



**Jacob K. Olupona, Rowland O. Abiodun, eds..** *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance*. African Expressive Cultures Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. 390 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-01882-3.

**Reviewed by** Francine Kola-Bankole

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Jacob K. Olupona and Rowland O. Abiodun have put together a complex group of essays that examines Ifá divination: its epistemologies, praxis, myth, tradition, performance, and transnational connections throughout the diaspora. The twenty-four essayists composed of respected scholars, scholar-practitioners, and practitioners use interdisciplinary approaches that pose analytical, conceptual, and theoretical questions. The essays in *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, the result of a 2008 interdisciplinary conference at Harvard University, collectively argue that Ifá oral traditions need to be preserved. Although it occasionally reads as several separate books and quite a number of essays reiterate much of the same information, the book offers ways of seeing not found elsewhere in the literature and a stunningly complex depth of knowledge. The book presents complex hermeneutic arguments that are not easily accessible to an undergraduate student, but offer much to scholars. Making use of the *odú* (sacred verse) and specific ritual objects (divination chains, for example), the essayists underscore the value of history and tradition. The editors are successful in their goals in proving the continued relevance of Ifá divination in contemporary society. The essays effectively

demonstrate the global interconnectivities of Yorùbá religion and ideology in the diaspora.

*Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance* is divided into four sections: “Ifá Orature: Its Interpretation and Translation,” “Ifá as Knowledge: Theoretical Questions and Concerns,” “Ifá in the Afro-Atlantic,” and “Sacred Art in Ifá.” Each section is also interwoven with four overarching themes that include respect and preservation (Abiodun, Adélékè Adéèkó, and Henry John Drewal); continuity and change (Laura S. Grillo, Ayò Opefeyitimi, and Mei-Mei Sanford); transnationalism and globalization (M. Ajisebo McElwaine Abimbola, Kamari Maxine Clarke, Stefania Capone, Ysamur M. Flores-Peña, Velma Love, and Joseph M. Murphy); and technology’s influence on the visual arts (Akíntúndé Akínyémí, Bọlaji Campbell, and Philip M. Peek). Sometimes obliquely, the authors express their concerns with how Ifá’s sacred and secret knowledge is transmitted to the outside world (Barry Hallen). Most ground their particular arguments by reiterating the power of this system of knowledge, and how misuse is dangerous to both the diviner who reveals the secret and the person who gains unapproved access (Ọlásopé O. Oyélàrà̀n). Discussions on continuity and change in addition to concerns with Ifá’s placement within the global pantheon of religions

(Akínwùmí Ìṣọlá, Wyatt MacGaffey, Olupona, and Olufemi Taiwo) and its preservation of the historicity of Yorùbá and the Ifá corpus are paramount throughout the book (Wándé Abimbólá, Andrew Apter, and John Mason). Each author revisits the origins of Ifá as he or she introduces his or her particular focus. Emphasis is on the multifaceted visual and sensorial dimensions of divinity that encompass oral narrative, ritual objects, sacrifice, and performance.

“Ifá Orature,” the first section, consisting of five chapters, defends oral narrative as history (Apter, chapter 3) and takes the position that divination is prescriptive (Adéèkó, chapter 5). It is a careful study of how Ifá divination is structured, and it argues that the oral traditions, though highly conservative, do allow for creativity and originality. Calls for respect for oral African traditions uniformly undergird the essays. Opefeyitimi’s contribution (chapter 1) smartly bookends Mason’s writings (chapter 14, section 3). Both Opefeyitimi and Mason contextualize and historicize the mythic and the sacred in Ifá divination. Given the focus on tracing historicity and defending oral traditions, each of the essays in this section helps achieve the editors’ goals of debunking some of the colonialist discourse that treats Ifá oral narratives as ahistorical and timeless. Both Abimbólá (chapter 2) and Oyélàrà (chapter 4) identify loss of language in the diaspora as the culprit for innovations in ritual, not only for inaccuracies in recollecting the oral narratives but also in the performance of the rituals themselves. Similarly, Oyélàrà questions the consequences that result when oral traditions are written down to become globally accessible.

The onus of responsibility is one of the recurrent themes in the essays contained in part 2, “Ifá as Knowledge.” Hallen (chapter 6), for example, asks sixteen questions, including “Who has the ability to teach and disseminate the Yorùbá religion?” and “What is lost when the sanctity and sacredness of the oral traditions of *odu* and rituals

adapt to accommodate contemporary methods of accessing and using Ifá divination?” (pp. 91, 93-94). Central to his questioning is the philosophical concern of transnational representation and voice: does Yorùbá Ifá speak for diaspora Ifá traditions, and does the academic have more authority than the *babaláwo* (diviner)? Indeed, most of the authors argue that secrecy has the primary function of maintaining hierarchical relationships and that there are consequences when it is breached.

The seven essays in the third section, “Ifá in the Afro-Atlantic,” address the pressures that globalization has placed on the Ifá corpus. Cultural heritage and reclaiming identity is the skeleton upon which new critical positions and concepts are presented in detailed arguments of how this religion, by necessity, adapted to new localities. Slavery is primarily blamed for diasporic changes in power structures, rituals, and performance. Loss of language and the absence of a *babaláwo* are cited for the reasons why women play a larger role among some communities but are relegated to the periphery in others. Love (chapter 13) writes that, “for African-American practitioners, the Ifá tradition presents an opportunity to reclaim cultural memory” (p. 189). She goes on to say that Ifá worship is also a way to heal cultural trauma. Flores-Peña (chapter 16), Capone (chapter 17), and Abimbola (chapter 18) specifically address the role of women in Ifá priesthood, while Clarke (chapter 19) argues that Africa merely represents the symbolic domain that legitimizes Ifá’s historical roots. Love and Clarke represent different views of the place of cultural reclamation and identity for the descendants of slaves. It is important to note, as the editors remind readers, that Clarke’s position is based on her contention that the diaspora’s identity stems from the consequences of post-Cold War politics rather than the consequences of slavery. From here, she introduces positions based in transnationalism and

identities that are theoretically different from those formed out of slavery and its aftermath.

“Sacred Art in Ifá,” part 4, offers five discussions on how technology and the media have irrevocably altered Ifá divination for many devotees. The visual arts, colors, and art mediums that explain Ifá are explored in terms of receptivity within today’s global arena. Appropriation of rituals and Ifá’s visual cannon are the subjects for Peek (chapter 20), Campbell (chapter 21), Grillo (chapter 22), Drewal (chapter 23), and Akínyémí (chapter 24). Drewal makes the point to differentiate between the ways in which a westerner has to learn to see with more than the eye, unlike individuals in some African cultures, for example, who are more accustomed to using multiple ways of seeing. With his translation of the Yorùbá proverb that “the outsider or uninitiated usually sees through the nose” (p. 325), Drewal suggests that it is time to rethink the ways of studying art forms, using not only the five senses but also intuition and motion, to help avoid the mistranslations and misunderstandings that frequently occur when individuals witness events of which they have no prior knowledge but process only through their own cultural apparatus. Perhaps the starkest examples of appropriation highlighted by Akínyémí become symptomatic of the global malaise, well illustrated by the Nigerian video industry’s mining of the convenient ritual and easy object to make the point that Ifá is a commodity for sale. For a fee, one can have an Internet reading that completely removes the client from physical contact with the diviner.

*Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance* is a valuable addition to the scholarly literature on Ifá. The essays, with amazing depth and complexity, situate this practice and the religion it represents into a broader global context.

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