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# Spiritual Journeys: A Study of Ifá /Òrìṣà Practitioners in the United States Initiated in Nigeria

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# SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS: A STUDY OF IFÁ/ÒRÌṢÀ PRACTITIONERS IN THE UNITED STATES INITIATED IN NIGERIA

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## Dedication

Dedicated to Walter Van Der Meer (1957–1969)

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to understand the culture of one of the newest branches of traditional Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà practice in the United States from practitioners born in the United States that were initiated in Nigeria, West Africa. The epistemology of the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system in the United States has been based on the history and influence of *Regla de Ocha* or *Santeria* that developed out of Cuban innovation and practice. This is an ethnographic and auto-ethnographic study that pulls from participant observation, field notes, interviews, and photos as data.The central question of this dissertation is what are the challenges and opportunities for this branch of practitioners in the United States who were initiated in the Ifá/Òrìṣà practice in Nigeria? Some of the main findings indicate that the opportunities include: opening doors intellectually and spiritually about African philosophical thought and ethics were that: it instills a sense of spiritual discipline; it lays the foundation, giving confidence that one can achieve what they set their minds to; and, it offers spiritual technologies and systems that are liberating and relevant in the Unites States in terms of identity, direction, and purpose. Some of the challenges included: a rugged Nigerian experience, and cultural change; a transformative experience from the initiation rituals; understanding and learning the Yorùbá language; and, the contradiction of Africa being the idea of utopia. The challenges in the United States also included: understanding and learning the Yorùbá language; understanding the different systems of practice in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system; the role of women as Ifá priests; ecological concerns in disposing ritual sacrifices; accessibility to traditional (African) ritual items; issues of acceptance, inclusion, and exclusion on the basis of race, gender, and sexual identities from other systems of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice; and, developing new communities of practice base on the experiences of this newest branch of practitioners.

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# Chapter I: Introduction

## The Journey

The driver picked us up early that morning to take us over to Baba's compound. It was a short ride to where he lived. Within that quick drive through the busy intersection in the center of town in Ọ̀yọ́, we could see glimpses of the lives of ordinary Yorùbá people. Women, children, and teenage kids were carrying packs of fresh baked bread, fruits, or, other items in a basket on top of their heads, or hawking the latest editions of the daily national newspapers about Nigeria's politics. Motorbike riders were picking up fares on the bumpy road. When the driver reached the compound he beeped his horn so that the gateman would open the gate. "*Ẹ kàarò*," the kids shouted out to greet us, smiling and looking curiously at us as the car pulled into the courtyard of the compound. On the left side was a garage that had a room right above it. In front of us were two attached one-story houses. We were led into the house on the left where we meet Ìyábeji, Baba's second wife. She greeted us and offered us breakfast. As we were about to eat, someone came and summoned us for Baba. We left through Ìyábeji's back door into a smaller courtyard where there was another house. This was a two-story house. As we entered we went into another room where Baba was sitting down with about six other babalàwos. Four of the younger priests sat on the floor and two of the senior priests sat across from each other on couches. I remembered recording notes in my journal the following morning on May 23 at 1 a.m.

> What a day! We went over to Baba's compound was about to eat and was called over for divination. It was a group of babalàwo's present—young and old. I was the first that they divined for. I wasn't ready for this. Ìká Di came up w/IRE (The odu sign come with blessings). It said I should be a Babalàwo and that with sacrifice my life will be successful. . . . The electricity went out in the afternoon—Nigerian Politics.

This was May of 1999 and my first trip to Nigeria. It was a spiritual journey. It was a follow-up to the spiritual work I was doing with Dr. Wandé Abímbọ́lá in Boston that began four years before. He is the person refered to as *Baba*, a term that means father. Baba is also short for

*babaláwo,*[1] which means "father of the secrets." A babaláwo is also another name for a person who is an Ifá priest. After taking a seminar with him, I received my one hand of Ifá, or *kofá* as it is called in Nigeria. Kofá was a traditional ritual that would take place in ancient times in Yorùbáland days after a child was born. It was a ritual where the child would receive the sacred palm nuts or *Ikin*. A babalàwo would divine and identify which of the 256 odù would be their signature or personal odù. During that reading certain things would be revealed about the person's destiny and the things they should be cautious about. These readings generally offer some very deep philosophical and ethical wisdom that would help that person navigate the constant obstacles that life brings.

The journey I took to Ọ̀yọ́, Nigeria for the purpose of spiritual development and initiation into the priesthood of the Ifá/ Òrìṣá belief system, is one that many people in the United States have taken. This dissertation is about Ifá/ Òrìṣá practitioners in the United States who made similar journeys. Seeking initiation in Nigeria is a considerable spiritual journey but it is one of several routes into Ifá/ Òrìṣá practice.

From the 1950s to the 1980s, the major influence on Ifá/ Òrìṣá practice in the United States was Cuban *La Regla de Ocha,* which became popularly known in the United States as *Santeria*; and *Orisha Vodo*, which emerged out of the Yorùbá Revivalism Movement or the New Yorùbá Movement from the Ọ̀yọ́tunji Village, in Sheldon, South Carolina.

Particular to those who reconnected to the original source of Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in Nigeria is their ability/purpose to negotiate between cultural preservation and innovation if not transformation in the United States context. What are the cultural practices of U.S. Ifá/Òrìṣá

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[1] A glossary of what may be unfamiliar terms to many readers, and that are used in this dissertation, is presented in Appendix A.

practitioners who received their training, like I did, from a Nigerian born priest in the United States, and got initiated in Nigeria, rather than in Cuba or in the United States? How are they shaping the United States version of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice? In this study I'm also looking to learn more about the nature of cultural innovation and leadership in the change process too.

**Situating the Researcher**

I have been observing the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice since 1975. In 1983 I became a practitioner in Cuban Santeria. In 1994 I was a member of *Ilé Àṣẹ Ṣàngó Éwélérè*, or the House of Ṣàngó the herbalist and healer. Both experiences were in Boston, Massachusetts. *Ilé Àṣẹ Ṣàngó Éwélérè* practice of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system could be classified by what Clarke (2004) has described as a "hybrid reinterpretation of traditional practices" (p. xxi). It included elements of Cuban Santeria and traditional Yorùbà ritual practices. The major influence was on traditional Yorùbà practice. It was through *Ilé Àṣẹ Ṣàngó Éwélérè* that I began studying Ifá with Dr. Wàndé Abímbọ́lá. I received my *Kofá*, or One Hand of Ifá, from Dr. Abímbọ́lá in 1995. Kofá, receiving the sacred palm nuts or icons of Ifá, is a ceremony that begins the study and practice of the philosophical and ethical values of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system in order to achieve one's destiny. It was also Dr. Abímbọ́lá who accompanied me to do my *Tefá*, or initiation into the Ifá priesthood (1999) in Nigeria. Figure 1.1 shows a gathering of Nigerian babaláwos after my Ifá initiation in Ọ̀yọ́, Nigeria on May 25, 1999.

*Figure 1.1.* Nigerian babaláwos with the author after Ifá initiation. This was in Ọ̀yọ́, Nigeria on May 25, 1999. Ifásọ́lá (bottom left), Dr. Wàndé Abímbọ́lá (top left).

In 2000, I was given the title *Akogun Awo Alaafin Ọ̀yọ́,* by the senior Ifá priest there. In 2013 I was honored at the palace of the *Ọọ̀ni* or King of Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀. I was given a post by the *Ọọ̀ni* as one of the *Asoju Esin Ati Asa Yorùbá*: representative or ambassador of Yorùbá Religion and Culture.

As a part of my quest to learn and understand the Ifá/Òrísá practice I have travelled to Nigeria four times: in 1999, 2000, 2010, and 2013. I have travelled to Cuba 15 times, sometimes several times during particular years in 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2010, and 2012. I visited Trinidad twice: in 2008 and 2009. I have also participated in three of the 10 World Òrìsá Congresses, and have attended seminars by Dr. Wàndé Abímbọ́lá in Boston, New York City, Louisville, and Atlanta. I have observed and participated in numerous rituals, Ifá festivals, and *bembes* or Òrìsá celebrations in Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀, and Ọ̀yọ́, Nigeria; Havana and Santiago, Cuba; Trinidad;

San Francisco, Boston, Hartford, Connecticut; New York City, Louisville, Sheldon, South Carolina, Atlanta, and Orlando, Florida in the United States.

One of the purposes of situating myself as the researcher is to also to employ an autoethnographic methodology as a way to view the research. As a method, autoethnography allows me to use myself as a lens to understand the culture. The relevancy of my experience is to also provide a snapshot of some of the processes and influences that some believers and practitioners in the Ifá/ Òrìṣá system in the United States go through. It is to also show some of the cultural innovations and transformations that takes place for those in the United States who seek to be initiated in Nigeria.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study is foremost about the culture of innovation and transformational spiritual practice in a different context than its origin. Santeria or *La Regal de Ocha* in Cuba was an innovation of traditional Yorùbá cultural practices of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system (Brown, 2003). Under the leadership of Adéfúnmi I, Orisa Vodu or Yorùbá revivalism was also an innovation of Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system practiced by African Americans in the United States (Brandon, 1997; Clarke, 2004; Hucks, 2012). Throughout both developments in the United States, Cuban Santeria served as the dominant influence on the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice. Today, and over the past 25 years, many African Americans and other groups are bypassing the Santeria and Yorùbá revivalist networks and traveling directly to West Africa to affiliate with the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá practice. Those interested people are bypassing getting initiated into the Cuban/Santeria belief system in the United States while exploring the meaning of Yorùbá traditional spiritual practices on their own cultural, political, social, and economic terms in the United States.

The purpose of this study is to understand the culture of practitioners in the United States who were initiated in Nigeria. These practitioners have introduced a new form of practice to the North American context; but I have not been able to find any research that specifically examined this phenomenon and the challenges or opportunities that it brings.

**Ifá/Òrìṣá Revival Towards Spiritual Reconnection Through Initiation in Nigeria**

The enslavement of African people in the United States was primarily under a dominant Christian religious system. Some shifts from this dominant religious practice occurred in the late 1950s and 1960s. During this period, African Americans in urban communities began embracing Islam, joining the Nation of Islam founded by Elijah Muhammad and popularized by Malcolm X. The 1950s and 1960s was also a period in which the Civil Rights Movement emerged to fight against racial segregation. This period also produced a Black Power /Black consciousness movement advocating for Black self-determination. It embraced a positive identification of Black racial solidarity, pride in African heritage, and African American national liberation.

The Black Arts Movement became the cultural wing of the movement that promoted a radical expression of Black consciousness (Smethurst, 2005), and African American national liberation. This movement included ideas about traditional African spiritual belief systems. Walter King, a former dancer who later became Ọba Adéfúnmi I, was one of the leaders of the new Yorùbá movement promoting the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in the United States.

Adéfúnmi I was one of the founders of the Yorùbá Temple chartered in the state of New York as the African Theological Archministry, Inc. in 1960 (Brandon, 2002). The practice of West African traditional Yorùbà Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system is a growing phenomenon in the United States. This spiritual system was founded in Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀, Nigeria. It has since spread globally and is prominently practiced in South America where in Brazil it is called *Candomble*; in Cuba as *La*

*Regal de Ocha*, *Lucumi*, or, Santeria; in Trinidad and Tobago as *Sango Baptist*; and in the United States as Santeria and *Orisha Vodu,* practiced by African Americans. Practitioners are also blossoming throughout Europe in Britain, Germany, Holland and Switzerland among other places.

The development of the Yorùbá Temple grew out of Adéfúnmi's affiliation with Cuban Santeria practitioners in New York City. According to Brandon (2002) the affiliation with the Cuban Santeria practitioners was "in pursuit of an appropriated religious ideology and cultural base from which to launch their wider political aims" (p. 154). This related to more of a Black cultural nationalist trend.

**Research Question**

Literature on Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá practice has gaps in its examination of practitioners in the United States as to where they choose to be initiated in the practice. Research on the practice addresses various dimensions in Africa about Yorùbá oral literature (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975b; Ajuwon, 1977), divination (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1977; Bascom, 1993; Pemberton, 2000) ritual performances (M. Drewal, 1992), and practitioners who visited Nigeria to witness Ifá/Òrìṣá festivals, or, as a prigrimage to express solidarity with Africa as a symbol of Black identity (Clarke, 2004; Eason, 2008; Hucks, 2012). Research also pointed to the experience of people initiated into the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in the United States (Brandon, 1997; Clark, 2007; Clarke, 2004; Hucks, 2012). My focus is on people in the United States who were initiated in Nigeria. I presume that they become competent in negotiating current Nigerian understandings of Ifá/Òrìṣá in the context of different cultural norms, values and practices in the United States, for instance in relation to gender equity and sexual orientation as will be explained briefly below. There are differences in some of the philosophical, ethical, and ritual practices of the traditional Ifá/Òrìṣà

belief system in Nigeria. Some of these differences are points to be explored in my interviews that can help to understand the shift in practitioners' getting initiated in Nigeria. The central question has been: what are the challenges and opportunities for practitioners in the United States who were initiated into the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in Nigeria? Learning from these challenges and opportunities can tell us some things about the type of cultural or spiritual leadership that is emerging out of this branch of practitioners.

The Cuban Ifá/Òrìṣá system has been the dominant system for practitioners initiated in the United States. The development of the Orisha Voodoo, and the Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village system which appealed to African Americans was also a result of racial tensions with some Cuban practitioners and the influence of Catholicism in that practice. Both the Cuban and the Ọ̀yọ́túnjí systems are laced with innovations and depart from some of the beliefs and practices that are observed in the Nigeria Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá system.

The social politics of gender, race, and class, influence how practitioners, and initiated people are received in the Cuban and Ọ̀yọ́túnjí systems in the United States. In the Cuban system, women and gay practitioners are relegated to be initiated primarily as *Santeras* and *Santeros* while generally being excluded from the Ifá priesthood. In the Ọ̀yọ́túnjí system whites are excluded from being initiated. The question of class relates to those who can afford the cost of initiation as well as travel and be a part of the ritual privileges in the Ifá/Òrìṣá priesthood.

In Nigeria, gender or sexual orientation are not prohibitions for people to be initiated. Women are initiated in both Òrìṣá and Ifá priesthood with few exceptions as some Ifá communities of practitioners do not initiate women. There is an irony in the fact that Cuba is a nation proud of its revolutionary history, yet Cuban practitioners are prone to exclude women and gay practitioners from (or confine them to) some ritual privileges. Nigerian practitioners are

more inclusive of women, White people, and gay practitioners; yet, there is a national policy in that society that prohibits gay people from having equal rights. There are exceptions within communities of practitioners in Africa, Cuba, and the United States in how women, White, and gay people are included or excluded in the various systems of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice.

Among Cuban practitioners in the United States there are assumptions that practitioners who travel to Nigeria to be initiated do so because the rituals are cheaper or considered more powerful (Clark, 2007). It is also believed, according to Clark, that after being initiated in Africa the initiate is isolated by practitioners in America who belong to "community-based traditons" (p. 12). Clark also pointed out that upon the return to the United States as a new priest initiated in Africa or Cuba, "the local community that they bypassed would have nothing to do with them and would not recognize their foreign inititations" (p. 12).

Clark (2007) does not venture further to understand the meaning or the challenges that practitioners in the United States experience in their journeys to be initiated in Nigeria, or the impact of their experiences in the United States. My study is important because it looks at the meaning from the practitioners' own understanding of their experiences. Furthermore, my study explores the challenges and opportunities that practitioners inititated in Nigeria have been presented with.

In addressing my research question I want to learn how practitioners from the United States resolve some of the discomfort and tensions of interacting with practitioners in the United States who were initiated in the Cuban and Ọ̀yọ́túnjí systems. How do these practitioners adapt to the differences around the exclusion of women, gay, and White people in aspects of the practice in the United States? In what ways do their beliefs influence their practice differently than the

Cuban and Ọ̀yọ́túnjí systems? How does their practice fit into the social, political, historical, and spiritual context of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system?

All practitioners acknowlege Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀ in Nigeria as the home and origins of Ifá/Òrìṣá belief and practice. Still there is some discomfort about the re-Africanization (Clark, 2007) of the practice in the Americas. There are also some ideas in the literature, according to Clark, suggesting that the practice in the Americas is more authenic. "Some people in the Americas even suggest that the traditions as they have been maintained in the Americas are in fact truer to the original traditions than the vestiges left in Nigeria" (p. 157).

There are many practitioners from the United States who were initiated in Nigeria who also have had experiences with the Cuban and Ọ̀yọ́túnjí systems. Some of these practitioners are able to share their experiences about those systems as well as their experiences about the system in Nigeria. In exploring my research question, I also hope to get a more comprehensive view about Yorùbá Ifa/Òrìṣá belief systems and practices in the United States.

**Innovation**

Innovation in Ifá/Òrìṣá belief and practice can be viewed as a sustained process that evolved as part of Yorùbá culture. Innovation is a part of a long history in the development of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system. According to Yorùbá myths, the creation theory pointed to Olódùmarè, the Supreme Creator, who sent the divinities to create *ayé* or earth (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997c), to make human beings. This mythical creation process is an innovation in itself. Bray, Konsynski, and Streator's (2007) concept of innovation illustrated that Yorùbá myth, is also a "process of making improvements by introduction of 'something new' to a system" (para. 7).

Hochgerner (2010) suggested that we look at innovation with similarities and differences in mind. He pointed out that in innovation, "there are similarities yet also differences between

social innovations concerning societal issues, and innovations based on technologies aiming at business purposes" (p. iv). This is an important point because Western perception of innovation seems to be more about advances in fields such as telecommunications and digital technology.

According to Hochgerner (2010) innovation offers prospects of change with implications for the future. Hochgerner stated: "Any innovation provides a base camp to form new, tiny or strong branches of future changes at any given time with particular social, economic or technical status" (p. ii).

Bornstein (2007), Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller (2008), and Howaldt and Schwarz (2010) all discuss appropriate innovation in a social context. Phills et al. pointed out that "innovation is both a process and a product" (p. 37). They defined social innovation as "a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals" (p. 39). Whether it is original or not, in order to be viewed as innovation, its process or outcome must meet two criteria, novelty and improvement:

> The first is novelty: Although innovations need not necessarily be original, they must be new to the user, context, or application. The second criterion is improvement. To be considered an innovation, a process or outcome must be either more effective or more efficient than preexisting alternatives. To this list of improvements we add more sustainable or more just. By *sustainable* we mean solutions that are environmentally or organizationally sustainable—those that can continue to work over a long period of time. (Phills et al., 2008, p. 37)

When Ọ̀rúnmìlà, the Yorùbá divinity of wisdom, returned to *ọ̀run odò* or heaven below because of his son's disrespect, he gave his children 16 Ikin or sacred palm nuts. He told them to consult Ifá for the things in life they needed instead of his returning to *ayé,* earth (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975a). The name Ifá and Ọ̀rúnmìlà refers to a person who is the same deity. The difference that is widely accepted by most Ifá priests is that, "the name 'Ọ̀rúnmìlà' refers exclusively to the

deity himself, the name ‘Ifá’ refers both to the deity and his divination sytem” (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976, p. 3).

