, and the person becomes a witch without realizing it.”<sup>37</sup>

Awolalu adds that “some people pay for and procure it and others have witchcraft ‘stuff’ passed to them in food given by women who are witches”.<sup>38</sup> Finally, our characterization reveals that it is not frivolous to conceive witchcraft as the “cult of women”, since women are regarded as the covert initiators of a scheme and men, who are usually in the minority, are the actors.<sup>39</sup> It is the case that

“... this relationship between female and male power parallels concepts about spiritually powerful women and men in Yorùbá society, known as *àjé* and *oṣó* respectively. Yorùbá say that the mothers (*àjé*) conceive a plan and their male counterparts (*oṣó*) carry it out.”<sup>40</sup>

The use of *oṣó* here questions the degree of the tenability of Ogungbemi’s claim that “men who have the power of witchcraft are different from those who practise sorcery. The name given to sorcery in Yoruba is *oṣó*, and not *àjé*”.<sup>41</sup>

It is important to state here, however, that there are some African societies whose witchcraft beliefs do not involve sex antagonism or discrimination. Among the Yamba of Cameroon, for instance, “witches may be male or female. There is no suggestion that women are more likely to be witches than men or vice versa”.<sup>42</sup> S. F. Nadel shows that, among the Gwari of Nigeria,

30  
Ibid., p. 104.

31  
O. J. Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, pp. 84–86.

32  
Margaret J. Field, *Search for Security: An Ethno-psychiatric Study of Rural Ghana*, Faber and Faber Press, London 1960, pp. 36–37.

33  
O. J. Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, p. 84.

34  
Ibid., p. 85.

35  
E. Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion*, Epworth Press, London 1969, p. 114.

36  
M. J. Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People*, p. 135.

37  
George Simpson, *Yoruba Religion and Medicine in Ibadan*, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan 1980, p. 76.

38  
O. J. Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rite*, p. 86.

39  
Henry J. Drewal, Margaret T. Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1990, p. 103.

40  
Ibid.

41  
S. Ogungbemi, *Philosophy and Development*, p. 129.

42  
Hermann Guffler, “Witchcraft Beliefs among the Yamba (Cameroon)”, *Anthropos* 94 (1999) 1–3, pp. 181–198, p. 182.

too, witchcraft beliefs “involve no sex antagonism or sex polarity”.<sup>43</sup> He explains further that “witches and their victims are indiscriminately male and female. Witchcraft is discovered by ordinary divination, practiced by both men and women, and anti-witchcraft measures consist in the main in an annual ‘cleansing’ ritual which embraces the whole community, again irrespective of sex”.<sup>44</sup>

## On the Existence of Witches

John Mbiti observes that:

“Every African who has grown up in the traditional environment will, no doubt, know something about this mystical power which often is experienced, or manifests itself, in the form of magic, divination, witchcraft and mysterious phenomena that seem to defy even immediate scientific explanation.”<sup>45</sup>

A good reading of Mbiti’s claim shows that, by definition, witchcraft practices fall within the domain of the occult and become extremely difficult to explain empirically. Due to this seeming failure of witchcraft practices to fit into the scientific explanatory model, there was optimism during the colonial era that witchcraft practices would disappear through modernization. As a matter of fact, colonial administrators and missionaries castigated witchcraft practices as superstition and, with several failed attempts to suppress such beliefs, “anticipated that witchcraft beliefs would disappear through modernization, as it was claimed they had done in Europe under the influence of the Enlightenment”.<sup>46</sup> Parrinder conveyed this optimism over six decades ago thus:

“It is sometimes said that belief in witchcraft is on the increase in these days of modern towns and new ideas, and general insecurity (...). Education will slowly dispel some superstitions. Medical and child care will remove many unexplained diseases. But nobler beliefs and a new religion would lift the load of false beliefs and prejudice. It took centuries for the superstition to disappear from Europe, and it will fade out in Africa in due course if the forces of enlightenment are maintained and increased.”<sup>47</sup>

Today, however, Parrinder’s optimism has not materialized in part because belief in witchcraft remains one of the most potent in the lives of most African people. C. K. Meek, who is of the opinion that witches and witchcraft do not exist, adds that “it is a belief which cannot easily be exorcised, for it is not an isolate factor, but an integral part of the whole psychological and magico-religious system”.<sup>48</sup> From the psychological point of view, it is contended that “there is a great deal of neurosis, hysteria, and psychic maladjustment, and all these contribute to the belief in witchcraft”.<sup>49</sup> This point is graphically reflected also in the claim that “a great deal of the belief in witchcraft is due to self-deception, suggestibility, and the power of thought”.<sup>50</sup>

“Everything connected to witchcraft”, S. F. Nadel writes, “takes place in a fantasy realm which is, almost *ex hypothesi*, intangible and beyond empirical verification”.<sup>51</sup> This is reflective of Sophie Oluwole’s characterization of witchcraft as “the claimed ability of the witch to affect her victims, or perform actions, without any physical contact and using no medicine”.<sup>52</sup> Oluwole adds that “authors who deny the existence of witchcraft claim that witchcraft neither designates something tangible or observable nor does it refer to something that has an independent existence either in the sense of being of actual or true, hence they label it an illusion”.<sup>53</sup>

Onesmus Mutungi's point is instructive here. According to him:

"In the so-called civilized communities, inexplicable eventualities are attributed to fate, bad luck, or the will of God. The native African seeks his explanation in witchcraft. What must be noted, though, is that in both communities, the struggle is the same—a search for causal explanation for misfortunes."<sup>54</sup>

From the standpoint of science, therefore, the issue often raised from these notions is that "scientific explanations are incompatible with witchcraft claims and that the former excludes the latter because science accords with reality".<sup>55</sup> Sogolo offers more explanation:

"The issue of incompatibility between the claims of science and those of witchcraft does not arise. Two claims are incompatible if they are of the same genre and if they cannot be held jointly without absurdity. But for such claims to be ever compared, they must be of the same sort. And since (...) witchcraft is neither a species of science nor proto-science, the issue of incompatibility between the claims of science and those of witchcraft is non-existent. Against this, some might insist that although the claims are of different sort they are about the same world. In reply, all that need to be said is that the very difference in question is due to the fact that both conceptual schemes are about different forms of life."<sup>56</sup>

Hallie Ludsin provides an instance of what Sogolo is suggesting when he draws our attention to the fact that "while witchcraft believers accept that a person died of a heart attack or their cattle died from a disease – which explains how the misfortune happened – these cultures seek a metaphysical answer for why it occurred".<sup>57</sup> To show that the limitation of science as a paradigmatic explanatory model, Sogolo gives an analogy of a medical student who could "provide an adequate explanation of how the poison a child has eaten could have led to the child's death", but could not provide an answer to "why the child had to eat the poison or why was it X's child and not Y's child".<sup>58</sup> Sogolo

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S. F. Nadel, "Witchcraft in Four African Societies: An Essay in Comparison", *American Anthropologist* 54 (1954) 1, pp. 18–29, p. 20, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1952.54.1.02a00040>.