What Ọ̀rúnmìlà offered his sons was a solution on how to get reliable advice when in need of money, houses, wives, children, clothes, or, all other things they find valuable in life. What he offered also an innovation that speaks to the four distinct elements of innovation that Phills et al. (2008) identified:

> First, the process of innovating, or generating a novel product or solutions, which involves technical, social, and economic factors. Second, the product or invention itself—an outcome that we can call *innovation* proper. Third, the *diffusion* or *adoption* of the innovation, through which it comes into broad use. Fourth, the ultimate value created by innovation. (p. 38)

Ifá divination is the process in which a Ifá priest uses the sacred Ifá tools to perform a spiritual ritual that helps a person find a solution to their concerns. It is a way of getting spiritual advice from the Òrìṣà and ancestors on how to succeed in life.

**Wándé Abímbọ́lá as innovator.** The Ifá/Òrìṣá knowledge system consists of thousands of poems. In Nigeria these are learned by heart by those who become initiated. The purpose of the poems is to offer wisdom on philosophy, ethics, and ways to successfully navigate the obstacles in life. Understanding of the structure of the poems helps memorization for the diviner and identifes themes that are applicable to help the inquirer. When W. Abímbọ́lá (1977) wrote a structural analysis of Ifá poems, he offered a major innovation to Ifá/Òrìṣá knowledge. He was not the first to do an analysis, but his analysis of Ifá text differs from that of Bascom (1993), which was first developed in 1969 (see Bascom, 1969/1991). W. Abímbọ́lá pointed out that, “each Ifá poem has a maximum of eight and a minimum of four structural parts” (1977, p. 18). Based on his knowledge of the structure of Ifá poems, Bascom had suggested that most verses could be considered as comprising three parts.

W. Abímbọ́lá's (1977) structural analysis offered a new, more detailed, and clearer understanding in how Ifá poems are organized and chanted. According to Bascom (1993), the three structural parts of an Ifá poem consisted of, "(1) the statement of the mythological case which serves as a precedent, (2) the resolution or outcome of this case, and (3) its application to the client" (p. 122). Abímbọ́lá's explanation of his eight structural parts of an Ifá poem pointed out that,

> The first part states the names(s) of the Ifá priest(s) involved in a past divination. The second part states the name(s) of the client(s) for whom the divination was performed. The third part states the reason for the divination while the fourth part contains the instructions of the Ifá priest(s) to the client(s) after the divination. The fifth part then tells whether or not the client complied with the instructions. The sixth part narrates what happened to the client(s) after he carried out or refused to carry out the instructions. The seventh part contains the reactions of the client(s) to the joy or sorrow that resulted from the process of divination while the eighth part draws a fitting moral from the story as a whole. At the end of the seventh part, in some *ẹsẹ Ifá*, there is a repetition of either Parts I-VII or Parts I-IV before the Ifá priest returns to the eighth part. (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976, p. 43)

W. Abímbọ́lá's scholarship on "The Yorùbá Concept of Human Personality" (1973), Ìwà Pẹ̀lẹ́ (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975b), and his structural analysis of Ifá poems (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976, 1977), are innovations to the scholarship of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system worldwide. The seminars and workshops he has conducted over the years in the African diaspora in the Americas, have allowed him to demonstrate ritual practice from a new perspective. It has also allowed him to share philosophical and ethical ideas grounded in the Ifá literary corpus. W. Abímbọ́lá's work and his founding of the Ifá Heritage Institute, a two-year college in Oyo, Nigeria, is another innovative way to train Ifá priest using indigenous methods. All of these creative and scholastic contributions have positioned Wándé Abímbọ́lá as an innovator in this field. For illustration purposes, my own development towards this innovator can be helpful.

Over the past 39 years, I have been involved in observing and participating in the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system and practice. In 1975 I began observing an African American who was involved in the Cuban Òrìṣá system. This was the same year that W. Abímbọ́lá (1975b), published his book on Yorùbá oral tradition. The man who I was observing was a photographer and was also promoting an upcoming national Black student conference to be held at Tufts University. He wore assorted colorful beads around his neck. The top of his shirt was unbuttoned to expose them. In the Cuban Ifá/Òrìṣá system, the beads are called *collares* (Brown, 2003). In Yorùbá they are called *ìlẹ̀kẹ̀* (Clarke, 2004). The *collares* are a standard symbol of Òrìṣá devotes in the Cuban system.

Several years later the photographer invited me to a Cuban spiritual meeting or *centro*. The room that the *centro* was in had chairs lined up around the light blue walls. In front of the room there was an altar table with a white cloth on top. Sitting on top of the cloth were a couple of statues or dolls. One of the statues was of an elderly Black man wearing a straw-like hat, sitting down with his pants rolled up to his ankle, a whitish shirt, and a red handkerchief tied around his neck. I also remember seeing a statue of a light-complexioned male with only a cloth wrapped around his waist, standing on crutches with a dog near him. There was also a black heavy set female doll sitting in a chair wearing a checkered blue and white dress that got wider as it went below her waist. Besides some other items, there was a bottle of Florida water and glasses of water on the table with some white candlesticks placed in candle holders sitting in the front center of the table. On both sides of the candles were vases of flowers—white and yellow mums, with red roses. On the floor in front of the table sat a pile of thin branches with leaves, a white bowl with water, a hickory cup, and bottles of Aguardiente or rum.

Sitting on one side of the altar was a santero or priest. On the other side was an assistant who would watch over the altar and priest. When the centro started, the assistant would light a cigar, pour Florida water, Aguardiente, some perfume, and rub some petals from the flowers into the white bowl of water on the floor. The assistant would pick up the hickory cup and pour some Aguardiente in it. He would sip some of the Aguardiente and then spray some of it in quick bursts on the leaves. He would take the cigar, place the lit part in his mouth and blow smoke over the leaves. He would go over to the four corners of the room, sip again on the Aguardiente and quickly spray the corner and immediately shake the leaves in that area. When he was done he would break the branches of leaves and dip his hands in the bowl of water on the floor, then rub them together. After cleansing himself at the altar he would tap his fingers on the table and sit down.

One by one, people would go up to the altar and dip their hands into the water in the white bowl on the floor. After rubbing their hands together, they waved their hands around the aurora of their heads and then brush their arms and legs to cleanse themselves also. They would stand in front of the altar for a moment of prayer and when done, tap their fingers on the table and then return to their seats. The priest would observe each person as they went up to the altar as well as observing people around the room. When everyone was done, the priest would get up and cleanse himself at the altar as well.

After saying some Catholic prayers from Allen Kardec's book, singing a song or two, the room would get silent. Some people would go back up to the altar and cleanse themselves again. Sometimes the priest would look at someone, and then point at the altar for them to also come up and cleanse themselves again. There would be other priests in the room as well. Sometimes they would ask you questions or say something to you about issues or people in your life. They would

caution you about things and give you advice or recommend a spiritual bath. On most occasions the priest who sat next to the altar would get possessed by a spiritual guide. When the priest became possessed, his assistant would salute him and help put on his regalia. He would then pour some Aguardiente in the hickory cup and light up a cigar for him. After puffs of the cigar and some sips from the hickory cup, the possessed priest, now a spiritual guide, would invite each person to come up and greet him.

When each person came up, the spiritual guide would counsel with them. The spiritual guide would tell them things they should be cautious about, as well as good things that would come to them. The spiritual guide would give a prescription of spiritual work to do, and Òrìṣá or Palo gods to consult with. The centro was like a spiritual portal that connected people to different spiritual entities to help resolve their problems. After speaking with everyone the spiritual guide would sit down. He would pass through that possession and return back to the conscious self of the priest. Prayers would be said and the spiritual meeting would be over.

After going to these centros, I eventually received my set of beads or *collares* and some icons of the Òrìṣá called *Warriors* or *guerreros de santero* (Brown, 2003). I was involved with this system and group for about 10 years. Murphy (1988), Brandon (1997), Clark (2007), and Brown (2003) touched on similar observations to mine as these related to the icons, rituals, priesthood, and issues one might encounter in the Cuban Òrìṣá practice in the United States. The contradiction between the Yorùbá African gods and the Catholic icons and prayers also raised questions for me. Brandon (1997) and Hucks (2012) pointed out that this contradiction was one of the major factors that lead Ọba Adéfúnmi I to create the Yorùbá Temple and Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village. The question of African American nationalism and Yorùbá practice goes beyond the contradictions between African gods and Catholic icons. For some African American Yorùbá

practitioners, the issue of African American self-determination evokes a plethora of questions about race, class, and gender.

During my observation and participation in the Cuban system of Òrìṣá practice, Ifá was placed mysteriously in the background. My first reading or spiritual counseling was done in 1978 by an African American of Jamaican descent. He was a priest of Ọbatálá and was initiated in the Cuban Òrìṣá system. It was 1983 when I received my Warriors (guerreros de santero) or Òrìṣá icons and beads (collares). In the fall of 1994 I participated in a workshop in Boston with Afolabi Epega on Ifá on how to cast obi abata, another system of divination that does not require making sacrifice to the Òrìṣà or ancestors. While I got a better understanding about Ifá from that workshop, my most informative experience, observation, and conceptualization about Ifá practice came from Wàndé Abímbọ́lá, the Àwíṣẹ Awo Ní Àgbáyé, spokesperson of Ifá for the world.

**Learning as a mode of innovation.** The learning method for traditional Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners in Nigeria is founded on an apprenticeship model. That model is based on an oral process where students learn to chant Ifá (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976), Ìjálá (Babalola, 1966), Ìrémọjé (Ajuwon, 1977), and Oríkì (Awẹ, 1975) or itans (Barber, 1990) or stories of various Òrìṣá, or other oral literary forms by listening and repeating after their teacher. Once a student learns various parts of a verse it is on them to practice reciting it until it is locked into their memory.

Studying Ifá with Abímbọ́lá offered aspects of traditional method in learning of the practice. Abímbọ́lá's experience as an accomplished babaláwo, traditionally trained and an accredited scholar, is something that I found missing in the African diaspora.

Scholarship on the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system and practice can be helpful in exploring the epistemological depth of Yorùbá spiritual knowledge. W. Abímbọ́lá's (1975b) book on Yorùbá oral tradition pointed out the need for "well trained" (p. 12) African scholars to uncover the

"hidden facts about the ancient past (p. 12). Researching the oral literary forms of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system in Yorùbáland was helpful in understanding the sophisticated structures and linguistic forms used to preserve these "verbal art" (p. 2) forms. It was also from scholarship on Ifá/Òrìṣá system that I was able to get a deeper "understanding of Yorùbá oral tradition" (p. 46). It is through the research of the Ifá/Òrìṣá tradition that I began to recogize innovation in the practice.

Brandon (2008) echoed the point of scholarly writing and its ability to bring alive the importance of orality: "In a mutually defining moment, writing brings the concept of oral tradition into existence" (p. 450). He also pointed out that it was the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) in 1843, that published the first Yorùbá-English bilingual dictionary. Brandon also stated, that by 1861, there were enough Yorùbá people able to read the new orthography that,

> this first generation of literate Yorùbá were both subjects and agents of the missionary effort. Many of them keep journals describing their experiences as converts and as missionaries. Some were employed as researchers, native ethnographers to describe traditional beliefs and practices. As a result, texts in the archives of the Anglican Christian Missionary Society in England by Yorùbá converts who occasionally reverted after devoting considerable time to researching their own indigenous heritage and writing about it. This material is in Yorùbá, rather than English, and is of great importance. (p. 458)

Since the Christian Missionary Society influence, Yorùbá authors have written about Ifá/Òrìṣá practice up to the present. According to Brandon (2008), in the United States, both African and African American Ifá priests are known to "use hymnbooks and transcribed Ifá text as integral parts of their worship and education" (p. 460). Brandon also pointed out that the reliance on text was a part of the Cuban Ifá/Òrìṣá system before the 1850s. The development of *Folletos* and *Libretas,* or notebooks, provided ways to document Ifá/Òrìṣá knowledge and practice. Brandon stated that folletos, "were used as supports for memory and a means of recording ritual, linguistic, and mythological information during the extended process over which

it was slowly observed, revealed, and taught" (p. 462). The libretas were personal notebooks of priest and priestess completed "during the year of initiation" (p. 463). Brandon also stated that the *libretas* may extend back long before the 1920s. But both the libreta and folleto could be a "pamphlet or book to be used by people other than the complier" (p. 462). He added that, "in the twentieth century, the notebook became a manual, which could be used by a priest to instruct devotees or by extension for priests to instruct each other" (p. 462). Although the written text had advantages, it also played a role in distorting the living language:

> At the same time as these manuals preserved and promoted Yorùbá religious vocabulary, one never finds in these manuals the diacritical signs for indicating tones that are an indispensable part of Yorùbá orthography, something that in effect hastens the disintegration of the language as a living tongue while calcifying a distorted version of its as a sacred language. (p. 463)

There is a clear history over the past 170 years of learning methods that included orality and textualization. The important discovery about the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice is that it is based on verbal art forms. Scholarly research pointed out that the Ifá/Òrìṣá practices are not just verbal art forms that stand alone. These verbal art forms function with other cultural forms of music, art, dance, drama, foods, and horticulture (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975b). My observation and participation of Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in Nigeria, Trinidad, Cuba, and the United States verified the differences in cultural styles and the levels of verbal art forms that are used in each country.

What the scholarship on the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in West Africa also highlighted is that there are Yorùbá traditional verbal art forms like Ìjálá, Ìrémọjé, Oríkì, and other forms that are still actively practiced. These are rare in the United States, Cuba and Trinidad. I have not found scholarly literature that substantially addresses these forms in the Americas. The scholarship also revealed that research on the practice is relatively young and sparking innovation and change

with a focus on West Africa as an important source of identification and learning (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975b).

W. Abímbọ́lá (1997a) stated:

> Many African Americans who embrace religions of African descent are doing so because they are looking for an alternative way of life based on identification with Africa. Not Africa as it is today, but Africa as it used to be. (pp. 28–29)

Clarke's (2004) and Hucks' (2012) research showed the efforts made by African Americans in the United States that travel to Africa as a symbol and source of racial and cultural pride, solidarity, and spiritual development. Clarke pointed out that the "Africanization" (p. 39) of Yorùbá practices in the United States,

> is critically shaping the development of new practices and different interpretive schools within reorganized networks of power. The influence of different interpretive schools that emerge out of the normative authority of different òrìsá religious systems, such as Santería and òrìsá voodoo, and the terms for which practices get to count as legitimate and which are decentered, depend on the sources of authority in relation to the hierarchy of variables at play. (p. 39)

Clarke (2004) also raised concerns as to how practitioners can create new norms of legitimate and institutionalized practice without the enforcement of the state. She mentioned three factors that,

> contribute towards the development of the institutional elements of communities: (1) particular elements of fairness by which internal and external rules are used to establish the mechanisms for legitimacy and justice (i.e., redemption from slavery); (2) substantive rules and regulations that legitimate norms (i.e., dress codes, racial regulation); and (3) for communities to reproduce themselves they must have protocol and procedures by which norms can be derived [ritual practices]. (p. 40)

Hucks (2012) shares similar views about the importance of a transformative image of Africa and the need for African Americans in the United States to make it part of a reconfigurarion of national identity, and rethinking cultural norms. Hucks pointed out that studying African American Yorùbá practice in North America led her to "view the quest for

religious meaning of Africa as acts of rehumanization, reenculturation, and revaluation in the diaspora" (p. 312). Hucks added that,

> because of the egregious apparatus of dehumanization visited upon African Americans throughout most of American social history, African Americans have consistently sought resistance strategies to rehumanize their social and spiritual selves. Within the context of Yoruba religion, these strategies included transforming images of Africa; reconfiguring national identity, creating new histories, identifying new origins, rethinking cultural norms; producing textual legacies; and reconstructing religious meaning. (p. 312)

The scholarship on the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system and practice pointed to a need for self-reliance and innovation for African American practitioner in order to preserve their way in the United States. Hucks scholarship also spoke directly to this, "As Nigerian Yoruba wrestle with the place of orisa traditional culture in contemporary society, African American Yoruba seek to find ways of ensuring its continued, yet innovative, preservation within North America" (Hucks, 2012, p. 317).

In my experience and practice in the Ifá/Òrìṣá system, and the scholarship that I have reviewed, many challenges lie before practitioners. This is also true for West African practitioners. Questions around the intersectionality of class, gender, sexual orientation, and racial or ethnic associations can create a firestorm of difference among practitioners in the United States. While scholarship is identifying these challenges, it also leads to a question as to what direction innovation and preservation will take among African Americans, Latin Americans, European Americans, and other groups in the United States. W. Abímbọ́lá (1997a) understood that challenge, but stated,

> One can easily understand why some people feel the way they do, based on their experience in the past, and to some extent their experience even now. But we would like to see this religion as a tool to heal all those wounds. This religion should not be a part of the racial problems of the Americas, or the world. This religion should be used as a bridge, as something to cure and heal those wounds, so that the future of the world will be one where there is no hate, where we can all live together irrespective of nationality, color

> or creed. This is the way we envision this religion; we do not picture it in terms of excluding certain people. (p. 29)

**Ifá/Òrìṣá Practice as Transformation**

The approach to the challenges that W. Abímbọ́lá identified requires that the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice be transformative. As Burns (2003) stated, this kind of transformation must "cause a metamorphosis in form or structure, a change in the very condition or nature of a thing, a change into another substance, a radical change in outward form or inner character" (p. 24). Burns added that this means that the alterations must be "so comprehensive and pervasive, and perhaps accelerated, that new cultures and value systems take the place of the old" (pp. 24–25).

Ifá literary corpus includes many messages that can push practitioners in the direction of transformation. The literature clearly pointed out that character or *Ìwà Pẹ̀lẹ́* is a core principle of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975b). It is through the practice of Ìwà Pẹ̀lẹ́ that the "virtues of good character" (Van Der Meer, 2004, p. 195) can manifest. I have previously pointed out that,

> today, considering the society we live in, one's development of good character is a revolutionary act. This act requires structural changes in our personalities; it's an action which improves on the internal weaknesses within us while at the same time struggling with the vestiges of colonialism that has shaped our internalized racial oppression and/or dehumanization. (Van Der Meer, 2004, p. 198)

The development of a transformational spiritual practice will require the networks of Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners in the United States to focus more on helping to build their communities instead of practitioners enriching themselves. In order to be of service to his community, W. Abímbọ́lá (1976) said that

> no *babalawo* [or iyanifa] should use his [or her] position to enrich himself in any way; he must not refuse anybody his service on account of money—if any person is too poor to pay the customary pittance for divination, the *babalawo* must divine for him free of charge; or if the person cannot afford the prescribed sacrifice, the *babalawo* must take whatever he can afford and translate the will for the deed. It seems, in fact, that the

> babalawo is under a vow of poverty, to spend himself in the service of the community, making just enough to keep himself, his real reward being in the service of Ọ̀rúnmìlà. (p. 17)

**Ethics in Research**

During the entire process of conducting research, the researcher has a responsibility to protect the rights of all participants. Whenever an Ifá/Òrìṣá priest divines for a person, that relationship is a private one between both the diviner and the inquirer unless the inquirer agrees for others to observe the process. Because of my unique role as a priest-practitioner and scholar-practitioner, it was important to protect the confidentiality of the parties involved in any ritual or ceremonial engagement.

For a researcher, ethical principles must be a guiding factor in the entire research process. This is also true as a priest-practitioner. It is important as a researcher to be respectful to the people whose lives are being gazed into. It is the researcher's obligation to guard against any exposure that could be harmful to a person or their cultural practices or beliefs.

As a part of exercising ethical principles in conducting research, I informed all participants about their rights and confidentiality. They were also briefed about the nature and process of the research that will be conducted. Additionally, they had access to records of their interviews and the right to approve the publishing of any parts of their interviews or images.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have identified the purpose of this study and presented my central research question. I have also positioned myself as the researcher who is also a practitioner in Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system.

In Chapter II, I review the literature. There, the themes and concepts addressed are developed in five sections:

- Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system;
- Origin and history of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system; the concepts of orí and Ìwà Pẹ̀lẹ́;
- Nigeria, Cuba, United States, and the globalization of Yorùbá spirituality;
- Ethnographic methods in Ifá/Òrìṣá practice: divination, rituals in Yorùbáland rituals in the diaspora, Santeria, and Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village and the Yorùbá revivalist networks; and
- Ifá divination practice; the divinities, ancestors, women in Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system.

Chapter III focuses on the methodology of this study. There, I explain how ethnographic methods are an appropriate qualitative research approach to understand Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá practice. Also, I expand on the use of autoethnography as a research method that allows the researcher to use him or herself as a lens to understand the broader culture being studied.

In Chapter IV, "Findings and Discussion," I summarize the results, evaluate and interpret what are the challenges and opportunities for people in the United States who get initiated into the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system and practice in Nigeria. I also look at the scope and of limitations of the study and suggestions for possible future study.

Finally, in Chapter V, "Implications for Leadership and Change," I apply my research as a priest-practitioner and a scholar-practitioner to examine how the work has changed me as a person. I also discuss how the research has helped me to move the practice and scholarship of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system forward.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

In this chapter I examine relevant literature, themes, and concepts in the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system that originated in Yorùbáland. Through this examination one can get a better understanding of the source of this system and its practice. I also look at theories of innovation, and transformation to understand some of the challenges and opportunites for the Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners from the United States who were initiated in Nigeria. Through these examinations I address the purpose of this study by understanding the culture of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners in the United States who were initiated in Nigeria. The themes and concepts that I address in this chapter are developed in five sections:

- Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system;
- Origin and history of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system; the concepts of orí and Ìwà Pẹ̀lẹ́;
- Nigeria, Cuba, United States, and the globalization of Yorùbá spirituality;
- Ethnographic methods in Ifá/Òrìṣá practice: divination, rituals in Yorùbáland rituals in the diaspora, Santeria, and Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village and the Yorùbá revivalist networks; and,
- Ifá divination practice; the divinities, ancestors, women in Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system.

Practitioners in the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system exist in different systems of practice. Each system of practice has its own peculiar ritual protocols and standards. The development of each system of practice also has produced innovations in the diaspora to help them adapt to the challenges and opportunities they faced.

Examining the origins and history of Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system, the role and functions of the deities, and divination practice, the significant and philosopical concepts of orí and Ìwà Pẹ̀lẹ́, the relationship to the ancestors and women in the practice, are foundational to

understanding the culture and innovations of diverse Ifá/Òrìṣá systems in the diaspora. This also provides a lens through which to view and understand the culture of practitioners in the United States who were initiated in Nigeria, and how they are adapting to the challenges and opportunities among practitioners in the United States engaged in different systems of practice. I have found no other studies that examine the questions I pose in this research about the culture of the Ifá/Òrìṣá United States based practitioners initiated in Nigeria nor about their challenges and opportunities. How do these practitioners practice their beliefs, and what is their relationship to other systems of Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in the United States? What are the relationships like between their community of practice in Nigeria and their place in practice in the United States, and, especially, how do these practitioners address the social issues of race, class, and gender within their own system of practice in the United States? Finally, how are these practitioners adapting, innovating, and creating transformational spiritual experiences in the African diaspora?

**Ifá/Òrìṣá Belief System**

The Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá system and practice is centered on Olódùmarè as its Supreme Creator. Olódùmarè lives in *ọ̀run* or heaven. In Yorùbá cosmology there are two heavens: *ọ̀run okè* where the Òrī̩ṣá came from and which is heaven above; and *ọ̀run odò* or heaven below, the final resting place of the Òrìṣá (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997a). Olódùmarè is also known as *Ọlọrun* or "one who owns the sky" (Bascom, 1969/1991, p. 104).

There is also the "the spiritual world and the natural world" (K. Abímbọ́lá, 2006, p. 52). The spiritual world is where Olódùmarè and all the Òrìṣá live and the natural world is where humans, animals and plants reside. It is through the process of divination, sacrifice, and spiritual procession that humans can engage the spiritual world from time to time. These Òrìṣá who were

instructed to come down from heaven above to earth are "400+1 in number" (W. Abímbọ́lá,, 1997a, p. 14).

The meaning of the "+1" concept is the representation of the "collections of all newly created entities—that is, those entities that were added to the Yorùbá pantheon after the creation of Ayé (the natural world)" (K. Abímbọ́lá,, 2006, p. 29). The Òrìṣá are the good supernatural forces and there are also another 200+1 negative or evil supernatural forces that exist. W. Abímbọ́lá (1976) identifies these two supernatural forces as malevolent and benevolent. There are also two types of good supernatural powers that aid humans in their daily sojourns on earth, "the gods (*Òrìṣá*) and the ancestors (*Òkú ọ̀run*)" (W. Abímbọ́lá, p. 151). Additionally there are also two types of evil supernatural powers that work against the daily efforts of humans, "the *Ajogun* (belligerent enemies of man) and the *Enìyán* or *Ẹlẹyẹ* (witches) [powerful beings]" (pp. 151–152).

In the paradigm of 400+1, several of the deities—*Ọbatálá*, *Èṣù*, and *Ifá*—were not created by Olódùmarè but co-existed along with him (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976, p. 51). Even though Olódùmarè is regarded as the supreme god, the creation of human beings was a joint affair that other deities participated in (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1977).

One of the myths found in the sacred literature of Ifá called *Odù*, or sacred Ifá stories, provided an account on how Ifá divination came about. Each Odù has its own name and particular poems. The Odù Ìwòrì Méjì tells how the sacred Ifá palm nuts, or ikin, was used for divination. At a time when Ifá was living on earth, he invited his eight sons to participate in a festival. As a customary sign of respect each son greeted Ọ̀rúnmìlà also known as Ifá with, "àbọ̀rúbọ̀yè bọ̀ ṣíṣẹ̀ (may the rituals be blessed and accepted)" (K. Abímbọ́lá, 2006, p. 51). The youngest of Ọ̀rúnmìlà's sons refused to greet him causing Ọ̀rúnmìlà to return to heaven.

After Ọ̀rúnmìlà's return to *ọ̀run òkè,* affairs on earth fell into a shamble, and the existence of all of nature was threatened. Òrúnmìlà's sons were sent to heaven above to beg their father, "to return to the earth so that peace, order and continuity might be restored" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975a, p. 53). Ọ̀rúnmìlà refused to return with them but gave them some advice:

> He asked them to stretch their hands foward [forward], and gave them the sixteen sacred palmnuts of Ifá divination. He said,
> When you get home,
> If you wish to have money,
> That is the person you are to consult.
> When you get home,
> If you wish to have wives,
> That is the person you are to consult.
> When you get home,
> If you wish to have children,
> That is the person you are to consult.
> If you wish to have houses on earth,
> That is the person you are to consult.
> If you wish to have clothes on earth,
> That is the person you are to consult.
> All the good things you wish to have on earth,
> That is the person you are to consult. (W. Abímbọ́lá,1975a, p. 67**)**

This poem in the Odù Ìwòrì Méjì provides some historical context according to Yorùbá myth regarding the birth of the Ifá divination system. It also underlines themes around respect, order, peace, and wisdom. The advice that Ọ̀rúnmìlà offers his children is in line with his assignment from Olódùmarè to bring order and wisdom to earth (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976). It is from this role that Ọ̀rúnmìlà has earned one of his praise names "*Akoni-loran-bi-iyekan-eni* (He who gives wise advice like one's relative)" (W. Abímbọ́lá,1976, p. 9).

The Odù Ìwòrì Méjì is but one verse or poem from one Odù. The Ifá literary corpus is made up of 256 Odù or signs. Each Odù contains poems collectively called *ẹsẹ* (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1977). The *ẹsẹ Ifá* is what a diviner uses to address the issues of their clients. The solutions for the clients are encoded in ẹsẹ Ifá. The Odù poems are believed to be "the central and most

important part of the divination system" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976, p. 31). Within these important poems there are two categories of Odù, "*Oju Odu* (the principal Odù), [are] sixteen in number. The second category consists of the *Omo Odu* or *Amulu Odu* (Minor Odù), [which are] two hundred and forty in number" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976, p. 26).

The poem of the Odù Ìwòrì Méjì that cites the birth of Ifá divination system is 157 lines long. Some Ifá poems can be twice that. Each Odù can have "between 600 and 800 poems" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1977, p. 37). The figures for the total number of poems range from 153,600 to 204,800 poems (K. Abímbọ́lá, 2006). Bascom (1993) gives a much more conservative total estimated at around 4,000 verses (p. 121).

The 16 principal *Odù* or *Oju Odù* are called Méjì's because the marking of the sign on one side is the same as the mark on the other side. The odù signs are representative markings of the different 256 odùs. Table 2.1 gives an illustration of the Odù sign and their corresponding names.

Table 2.1

*Chart of the 16 Principal Odù Signs and Names*

| Principal Odù Numbers, Names, and Signs | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Ogbè Méjì | 2 | Òyèkú Méjì | 3 | Ìwòrì Méjì | 4 | Òdí Méjì |
| | I I<br>I I<br>I I<br>I I | | II II<br>II II<br>II II<br>II II | | II II<br>I I<br>I I<br>II II | | I I<br>II II<br>II II<br>I I |
| 5 | Ìrosùn Méjì | 6 | Ọ̀wọ́nrín Méjì | 7 | Ọ̀bàrà Méjì | 8 | Ọ̀kànràn Méjì |
| | I I<br>I I<br>II II<br>II II | | II II<br>II II<br>I I<br>I I | | I I<br>II II<br>II II<br>II II | | II II<br>II II<br>II II<br>I I |
| 9 | Ògúndá Méjì | 10 | Ọ̀sá Méjì | 11 | Ìká Méjì | 12 | Òtúrúpòn Méjì |
| | I I<br>I I<br>I I<br>II II | | II II<br>I I<br>I I<br>I I | | II II<br>I I<br>II II<br>II II | | II II<br>II II<br>I I<br>II II |
| 13 | Òtúá Méjì | 14 | Ìrẹtẹ̀ Méjì | 15 | Ọ̀sẹ́ Méjì | 16 | Òfún Méjì |
| | I I<br>II II<br>I I<br>I I | | I I<br>I I<br>II II<br>I I | | I I<br>II II<br>I I<br>II II | | II II<br>I I<br>II II<br>I I |

In the minor Odù or Ọmọ Odù, one side or leg of one of the principal Odù visits with one side or leg of another principal Odù. Each of the two sides of the minor Odù is different. To the Yorùbá, the Odù are considered divinities in their own right. Ọ̀rúnmìlà "promised his children and his followers that he would send to them certain divinities who would perform some of the functions he used to perform when he was on earth" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976, p. 26).

After the 16 principal Odù, the other 240 minor Odù are arranged in 12 [15] sections called *Àpólà* (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976). The reason they are also called *Amúlù Odù* is because their

names are a combination of two of the principal Odù. When the first Odù Ogbè meets Òyèkú the name becomes Ogbè-Òyèkú. When Òyèkú visits Ogbè, the name is Òyèkú-Ogbè. This reciprocal visitation is what creates the 240 Amúlù Odù. The order of visitations starts with Ogbè visiting each of the other 15 principal Odù and each of them returning the visit as Table 2.3 illustrates. This order or arrangement of visitation is based on the Ọ̀yọ́ system which is fairly standard. In the Ilé- Ifẹ̀ divination system there is no immediate return visit. In Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀ case, Ogbè only visits each of the principal Odù one after the other.

Table 2.2

*Chart of Àpólà Ogbè Odù*

| Àpólà Ogbè | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Ogbè-Òyèkú | 11 | Ogbè-Ọ̀bàrà | 21 | Ogbè-Òtúrúpòn |
| 2 | Òyèkú-Ogbè | 12 | Ọ̀bàrà -Ogbè | 22 | Òtúrúpòn-Ogbè |
| 3 | Ogbè-Ìwòrì | 13 | Ogbè-Ọ̀kànràn | 23 | Ogbè-Òtúá |
| 4 | Ìwòrì-Ogbè | 14 | Ọ̀kànràn-Ogbè | 24 | Òtúá-Ogbè |
| 5 | Ogbè-Òdí | 15 | Ogbè-Ògúndá | 25 | Ogbè-Ìrẹ̀tẹ̀ |
| 6 | Òdí-Ogbè | 16 | Ògúndá-Ogbè | 26 | Ìrẹ̀tẹ̀-Ogbè |
| 7 | Ogbè-Ìrosùn | 17 | Ogbè-Ọ̀sá | 27 | Ogbè-Ọ̀sẹ̀ |
| 8 | Ìrosùn-Ogbè | 18 | Ọ̀sá-Ogbè | 28 | Ọ̀sẹ́-Ogbè |
| 9 | Ogbè-Ọ̀wọ́nrín | 19 | Ogbè-Ìká | 29 | Ogbè-Òfún |
| 10 | Ọ̀wọ́nrín-Ogbè | 20 | Ìká-Ogbè | 30 | Òfún-Ogbè |

After the Àpólà Ogbè the next Àpólà is Àpólà Òyèkú. In Table 2.3, the 15 Àpólà Odù are illustrated. Following Àpólà Ogbè, each Àpólà group decreases in number of Amúlù Odù.

Table 2.3

*Chart of Àpólà Section*

| | Àpólà Groups | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Àpólà Ogbè | 6 | Àpólà Ọ̀wọ́nrín | 11 | Àpólà Ìká |
| 2 | Àpólà Ọ̀yèkú | 7 | Àpólà Ọ̀bàrà | 12 | Àpólà Òtúrúpòn |
| 3 | Àpólà Ìwòrì | 8 | Àpólà Ọ̀kànràn | 13 | Àpólà Òtúá |
| 4 | Àpólà Òdí | 9 | Àpólà Ògúndá | 14 | Àpólà Ìrẹ̀tẹ̀ |
| 5 | Àpólà Ìrosùn | 10 | Àpólà Ọ̀sá | 15 | Àpólà Ọ̀sẹ́ |

**Origin and History of the Ifá/Òrìṣá Belief system**

The origins of the spiritual practice and beliefs of the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá are in West Africa. According to myths and legends, the ancient Yorùbá city of Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀ in Nigeria is believed to be the cradle of humanity (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1977). Yorùbá identity was shaped and influenced by Ifá/Òrìṣá practiced by multiple ethnicities in western Yorùbáland (Ojo, 2009). Ifá/Òrìṣá practice is a way of life guided by divination. Through divination, people can seek guidance from the divinities to help solve their problems or aid them in their achievements in life (Payne, 1992). Systems of divination could be found "in the Americas, India, Tibet, Japan and China, Africa, ancient Egypt and the Middle East, Judaism and Islam, and the Germanic world" (Peek, 1991, p. 1). Ifá is a West African phenomenon that originated from Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀ spread among the "*Edo, Igbo, Ewe, Fon, Nupe, Jukun, Borgu*, and other ethnic groups of West Africa" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1977, p. 5).

Though Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá practice is grounded in myth, it also contains historical references or markers about real Yorùbá history. According to W. Abímbọ́lá (1976) "Ifá is indeed the Yorùbá traditional body of knowledge" (p. vi). Yorùbá culture is rooted in oral tradition. The poems Ifá priest chanted by memory are "conceived by the Yorùbá as historical

poems containing the knowledge and wisdom of the past" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975b, p. 83). Certain Ifá poems "can help to supply historical evidence from place and personal names and list of ancient tools and implements" (Folayan, 1975, p. 99). Some Ifá poems also "give an idea of the early political vicissitudes of certain towns and villages" (Folayan, 1975, p. 99).

Scholars have documented the existence of habitation in Yorùbá land dating back to 350 B.C. (Agiri, 1975, p. 61). During this period the Yorùbá people were not known as such. During the first millennium A.D., emerging urbanization led to Yorùbá states and kingdoms (Agiri, 1975). Although Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀ is considered to be the point of origins and the center of Yorùbá life, Odùdwà's son Ọràányàn "established the royal ddynasty in Ọ̀yọ́" (Agiri, 1975, p. 71).

Ọ̀yọ́ was the original capital of the Yorùbá Empire (K. Abímbọ́lá, 2006). During the high period of old-Ọ̀yọ́ Empire, the Benin and Dahomey kingdoms "were under the rulership of the Aláàfin of Ọ̀yọ́" (K. Abímbọ́lá, 2006, p. 39). *Aláàfin* is a title that refers to the Ọ̀yọ́ king. The period between the documented existence of habitation in Yorùbá land in the 10th millennium B.C. and the height of political and military power in Ọ̀yọ́ in the 1st millennium A.D., is 11,000 years. H. Drewal, Pemberton, and Abiodun (1989) pointed out that, "Of the series or remarkable kingdoms over the last nine centuries, one of the earliest was Oyo" (p. 13).