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Ibid.

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J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 194.

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Johannes Merz, "From Relativism to Imagination: Towards a Reconstructive Approach to the Study of African Witchcraft", *Anthropos* 99 (2004) 2, pp. 572–580, p. 573.

47

E. G. Parrinder, *West African Religion*, p. 171.

48

C. K. Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe (Igbo)*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1950, p. 79.

49

E. G. Parrinder, *West African Religion*, p. 167.

50

Ibid., p. 169.

51

S. F. Nadel, "Witchcraft in Four African Societies", p. 19.

52

Sophie B. Oluwole, "On the Existence of Witches", *Second Order* VII (1978) 1–2, pp. 20–35, p. 20.

53

Ibid.

54

Onesmus K. Mutungi, *The Legal Aspects of Witchcraft in East Africa with Particular Reference to Kenya*, East African Literature Bureau, Nairobi 1977, p. 104.

55

G. S. Sogolo, *Foundations of African Philosophy*, p. 107.

56

Ibid.

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Hallie Ludsin, "Cultural Denial: What South Africa's Treatment of Witchcraft Says for the Future", *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 21 (2003) 1, pp. 62–110, p. 74.

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G. S. Sogolo, *Foundations of African Philosophy*, p. 108.

adds that the medical student might impute the event to chance, “suggesting that he is not equipped with the paradigms for answering questions of this nature”.<sup>59</sup> It is instructive to note, therefore, that the mechanistic or impersonal explanation of the medical scientist is incomplete because “it does not answer all the questions that arise in the case of an unusual event”.<sup>60</sup> In light of this, Sogolo explains that:

“Events such as human misfortunes, illness, suffering, death, etc., are inexplicable outside the web of social relations. They are inextricably connected with human emotions such as love, jealousy, anger, etc., and they can only be made intelligible when placed in these psychological and social contexts. This is why an impersonal explanation such as the one science provides is inadequate. It is also for this reason that in every known human community there is a dual approach to the explanation of events, the personal and the impersonal. This is to say that science and witchcraft have a symmetric relation, both performing different functions which converge in making natural phenomena intelligible.”<sup>61</sup>

The import of the above is in consonance with the view that “the visible and the invisible are necessarily complementary in African understandings of reality”.<sup>62</sup>

In all modesty, it is in the field of anthropology that the witchcraft phenomenon has gained prominence the most or, to put it in another way, it is anthropology that has given the subject its pre-eminence and popularity before others from other disciplines began to make their contributions. In the field of anthropology, there is an agreement that Evans-Pritchard, conveniently a leading authority on witchcraft, has “masterfully described witchcraft as a system to explain misfortune which, however, does not contradict empirical knowledge of cause and effect”.<sup>63</sup> With the assertion that witchcraft among the Azande people provides explanations for everyday events and offers a theory of causality, Evans-Pritchard shows that Azande’s beliefs – and, we must add, all such African beliefs in witchcraft – are not irrational but in themselves reasonable.<sup>64</sup> After a critical look, Evans-Pritchard’s position seems to convey the need to understand a different culture in its own terms. However, Johannes Merz distils Evans-Pritchard’s claim further to mean that witchcraft beliefs are “reasonable in their own terms only, thus basically advocating a cultural relativism”.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, Johannes Merz has some displeasure with “cultural relativism” which, in his words, “has dominated the anthropological discourse up to the present situation”.<sup>66</sup> To argue a good case for the existence and reality of witchcraft, Merz endeavours to “put forward an attempt of a possible reconstruction of a theory of witchcraft in terms of the common human faculty to imagine”.<sup>67</sup> In order to immunise himself against what Peter Geschiere calls “the paradox of a cosmological schizophrenia”,<sup>68</sup> Merz seeks to forge a theory that would take care of the inherent limitations of relativism, one of which is its failure to accommodate the idea of a common humanity. Borrowing Thomas Kuhn’s use of “paradigm” as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on, shared by the members of a given community”,<sup>69</sup> he agrees with Kuhn that “theories cannot be exclusive, they have to be open to other interpretations”,<sup>70</sup> He then proposes “the need for theories and definitions which also leave open the possibility of nonverifiable beliefs in the sense of the Enlightenment, such as the existence of witchcraft”.<sup>71</sup> Obviously witchcraft claims fall within the category of the nonverifiable. Merz goes further to offer an “anthropology of the imagination” which puts a premium on the idea of a common humanity, acknowledges and accommodates African epistemologies. According to Merz:

“The idea of the common humanity accepts that everybody has biological, cognitive, social, communicative, and spiritual needs. More important in this context is humanity’s shared need and ability to use language and construct identity and subjectivity by relating to others in the social world (...). To acknowledge common human characteristics, however, does not mean a denial of the plurality of different cultural discourses. But what it does do is maintain the potential tensions between communality and diversity, and in a wider sense of the self/other dichotomy.”<sup>72</sup>

One crucial point from the above is the possibility of breaking free “from the Western scientific hegemony and accept other different discourses as equally valid imaginations of ‘reality’”.<sup>73</sup> In this way, the syncretic blending of such dichotomies in African epistemologies, in the words of Francis Nyamnjoh, as “natural and supernatural, rational and irrational, objective and subjective, scientific and superstitious, visible and invisible, real and unreal”,<sup>74</sup> would complement Western epistemologies. We must state here that what has made the admission of the existence of witches or witchcraft controversial is nothing other than the difficulty for Africans “to draw a line between what is seen and unseen”.<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, Merz’s anthropology of imagination expounds that “witchcraft is imagined by using analogies from the seen world of daily experience in order to imagine what is unseen and not immediately accessible”.<sup>76</sup> Of the “unseen” are such claims as witches being capable of turning themselves into other bodily forms, fly at night in their various incarnate, travel great distances instantaneously, and so on. Consequently, therefore:

“In talking about witchcraft as imagined, the problem of the inseparability of the seen and the unseen no longer poses a problem. This is so because the common dichotomy between the real-

59

Ibid.