The political history of Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀ identifies Odùduwà as the political ruler of Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀. One of the mythical narratives of Yorùbá cosmology cites Odùduwà as the younger brother of the deity Ọbatálá. It was Olódùmarè, the Yorùbá Supreme Creator, who assigned Ọbatálá to mold human beings. Ọbatálá was one of the deities out of the *400 + 1* (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997a) sent to earth. Ọbatálá got drunk on palm wine and was not able to perform his job adequately. Olódùmarè, also known as *Ọlọ́fin òrun,* then sent Odùduwà to finish the job of creating earth. During that time,

the earth was covered with water so Olódùmarè sent the 400 + 1 Òrìṣás down from heaven dangling on an iron chain with,

> a parcel of dust from ọ̀run, (the Yorùbá heaven) together with a chicken and a chameleon. They sprinkled the dust on the water below, as a result of which dry land started to appear. They then let loose the chicken to scratch and spread the solid earth in all directions. Any place a particle of that dust touched immediately became solid. Then they let loose the chameleon to feel how solid the earth was before they themselves descended into Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀, which then became the first part of the earth to become dry and solid from primordial watery substance. (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997a, p. 14)

Although Obatálá is still considered a senior divinity, it is Odùduwà who is regarded as the founder of Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀ and was the "first Olọ́fin, law giver of the Yorùbá" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997a, p. 20). Women were part of the Òrìṣá sojourn from heaven to earth. Ọ̀ṣun was the first woman who was sent by Olódùmarè to earth. When the 400 + 1 divinities were sent to earth, according to the Odù Òsétùúrá, "only seventeen Òrìṣá were in the first party, and Ọ̀ṣun was the seventeenth" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997c, p. 144). It was only after the Òrìṣá included Ọ̀ṣun, the only woman, that their work on earth succeeded.

There are also claims that the Yorùbá are a people whose ancestry originated from the east. Agiri (1975) dismisses this as "mere political statements by the ruling dynasties to give themselves a respectable ancestry" (p. 160). Despite any claims of origin, it was during the reign of Odùduwà that the development of urbanization started among Yorùbá. The Yorùbá are regarded as "one of the most ancient urban civilizations of Africa" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997a, p. 20).

Odùduwà had a grandson, *Òrànmíyàn* who was believed to be the "greatest warrior of Yorùbáland" (K. Abímbọ́lá, 2006, p. 125). In the diaspora *Ògún* and *Ṣàngó* are the main Yorùbá deities generally recognized as warrior gods. Òrànmíyàn is regarded as the founder of Ọ̀yọ́ and its first Aláàfin or King who was also Ṣàngó's father. Odùduwà's legacy as the progenitor of Yorùbá people is rooted in their traditional belief system. His legacy is grounded in Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀ as

well as the Ọ̀yọ́ Empire through his grandson Òrànmíyàn. It was during Òrànmíyàn's reign as the Aláàfin of Ọ̀yọ́ that Òrànmíyàn deposed the Ọlọ́fin of Ifẹ̀ and appointed the first Ọ̀ọ̀ni of Ifẹ̀ (Agiri, 1975, p. 171).

Agiri (1975) pointed out that, Ṣàngó the god of lighting, is the more recognized deity even though his father Òrànmíyàn founded the Ọ̀yọ́ Empire. He stated that, "Although Ọ̀yọ́ tradition credits Òràányàn [Òrànmíyàn] with the foundation of the kingdom, it also ascribes its establishment to Ṣàngó, a deity that has since then become recognized as the patron god of all Aláàfin" (p. 71).

The history and origins of Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system is a very complex narrative woven with myths, legends, and folktales. It contains a rich philosophical and ethical epistemology grounded in Yorùbá cultural life and nature. It connects the natural world with the supernatural world and the benevolent forces with the malevolent forces. Nature, animals, and humans are linked and personified as one. The divinities and ancestors are placed in the forefront as having significant roles in the lives of all human beings.

One of the unforeseen developments that occurred through and after the transatlantic slave trade was the global expansion of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system. It expanded in the Caribbean, and South and North America, creating new cultural and global dimensions in the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice (Olupona and Rey, 2008). The globalization of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system and practice throughout the African Diaspora raises many questions about what the influences and challenges of this practice are. This expansion process has led Yai (2008) to conjecture, "Òrìṣá tradition has its foot in Africa and its head in America" (p. 240).

**Orí**

Yai's (2008) description and metaphor of *head* and *foot* delves into Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá philosophical thought. In the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system, orí is one's spiritual head and is an Òrìṣá. The word foot in Yorùbá is *ẹṣẹ̀*. Orí in Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá practice is also representative of one's destiny and ẹsẹ̀ is representative of struggle. According to Ifá sacred literature, in order for the head to get things done, it needs feet (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976). In this case, ẹṣẹ̀ is also one's foundation which raises the question: how can one achieve their destiny without effort, struggle, or a foundation?

Orí is one of the concepts in the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system that has increasingly become a part of the discourse thoughout the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief systems in the diaspora. The concept of orí has deep philosophical meaning as one's spiritual head and the destiny one chooses (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1973, 1975a, 1975b). When I began studying the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system from a Nigerian practitioner, learning about orí was embedded within learning about the cosmology.

The ritual of receiving one hand of Ifa is related to one's orí as it is intertwined with one's destiny. Orí, as an icon of Òrìṣá, is also becoming a growing part of Òrìṣá that practitioners in the United States are recieving. It is regarded as one of the most important Òrìṣá. It is believed that no divinity can bless one unless one's orí accepts (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1973).

**Iwá Pẹ̀lẹ́**

The basic principle of the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system is *Ìwá Pẹ̀lẹ́*, or what is referred to as good or gentle character (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975a). Ìwá Pẹ̀lẹ́ is the ethical foundation of Ifá/Òrìṣá practice and is somewhat of a measure of whether one's practice is in the realm of the sacred or the profane.

Ifá priests are expected to strive for good or gentle character throughout their lives. Patience, humility, kindness, truthfulness, and respectfulness are some of the virtues and ethical values of ìwá pẹ̀lẹ́. These are some of the principles that are part of the thematic underpinnings in Ifá verses shared with a practitioner during divination.

According to myth, Iwá was the wife of Ọ̀rúnmìlà who had all of the virtues of good character except for one. It was that one bad character flaw that caused her husband to put her out of their house (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975a). After Iwá was gone, Ọ̀rúnmìlà's life fell apart. When Ọ̀rúnmìlà began to understand the value of Iwá in his life, he began searching for her. From the story of Iwá, we can conclude that no one is perfect. Just as Ọ̀rúnmìlà was searching for Iwá, good character is a value that practitioners should strive for.

**Nigeria, Cuba, United States, and the Globalization of Yorùbá Spirituality**

The practice of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system in Nigeria, Cuba, the United States, and other parts of the African Diaspora is a part of a growing globalized practice. The spreading of the practice in the United States was predominately influenced by the Cuban innovative practice of the Ifá/Òrìṣá system. Literature on the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice pointed to the Cuban influence as well as the emergence of the New Yorùbá Movement that developed from African American practitioners in Harlem, New York, and the Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village in South Carolina.

W. Abímbọ́lá (1977) in literature, Brandon (1997, 2002) in anthropology, Brown (2003) in art history, Clarke (2004) in anthropology, Olupona and Rey (2008) and Hucks (2012), in religious studies— all capture various aspects about the influences and experiences of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice and its connections to Nigeria, Cuba, United States, and other parts of the African Diaspora.

W. Abímbọ́lá, (1973, 1975a, 1975b, 1976, 1977, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 2000) is one of the leading scholars and widely cited on Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system and practice. In addition to his scholarship, he has been a major source for practitioners in the United States who journeyed to Nigeria to be initiated. His examination of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in Nigeria and the African diaspora has exposed some of the conceptual differences in the philosophical understanding within the practice. His work has laid the foundation for more innovative practice to develop in the United States. In addition to opening the doors to more innovative practice, W. Abímbọ́lá's scholarship also opens the door for new research that can further explore the culture of Ifá/Òrìṣá United States practitioners who were initiated in Nigeria. Although his scholarship does not specifically address the culture, challenges, and opportunites of these practitioners, it does examine the literary, philosophical, ethical, and structural aspects of the general experiences and practice in Nigeria. My study aims to extend this examination and to take critical social science perspectives in this assessment. A native-born Yorùbá speaker with linguistic background and training as an Ifá priest, W. Abímbọ́lá's scholarship brought a unique perspective, not only in the belief system and practice, but also to understanding the methodological problems in a culture that has become globalized (Miller, 1997).

Brandon's (1997) study gave a broad historic overview of the development of Santeria. He identified Santeria's development into five phases. The first phase began in West Africa where he also traced the origin of Yorùbá religion to Odùduwà in Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀ and its transatlantic journey to the Pre-Santeria period in Cuba up until 1760. His second phase is the Early Santeria period between 1760 and 1870. He pointed out that this phase was the initial period of syncretism between the Yorùbá gods and Catholic saints producing a new "Afro-Catholic religion" (p. 5). The third phase was Santeria from 1870 to 1959, a period transforming Santeria from the early

stage of spiritualism to the dominant “Yorùbá-spiritist-Catholic amalgam” (p. 5), abandoned by the Catholic Church’s protection. The fourth phase was Santeria’s arrival in New York. Brandon (1997) pointed out that this phase bore two new branches related to Santeria: the Persisting Santeria and Santerismo branch, and the Persisting Santeria and Early Orisha-Voodoo branch. The first of these was “the formative stage of Santerismo in which some preexisting forms of Puerto Rican Espiritismo exhibits the influence of Santeria” (p. 9). The second branch was a connection between Santeria and Black Nationalism.

The fourth phase identifed by Brandon (1997) was a significant turning point. This phase, in the 1950s and 1960s, was when the connection with Black nationalism was made, a pivotal historic period in the African American freedom movement and the anti-colonial struggles in Africa. This was a period of Black awareness and resistance to forms of ecomomic and political repression. Brandon’s fifth phase was the Orisha Voodoo period in 1970 and 1971. This period witnessed the alignment of Orisha Voodoo into a movement which birthed Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village. This was also a period in which Orisha Voodoo distanced itself from Catholic influence and began to identify with the Black gods that originated from the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in Africa.

Brandon (1997) also suggested that, out of these five phases, he found a “transformative period” (p. 3), and one marked by “innovation” (p. 3). Despite these developments he did not necessarily feel that they led to any “coherent direction of change” (p. 3). Brandon (2002) later reflected more on how Santeria and Orisha Voodoo took on “social organization characteristics of a movement for personal transformation and change.” (p. 170). He also emphasised that due to the centralized and hierarchical structure of the different local Santeria and Orisha Voodoo groups, along with frequent disagreements of the leadership, “the movement as a whole is acephalous” (p. 160).

Brandon's (2002) view about the coherent direction of change in the development of Òrìṣá practice in the United States is beginning to unravel. The influence on the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice by practitioners who were inititated in Nigeria is pushing the direction of changes towards a broader understanding and practice of the philosophical and ethical aspects of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief systems in the United States. It is also influencing the changing roles women and gay Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners are having in these systems of practice. But I am in full agreement with Brandon that leadership in the Ifá/Òrìṣá movement in the United States as a whole is still "acephalalous" (p. 152). This is one of many challenges for those practitioners from the United States inititated in Nigeria.

Ọba Adéfúnmi of the Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village can be credited, along with African American women practitioners in the United States, for some women who were involved in the Orisa Voodoo system, being initiated into Ifá in West Africa (Brandon, 2002). In addition, the African Theological Archministry, Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village's publicly charted religious organization, created, within the U.S. context, represents "an important innovation [as it related to] . . . the initiation and instruction of women into Ifa divination" (Brandon, 2002, p. 161). Until this innovation, women in the United States were widely shunned from this level of Ifá/Òrìṣá participation and practice. This history showed some of the early stages of the thinking and preparation for the Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners in the United States making the journey to Nigeria for initiation.

In the history of Santeria in the United States, a major split occured between babalawos in Havana, Cuba, and a group of Cubans in Miami, Florida over the dissemination of *Olofin* (Brown, 2003). This split also led some Miami Cubans to do their initiations in Nigeria. In the Cuban system it is the possession of Olofin that gives babalawos the right to initiate new babalawos. According to Brown, Olofin in Cuba is considered "the preeminent *poder* or

*fundamento* [power] of La Regla de Ifá" (p. 79). Brown also focused on the Afro-Cuban aspect of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in his research on art, ritual, and innovation. He maintained that the split that occurred led to Jose Miguel Gomez Barberas, a Miami Cuban initiated into Ifá in 1970 to eventually go to Òsogbo, Nigeria to receive Olofin (Brown, 2003). It was several years after receiving Olofin that Barberas took "three Miami Cubans to Nigeria to be initiated as babalawos" (Brown, 2003, p. 94) by Yemí Ẹlẹbuboṇ, a native Yorùbá babálawo. This later journey positioned Barberas in a similar way that "mirrored" (p. 95) the experience of Oba Oseijeman Adefunmi I, founder of Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village. Barberas' journey to Nigeria "legitimated" (p. 95) his own "claim to authority" (p. 95). His taking other Cubans to Nigeria to be initiated, acknowledged Nigerian priests' authority as well as the Cuban authoritarian claims to initiate babaláwos.

Clarke's (2004) ethnographic mapping and study of multisided transnational networks picks up on the value of journeying to Nigeria with her connections to the African American Yorùbá revivalist movement led by the Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village in, Sheldon, South Carolina. Clarke, a Black Canadian, travelled with Ọ̀yọ́túnjí members visiting their networks throughout the United States and their connections in Nigeria. Clarke believed that African Americans in the United States "are reshaping how òríṣá traditions are to be practiced" (p. 6).

Clarke (2004) also believed that Black Americans, particularly the "Yorùbá hertitage travelers" (p. 13), do so for the sake of gaining knowledge, training, and "the hope of building institutions of expertise back home" (p. 13). Clarke recognized that the connections and relationship that practitioners are making in Nigeria and West Africa will play a role in future innovations of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in the United States and the African Diaspora.

In their edited volume that addressed aspects of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief systems and practice, Olupona and Rey (2008) focused on the "global Yorùbá 'religioscape' " (p. 9). Scholarship in this text covered systems of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief and practice in Nigeria, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and United States. It included essays on Santeria in Cuba and the United States; Candomblé in Brazil; Vodu in Haiti; and African American Yorùbá revivalism in the United States. Olupona and Rey (2008) looked at how the practice in various systems in its adaptations were innovative. They cited Peter Berger's perspective about the meaning of global Yorùbá religious culture:

> It is differently received in different countries, and it is modified, adopted, and synthesized with local cultural traditions in many, often innovative ways. What is more, there are cultural movements, many of them religious, that originate outside the West and that have an impact on the West. These movements constitute alternative globalizations opening up the intriguing possibility of alternative modernities. (Olupona & Rey, pp. 6–7)

The various articles in Olupona and Rey's (2008) book were based on three questions that the editors framed:

> (1) What are the dominant, normative, and essential components of Yorùbá religious culture's production of meaning? (2) What kinds of text continue to legitimize Yorùbá religion in its local and global contexts? (3) How were these texts validated, contested, and/or manipulated by the practitioners and other relevant agents and/or institutions? (p. 9)

The intersectionality of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system with Islam and Christianity in Nigeria and Europe was also examined in this book. Oluponan and Rey (2008) concluded that the Yorùbá gods have done their part in creating a cosmology that helps humanity govern their lives in harmony. They also concluded that "the rest is up to us" (p. 21), especially in a world that is marred by "this most tragic of human tendencies" (p. 21), ones that raise the "existential questions as to whether Yorùbá or any other religious culture will see the next millennium" (p. 22).

In one of the most contemporary studies of Yorùbá spiritual practices, Hucks (2012) chronicled and examined African American participation and innovation. Hucks considered Oseijeman Adefunmi I, founder of Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village, as a pioneer and architect of making Africa the core of a "religious symbol" (p. xviii) in the United States. Hucks pointed out that Africa as a symbol "functions as a metaphor of both protest and freedom" (p. 194). African Americans during the periods of the 1950s and the 1960s lived under segregated policies in the United States. This was parallel to the independence of some African countries and the Civil Rights Movement of African Americans. The image of Africa during this time was still very negative and represented a debasement of Black humanity as Hucks (2012) illustrated:

> Africa became a symbol of Black subhumanity and the captured African body the site for mapping subhuman meanings. Slavery's real offense and 'primordial disaster' however, rested in the reduction of Africans, their skin, and their bodies to be a 'perverse negation' of sacred and divine essence and to codified symbols of evil and carnality. (p. 35)

Hucks (2012) also placed her study within the various Ifá/Òrìṣá practices. She stated: "It [Yorùbá Tradition] seeks to understand the "Pan-Yoruba Diaspora and its multiple articulations (Ifá, Ocha, Santeria, Lucumi, Orisa, Orisha) not as a single fixed religious tradition but as a global religious complex developed within varying 'socioreligious locations'" (p. xviii). She continued from where Brandon's (1997) fifth phase of Orisa Voodoo left off, and examined the practice and challenges of practitioners influenced by Ọba Adéfúnmi I.

**Ethnographic Methods Used to Study Ifá/Òrìṣá Practice**

Ethnographic methods have been used in the study of various aspects the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system and practice in Africa and the African diaspora. These methods have been employed by anthropologists, as well as sociologists, pyschologists, literary scholars, and art historians. Some of these studies focused on divination (Bascom, 1993; Pemberton, 2000), rituals in Yorùbáland (Lawal, 1996; M. Drewal, 1992); rituals in the diaspora (Brown, 2003); Santeria (Murphy, 1988);

and Yorùbá revivalism in the United States (Clarke, 2004). Ethnographic methods offer many benefits to scholars who conduct research "interested in understanding and describing a social and cultural scene from the emic, or insider's perspective" (Fetterman, 2010, p. 2). It is also an appropriate way to learn about the shared values and cultural beliefs of Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners in Africa and the African diaspora in the United States.

**Divination**

Divination in the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice is a sacred art form of casting the ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀ chain or sacred palm nuts of Ifá (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976); for other divinities, divination is performed with the sixteen cowrie shells or ẹ́rindínlógún (Bascom, 1993). The practice of ẹ́rindínlógún is probably more widespread in the diaspora than Ifá (Bascom, 1993) especially when considering Brazil and Cuba. Figure 2.1 shows Dr. Wándé Abímbọ́lá engaged in a divination in Brooklyn, New York.

*Figure 2.1.* Dr. Wándé Abímbọ́lá engaged in a divination in Brooklyn, New York. Enroue HalfKenny (top left) a Ifá priest from the United States who was initiated in Nigeria observes.