60

Ibid.

61

Ibid., pp. 108–109.

62

Adeline Masquelier, “The Return of Magic”, *Social Anthropology* 12 (2004), pp. 95–102, p. 95, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2004.tb00092.x>.

63

J. Merz, “From Relativism to Imagination”, pp. 572–580, p. 574.

64

E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*, p. 99.

65

J. Merz, “From Relativism to Imagination”, p. 575.

66

Ibid.

67

Ibid.

68

Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville 1997, p. 19.

69

Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1996, p. 175.

70

J. Merz, “From Relativism to Imagination”, p. 576.

71

Ibid.

72

Ibid.

73

Ibid.

74

Francis B. Nyamnjoh, “Delusions of Development and the Enrichment of Witchcraft Discourses in Cameroon”, in: Henrietta L. Moore, Todd Sanders (eds.), *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, Routledge, London 2001, pp. 28–49, p. 29.

75

J. Merz, “From Relativism to Imagination”, p. 577.

76

Ibid.

ity as what is seen and fantasy as what is not immediately accessible to the senses is both part of the imagination and, therefore, indistinguishable.”<sup>77</sup>

### Mythographic Representations of Witchcraft in the *Ifá* Corpus

Of interest to this section is Geoffrey Parrinder’s perceived misconception that Africans (in this case, the Yorùbá) relied only on mnemonic genius in terms of their history, their cosmology, their philosophy, and so on, and therefore did not have the slightest idea about writing. With witchcraft at the back of his mind, Parrinder claims that “there is no evidence for the extent of the belief in any previous century, since there are no reliable records”.<sup>78</sup> By “reliable records”, one suspects that Parrinder valorised writing at the expense of orality and was most probably unaware of the fact that the Yorùbá had an idea of and could produce scribal discourses before their first contact with the missionaries or the colonial masters.

Today, virtually all available materials on *Ifá* – books, journals, monographs, and so on – attest to the fact that *Ifá* is a store-house “for Yorùbá traditional body of knowledge embracing history, philosophy, medicine and folklore”.<sup>79</sup> Because of its stereotypical oral nature, some critics have written off the system as nothing more than a religious and mythic discourse, where the term *myth* is understood in terms of such ugly concepts as “primitive”, “backwardness”, “superstitious”, “archaic” and not as “early science, the result of men’s first trying to explain what they saw around them” or as “an explanation of something in nature; how, for instance, any and everything in the universe came into existence”.<sup>80</sup> Elsewhere, however, I have shown the failure of the critics of myths or mythologies to “see any relation between science or modern knowledge and mythology”.<sup>81</sup> One of such points of interest is rendered in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* thus:

“Modern science did not evolve in its entirety as a rebellion against myth, nor at its birth did it suddenly throw off the shackles of myth. In ancient Greece the naturalists of Ionia (Western Asia Minor), long regarded as the originators of science, developed views of the universe that were in fact close to the creation myths of their time. Those who laid the foundations of modern science, such as Nicholas of Cusa, Johannes Kepler, Sir Isaac Newton, and Gottfried Leibniz, were absorbed by metaphysical problems of which the traditional, indeed mythological, character is evident.”<sup>82</sup>

To put our point in clearer perspective, some critics in the enterprise of philosophy often argue that an anonymous corpus of writing that includes myths, legends, poetry, song, and proverbs is not worthy of the title ‘philosophy’.<sup>83</sup> Here, going back timeline in the development of philosophy will suffice. With Greek and Roman philosophy in mind, the popular belief is that philosophy started, to use Mircea Eliade’s vocabulary, at the process of ‘demythification’.<sup>84</sup> This implies that philosophy started in that region when some individuals began to lose interest in the divine history transmitted by myths. This also suggests that philosophy started when the Greeks, especially, began to distance themselves from the mythological narratives of their time, when stories about Greek gods and goddesses – Cronos, Zeus, Hera, Athene, Poseidon, Hades, Apollo, Hermes, and so on – began to lose their effects on the cultural context of the time. But a critical look at the history of philosophy shows that philosophy did not succeed in distancing itself from mythologies. As a matter of fact, philosophical persuasions in the Ancient period, for instance, were steeped in mythologies. Let us take a few great masters for example.

Pythagoras saw numbers as divine, taught that philosophy and mysticism should not be separated, talked about the transmigration of the soul and even claimed that he took part in the Trojan War which took place in the pre-Ionian era hundreds of years before he was born. On his part, Heraclitus reasoned from physics to metaphysics, from human soul to the divine cosmic soul. Even the great Greek philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle, did not discard mythologies as complete absurdities. Plato made use of myths as allegories in several of his dialogues and Aristotle, too, acknowledged that, with regard to heavenly bodies, some mythical data might correspond to reality. It is also true that most of these first Greek philosophers “often wrote in riddles and allegories, and they more often sounded like mystic poets than contemporary science professors”.<sup>85</sup>

Most scholars of *Ifá*<sup>86</sup> have presented the structure of *Ifá* with little variations, not in the order of the precedence of the *odù* (*Ifá* graphemes) but in the pronunciation of certain *odù* names, especially at the level of the 240 minor *odù*. This, however, is inconsequential here, since such variations could result from the different dialects spoken by the Yorùbá. Simply put:

“*Ifá* has 256 *Odù* which derive from 16 basic or original *Odù*. Each of the *Odù*, loosely identified variously as ‘verses of Ifa divination poetry’ or ‘categories of Ifa divination’, has a signature which is determined by the pattern that emerges from the throwing of the divining medium—chain, palm nuts, kola nuts, etc.”<sup>87</sup>

According to Adeleke Adeeko, “the foundation of analysis in *Ifá* is the systematized graphic translation of the results of the random presentation of the divination objects, among which the chain (*òpèlẹ̀*) and palm nuts (*ikin*) are the two most prestigious”.<sup>88</sup> He gives a lucid analysis of the processes involved in *Ifá* divination and points out that:

“Identifying the presented units gives the diviner clues as to which stories to tell to illustrate the problems revealed by the divination god and to decipher what ritual sacrifices or behavioral changes to prescribe. The casting, imprinting, and narrating process typically starts after the cli-

77

Ibid.

78

E. G. Parrinder, *West African Religion*, p. 171.

79

Wande Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá*, UNESCO, Niamey 1975, p. 32.

80

Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, Penguin Books, London 1940, p. 19.

81

Omotade Adegbindin, *Ifá in Yorùbá Thought System*, Carolina Academic Press, Durham 2014, p. 68.

82

*The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., Chicago 2005, p. 720.

83

Barry Hallen, *A Short History of African Philosophy*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2002, p. 11.

84

Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, Harper and Row, New York 1986, pp. 111–112.

85

Robert C. Solomon, Kathleen M. Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York 1996, p. 12.

86

See: Akinbowale Akintola, *Yoruba Ethics and Metaphysics*, Valour Publishing Venture, Ogbomosho 1999; Wande Abimbola, *Ìjìnlẹ̀ Ohùn Ènu Ifá, I*, Collins, Glasgow 1968.

87

Olufemi Taiwo, “*Ifá*: An Account of a Divination System and Some Concluding Epistemological Questions”, in: Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., Oxford 2004, pp. 304–312, p. 307.

88

Adeleke Adeeko, “Writing’ and ‘Reference’ in *Ifá*”, in: Jacob K. Olupona, Rowland O. Abiodun (eds.), *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2016, pp. 66–87, p. 69.

ent has whispered his or her purpose into some tokens, which could be money mixed with the divination objects the sign revealed and the illustrative stories told must bear some allegorical relationship to the problem the client wants to solve.”<sup>89</sup>

The combination of the two hundred and forty minor *odù* or *Àmúlù Odù* and the sixteen principal *Odù* provides us with a comprehensive chart of the order of precedence in *Ifá* system. Adeeko explains:

“In practical counselling, the basic units must double to produce a diagnosis and prognosis. A pattern that signals *Ọyèkú* on the right hand and *Ogbè* on the left will be named *Ọyèkúlógbè* – it will be *Ogbèyèkú*, if the other way round – and one *Ófún* on both sides will be *Ófún Méjì* (...). The inscription issues from a grid that is structured so systematically that naming errors can be fixed with little difficulty.”<sup>90</sup>

It is important to note here that the historical development of writing – from graphic forms to proto-writing, logographic to the development of phonetic transcription and the alphabet – evinces our gross misuse of the term “literacy”. This misuse of the term is mostly clustered with many ambiguities which often debar us from admitting, for example, the inscriptive nature of the *Ifá* system into our writing history. For those who are familiar with the system and how it operates, therefore, it is common knowledge that inscription is one salient feature of the *Ifá* system which has “close ties to a minimally mediated writing system”.<sup>91</sup> Thus:

“The foundational role of the inscription system in the *Ifá* divination process distinguishes it as a ‘literate’ learned means of inquiry—*Ifá* is commonly called *alákòwé* (operator of the scribal discourse)—and not a *séance* or some other kind of intuitive, magical, or gifted fortune telling.”<sup>92</sup>

In light of the foregoing, Parrinder’s search for “reliable records” to back the admission of the reality or existence of witchcraft by Africans or the *Yorùbá* is idle and is no doubt oblivious of the truth that “*Ifá* writing is mythographic”, in part because the inscriptions that result from the process of divination “generate stories and not phonemes”.<sup>93</sup> Consequently, our concern at this juncture is to show through the *Ifá* mythography the truth or falsity of some of the witchcraft claims that we have grappled with in the previous sections. We believe also that other issues on witchcraft that were not raised in the previous sections might come up as we delve into the mythography. Although the popular notion in many quarters is that *Ọsá Méjì* deals with witchcraft issues the most,<sup>94</sup> I believe that the contribution of *Ìrosùn-Ọsẹ̀* to witchcraft claims, too, is useful here:

Text 1, *Ìrosùn-Ọsẹ̀*:

I	I
II	I
I	II
II	II

Ọrúnmilà ní ó di isògbà èkínní lẹ̀hìnkùlẹ̀ àwọn iyà mí àjẹ

Wọn ní kíni Ọrúnmilà wá ẹ

Ọrúnmilà ní òhun wá ẹ̀pẹ̀ lágbájá ni

Wọn ní Ọrúnmilà ò tún gbodò wá mọ̀ lóri ọ̀rọ̀ ẹ̀ni òhun

Wón ní bí Ọrúnmilà bá tún wá

Àwọn ó sẹ̀gbá ẹ̀leyẹ̀ sí i lápá ọ̀tún

Àwọn ó sẹ̀gbá ẹ̀leyẹ̀ sí i lápá ọ̀sì

Àwọn ó sẹ̀gbá ẹ̀leyẹ̀ sí i níwájú

Àwọn ó sẹ̀gbá ẹ̀leyẹ̀ sí i lẹ̀yìn

Àwọn ó sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sálẹpẹpẹ ibi ó dúró sí	10
Àwọn ó sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sààrin àtàrí rẹ	
Ọ̀rúnmilà gbéra, ó tọ̀ Olódùmarè lọ	
Ó kálàyé ẹ̀ fún Olódùmarè:	
Ọ̀rúnmilà ní ó di isògbà èkínní lẹ̀hìnkùlé àwọn iyà mi àjẹ	
Wọn ní kìnì Ọ̀rúnmilà wá ẹ̀	15
Ọ̀rúnmilà ní òhun wá ẹ̀pẹ̀ lágbájá ni	
Wọn ní Ọ̀rúnmilà ò tún gbọ̀dò wá mọ̀ lórí ọ̀rọ̀ eni ọ̀hún	
Wón ní bí Ọ̀rúnmilà bá tún wá	
Àwọn ó sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sí i lápá ọ̀tún	
Àwọn ó sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sí i lápá òsì	20
Àwọn ó sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sí i níwájú	
Àwọn ó sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sí i lẹ̀yìn	
Àwọn ó sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sálẹpẹpẹ ibi ó dúró sí	
Àwọn ó sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sààrin àtàrí rẹ	
Olodumare pé kí Ọ̀rúnmilà padà	25
Ó ní tíwọn bá sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sí i lápá ọ̀tún	
Ó ní tíwọn bá sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sí i lápá òsì	
Ó ní tíwọn bá sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sí i níwájú	
Ó ní tíwọn bá sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sí i lẹ̀yìn	
Ó ní tíwọn bá sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sálẹpẹpẹ ibi ó dúró sí	30
Ó ní tíwọn bá sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sààrin àtàrí rẹ	
KỌ̀rúnmilà pé sin-ni-mo-sin...	
Ọ̀rúnmilà ní ó di isògbà ẹ̀ẹ̀kejì lẹ̀hìnkùlé àwọn iyà mi àjẹ	
Wọn ní ẹ̀bí àwọn tí sọ̀ pé Ọ̀rúnmilà ò gbọ̀dò wá mọ̀	
Wọn wá sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sí i lápá ọ̀tún	35
Ọ̀rúnmilà ní sin-ni-mo-sin..	
Wọn wá sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sí i lápá òsì	
Ọ̀rúnmilà ní sin-ni-mo-sin..	
Wọn wá sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sí i níwájú	
Ọ̀rúnmilà ní sin-ni-mo-sin..	40
Wọn wá sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sí i lẹ̀yìn	
Ọ̀rúnmilà ní sin-ni-mo-sin..	
Wọn wá sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sálẹpẹpẹ ibi ó dúró sí	
Ọ̀rúnmilà ní sin-ni-mo-sin..	
Wọn wá sẹgbá ẹleyẹ sààrin àtàrí rẹ	45
Ọ̀rúnmilà ní sin-ni-mo-sin...	
Wọn ní Ọ̀rúnmilà ò gbọ̀tàn,	