Bascom's (1969/1991) research was a paramount study of Ifá divination practice in Nigeria. Bascom also cited Maupoil's *La Géomancie à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves,* as "the most important of previous studies" (p. ix) for Dahomey. Bascom's study used the participant observation approach that Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland and Lofland (2001) called "shared characteristic features of ethnography" (pp. 4–5) and what Fetterman (2010) refers to as "a crucial part to ethnography research and effective field work" (p. 37). Bascom (1993) stated that,

> Most of the data for this study were recorded in the city of Ifẹ̀ in 1937–38 on a predoctoral fellowship from the Social Science Research Council; six weeks were spent in Igana during that year. A Fulbright grant in 1950–51 made it possible to spend about three months each in Mẹkọ, Ọ̀yọ́, and Ileṣa and to work for a day or two in Ilaro, Ilara, Abẹokuta, Ibadan, Isẹyin, Oke-Iho, Irawọ, Ogbomọṣọ, Oṣogbo, Ṣagamu, Ijẹbu Ode, Ọndọ, and half dozen towns in Ekiti. Further research was carried on during a two-month visit at the time that Nigeria received her independence in 1960 and during three months in 1965. (p. x)

Bascom (1993) identified key and credible informants who assisted him in his research. He thanked the King or Ọ̀ọ̀ni of Ifẹ for his "assistance and cooperation" (p. x) as well as some of the "Awoni" (p. 91) or the "sixteen babalawo of the King of Ifẹ" (p. 91). He also identified that he had an interpreter whose guidance was significant. He stated that "the late D. O. Rufus Awojọdu served as interpreter in 1937–38 and whose personal fascination with Ifa divination induced me [Bascom] to become so deeply involved in this most important aspect of Yoruba life" (p. x). Bascom (1969/1991, 1993) made descriptive studies of the various aspects of Ifá divination. It is an ethnography that fits what Spradley (1979) said: "Ethnography is the work of describing a culture" (p. 3).

As an art historian, Pemberton's (2000) edited work contained studies on divination as a form of ethnography also more in line with Spradley's (1979) notion of describing a culture.

Pemberton examined divination in general as a practice in Africa. The focus of his volume was threefold and concerned with the challenges of methodological issues. It included,

> a study of rituals of divination in several Central and West African cultures as well as Madagascar; an analysis of the nature and use of ritual objects as instruments and as works of art; and methodological issues in cross cultural inquiry. (Pemberton, 2000, p. 2)

Pemberton's (2000) study coincided with Fetterman's (2010) perspective that considered "cultural interpretation ethnography's primary contribution" (p. 17). Fetterman (2010) pointed out that "cultural interpretation involves the researcher's ability to describe what he or she has heard or seen within the framework of the social group's view of reality" (p. 17). Pemberton (2000) also included a study by W. Abímbọ́lá that offered an emic perspective—that is, an insider perspective of a social group—on the issue of "continuity and change in the tradition of Ifa divination, ranging from the oral/verbal texts to the retentions as well as the changes in the rituals as practiced in both Africa and the African diaspora" (p. 176). W. Abímbọ́lá's perspective is an important one, as Fetterman points out: "An emic perspective compels the recognition and acceptance of multiple realities. Documenting multiple perspectives of reality in a given study is crucial to an understanding of why people think and act in different ways they do" (p. 21).

**Rituals Practice in Yorùbáland**

Rituals are essential aspects of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice. The definition of ritual varies and is open to broad interpertations (Bell, 2009; Hicks, 2002). The understanding of ritual is fundamentally connected to their use and re-enactment of fundamental symbols, beliefs, and sacred stories, or myths (Hicks, 2002). As a part of symbolic actions in general, Hicks viewed ritual as a certain "form of behavior by which human beings communicate ideas, values, and sentiments they share in common" (p. 113).

Lawal's (1996) ethnographic study, from the lens of an art historian who also grew up in the tradition, sees the Gẹlẹdẹ spectacle as, "a public display by colorful masks which combines art and ritual dance in order to amuse, educate, and inspire to worship, all at the same time" (p. xiii). Gẹlẹdẹ is the Ketù and Òǹkò regions cultural display of *Egúgún* or ancestor ritual performance. According to Lawal, the Gẹlẹdẹ spectacle shows the Yorùbá as "one of the largest and most prolific art-producing groups in Africa" (p. xiii). Lawal also offered an emic perspective where he attempted to show that "Yoruba culture has its own built-in theories by which much of its artistic expressions can be studied or comprehended" (p. xvi). He said that the observations in his study "combine the knowledge and experience of an insider with the analytical eye of a researcher" (p. xv). Lawal added that his study situated "Gẹlẹdẹ within a larger framework of the Yorùbá dialectic of existence, in which art functions as a metaphor for stimulating increase and for promoting spiritual well-being and social harmony within a given community" (p. xv). He also commented about the theory and methodology he used:

> Unfortunately, some scholars have become so obsessed with theories which attempt to relate the "particular" to the "universal" that their conclusions often reflect the Eurocentric bias of the theories per se rather than the traditions of the culture they purport to analyze. Moreover, the search for paradigms often results in intellectual fantasies that mystify rather than clarify the subject being studied. (pp. xv–xvi)

Lawal (1996) also pointed out that Gẹlẹdẹ, like other Yorùbá masking traditions, "have two levels of knowledge" (p. xix). The first level, he stated, is the "exoteric level" (p. xix) where "the songs chorused during the nocturnal concert (*èfẹ*), and the motifs on wooden headdresses [are] intended to entertain or educate the public" (p. xix). At the exoteric level, according to Lawal, "almost every adult can decode the meaning or significance of these popular songs and motifs" (p. xix). The second level is the "esoteric level" (p. xix), which included the "myths pertaining to the origin of Gẹlẹdẹ, incantations, and certain abstract symbols" (p. xix). At the

esoteric level, according to Lawal, “Only ritual specialists, such as diviners (*babaláwo*) and herbalists (*oníṣegùn*) and few elders within the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ hierarchy, know the meaning of these restricted elements” (p. xix).

Lawal’s (1996) study of Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ also reviewed previous studies and identified Henry and Margaret Drewal’s (1983) study on the same topic. Lawal cited Benedict Ibitokun’s critique of the Drewals’ study that stated:

> Although Benedict Ibitokun (from a Kétu Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ family) blames the inability of the Drewals to perceive a normative or unifying thread in Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ on their descriptive, piecemeal approach, which makes their study more horizontal than vertical (1993:18–20) I am inclined to blame it on an insufficient use of Yoruba oral tradtion. (Lawal, 1996, p. xxi)

Lawal (1996) agreed that this criticism should not “detract from the contributions of the Drewals to the scholarship on Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀” (p. xxi). Lawal also stated that he was more inclined to blame Ibitokun’s critique of the Drewals for “insufficient use of Yoruba oral tradition” (p. xxi). Lawal’s study fit into what Creswell (2005) said about conducting ethnography: “You may be a participant in the group or simply an observer, but you gather extensive fieldnotes, interview people, and collective letters and documents to establish the record of the culture-sharing group” (p. 436). Lawal stated that the purpose of his study was to “allow the data on Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ to speak for themselves” (p. xx). He explained:

> I have relied not only on my own field observations and interviews but also on Yoruba oral traditions and on evidence collected by other scholars. Through this method, which combines synchronic, diachronic, formal, textual, contextual, and linguistic analyses, I have attempted to place Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ in a wider temporal and cultural perspective. (p. xx)

M. Drewal’s (1992) study on Yoruba ritual used a performance paradigm as an “attempt to make an African system of thought explicit from the vantage point of its practitioners’ theories and embodied practices” (p. xiv). M. Drewal added that her study of Yorùbá ritual practice “resonates most with poststructuralist theories of performance, social process, and literature”

(p. xiv). She also stated that she had "adopted an actor-centered approach that privileges not only what people do, but what ritual specialists say about what they do, their intentionality" (p. xvi). She added that "the most direct access to the performer's interpretive process, apart from actual performance, is through her or his own explanation of that process" (p. xvi). She described how her ethnography on Yorùbá ritual came about:

> My understanding of ritual has been shaped by my experience in southwestern Nigeria with Yoruba practitioners and their performances. Following my initial visit in 1970, I have been back five times for extended periods. I also spent the summer of 1974 in Salvador, Brazil, studying Yoruba derived Candomblé performance. (M. Drewal, 1992, p. xvi)

One of the key actors in M. Drewal's (1992) study was a "seventh-generation" (p. xvii) babaláwo named Kọlawole Ọṣitọla. Drewal had worked with Ọṣitọla since 1982 and tape-recorded "more than one hundred and fifty hours of conversations" (p. 31). Their talks were "mostly in English, but interspersed with key concepts and discussions in Yoruba, covered religious and ritual topics" (p. 31).

**Rituals Practice in the Diaspora**

Brown's (2003) ethnohistorical study investigated "three areas of innovation in the nineteenth century" (p. 15) through the lens of creolization. The three areas were "institutional, rituals, and iconographic" (p. 8). Ifá/Òrìṣà rituals in the diaspora have been conceptually framed as "pure African retentions" (p. 5), or creolization. Cuba's influence on Ifá/Òrìṣá rituals leans more to the creolized practice.

In studying the Cuban influence of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice, Brown (2003) was "interested as much in the creolized iconography and performances innovated within uniquely Cuban creole institutions, and island-wrought ethnic reformations, as in tracing Santeria iconography directly to its West African 'tribal origins'" (p. 7). Brown's interest in using the "creole linguistic

metaphor" (p. 7), was "intended to address, to the greatest extent possible, given my training, and the 'social (or socio-relational) dimension'" (p. 7).

Brown (2003) did fieldwork from 1983 to1987 in the " 'house-temples' of New Jersey, New York, Miami, and Havana" (p. 2). He said his research relied on "significant archival data and upon published primary and secondary accounts to address aspects of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Afro-Cuban culture, religion, institutions, and aesthetic practices" (p. 12). He added that he "used multimedia fieldwork documentation, including one-on-one interviews, to address contemporary ritual and aesthetic practices" (p. 12).

**Santeria**

Murphy's (1988) ethnographic study is also part ethnohistorical and part auto-ethnographic. In the introduction to *Santeria: African Spirits in America*, he did what Creswell (2005) referred to as describing "a group within its setting" (p. 53). Murphy gave a description of the closing of a Santeria ceremony:

> In a basement in the heart of the Bronx, a religious ceremony is coming to a close. Nearly one hundred people have come from all over the city to sing and dance for the gods of their ancestors. They are quiet now, and in their midst, four old women dance together slowly. They wear white dresses and headties, and their brown faces shine calm and fine. They sway in a circle, and though their backs are bent, their feet move in delicate rhythm. As they dance, they sing a song from Africa:
>
> Olokun, Olukun
> Baba Baba Olokun
> Moyuba Baba Olokun.
>
> Olokun, Owner of the Ocean
> Grandfather Olokun
> We bow before you father Olokun.
>
> For the few moments, the mean streets outside vanish before a world of the spirit, a primordial Africa of the heart. (p. 1)

Murphy (1988) gave historical details about Africa and discussed the origins of Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system and practice. He elaborated also on the fall of the Ọ̀yọ́ Empire and the flood of

African captives that were transported to Cuba to be enslaved, claiming that the estimates for the total number of Africans taken to Cuba "range from 527,828 to 702,000" (p. 23). Murphy also stated "We do know that a large number of these were Yoruba and baKongo, for their influence is everywhere in Cuban music, dance, and religion" (p. 23). His research was conducted in the Santeria community in the Bronx, New York over several years. He said that he "participated and observed scores of Santeria ceremonies" (p. ix). Murphy (1988) offers another description, this time about his visit with a babaláwo:

> In Padrino's *ile*, this private shrine room is also a place for consultations with his patron *orisha*, Ifa. Although the huge display of *orisha* objects commands attention, on the other side of the room is a small table and two chairs where Padrino works his greatest service to the orisha and his fellow human beings. This is the consulting room of Ifa, where Padrino brings the wisdom of Africa to bear on the problems of her descendants in New York. I must return to hear it. (p. 61)

**Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village and the Yorùbá Revivalist Networks**

Clarke's (2004) study on Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village in South Carolina and on the Yorùbá revivalist networks throughout the United States, is a great example of an ethnographic study. Clarke was captivated about the history of enslaved Africans and how their dispersals globally "shaped Black membership in African imaginaries in geographically distinct ways" (p. xiii). She wanted to know "how one writes an ethnography about mobile subjects whose subjectivities are complex and whose social histories are sometimes unknown" (p. xiii). She was also curious about what "an ethnography would say about the limitations of single-site fieldwork and its ability to capture contemporary movements that may not be linked to empirically derived dispersals, but instead to social memories and imaginaries" (p. xiii).

Clarke's (2004) data was collected over a "ten year, four-phased period of participant observation in three countries" (p. xxi). She said that by immersion and living among her informants "my methods principally centered on participant observation in a multisited procedure

in accordance with which I assumed that tradition, conceptions of Yorùbá, and race were locally and historically contingent" (p. xxi). In the first part of the study, she established the "framework for understanding the context in which the political economy of 'traditional' Yorùbá revivalism has emerged globally" (p. xvii). The second part of her study focused on demonstrating "not just how these relations and meanings circulate and are transformed, but how they gain legitimacy in deeply historical realms of modern subjectivity" (p. xvii). Clarke added:

> To reveal and analyze these processes of making, interpreting, and transforming social categories, I examine what I have identified as the institutionalization of a deterritorialized network of Yorùbá communities in which I chart how social institutions that exist in deterritorialized context plays out in informal transnational contexts. These Yorùbá practitioners are not located in West Africa, nor were their parents born there. In most cases, the Òrìṣá practitioners in this book are sixth- or seventh-generation black Americans, most of whom have never visited an African country, but who use deterritorial practices to transform social meaning in time and space. Through the reconceptualization of constitutional principles of national membership, they use religious, ritual, text, and legal and racial discourse to participate in the production of a Yorùbá community outside of the African continent. (pp. xvii–xviii)

Ifá/Òrìṣá epistemology in the diaspora has been based on a variety of ways of knowing. The influence of the Cuban system of Regla de Ocha, Lucumi, or Santeria, derived from the Yorùbá oral tradition of learning. Throughout time, practice in the Cuban system learning was combined with folletos, lebretas, (notebooks), and manuals as described by Brandon (2008). Brandon also pointed out that "In the twentieth century, the notebook became a manual, which could be used by a priest to instruct devotees or by extension for priests to instruct each other" (p. 462). Knowing by text was also true in Nigeria which was influenced by the Christian Missionary Society with the development of Yorùbá orthography (Brandon, 2008).

The development of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in the United States was combined with the learning hybridity of orality, with textuality influenced by anthropologist, ethnographers, missionaries and other scholars who studied the Ifá/Òrìsá practice. According to Hucks (2012),

"the mounting textualization in the current era makes previously oral forms of knowledge accessible to a number of American communities" (p. 240). Hucks found "Yoruba's American-born practitioners innovatively used history, race, and religion as sacred currency for ritual, culture, and textual articulations of Africa" (p. 10). She found that "within the Yoruba movement, Adéfúnmi, along with other African Americans, promoted a unique expression of Africa based less on physical encounters with it than on historical and symbolic interpretations of it" (p. 16).

Regarding the way of learning for members of the United States-based Ọ̀yọ́túnjí community of Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners, Clarke (2004) said: "Most of the texts that document Yorùbá practices and are used in Ọ̀yọ́túnjí today were published by early anthropologists and sociologists" (p. 158). She added that these texts "form the source of knowledge for African American ancestral history, and despite the apparent stability of these written historical forms, Yorùbá revivalists participate in shaping norms of acceptability by basing their terms of practice on renditions of these accounts" (p. 158).

**Ifá/Òrìṣá Practice**

The practice of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system falls into what Durkheim (1912/2001) saw as a religious phenomenon consisting of two areas of "beliefs and rites" (p. 36). Accordingly, religious beliefs also fall into two opposing catergories, the "*profane* and *sacred*" (p. 36). Initiation into the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system represents the process of taking the pre-initiate from the profane world into the sacred world. This process is a transformative period in the initiate's life as they leave the old and profane world and enter reborn into the new and sacred world. Durkheim's definition of religion pointed out this pursuit as embracing the sacred as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things sat apart and

surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community" (p. 46).

There are differences as to whether practitioners view the practice as a religion or as spirituality. Stanczak (2006) defines spirituality as "the active and sometimes creative fluid attempts by individuals and groups to connect with the sacred" (p. 4). Stanczak's definition places emphasis more on how people engage than on the institutionalization, control, and management of pursuing the sacred. Stanczak believes that spirituality can be understood by six threads: transcendent; active and ongoing; multidimensional; unlimited; pragmatic; and emotional.

Religion or spirituality as practiced in the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system is a practice of utilizing the sacred, the divinities, their convenants, and their ethical principles; keeping away the profane as well as malevolent forces. Ifá/Òrìṣá practice utilizes divination and sacrifice as a central component for this intervention. These interventions are designed to help a person not only to remove the obstacles in the way of leading a successful life, but also to provide a set of ethical principles that helps them reflect on needed internal changes within themselves. In addition to the ritual aspect of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice, practitioners draw on the philosophical and ethical values of the belief system to work on practicing Ìwá Pẹ̀lẹ́ or good character in their daily lives.

Practitioners who have the icons of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system, regularly engage in rituals by offering those icons prayers, chants, food, and drinks to the particular likings of each divinity. The practice also involves annual celebrations on receiving those icons, particularly for those initiated into different societies of the Ifá/Òrìṣá priesthood.

The àṣẹ or blessings that the ancestors and Òrìṣá bestows on a person must be accepted by that person's orí, or spiritual head. It is the making of good decisions with our Òrí that is also

a daily practice for practitioners at all levels or stages of their engagement in the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system.

Each individual practitioner's Òrí, initiated or not, has free will to make decisions that have negative or positive results. The decisions by their Òrí will align them within either category of the profane or the sacred. Propitiation of one's Òrí is a fundamental component of the practice in order to get postitive results and operate within the sacred.

**The Divinities**

The divinites in the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá system are the Òrìṣá. Each Òrìṣá represents a particular domain or power that can be beneficial to those who petition and give them the appropriate offerings. It is through divination that particular divinities emerge and sacrifices for them are identified. Some of the 400 + 1 divinities have priesthoods that devotees can be initiated into. Other divinities are representative of concepts that have no priesthoods. Road or *ọ̀na*, mouth or *ẹnu*, head or *orí*, and house or *ilé,* are all Òrìṣá. These Òrìṣá do not have priesthoods that people are initiated into; instead they are representatives of concepts.