89

Ibid.

90

Ibid.

91

Ibid., p. 72.

92

Ibid.

93

Ibid.

94

See: Wande Abimbola, *Àwọn Ojú Odù Méré-èrindínlógún*, Oxford University Press, Ibadan 1976.

Òrúnmilà ní òhun gbòtàn, òhun sì gbọ ọ tán Ó ní Oníyèyè Òpépe loókọ iyá éyin àjẹ n jẹ Àkàrà niyá a yín n dín lóde ọrun	50
Àjónákù igi tí iyá yín fí n dínkàrà n bẹ lágbalá Olódùmarè dóní yíi. Wọn ní kí Òrúnmilà ó fíyè dénú Wọn ní àjẹ yòwúù tÒrúnmilà bá bẹ tí ò bá gbọ Wọn ní fúnra àwọn làwọn ó paá Ọnà òdì ni yóò bgà lọ sóde ọrun. <sup>95</sup>	55
Òrúnmilà paid an urgent visit to the Witches the first time They asked what had brought him to them He replied that he had come to appease them on behalf of someone (their victim) They said that Òrúnmilà should not come on behalf of that person again They warned that should Òrúnmilà come back again	5
They would afflict him with paralysis on his right limb They would afflict him with paralysis on his left limb They would afflict him with paralysis on his chest They would afflict him with paralysis on his backbone They would afflict him with paralysis wherever he stood They would afflict him with paralysis right on his head That he would suffer and be shaking from loss of control Òrúnmilà then ran to meet Olodumare He narrated his ordeal to Olodumare: He paid an urgent visit to the Witches They asked what had brought him to them	10
He replied that he had come to appease them on behalf of someone (their victim) They said that he should not come on behalf of that person again They warned that should he come back again They would afflict him with paralysis on his right limb They would afflict him with paralysis on his left limb	15
They would afflict him with paralysis on his chest They would afflict him with paralysis on his backbone They would afflict him with paralysis wherever he stood They would afflict him with paralysis right on his head Olódùmarè then asked Òrúnmilà to go back to the Witches And should they afflict him with paralysis on his right limb Afflict him with paralysis on his left limb Afflict him with paralysis on his chest Afflict him with paralysis on his backbone Afflict him with paralysis wherever he stood	20
Afflict him with paralysis right on his head That Òrúnmilà should say “sin-ni-mo-sin”, the sound of a frying bean-cake	25
	30





The three were the apprentices of Ọ̀rúnmilà	
Ọ̀rúnmilà taught them the use of ikin for divination and they excelled	5
He taught them how to imprint the graphemes and they excelled	
He taught them how to make offerings and they excelled	
A woman was in labour at Ọ̀tu-Ifẹ̀	
So, Ọ̀rúnmilà was called to come to her aid	
Then the Witches came to Ọ̀rúnmilà's house	10
They did not meet Ọ̀rúnmilà	
But they met Ọ̀súnunlẹ̀yọ̀, his wife, at home	
Ọ̀súnunlẹ̀yọ̀ told them that Ọ̀rúnmilà was not around	
She said that Aga-ní-wọ̀rẹ́ẹ́ was at home	
Oşù-gbókèrè-níyì was at home	15
Erin-ní-sonípè-ohùn-òkinkin was at home	
The Witches then asked the apprentices to follow them	
They covered long distance	
Reached the bank of a river	
At a crossroad under a sacred palm tree	20
The Witches then killed human beings and were feasting on them	
Ọ̀rúnmilà returned home and did not see his apprentices	
Ọ̀súnunlẹ̀yọ̀ then said that the Witches had gone with his apprentices	
Ọ̀rúnmilà set out in search of his apprentices	
He reached the bank of a river	25
At the crossroad under a sacred tree	
Ọ̀rúnmilà then saw the Witches feasting on the flesh of human beings	
Ọ̀rúnmilà greeted them	
He asked whether they ever saw his apprentices	30
They denied ever seeing his apprentices	
Ọ̀rúnmilà then turned his back and was leaving	
One of the Witches quickly called out to him	
She praised him as a linguist, the one who sees through time	
She admitted that he had already known what they did	35
They asked him, the linguist, to move closer	
They said that some young men met them at the river bank	
And they were rude to them	
Then they killed them	
Prepared their flesh and began to eat them	40
Ọ̀rúnmilà requested that their parts be brought out, so he could see them	
They brought out Aga-ní-wọ̀rẹ́ẹ́'s body parts	
They brought out Oşù-gbókèrè-níyì's body parts	
They brought out Erin-ní-sonípè-ohùn-òkinkin's body parts	
Ọ̀rúnmilà burst into tears	45
He cried with the tune of <i>iyẹ̀rẹ̀, Ifá</i> poetry	

He cried about what fate has brought forth  
 He called out Aga-ní-wòrẹ́ẹ́, someone else's child! 50  
 Oṣù-gbókèrè-níyì, someone else's child!  
 Erin-ní-sonipè-ohùn-òkinkin, someone else's child!  
 They pleaded with Ọ̀rúnmilà to be calm  
 That they (witches) could bring back the dead  
 Ọ̀rúnmilà then pleaded with them to bring back his apprentices 55  
 Alas, they brought back Aga-ní-wòrẹ́ẹ́!  
 They brought back Oṣù-gbókèrè-níyì!  
 They brought back Erin-ní-sonipè-ohùn-òkinkin!  
 They gave them back to Ọ̀rúnmilà alive.

Now, given the fact that Ifá is a “learned means of inquiry”, the debate on whether witchcraft and sorcery can be used interchangeably is settled: witchcraft and sorcery are not the same. In *Ìrosùn-Ọ̀sẹ́*, the witches do not have any physical contact with their victim and the spiritual dimension of how the victim can be rescued from the affliction is implicitly depicted. *Ọ̀sá-Méjì*, lines 51–57, demonstrates graphically that witchcraft is essentially about the use of invisible projection which does not require the use of medicines, rites, incantations, and so on. To this end, therefore, such scholars as Evans-Pritchard, Field, and Crawford are right in defining it as a psychic act. Also, in those *Ọ̀sá-Méjì* lines, we see an outright rejection of Ogungbemi's claim that it is impossible for a witch to change into such other bodily forms as birds, snakes, and so on.<sup>97</sup> The problem with Ogungbemi's criticism, one suspects, lies in his failure to see witchcraft as, in Sogolo's words, “neither a species of science nor proto-science”.<sup>98</sup> In modern day, however, many people often find it disturbing that African witchcraft – if it truly exists and has the characterization we ascribe it – has not succeeded in challenging the Western scientific hegemony, especially in the areas of development, science and technology. Drewal and Drewal, quoting Adeleye (1971), reflect this line of thought thus:

“The *àjé* [destructive mothers] change into birds and fly at night. If they used that knowledge for good, it might result in the manufacture of airplanes or something of the sort. They can go to Lagos and back in very short minutes. They can see the intestines of someone without slaughtering him; they can see a child in the womb. If they used their powers for good, they would be good maternity doctors.”<sup>99</sup>

Thus, conceiving *àṣẹ* as “vital force” or “life force”, Drewal and Drewal observe that “the visualization of innovations perceived to be the result of “positive *àṣẹ*” constitutes a direct and explicit appeal to the mothers to use their powers in constructive rather than destructive ways”.<sup>100</sup>

One important issue that is often raised in the debate about the existence of witchcraft borders on the activities of witches towards kinsmen or members of their family. We have a crop of researchers who thrust the idea that witches usually turn their evil barb against members of their own kinship—sons, daughters, and other relatives. Parrinder is one of such scholars. According to him, “it may be noted that witches are often said to have no power of killing those to whom they are not related and only eat members of their own clan.”<sup>101</sup> This view is shared by David Hammond-Tooke, George Simpson, Segun Ogungbemi, and a few others. David Hammond-Tooke posits that “the essential malignity of witchcraft is that witches (...) tend to harm people close

to them—people like kin and neighbours whom, in any normal society, one should love, cherish and co-operate with”.<sup>102</sup> Given his Yorùbá ancestry and the reality of Yorùbá urbanism, Ogungbemi’s position on this is unfortunately most striking. “In Yorùbá society”, he writes, “witches only act on their relations and not on strangers”.<sup>103</sup> His stress on “not on strangers” demands that we avidly search for the idea of Yorùbá lineage and see the implication that this has for his assertion. According to William Schwab:

“Yorùbá kinship system is the lineage structure. A Yorùbá lineage, commonly termed *idilé* is a strictly unilineal descent group which (...) comprises all those persons, male and female, who trace descent from an acknowledged common ancestor through known or putative agnatic antecedents.”<sup>104</sup>

Elsewhere, Schwab notes that “each male member of an *idilé* is a potential founder of a segment which in time may be divided into further segments by his descendants”.<sup>105</sup> This gives the idea that a large number of people constitutes an *idilé* or lineage group, “which forms the basis for the association in the residential unit, the compound”.<sup>106</sup> Yet, if, in the words of Schwab, “the compound need not be coterminous with one lineage group”,<sup>107</sup> then it is fair to assume that a compound, termed as *agbo ilé*, will normally record a staggering number of inhabitants when compared with that of *idilé*. *Agbo ilé* can sometimes give a picture of a busy market, where the inhabitants can hardly enjoy any form of privacy and are expected to relate well amidst varying social distinctions, ranking of wives, unhealthy competitions among children, and so on, which often cause jealousy and other forms of dissension. In short, if a witch is living in such a setting, then she is likely to use her power more against a member of the lineage every other day than against an outsider who does not contest any interests with her. This is not to say that she could not use her power against someone outside her lineage. In Ìrosùn-Òsé and Òsá-Méji cited above, it can be deduced that Òrúnmilà’s client in the former and, in the latter, his apprentices – Aga-ní-wòrèṣé, Oṣù-gbókèrè-niyi, Erin-ní-sonipè-ohùn-òkinkin – are unknown to the Witches.

Another striking point of interest in the two narratives is that of the relationship between witches and the dieties, in this case Òrúnmilà. The narratives explicate the hegemonic status of the witches over the dieties, thereby instruct-

97

S. Ogungbemi, *Philosophy and Development*, p. 138.

98

G. S. Sogolo, *Foundations of African Philosophy*, p. 107.

99

H. J. Drewal, M. T. Drewal, *Gèlèdè*, p. 203.

100

Ibid.

101

E. G. Parrinder, *West African Religion*, p. 135.

102

David Hammond-Tooke, *Rituals and Medicines: Indigenous Healing in South Africa*, Ad Donker, Johannesburg 1989, p. 80.

103

S. Ogungbemi, *Philosophy and Development*, p. 129.

104

William B. Schwab, “The Terminology of Kinship and Marriage among the Yorùbá”, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 28 (1958) 4, pp. 301–313, p. 301, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1157637>.

105

William B. Schwab, “Kinship and Lineage among the Yorùbá”, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 25 (1955) 4, pp. 352–374, p. 353, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1156875>.

106

Ibid., p. 356.