Some of the Òrìṣá's like Ifá, Èṣù, Ògún, Ṣàngó, Ọ̀ṣun, Ọbatálá, and Yemọja are divinities who have priesthoods. A devotee of an Òrìṣá can be initiated into that Òrìṣá's priesthood. Ifá is the divinity of wisdom and considered the spokesperson for all of the divinities. A person goes to consult with an Ifá priest for all the important stages of their life (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997a). During a consultation with an Ifá priest, poems from the Odù that were divined will be chanted. In those poems, stories may reference or speak about different Òrìṣá,

> Throughout the life of a person, Ifá is so important. From birth to death, a person goes to a diviner at every turn in his or her life. Apart from that, the literature of Ifá contains references to all the Òrìṣá as well as the ideas and values which the Yorùbá people cherish. (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997a, p. 86)

**Ancestors**

The worship and veneration of ancestors are also a central component of Ifá divination practice. In the Yorùbá divination system and practice the ancestors are called *Egúngún*. Egúngún is used to describe all masqueraders but is an appellation of Ọ̀yọ́ (Olajubu and Ojo, 1977).

In the Yorùbá belief system when a person dies, they are still part of the functioning natural world. The departed person becomes a member of the ancestral spirit world who can aid them in the spiritual world. The connections to the ancestors has a strong appeal to African American practitioners in the United States because of the racial solidarity (Clark, 2004) and the lost of lives during the horrific history of the transatlantic slave trade, enslavement, slavery, and racial segregation.

**Women in Ifá/Òrìṣá Belief System**

Women are included in virtually all aspects of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice. The only prohibition against women is seeing the mythical Òrìṣá Odù. Women are not allowed to look into the sacred pot that houses the icon of Odù. The abode of Odù is believed to represent the mythical wife of Ifá (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976).

Women play a substantial role in the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice. According to Yorùbá myth, Olódùmarè told the deities to include women in all the things that they did and that, otherwise, whatever they did will be ruined by women (Murphy & Sanford, 1988). Olódùmarè's dictum was a result of the initial maltreatment of women who were included in the first group of Òrìṣá that came to earth from heaven (Olajubu, 2003). Bádéjo (1996) pointed out the power of women in the divinity of Ọ̀ṣun who "possess the power to withhold the life-force which activates humanity" (p. 74). The *ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* system of divining with 16 cowrie shells, the divining

system that Ọ̀ṣun used, is possibly older than *dida ọwọ́*, divination with the divining chain, and *ètìtẹ̀-alẹ̀*, divination with the Ifá palm nuts (W. Abímbọ́lá, 2000).

In Ifá literature, women's image is often "depicted as *aje* (witches)" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997b, p. 402). Badejo (1996) referred to the meaning of the term *àjẹ́* as "powerful beings" (p. 78). Those beings use their "power both positively and negatively" (p. 78). The terms *àjẹ́, ìyàmi, ènìyàn*, or, *ẹlẹyẹ* that refer to women as witches, is about their power and authority both positive and negative.

> Whether as human beings endowed with supernatural powers, or as a mother, or as wives or as market women, the image of women which one can see in the *Ifá* literary corpus is that of power and authority rather than helplessness and subservience which is the contemporary image which anthropologists tend to paint of African women. (Badejo, 1996, p. 411)

One of the gaps in literature on Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners concerns women Ifá practitioners from the United States initiated in Nigeria. This gap is also an opportunity for further research. There are an increasing number of women in the United States travelling to Nigeria to be initiated. This presents challenges for them and practitioners back in the United States because of different systems of Ifá/Òrìṣá initiation who view women initiations into Ifá as prohibitive.

**Types of Practitioners**

In my oberservation of and participation in the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system, there are at least three types of practitioners: the uncommitted, the committed, and the initiated. Uncommitted practitioners are those who received their first divination to help them resolve personal problems in their lives. These practitioners have no real understanding of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system. Uncommitted practitioners are people who heard about the system from a friend, family, or read about it, or saw something about it on the Internet. Another kind of uncommitted practitioner is one who is aware of the system but has yet to receive any icons of the divinites. They get

consultations on occasions with Ifá/Òrìṣá diviners around relationships, work, illness, business, travel, and other sorts of personal matters. These uncommitted practitioners also attend spirtual gatherings and celelabrations of inititiated the Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners.

The committed practitioners are those who participated in rituals to receive their icons of a particular Òrìṣá. In the Cuban or Santeria system these practitioners received several icons and necklaces of various Òrìṣá. Practitioners who became committed to those Òrìṣá generally became godchildren to the priest who performed the rituals for them. In the Nigerian system, committed practitioners who are based in the United States, received their Kofa from a babalawo. This ritual is the beginning stage for a practitioner whose destiny in the practice has been partly identified, and the door to learning and getting a better understanding that the system is open.

The third type of practitioner is one who gets initiated into one of the Òrìṣá or ancestor societies. These practitioners are afforded more privileges in ritual access and performance. Initiated practitioners also have a higher level of responsibility in observing taboos, ethical protocols, and the propitation of the Òrìṣá. It is with training that initiated practitioners become diviners and perform ritual sacifices, as well as initiate new priests. Not all initiated practitioners function in the role of diviners and ritual performers. Ifá/Òrìṣá priests are not divinities or saints; they are human beings who also receive divination in order to keep their spiritual balance with the sacred to maintain a successful life.

**Practice in the United States**

Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in the United States, particularly in cities, can sometimes be problematic especially around the issue of ritual animal sacrifice. The ritual sacrifice of animals as a religious rite is legal. However, carrying live chickens and goats to ritual destinations are odd sights for city people. The social and cultural environment in many parts of the United States

are much different than in Nigeria, or even Cuba, where the cultural environments are more accepting.

Although Cuban Santeria, the Oyotunji Village network, and the more traditional Nigerian Ifá/Òrìṣá systems of practice have simularities, many of the differences are in the ritual protocols. This involves the methods of ritual performance and how the prescriptions of sacrifice are determined. In the Cuban system, sacrifice tends to be more fixed. The prescriptions for sacifice are based on the general odu. My observation of and participation in sacrifice in Nigeria is based on the particular verse of the odu, what divinities are identified in that odu, and what items different Òrìṣá like.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I examined relevant literature, themes, and concepts in the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system that originated in Yorùbáland. I also looked at theories of innovation and transformation to understand some of the challenges and opportunites for the Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners from the United States who were initiated in Nigeria.

Some of the key insights from this literature established that Ilẹ́-Ifẹ̀ in Nigeria is the home of the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975a, 1997a; Agiri, 1975; Ojo, 2009) and *Ọ̀yọ́* was the original capital of the Yorùbá empire and the height of political and military power (K. Abímbọ́lá, 2006; Agiri, 1975; H. Drewal et al., 1989). Although the practice has been globalized as part of the consequence of the transatlantic slave trade, different systems of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice were innovated in the diaspora (Brandon, 1997; Brown, 2003; Clarke, 2004; Hucks, 2012; Murphy, 1988; Olupona and Ray, 2008). The literature identifies W. Abímbọ́lá (1973, 1975a, 1975b, and 1976) as a principle innovator who emphasized some of the major philosophical and ethical concepts of Ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́ and orí.

The value of W. Abímbọ́lá's scholarship compared to that of many other scholars who write about the philosophical and ethical concepts, structure of Ifá literature, and systems of practice in the diaspora, is his emic perspective. W. Abímbọ́lá is both a high-ranking practicing babaláwo, born and raised the Yorùbá culture, and a scholar.

While the literature reviewed here also addressed the innovations of new systems of Ifá/Òrìṣà belief and practice in the diaspora, there are gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of practitioners who travelled from the United States and were initiated in Nigeria. Many scholars have written about other systems of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice outside of Nigera, and the experiences of practitioners in the United States, and Cuba (Brandon, 1997, 2002; Brown, 2003; Clark, 2007; Hucks, 2012; Murphy, 1988; Olupona and Ray, 2008). But I was not able to find any scholarly literature that examined in detail the experiences of United States-based Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners who were initiated into Ifá in Nigeria. Nor did I find any studies that specifically examined this phenomenon and the challeges or opportunties that this experience brings.
The themes and concepts that were addressed in this chapter were developed in five sections:

- Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system;
- the origin and history of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system including the concepts of orí and Ìwà Pẹ̀lẹ́;
- Nigeria, Cuba, United States, and the globalization of Yorùbá spirituality;
- Ethnographic methods in Ifá/Òrìṣá practice; divination, rituals in Yorùbáland and in the diaspora, Santeria, and Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village and the Yorùbá revivalist networks; and
- Ifá divination practice; the divinities, ancestors, and women in Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system.

In examining the themes and concepts in the five sections of this chapter I also looked at aspects of the foundational philosophical concepts of the Ifá/Ọrìṣá belief system.

# Chapter III: Methods

## Ethnographic Methods in Qualitative Research

One of the important things I learned in the Antioch Leadership and Change PhD Program was that one's research method is based on the researcher, and the problem, question, or, theory he or she wants to inquire about. To conduct a study about Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners in the United States who were initiated in Nigeria, requires the researcher to know the best way to convey the meaning of that knowledge and experience. This methodological process is important according to Lawal (1996) who cited Blier's assertion that the, "methodological orientation of any analysis necessarily [has an] impact on its result in a significant and enduring way. . . . They guide what is viewed, how it is seen, and the way in which it is contextualized and comprehended" (p. xv).

The study of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice is a way to examine the culture of a people's way of life. Fetterman (2010) pointed out that "culture is the broadest ethnographic concept" (p. 16). According to Creswell (2005) ethnography as a methodology is a way of

> describing, analyzing, and interpreting a cultural group's patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language that develop over time. In ethnography, the researcher provides a detailed picture of the culture-sharing group, drawing on various sources of information. The ethnographer also describes the group within its setting, explores themes or issues that develop over time as the group interacts, and details a portrait of the group. (p. 53)

Studies on Yorùbá oral traditions are mostly qualitative and researched in the fields of literature by scholars like W. Abímbọ́lá (1975a, 1975b, 1976, 1977); in anthropology by Bascom (1969/1991, 1993), H. Drewal and Drewal (1983), M. Drewal (1992), Brandon (1997, 2002), and Clarke (2004); in philosophy by K. Abímbọ́lá (2006); in religious studies by Brown (2003), Hucks (2012) and Olupona and Rey (2008); and in art history by Lawal (1996) and Pemberton (2000). Many of these scholarly works have drawn on ethnography as a central component in

their research design. In this dissertation I have continued in the footsteps of ethnographers to understand and learn new aspects of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice.

**What is Ethnography?**

Fetterman (2010) said that "Ethnography is what ethnographers actually do in the field" (p. 15). Creswell (2005) emphasized that in order to provoke the senses of the reader and make the scene real in ethnography, the researcher must describe "events, activities, and places without veering too far from the actual scene of attention and the people whose shared patterns need to be discerned" (p. 446). He also pointed out that the description, "needs to be detailed and thick, and needs to identify specifics" (p. 446).

In addition to a thick description, Fetterman (2010) stated that ethnography "is about telling a credible, rigorous, and authentic story. Ethnography gives voice to people in their own local context, typically relying on verbatim quotations and a 'thick' description of events" (p. 1). He also said that, "the ethnographer is interested to understanding and describing a social and cultural scene from the emic, or insider's perspective" (p. 2).

Atkinson et al. (2001) pointed out that, notwithstanding the differences of ethnographers, there are shared characteristics and features of the field:

> They are grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation. Observation and participation (according to circumstance and the analytic purpose at hand) remain the characteristic features of the ethnographic approach. (pp. 4–5)

According to Fetterman (2010), participant observation is also crucial to ethnographic research and effective fieldwork. He said: "participant observation is immersion in a culture" (p. 37). He added that typically an ethnographer "lives and works in the community for 6 months to a year or more. . . . long-term residence helps the researcher internalize the basic beliefs, fears,

hopes, and expectations of the people under study" (p. 37). Spradley (1979) said that since the goal of ethnography is "'to grasp the native's point of view' (Malinowski 1992:25); we need to define the concept of culture in a way that reflects this objective" (p. 5). From the perspective of ethnography, Spradley's (1979) concept of culture referred to "the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior" (p. 5).

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2001) pointed out that participant observation is more than just establishing a place to investigate, experience, and represent the social life in that place over a long period of time. They said that, "participant observation involves not only gaining access to and immersing oneself in new social worlds, but also producing *written accounts of descriptions* that bring versions of these worlds to others" (p. 352). Emerson et al. found that written accounts brought recognition that the "ethnographer is the scribe as well as the explorer and quasi-insider of both exotic and familiar social worlds" (p. 352).

The above interpretations of ethnography all presume that the researchers are outsiders to the community they study. As an Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioner, my position as a researcher, while still ethnographic, was not an outsider's point of view. It is true that Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners are not an homogenous group, and that, therefore, even a fellow practitioner is not completely an insider. At the same time, my practitioner's long-term observations of almost a lifetime, bring in a comprehensive understanding of Ifá/Òrìṣá practice from within, as discussed further below.

**Fieldnotes and Fieldwork**

According to Emerson et al. (2001) day-to-day writing of fieldnotes are also central to an ethnographic account. They stated: "Indeed, at their core, fieldnotes are writings produced in or in close proximity to 'the field'. Proximity means that the fieldnotes are written more or less

*contemporaneously* with the events, experiences and interactions they describe and recount" (p. 353).

The daily process of writing fieldnotes eventually grows into what Emerson et al. (2001) said develops into a bigger "*corpus*" (p. 353). They added,

> As a result, a fieldnote corpus need have little or no overall coherence or consistency; it typically contains bits and pieces of incidents, beginnings and ends of narratives, accounts of chance meetings and rare occurrences, and details of wide range of unconnected matters. (p. 353)

As seen in the opening paragraphs of this dissertation, making notes of my experiences and observations, or journaling, is second nature to me. This reinforces the comfort I feel with ethnographic methods. Some researchers have different takes on writing about fieldnotes, and when to write them. A key difference is writing fieldnotes "about others and writing about (and for) oneself" (Emerson et al., 2001, p. 354). Emerson et al. (2001) added, "some field researchers consider fieldnotes to be writings that record *both* what they learn and observe about the activities of others *and* their own actions, questions and reflections" (p. 354). They further pointed out another view where other researchers,

> insist on a sharp distinction between records of what others said and did—the 'data' of fieldwork—and writings incorporating their own thoughts and reactions. Some of these ethnographers view only the former as fieldnotes and consider the latter as personal 'journals' or 'diaries', others hold a diametrically opposed view and '*contrast* fieldnotes with data, speaking of fieldnotes as a record of one's reactions, a cryptic list of items to concentrate on, a preliminary stab at analysis, and so on' (Jackson, 1990: 7). (Emerson et al., 2001, p. 354)

For researchers in the field, writing fieldnotes during an event can be a sensitive matter. According to Emerson et al. (2001), this is dealt with by fieldworkers who "constantly rely upon interactional skills and tact to manage open jottings and their implications" (p. 357).

The note taking and journaling that I did to record my experience in Nigeria was a way to remember and understand the process and the culture I was immersed in. These processes in

ethnography are considered field notes and fieldwork (Fetterman, 2010; Spradley, 1979). Spradley (1979) said that "an ethnographic record consist of field notes, tape recordings, pictures, artifacts, and anything else which documents the cultural scene under study" (p. 69). Fetterman (2010) pointed out that field notes "consist primarily of data from interviews and daily observation" (p. 116). Regarding fieldwork, Fetterman (2010) found that being unfamiliar with "behaviors and situations" (p. 33) could be confusing, therefore, "the ethnographer's hike through the social and culture wilderness begins with fieldwork." (p. 33).

Further discussing fieldwork, Spradley (1979) stated that it "involves the disciplined study of what the world is like to people who have learned to see, hear, speak, think, and act in ways that are different. Rather than *studying people*, ethnography means *learning from people"* (p. 3). Unlike the ethnographic approach of researchers like Clarke (2004), I did not undergo rituals in order to conduct "anthropological traditions of local studies" (p. xxi). The rituals and initiations I went through were based on fully learning from the experience and in order to be a better practitioner. Also my interest was in learning how to apply the ritual, philosophical, and ethical practices in innovative ways within my shared cultural and environmental context in the United States. Even though I am an outsider, because of the different lived cultural experiences, I am also an insider based on ritual privileges and the adherence to the practice of philosophical and ethical protocols.

**Interviewing**

Fetterman (2010) found that "the most important element of fieldwork is being there—to observe, to ask seemingly stupid but insightful questions, and to write down what is seen and heard . . . life histories of individuals can be particularly illuminating" (p. 9). Asking insightful questions requires researchers to conduct interviews. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) stated

"research interviewing is thus a knowledge-producing activity, but the question is how to characterize the form of knowledge that qualitative research interviewing can give us" (p. 47). They suggest that qualitative interviewing can sometimes be called "an *unstructured* or a *nonstandardized* interview. Because there are few prestructured or standardized procedures for conducting these forms of interviews, many of the methodological decisions have to be made on the spot, during the interview" (p. 16). In the process of learning more about the culture of practitioners in United States who were inititated in Nigeria, my access to those practitioners sometimes called for me to make on-the-spot decisions in conducting unstructured and informal interviews.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) identified two contrasting metaphors for the interviewer: "as a miner or as a traveler" (p. 48). They said that the "two metaphors stand for alternative genres and have different rules of the game" (p. 49). They found that,

> A miner's approach will tend to regard interviews as a site of data collection separated from the later data analysis. A traveler's conception leads to interviewing and analysis as intertwined phases of knowledge construction with an emphasis on the narrative to be told to an audience. The data-mining conception of interviewing is close to the mainstream conception of modern social sciences where knowledge is already there, waiting to be found, whereas the traveler's conception is nearer to anthropology and a postmodern constructive understanding that involves a conversational approach to social research. (p. 49)

Drawing on the epistemological perspectives of the two metaphors for interviewers, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) also described interview knowledge as having "seven key features" (p. 53). They stated: "Interview knowledge is produced, relational, conversational, contextual, linguistic, narrative, and pragmatic" (p. 53). They also asserted:

> In a *qualitative research interview*, knowledge is produced socially in the interaction of interviewer and interviewee. The very production of data in the qualitative interview goes beyond a mechanical following of rules and rest upon the interviewers' skills and situated personal judgment in the posing of questions." (p. 82)

According to Spradley (1979), "an ethnographic interview is a particular kind of *speech event* . . . every culture has many social occasions identified primarily by the kinds of talking that takes place; I refer to these as speech events" (p. 55). Fetterman (2010) pointed out that interviewing "is the ethnographer's most important data-gathering technique. Interviews explain and put into a larger context what the ethnographer sees and experience. They require verbal interaction and language in the commodity of discourse" (p. 40). Fetterman further stated "informal interviews are the most common in ethnographic work" (p. 41). Comparing structured interviews and informal interviews, he pointed out the value of informal interviewing:

> Informal interviews are useful throughout an ethnographic study in discovering what people think and how one person's perception compares with another's. Such comparisons help the fieldworker identify shared values in the community—values that inform behavior. Informal interviews are also useful in establishing and maintaining a healthy rapport. (p. 41)

To conduct an interview, a researcher needs a reliable source of information. Spradley (1979) refers to this source as an informant. He defined the term informant referencing *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*: "a native speaker engaged to repeat words, phrases, and sentences in his own language or dialect as a model of imitation and a source of information" (p. 25). He added that "informants are a source of information; literally, they become teachers for the ethnographer" (p. 25).