107

Ibid.

ing us that Olódùmarè has given them awesome power to dominate the world. Ìrosùn-Òsé, lines 25–32, for instance, shows that only Olódùmarè knows the secret of the witches. This confirms an oral source that witches cannot be subdued, but can only be appeased through the offering of *ẹbọ* or *ètùtù*.<sup>108</sup> The terms *ẹbọ* and *ètùtù* are based on the verbs *bọ* and *tù* which translate as “worship” or “revere” and “appease” or “calm” respectively. Offering of *ẹbọ* or *ètùtù*, on the one hand, suggests that the way to free their victim is a matter of “negotiation” and, on the other, corroborates the view that witches “occupy a position of subordinate to those of the supreme diety, Olódùmarè, and of Ọ̀rúnmilà, god of the Ifá divination system, and equal or superior to that of the gods”.<sup>109</sup> Perhaps, it is this understanding among the Yorùbá that allows witchcraft to enjoy some fair measure of euphemism which hides its conceptualised image of virulent activities towards other persons. For instance, the Yorùbá use the phrase *àwọn iyá* which translates as “our mothers” for witches to convey their regard for the witches’ “mystic powers of womanhood”.<sup>110</sup> Although in witchcraft accusations old women are often the object of mistrust and are perceived as witches, it is the case among the Yorùbá, however, that

“... elderly women (...) are considered neither anti-social nor the personification of evil. Rather they form an important segment of the population in any town and tend to be shown much respect and affection. Because of their special power, they have greater access to the Yorùbá deities.”<sup>111</sup>

Thus, to impress the “inscrutability of the mothers”, “the intensity of their power in the minds of men”, “female images (...) of secrecy and covertness”, Drewal and Drewal<sup>112</sup> offer their popular praise poem thus:

My Mother Ọ̀sòròngà, famous dove that eats in the town  
Famous bird that eats in a cleared farm who kills an animal without sharing  
with anyone

One who makes noise in the midnight

Who eats from the head to the arm, who eats from the liver to the heart

*Ìyáami Ọ̀sòròngà, afínjú àdàbà tí ñjẹ láàrin ilú*

*Afínjú ẹyẹ tí ñjẹ ní gbangba oko ap'ẹran mahagun*

*Olókìkì òru*

*A ti orí jẹ apá, a tẹ̀dò jẹ ọkàn*

Witchcraft no doubt has suffered several negative ascriptions partly because of its frightening features, its unobservable means and the difficulty of making it intelligible on the empirical plane. Despite this evidential problem of proof, witchcraft practices have, in today’s rapidly changing world, attracted so much attention within Africa’s sociocultural context. In fact, some people hold strongly to the view that the dimensions or uses of witchcraft now change with changing trends in all facets of human life in Africa – politics, commerce, sports, religion, and so on. Obsessed with the concerns of modernity, some African states attempt to suppress or contain, through legal means, witchcraft activities because of the general feeling that such occult forces create a basic impediment to growth or development. South Africa is a good example. The truth is that witchcraft “is still widespread at all levels, including among those in formal employment as civil servants, religious leaders and business people in local towns and urban centres”.<sup>113</sup>

Interestingly, too, some people argue that witchcraft serves as a mechanism for regulating social behaviour and entrenching moral relations. This posi-

tion derives from the conviction that people tend to imbibe good conduct on the realization that doing otherwise sometimes attracts the disruptive force of witchcraft. This could be distilled further to mean that witchcraft is socially useful by “giving the victims a socially prescribed target for protective or remedial action, (...) maintaining civility in everyday life (because of failure to be polite could be interpreted as malevolence) and providing social control by ridding a community of deviant persons”.<sup>114</sup> From the psychological point of view and considering the abundance of repressed hostility, frustration, and other such modern-day realities, it makes sense to reason with the Tanzanian group Research on Poverty Alleviation (REPOA)<sup>116</sup> that witchcraft “provides a way to explain serious misfortunes and render those who suffer them blameless in the eyes of society”.

On the final note, we must admit that the two graphemes (*odù*) employed in this section can, despite their mythic colorations, be used to complement natural explanation of events and encourage further epistemological explorations of Ifá towards the forging of a proviso that, for the Yorùbá, witchcraft is an objective feature of reality.

#### Omotade Adegbindin

### O domorodačkoj afričkoj epistemologiji: mitografske predstave fenomena vješticiarstva u tekstovima Ifáe

#### Sažetak

*U umovima onih što snažno podržavaju hegemoniju znanosti ponad praksi usmenih tradicija, vješticiarstvo pripada dimenziji makabrističkih fantazija, djelomice i zato što je vještičarenje uvršteno u područje okultnog i teško je empirijski provjerljivo. Pozitivistički pristup i zapadnjačko omalovažavanje fenomena vješticiarstva stvara utisak da su prakse poput magije i vješticiarstva, usađene u usmene tradicije, teorijske pretpostavke te iracionalne. Za ovaj rad važno je pogrešno shvaćanje Geoffreyja Parrindera da se Afrikanci nisu naslanjali na zapise, nego na mnemoničke genije kada su u pitanju bile njihove povijesti, filozofije, kozmologije itd. Uzimajući vještičarenje kao pozadinu, Parrinder tvrdi da ne postoje pouzdani zapisi koji potvrđuju postojanje vještičarenja u Africi. Pod »pouzdati zapisi« očito je da Parrinder podrazumijeva pisanje ponad usmenog prenošenja i, samim time, nepoznato mu je da, za narod Yorùbá, Ifá može producirati zapise vezane za njihove mitske/religijske koncepcije, svjetonazore i živuće ritualne obrede. Ovaj rad pokazuje, u jednu ruku, da je naše pogrešno korištenje termina »pisanje« i »pismenost« razmješteno mnogim dvosmislenostima koje nas sprječavaju u prihvaćanju, primjerice, inskriptivne prirode Ifá sustava u našu povijest zapisa. U drugu ruku, rad predstavlja*

108

H. J. Drewal, M. T. Drewal, *Gèlèdè*, p. 74.

109

Ulli H. Beier, “*Gèlèdè* Masks”, *Odu* 6 (1958), pp. 5–23, p. 6.

110

H. J. Drewal, M. T. Drewal, *Gèlèdè*, p. 74.

111

Ibid., pp. 74–75.

112

Stephen N. Nyaga, “The Impact of Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices on Socio-economic Development of the Abakwaya in Musoma-Rural District”, in: Gerrie ter Harr (ed.), *Imagin-**ing Evil: Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations in Contemporary Africa*, Africa World Press, Trenton, N. J. 2007, pp. 247–268, p. 265.

113

Robert B. Edgerton, *Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony*, Free Press, New York 1992, p. 172.

114

See: Dar es Salaam: TOMRIC Agency, “Gender and Witchcraft Killings in Tanzania”, *All Africa* (March 27, 2000). Available at <https://allafrica.com/stories/200003270107.html> (accessed on April 10, 2018).

*Ifáu kao korpus pouzdanih zapisa i povlači argumente iz sistematiziranog grafičkog prevodenja dvaju strofa, Ìrosùn-Ọ̀sẹ̀ i Ọ̀sá-Mẹ̀jì, kojima se odgovara na pitanja o prihvaćanju postojanja vještica, zatim može li se čarobnjaštvo i vještičarstvo koristiti izmjenično, o djelovanju vještica prema članovima svoje porodice, o položaju vještica u hijerarhiji bića itd.*

#### **Ključne riječi**

afrička epistemologija, mitografija, vještičarenje, Ifá, Geoffrey Parrinder

### **Omotade Adegbindin**

#### **Zur indigenen afrikanischen Epistemologie: mythografische Darstellungen des Phänomens der Hexerei in Texten Ifás**

#### **Zusammenfassung**

*Im Geist derjenigen, die die Hegemonie der Wissenschaft über die Praxis mündlicher Traditionen stark unterstützen, gehört die Hexerei zur Dimension makabristischer Fantasien, zum Teil auch weil die Hexerei in den Bereich des Okkulten eingeordnet wird und empirisch kaum nachprüfbar ist. Der positivistische Ansatz und die westliche Herabwürdigung des Phänomens der Hexerei erzeugen den Eindruck, dass Praktiken wie Magie und Hexerei, die in mündliche Traditionen eingebettet sind, theoretische Annahmen und Irrationalitäten sind. Für diese Arbeit ist die falsche Auffassung Geoffrey Parrinders belangvoll, dass sich die Afrikaner nicht auf die Aufzeichnungen stützten, sondern auf die mnemonischen Genies, wenn deren Geschichte, Philosophien, Kosmologien usw. in Betracht gezogen wurden. Vor dem Hintergrund der Hexerei behauptet Parrinder, es bestünden keine zuverlässigen Aufzeichnungen, die die Existenz von Hexerei in Afrika beweisen. Unter den „zuverlässigen Aufzeichnungen“ gewährt Parrinder offensichtlich den Vorrang der schriftlichen im Vergleich zur mündlichen Überlieferung, und es ist ihm dadurch unbekannt, dass Ifá für das Volk der Yorùbá Aufzeichnungen produzieren kann, die sich auf ihre mythischen / religiösen Konzeptionen, Weltanschauungen und lebende Ritualzeremonien beziehen. Diese Arbeit zeigt einerseits, dass unsere falsche Verwendung der Termini „Schreiben“ und „Alphabetisierung“ durch zahlreiche Zweideutigkeiten zersplittert worden ist, die uns daran hindern, beispielsweise die inskriptive Natur des Ifá-Systems in unsere Aufzeichnungsgeschichte einzuführen. Auf der anderen Seite stellt die Arbeit Ifá als Korpus verlässlicher Aufzeichnungen dar und leitet Argumente aus der systematisierten grafischen Übersetzung zweier Strophen, Ìrosùn-Ọ̀sẹ̀ und Ọ̀sá-Mẹ̀jì, ab, die Fragen zur Akzeptanz der Existenz von Hexen beantworten. Darüber hinaus beantworten sie die Frage, ob Zauberei und Hexerei wechselweise verwendet werden können, außerdem die Frage zur Tätigkeit der Hexen gegenüber den Mitgliedern ihrer Familien und schließlich die Frage zur Position der Hexen in der Hierarchie der Wesen usw.*

#### **Schlüsselwörter**

afrikanische Epistemologie, Mythografie, Hexerei, Ifá, Geoffrey Parrinder

### **Omotade Adegbindin**

#### **Sur l'épistémologie indigène africaine : la représentation mythographique du phénomène de la sorcellerie dans les textes Ifá**

#### **Résumé**

*Dans la pensée de ceux qui soutiennent fermement l'hégémonie d'une science qui serait au-dessus de la pratique traditionnelle orale, la sorcellerie relève d'une dimension fantaisiste macabre, partiellement en raison du fait qu'elle s'inscrit dans le domaine de l'occulte et qu'elle est difficilement vérifiable de manière empirique. L'approche positiviste et la dépréciation du phénomène de la sorcellerie de la part de l'Occident donnent l'impression que les pratiques telles que la magie et la sorcellerie, enracinées dans la tradition orale, sont des hypothèses qui relèvent de la théorie et sont ainsi irrationnelles. Ce travail prend en considération la conception erronée de Geoffrey Parrinder selon laquelle les Africains ne se seraient pas basés sur des écrits, mais sur des génies de la mnémonique lorsqu'il est question de leur histoire, leur philosophie, leur cosmologie, etc. En se servant du contexte de la sorcellerie, Parrinder affirme qu'il n'existe pas*

*d'écrits fiables qui confirment l'existence de la sorcellerie en Afrique. Il est clair que sous l'appellation de « écrits fiables » Parrinder suppose que la transmission écrite est au-dessus de la transmission orale, et ainsi, il lui est inconnu que le système de divination Ifá peut produire pour le peuple Yorùbá des écrits liés à leur conception religieuse/mythique, leur vision du monde, leurs rituels vivants. D'un côté, ce travail montre que notre compréhension des termes de « écriture » et « éducation » se déploie par le biais de nombreuses ambiguïtés qui nous empêchent d'accepter, par exemple, le caractère inscriptible du système Ifá dans notre histoire de l'écriture ; d'un autre côté, ce travail présente le système Ifá en tant que corpus d'inscriptions fiables et tire ses arguments d'une traduction graphique systématisée de deux strophes, Ìrosùn-Òsẹ́ et Ọsá-Mẹ̀jì, à travers lesquelles les réponses aux questions concernant l'existence des sorcières et de leurs actions envers les membres de leur famille sont données, mais pose également la question de savoir s'il est possible d'utiliser les termes de magie noire et de sorcellerie de manière interchangeable et interroge le rôle des sorcière dans la hiérarchie de l'être, etc.*

**Mots-clés**

épistémologie africaine, mythographie, sorcellerie, Ifá, Geoffrey Parrinder