Fetterman (2010) recognized that the term informant is traditionally used in anthropology, but preferred to use the term "key actor" (p. 49). He believed doing so avoids "both the stigma of the term *informant* and its historical roots" (p. 49). Fetterman explained that the term came from anthropological work rooted in African colonialism by the British. He continued, "the term also conjures up images of clandestine activities that are incompatible with an ethnographic approach" (Fetterman, 2010, p. 67).

According to Sheftel and Zembrzycki (2013), their perspectives on interviews were based on being oral historians, which meant that "there are always surprises" (p. 4) with interviews. They found that "interviews often take us to places we did not know we need to go" (p. 4). They also pointed out that in the published work by researchers, experiences or processes in conducting interviews "are usually relegated to introductions or epilogues—safe spaces for those sorts of personal remarks—as a way of adding texture to the interview content contained within the body of our work" (p. 4). Sheftel and Zembrzycki found that differences between process and content confuse how researchers "listen to stories and shape them into narratives" (p. 4). They pointed out:

> Ethnographers have long examined how the two intersect, writing vulnerably so that they may understand and learn from the meanings therein. Everything that happens within and outside of the conversations they have with their informants is important. Process and outcome are interconnected because they are shaped by the relationships that ethnographers build and nurture throughout their research projects. (p. 4)

**Analysis**

Another important part of ethnography is the analysis. Spradley (1979) found that "analysis of any kind involves a way of thinking. It refers to the systematic examination of something to determine its parts, the relationship among parts, and their relationship to the whole" (p. 92). He further stated that ethnographers "especially want to avoid imposing categories from the outside that *create* order and pattern rather than discover it . . . Ethnographic *analysis* is the search for the parts of a culture and their relationship *as conceptualized by informants*" (p. 93).

Fetterman (2010) claimed: "Through analysis, the ethnographer tests hypotheses and perceptions to construct an accurate conceptual framework about what is happening in the social group under study" (p. 93). He said that analysis.

> begins at the moment a fieldworker selects a problem to study and ends with the last work in the report or ethnography. . . throughout the analytic trek, the fieldworker must make choices—between logical and enticing paths, between valid and invalid but fascinating data, and between genuine patterns of behavior and series of apparently similar but distinct reactions. (p. 93)

Fetterman (2010) also suggested that content analysis is the way that ethnographers "analyze written and electronic data in much the same way that they analyze observed behavior" (p. 103). He further stated,

> they attempt to discover patterns within the text and seek key events recorded and memorialized in words . . . content analysis is a methodology used to analyze written texts such as newspapers, magazines, e-mail, reports, books, and Web sites. (p. 104)

In examining ethnographic methods used in qualitative research, Fetterman (2010) suggested that,

> qualitative approaches focus on the intentionality or symbolic significance of key terms, phases, and financial figures. This requires coding the data and interpreting the patterns that emerge within the context of the cultural setting. The assumption underlying content analysis is that the frequency (or lack thereof) of a term or topic reflects its relative importance to the group or culture. (p. 104)

**Code of Ethics**

The application of the ethical principles that researchers and ethnographers subscribe to, is what Fetterman (2010) refers to as "a code of ethics that preserves the participants' rights, facilities communication in the field, and leaves the door open for further research" (p. 133). Throughout the process of ethnographic research, ethical principles should be a guiding factor. Concerning ethics, Fetterman professed, "ethnographers do not work in a vacuum, they work with people. They often pry into people's innermost secrets, sacred rites, achievements, and failures" (p. 133). Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners are protective of their beliefs and practice. As a practitioner I too must be respectful of the limits of what participants are willing to share from their sacred experiences and knowledge.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) believed that the question around ethical issues continues from the beginning to the end: “Ethical issues go through the entire process of an interview investigation, and potential ethical concerns should be taken into consideration from the very start of an investigation to the final report” (p. 62). All participants in this study were informed about the purpose and procedure of my research and about their rights to confidentiality and access to interview material that involves their participation. It is my own *Iwá Pẹ̀lẹ́*, or ethical responsibility, to respect and preserve the rights of all participates, including their right to decline to participate in the reseach.

Creating a transparent, respectful, and confidential process is key to the role an ethnographer plays in conducting a study. These roles, according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), are “critical to the quality of the scientific knowledge and the soundness of the ethical decisions in qualitative inquiry” (p. 74).

**Key Research Questions**

For many practitioners outside of Yorùbáland in West Africa and for whom Yorùbá is not their native tongue, what value does the Yorùbá language offer them? In what ways have initiation into the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in Nigeria influenced their practice and how has this influence impacted the way practitioners in the United Sates perform rituals and apply philosophical and ethical principles to their lives? Also, in what ways has initiation brought forth transformative leadership and change in the Ifá/Òrìṣ̲á practice in the United States? Has initiation in Nigeria helped to build community in the United States that stands for equity, social justice, and self-determination?

It was these and other questions about the culture of Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners from the United State initiated in Nigeria, that were talked about in interviews. I wanted to learn and

understand more about the cultural experience of their journey and the community that they are building through their practice. The participants in my ethnograpic study were all Ifá priests from the United States initiated in various locations in Nigeria. My ethnographic study also included a mix of men and women. The fieldwork was multi-sited; that is, conducted in different states and cities in the eastern part of the United States. I involved a total of eight participants in the project, observing their divination and ritual practice as well as conducting informal interviews with three of those participants over a two-to-three day period at their home shrines. The fieldwork with the remaining five participants was less intensive. I visited to observe their shrines and conduct informal interviews with them.

**Selection of and Working With Participants**

The selection of study participants was based on methods of sampling to collect qualitative data that both Fetterman (2010) and Creswell (2005) identified. These methods are appropriate in identifying the ideal participants in order to explore in-depth the challenges and opportunities of Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners from the United States who were initiated in Nigeria. Fetterman (2010) said that "judgement sampling" (p. 35) was the most common. He believed that it is ethnographers who rely on their own judgement in identifying the participants and who are engaged in the culture, that can most appropriately address the research question.

Creswell (2005) called his method "purposeful sampling . . . [a process in which] researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (p. 204). Both of these methods of identifying participants—judgment and purposeful— speak to the same point of how to best learn or understand my research question.

Creswell (2005) also identified three techniques used in purposeful sampling that I applied in selecting and working with participants in my study:

- maximal variation sampling,
- extreme case sampling; and
- typical sampling.

The purpose of using maximal variation sampling is to provide a diverse perspective of my selected participants. In this study, participants' age range was from late 30s to early 70s and included male, female, European American and African American. It included practitioners who perform higher levels of rituals for others, and those who perform on a casual level of rituals for others. In the maximal variation sampling strategy the researchers "sample cases or individuals that differ on some characteristic or traits" (Creswell, 2005, p. 204).

The purpose of using the extreme case sampling strategy is to include a range of practitioners engaged in ritual performance for others on more of a regular basis. Using this sampling strategy, I studied practitioners who also chant in the Yorùbá lanugage while performing rituals in ways that are practiced in Nigeria. In my experience there are very few practitioners in the United States in this category. The Cuban system of chanting during ritual performance has been more common even among some practitioners who were initiated in Nigeria. The purpose of using extreme case sampling as a form of purposeful sampling is to "study an outlier case or one that displays extreme characteristics" (Creswell, 2005, p. 204). In this case, the idea was to show this sample as enlightening in regard to the nature of advanced practice in the United States.

My use of the typical sampling strategy was to highlight aspects of some of the regular practices that most of the Nigerian-intitiated U.S. practitioners are engaged in. According to Creswell (2005) in the usual approach to sampling, "the researcher studies a person or site that is 'typical' to those unfamilar with the situation" (p. 204). In this sampling category, people who

are uninformed about United States practitioners initiated into Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in Nigeria, will be able to understand the typical culture of these practitioners. The list of participants, fieldwork sites and type of fieldwork are presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

*The Participants, Fieldwork Sites, and Types*

| PARTICIPANTS | FIELDWORK SITE | TYPE OF FIELDWORK |
|---|---|---|
| Participant #1 | Miami, FL | Observation of Shrine, Divination, Rituals, and Interview |
| Participant #2 | Bronx, NY | Observation of Shrine, Divination, Rituals, and Interview |
| Participant #3 | Atlanta, GA | Observation of Shrine, Divination, Rituals, and Interview |
| Participant #4 | Louisville, KY | Observation of Shrine and Interview |
| Participant #5 | Louisville, KY | Observation of Shrine and Interview |
| Participant #6 | Boston, MA | Observation of Shrine and Interview |
| Participant #7 | Marlboro, NJ | Observation of Shrine and Interview |
| Participant #8 | Harlem, NY | Observation of Shrine and Interview |

My approach has been to observe practitioners' ritual practices in their homes or community settings where they lead or participate in the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice. In order to learn and understand how practitioners in the United States know what they know and apply what they know, I relied on them as "key actors" (Fetterman, 2010, p. 49) or informants, as they have been conventionally called by ethnographers. My observation and participation with the key actors

placed me in the field to be able to experience and describe what I have seen. Langness (1965) said that after ethnographers' experience in the field, they take home "a record of all the events seen, plus description and explanations of them by informants, plus a great many more descriptions of things he has not seen" (p. 3).

Conducting informal interviews with some of the eight key players for a couple of days in their home settings further helped me learn more about the meaning of their initiation in Nigeria and the community of practice they are involved with in the United States. According to Fetterman (2010),

> the researcher uses informal approaches to discover the categories of meaning in a culture. Informal interviews are useful throughout an ethnographic study in discovering what people think and how one person's perception compares with another's. Such comparisons help the fieldworker identity shared values in the community—values that inform behavior. (p. 41)

I also did a biographical sketch of each interviewee after obtaining their consent to do so. Langness (1965) found that "the use of life history materials for the ultimate understanding of *culture* has remained fundamental" (p. 12). A biographical sketch of each person helped to show what changes key actors have gone through and how the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice may have influenced those changes. It is another tool that can help in understanding and describing cultural meaning.

As a practitioner I had an advantage in accessing members of the Ifá/Òrìṣá community in the United States. My background as a practitioner gave me the entry needed to identify key actors and to learn from their practice. I also knew that some of them were practitioners who were engaged in public discussions on issues of race, gender, and sexual identity. Jarvis (1999) found that "practitioner-researchers are able to report aspects of practice at a depth that traditional forms of research might well not capture, precisely because they are practitioners. Their research can be enriched if it is undertaken in collaboration" (p. 24).

Also because I am an initiated practitioner conducting an ethnographic study of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice, some aspects of the study were autoethnographic. Murphy's (1988) ethnographic study on Santería included parts that are autoethnographic. But unlike Murphy, who was not an initiate, I entered the study as a practitioner inititated into Ifá in Nigeria. Alexander (2008) stated that,

> Autoethnography thus engages ethnographical analysis of personally lived experience. The evidenced act of showing in autoethnography is less about reflecting on the self in a public space than about using the public space and performance as an act of critically reflecting culture, an act of *seeing the self see the self through and as the other*. (p. 91)

**Connecting Ethnography and Autoethnographic Methods**

In applying ethnography as a methodological approach to study Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners in the United States who were inititated in Nigeria, I also connected it with an autoethnographic approach. I had always had many questions about the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice and its system, and previously had made conscious efforts to research my curiosities at all opportunities. I am inclined to agree with Jarvis (1999) who believes that practitioners who "undertake research to satisfy their curiosity" (p. 7) are not generally "recognized as researchers" (p. 7). Jarvis also said of practitioner-researchers:

> They certainly do not have the traditional image of the researcher, and they may not always be in a position to conduct their research in a most satisfactory way, nor do they necessarily meet the stringent demands of some members of the traditional research community. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they should not be viewed as practitioner-researchers, because that is what they are. (p. 7)

The process of studying and learning more about ethnography has enabled me to be more reflective and analytical. It has brought me to the realization that I was engaging all along as a practitioner-researcher. This was something that I have been doing in my observation and practice of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system since 1975. I was not conceptually clear about the theories and methods of ethnography until I began to study these in my doctoral program. With this new

way of understanding the theories and methods of ethnography, I have been able to reflect on my quest to understand my process of searching or researching Ifá/Òrìṣá knowledge. My process of learning about the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice was to experience it and apply all that I could about it. The two workshops on Obí divination I took with Afolabi Epega, and the first seminar I took with Dr. Wandé Abímbọ́lá, provided the theoretical and cosmological frameworks that further piqued my curiosity. It was when I experienced the actual rituals involved in my Kofá ceremony in Boston, for my one hand of Ifá, and my Tẹfá ceremony in Ọ̀yọ́, Nigeria for my initiation, that the experience became concrete. The same is true of when I received my ìlẹ̀kẹ̀s/collares or beads, and my warriors/guerros de santo or Òrìṣà icons in 1983 from the Cuban Santeria priest in Boston. The difference was that my learning in the Santeria stage of my spiritual development was on observing and participating in the centros or spiritual meetings. The point is that it was the actual ritual experience that helped me to understand the practice in a concrete way.

In 1994 I began to write down notes and kept a journal of some of these experiences. My note-taking and journaling was a result of taking the workshop with Afolabi Epega. He encouraged this after teaching us how to throw *Obi Abata* (Epega, 1994). Throwing Obi Abata is considered a minor form of divination that non-inititated people can use to ask basic questions about daily issues in their personal lives. Unlike the other systems of divination, sacrifice is not required with Obi Abata. In my research I have yet to find scholarly literature on the epistemology of this system.

On a daily basis for more than a year, I wrote down the results of the Obi Abata signs that came up. I also wrote notes about what happened each day. The discipline that I developed from this process became habit forming. It was a process that I used to note my experiences whenever I travelled outside the United States.

On a visit to Cuba in 2010, I recorded some notes about Òrìṣá celebration I participated in and observed. That event confirmed my thinking about the role spirituality played in the Cuban revolution. It highlighted the power of culture and how people use it to handle difficult times. I typed those notes up on July 18, 2010, at 6:09 p.m. to describe the event and my feelings:

> The Tambor was pretty powerful; very African with strong female leadership. The drummers used homemade wooden boxes, one of which one of the players sat on as he played. That particular drum had such a powerful base sound you could feel the vibrations. The name of the Drum group was Kambisa Congo. There were 3 men and one woman, and about 50 people in a small living room. They played 3 drums and one bell, switching sometimes with the Shekere. All the members switched off sometimes playing different instruments.
>
> I have come to this conclusion before, that the African spiritual influence on the culture has been instrumental in helping the people in dealing with all of the sacrifices necessary to make the Cuban revolution successful. When you see the interactions of the people at the Tambor, dancing, clapping, and singing together to the rhythms of the drums, bells and cadences of the singer, you can see in the faces and expresses of the people that whatever obstacles tomorrow brings for them they have the confidence to meet it with victory. You can't buy that feeling from a MacDonald's express lane or a lottery scratch card.

In my quest to continue learning more about the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice I travelled to Nigeria four times (1999, 2000, 2010, and 2013). I went to Cuba 15 times, sometimes several times during particular years (2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2010, and 2012). I visited Trinidad twice— in 2008 and 2009. I kept journal notes about all these experiences. I did not write notes for each day I stayed in those countries but I did record some of those experiences over the course of the visit. The recording of these experiences was also captured in some cases by camera and video recordings.

My travels were designed to learn the culture through others and to learn about the culture being innovated by people initiated in Nigeria like myself. In positioning myself as a researcher and practitioner studying an aspect of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice, I have connected the learning of the culture of others with the learning of culture through myself.

**Ethnographer as Insider**

Unlike some of my peers whose research is ethnographic, my experience is also one as a Ifá priest who divines for other practitioners, performs sacrifice, and conducts other spiritual rituals. My observations and participation have a different gazeand ritual privilege. I have been able to participate with a different background and understanding of the practice than some of my peers who are primarily or only ethnographers.

My experience as a researcher is different than that of Murphy (1988) who stated that he had to struggle with the limitations of his "background in understanding the world of Santeria" (p. 116). As a practitioner initiated in Nigeria and who functions ritually in the practice in a leadership capacity in the United States, I have different kinds of limitations than my peers. My relationships with other levels of practitioners in the various systems of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice is also different than my peers who are ethnographers. In doing an ethnographic study about practitioners from the United States who were initiated into the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in Nigeria, I also bring an autoethnographic experience.

Since 1983 I have participated in and observed in nearly a thousand rituals or ceremonies, from divinations, and ebos (sacrifices), Kofás (one hand of Ifá ceremony), Tẹfás or Ifá initiations, in Nigeria, Cuba, Trinidad, and the United States. From 1994 to 1999, after pushing to study more about Ifá/Òrìṣá practice, I became a part of *Ilé Àṣẹ Ṣàngó Éwélérè*, the House of Ṣàngó the herbalist and healer in Boston, Massachusetts. Ilé Àṣẹ Ṣàngó Éwélérè practice of the Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system could be classified by what Clarke (2004) described as "hybrid reinterpretations of traditional practices" (p. xxi). This included elements of Cuban Santeria and traditional Yorùbà ritual practices. The major influence was on traditional Yorùbà practice.

Besides studying the literature or Odú of Ifá (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976, 1977), they also organized workshops on learning the Yorùbà language.

Àṣẹ Ṣàngó Éwélérè was under the leadership of two women priests, Ọṣunkemi and Ṣangoyẹmi who were initiated in Nigeria. They were responsible for bringing Afolabi Epega, Wàndé Abímbọ́lá, the late Aṣipade Ogundiya Abímbọ́lá, and the Araba of Ọ̀ṣogbo, Ifáyẹmi Ẹlẹbuibọn, to Boston. Ọṣunkemi and Ṣangoyẹmi created the Ìyá Mọ̀pó Workshop as a space and forum to educate people about Yorùbà culture. They stated in their brochure that,

> Ìyá Mọ̀pó is the Orisa in charge of all women's trades, the female energy of creativity and production, the one who guides, projects, and inspires women's work. In Yorubaland she is known in many aspects; she is the potter woman, cotton spinner and weaver, midwife and mother. She cooks soap, manufactures and sells palm oil, makes the indigo dye. Ìyá Mọ̀pó represents a strong ancestral wisdom continuously invoked in our daily labor as working women. (Ìyá Mọ̀pó Workshops, 1998)

It was during those years that I began studying and assisting Wàndé Abímbọlá with divinations, kofás, and ẹbọs. *Àṣẹ Ṣàngó Éwélérè* and Ìyá Mọ̀pó had many people come through its doors. Those who came represented a diverse range of people from lawyers, professors, artists, photographers, filmmakers, students, youth, the elderly, White, Black, Latino, working class, activist, homeless, gay, and straight. It was a major center for learning about the Ifá/Òrìṣá sytem and practice.

Since 2005, several years after Ọṣunkemi and Ṣangoyẹmi had relocated to the south, I had created a new study group in Boston to improve Yorùbá language skills and to learn more about Ifá/Òrìsá literature or the Odú's, ritual practices, and deeper knowledge about Yorùbá philosophical and ethic thought and practice. One of the biggest issues in the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice is the language. Spradley (1979) pointed out how important language was in conducting ethnographic studies. He stated that for ethnographers who research in non-Western societies "the language was a necessary prerequisite to thorough research" (p. 17). Spradley also found,

> language is more than a means of communication about reality: it is a tool for constructing reality. Different languages create and express different realities. They categorize experience in different ways. They provide alternative patterns for customary ways of thinking and perceiving. (p. 17)

One of my limitations in Ifá/Òrìṣá practice is my Yorùbà Language skill. While I am not fluent in Yorùbá, I am functional, a little more than being able to just use it ritually and ceremonially. Yorùbà language has been a major issue for practitioners in the diaspora. This is also one of the challenges for ethnographers trying to understand the culture in Nigeria.

**Autoethnography**

According to Chang (2008) autoethnography is "a research method that utilizes the researchers' autobiographical data to analyze and interpret their cultural assumptions" (p. 9). Chang pointed out that while "ethnographies and autoethnographers attempt to achieve cultural understanding through analysis and interpretation, . . . autoethnography is not about focusing on self alone, but about searching for understanding of others (cultural society) through self" (pp. 48–49).

Ethnographies that insert the researcher's personal experience too much into the autoethnography and that use other "creative analytical practices" (Denzin, 2006, p. 420) have raised the eyebrows of ethnographers who support a more analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006) as a way to keep autoethnography within the traditional theoretical domain.

An issue on autoethnography, the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* featured a debate among scholars "classifying autoethnography into two distinct genres (e.g., analytic and evocative)" (Burnier, 2006). Vryan (2006) took issue with how Anderson (2006) defined the term *analytic autoethnography,* stating that "using the terms *evocative* or *emotional* autoethnography to refer to nonanalytic autoethnography implies that analytical work does not

include evocation and that creative or emotionally rich text is somehow incompatible with analysis" (pp. 408–409). Chang (2008) said that to do autoethnograhies with an ethnographic intent,

> autoethnographers undergo the usual ethnographic research process of data collection, data analysis/interpretation, and report writing. They collect field data by means of participation, observation, interview, and document review; verify data by triangulating sources and contents from multiple origins; analyze and interpret data to decipher the cultural meanings of events, behaviors, and thoughts; and write ethnography. (p. 49)

Ellis and Bochner (2006) are opposed to keeping autoethnography within the traditional ethnographic domain, arguing, "autoethnography centers attention on how we should live and brings us into lived experiences in a feeling and embodied way. This is the moral of autoethnographic stories—its ethical domain" (p. 439). They also argued against autoethnography being "tamed" (p. 433), and added,

> autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaboration creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act. It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. Intimacy is a way of being, a mode of caring, and it shouldn't be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing. (p. 433)

Tedlock (2008) also found that autoethnography as such a lived experience, "at its best is a cultural performance that transcends self-referentiality by engaging with cultural forms that are directly involved in the creation of culture" (p. 152).

During my fieldwork I kept a journal to take notes on observations and items that triggered reflections of experiences in the practice, along with confirmations and differences in scholarly literature. I used those notes to write descriptions and explanations of the experiences. In used these in analyzing the text of interviews with key actors to compare them to each other and to identify patterns of practice that emerged. I paid attention to the vernaculars used, and Yorùbá lexicons as a way of gauging how the language expresses cultural practices. The analysis

of my notes and interviews also drew from theories about leadership and change as well as my own experience and reflections of the Ifá/Òrìṣá practice in the United States.

**Limitations of the Research**

The purpose of this study was to learn about and understand the culture, challenges, and opportunities of Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners in the United States who were initiated in Nigeria. Practitioners in the United States are also initiated in Cuba, Trinidad, Brazil, Mexico, and in the United States. Initiations can also vary by the different societies of Òrìṣá priesthoods involved. My study is limited to those practitioners who were initiated into the Ifá priesthood. This study also included those initiated into other Òrìṣá priesthoods before they were initiated into the Ifá priesthood.

While there are practitioners who live and practice throughout the United States, this study was limited to interviewing practitioners living mainly on the East Coast of the United States. Though some practitioners are initiated in their adolescence and young adult years, the ones interviewed in this study ranged in age from 40 to their early 70s. The exclusion of people under 40 in this study was based on their availabilities during the time restraints of my field work. I will discuss later in this study what the impact of this exculsion is on the findings of this research.

# Chapter IV: Findings

*Figure 4.1.* Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioner wearing Nigerian color Ifá beads.

The dark reddish and green *ide* and *eleeke* beads were common visual displays that each of my interviewees wore on their wrist, around their necks, or, on both that identified their affiliation with the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system from Nigeria. Figure 4.1 shows an Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioner wearing colored Nigerian Ifá beads. Besides the obvious paraphernalia that they wear, all participants from the United States were also initiated in Nigeria into the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system as Ifá priest. There are other priests who also wear similar colored beads or the yellowish and green kind but who were initiated in a different Ifá/Òrìṣà system in the United States, Cuba, or, the Caribbean. Different Òrìṣà are associated with different color beads and there are some variations in styles within the different Ifá/Òrìṣà systems.

This qualitative ethnographic study was designed to understand the culture of practitioners in the branch of the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system from the United States who were

initiated in Nigeria. This study was also designed to learn what some of the challenges and opportunities are for these practitioners in Nigeria as well as in the United States.

The interviews for this ethnographic study on Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from the United States initiated in Nigeria, spanned over a period of about six months. Observation and participation with these practitioners took place in the following locations:

- Bronx, New York;
- Hollywood, Florida;
- Louisville, Kentucky;
- Conyers, Georgia;
- Marlboro, New Jersey;
- Harlem, New York;
- Boston, Massachusetts; and
- Havana, Cuba.

The interviews were held both in the participants' sacred ritual spaces, as well, for some, at their work and professional spaces. The sessions incorporated aspects of their spiritual practices.

In the book, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Catherine Bell (2009) highlighted Pierre Bourdieu's observation that the context of practice itself has "ambiguities" (p. 83). Bell also outlined four features of practice as "(1) situational; (2) strategic; (3) embedded in misrecognition of what it is in fact doing; and (4) able to reproduce or reconfigure vision of the order of power in the world" (p. 81). The practice of those interviewed in this study is situated not only within a ritual context; it is also manifested in the ambiguities, or things "never clear

cut" (p. 83) in various aspects of their lives. This relates to the point that in Ifá, divination findings can cover what may occur in the past, present, or future.

The recorded interviews, photos, and field notes are some of the qualitative data used to compose this ethnographic and aspects of an autoethnographic study.[2] The interviewees are all practitioners I have known and shared spiritual experiences with. My relationships with some of the interviewees go as far back as 1975.

Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners come out of different systems that have different cultural experiences. The origins of all Ifá/Òrìṣà systems are in Nigeria. The Cuban Ifá/Òrìṣà system has had, and continues to have, a major influence on practitioners in the United States, the Caribbean, South America, and throughout parts of Europe. The influence of Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system in Nigeria is now having a noticeable influence on practitioners in the United States, Cuba, and other parts of the Caribbean, South America, and Europe. The impact of this influence has created waves of practitioners from the United States journeying to Nigeria to do their initiations into the Ifá/Òrìṣà practice.

Research of the experiences of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from the United States who were initiated in Nigeria, coincides with some ideas in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience,* wherein he describes aspects of meaning. Composing an ethnography about this branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners underline stories whose meanings points to what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) said was "the identity of different words, the relationship between events, and thus it helps to clarify, to establish order among unrelated or conflicting information" (p. 216).

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[2] The many quotations from the interviews used in this chapter, closely follow the words and expressions as spoken by the participants.

Interviewing Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners about their spiritual journey to Nigeria to be initiated into the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system, brought forth a variety of descriptive words that help depict the meaning of their experience. Each of the practitioners were drawn to the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system for different reasons. All of them in their own ways were searching for a deeper meaning of their spirituality that they were comfortable embracing. The words of Babatunde Gregory Anderson, one of the practitioners interviewed, framed the experiences of other interviewees by pointing out why practitioners were eventually drawn into the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. He said it was a journey of, "going on a spiritual quest or spiritual mission . . . trying to understand life's mysteries and inner visions" (B. G. Anderson, personal communication, November 8, 2015).

This ethnographic research is a study of the spiritual journeys examining the impact, challenges, and opportunities experienced by eight practitioners from the United States who were initiated into the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system in Nigeria. The following are profiles of the eight practitioners' interviewed for this study.

**Babaláwo Fatóòjolá Aukram Burton, Photographer, Educator (Louisville, KY)**

*Figure 4*.2. Babaláwo Fatóòjolá Ajala Aukram Burton taking photos at a fair at the Kentucky Center for African American Heritage.

When I entered the huge three story brick single family home of Fatóòjolá Ajala Aukram Burton, right behind the door was his Èṣù. I remember an elder babaláwo in Nigeria who once told me of the importance of having Èṣù inside your house, in front of your house and behind it. As long as I have known Fatóòjolá he has always had Èṣù behind his door. Èṣù is the divinity of the cross road, a mediator between good and evil forces (K. Abimbọ́lá, 2006). As the "ubiquitous and universal policemen," (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975a, p. 5). Èṣù is the keeper of the divine and potent power called *àṣẹ*. "Èṣù causes things and men to work together in harmony or suffer the consequences" (Mason, 2003, p. 1). He helps those who offer sacrifice.

Fatóòjolá was the first person I met who was an Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioner. He was the one who got me involved in the practice, and Èṣù was one of the first Òrìṣà I learned about. He started out as a practitioner in the Lucumi system. He had also originally planned to be initiated in that system. We met and I interviewed him on September 14, 2015.

Fatóòjolá is a professional photographer and a retired curriculum specialist with the Jefferson County Public Schools. He is currently the director of the Kentucky Center for African American Heritage. The center is a beautifully designed architectural presence located in the heart of the Russell Historic District in Louisville. Before its splendorous architectural redesign it was formerly the Louisville Railway Company Trolley Repair Shop.

The first time I met Fatóòjolá was in 1975. He was walking around the room taking pictures of people attending an organizing meeting. His open shirt exposed the eleekes he wore around his neck. Whenever I saw him I could see those colorful beads that he always wore. He also always had his camera with him. See Figure 4.2 shows Fatóòjolá Ajala Aukram Burton taking photographs.

The Èṣù behind Fatóòjolá's door, and the eleekes around his neck are some of the Òrìṣà icons and paraphernalia that Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners have in their homes or wear respectively. Beads worn by Yorùbá people and by practitioners in the various systems of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice are an expression according to H. Drewal and Mason (1998) of "temperament, empowerment, protection, potentiality, desire, wealth, and well being" (p. 17).

Fatóòjolá began to learn about the Ifá/Òrìṣà practice as a student activist. He was mentored by other activist Zaid Haynes and Akamal Duncan who were members of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and practitioners in the Yorùbá belief system. He, as well as his mentors, had been involved with Islam. The attraction to the philosophy and spirituality of the Ifá/Òrìṣà practice resonated for Fatóòjolá as well as for his mentors. Reflecting on what led him to become a practitioner, Fatóòjolá thoughtfully responded, "At the time I was really searching." His quest for philosophical and spiritual meaning led him to New York to join the house of Ṣàngó Gumi Marjorie Baynes Quinones, one of the early leading African American innovative priestess initiated in the United States by Cubans. His plans were to get initiated under her leadership.

The plans to get initiated by Quinones never happened for Fatóòjolá. After becoming "disillusioned about the whole thing," he connected in Boston with a Cuban priest of Yemọja, Jorge Fandino. His plans to get initiated with him also fell apart. Fatóòjolá said that later at a *bembe* he received an encouraging message from the Òrìṣà: "It doesn't matter where you get initiated, just get initiated. Get it done because it's going to really improve your life."

The primary goal and purpose for Fatóòjolá's initiation was based on creating balance and harmony in his life. It was to improve his life as a father, husband, a political activist, photographer, film maker, acupuncturist, educator, and other passions he had.

Fatóòjolá said that after receiving that message from the Òrìṣà to just get initiated, “it was at that point that I decided that I was going to get initiated in Nigeria, in Ọ̀yọ́ to be specific.” One of the factors that lead to his decision to finally do initiation in Nigeria was based on happenstance that lead him almost full circle back to Nigeria. He was no stranger to Nigeria having visited there many years before he chose to get initiated. It was of his first visit Fatóòjolá said, “I got a really big dose of the practice in Nigeria.” He had traveled there in 1979 with his wife, Ifájọ́kẹ́, and stayed at the Ọ̀ṣẹ́ Méjì Shrine where he could “see the culture really close and personal.”

During his stay at the Ọ̀ṣẹ́ Méjì Shrine, every morning babaláwos would knock on their door for Fatóòjolá and his wife to join them in prayer. After prayer, the babaláwos would “throw obi for everyone to make sure everything was going to be fine that day.” Fatóòjolá said, “Something else happened to me on that trip that stuck with me.” He added, “During my travels to the various market places, I ran into a book written by Bàbá Wándé Abímbọ́lá, who I had heard about.” The book was the *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá* (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1975a). “That book was like a bible to me because I was saying, ‘This is what I’ve been looking for.’”

Fatóòjolá didn’t have “a real deep enough understanding of the system itself, the cosmology.” It was from his observations and experiences in Nigeria, and what he read in the *Sixteen Great Poems*, that he got an understanding about “the rigorous training or the path of a babaláwo.” Fatóòjolá stated, “That [*Sixteen Great Poems*] was my first introduction to what a babaláwo was.”

Three years before Fatóòjolá traveled to Nigeria, he was taken to see a Cuban babaláwo by Ṣàngo Gumi Marjorie Baynes Quinones. She took him to see Pancho Mora, who was affiliated with one of the first known Santeria houses in New York (Hucks, 2012). According to

Hucks what was “distinctive” (p. 86) about Cuban practitioners like Mora, was their “attempt to transfer the religious practices of their old religion to a new American space while simultaneously maintaining geographical, theological, and ritual loyalty and allegiance to Cuba” (p. 86). Fatóòjolá said his visit with Mora was “specifically to get my guerreros, my warriors.” After divining for Fatóòjolá, Mora pulled the odù *Ìrẹtẹ̀ Ògúndá*, which was also the same as Mora’s odù. Mora told Fatóòjolá, “You need to go straight to Ifá.” Fatóòjolá said he felt all of this was “mysterious, I didn’t know what all that meant..”

It was many years after 1973 when Fatóòjolá had received his warriors from Pancho Mora and traveled to Nigeria, that he decided to finally get initiated. Although he had read and was very impressed with Wándé Abímbọ́lá’s (1975a) book, *Sixteen Great Poems*, he had never met him. He had always wanted to but didn’t know how. Fatóòjolá was living in Amherst, Massachusetts during the time that Abímbọ́lá was living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, teaching as a visiting professor at Boston University. I made the arrangements for Fatóòjolá to meet with Abímbọ́lá. Fatóòjolá recalling that visit said, “He [Tony Van Der Meer] took me by his house, I’ll never forget it. It was an evening. Bàbá Wándé was just chilling. We sat down and we talked and the rest is history.”

Fatóòjolá moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, and arranged for Abímbọ́lá to visit. During that visit Fatóòjolá and his wife received their *Kofá,* or *One Hand of Ifá* from Abímbọ́lá. Kofá is a traditional ritual that prepares a person to successfully navigate life's conflicts. After about three years, Fatóòjolá moved to Kentucky where he organized lectures for Abímbọ́lá to speak about the practice. During those visits, Fatóòjolá and his wife also received their orís from Abímbọ́lá. Despite the relationship that Fatóòjolá had developed with Abímbọ́lá, he said, “I was

still torn whether or not I was to make Òrìṣà in the house in New York, or if I was going to make Òrìṣà in Nigeria."

The divination with Pancho Mora in 1973 was his first experience in Nigeria in 1979. Reading Abímbọ́lá's *Sixteen Great Poems* all came together for Fatóòjolá about his understanding and desire to be initiated. He recalled, "Panco Mora told me that I was destined to be a babaláwo and when I read that book [*Sixteen Great Poems*] I was saying, 'man, this is what I want to do here!'"

Fatóòjolá finally decided that he would go to Nigeria to be initiated. He chose to go there specifically because of Abímbọ́lá. Addressing his rationale for this decision he said, "because, for me, what I had gone through, all the things that I learned from Bàbá Wándé, for me it was resonating more than it was to others."

Fatóòjolá said that his journey to be initiated in Nigeria allowed him, "to be immersed in the culture [and] . . . to interact with brothers and sisters in Yorùbáland, even though they have problems, their sense of humanity is just beautiful." After initiation, a seven-day process, practitioners don't have much to do and have a lot of free time. The free time for Fatóòjolá was his highlight. He said, "The highlight was really just being able to interact with the people, the freedom that I had."

Before his initiation Fatóòjolá had many questions. The big thing for him came after he was initiated. He felt that all of the questions he had before initiation were answered, but now he had more questions. It all became very overwhelming for him. Fatóòjolá said, "There was a time when I was like, 'what did I get myself into here?'" The initiation propelled him to reflect on his process, purpose, and to understand the meaning behind the philosophical, spiritual, and ethical

elements enclosed in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. In order to relieve himself from being overwhelmed, he had to see the bigger picture and take small steps to get there:

> I was really able to see how this system was, and it was overwhelming. Then over time I began to realize . . . when the talk about Iwá Pẹ̀lẹ́ and patience and stuff like that . . . that's what is being talked about here, is that you got to set a trajectory. This is a long range marathon, relay. Because we got to pass it on to the next generation; the stuff that we don't accomplish ourselves the next generation's going to accomplish. When I started thinking like that, it helped to relieve me a little bit, and then I started climbing a mountain one step at a time. Before that it was, "I don't know If I'm going to make it there now; this is too steep."

The impact on Fatóòjolá on his journey to Nigeria to be initiated was to instill a deeper sense of discipline. During various stages of his life as a practitioner, his exposure to Ifá/Òrìṣà practice has impacted his life. "It's opened doors for me intellectually, spiritually, mentally. It instilled a sense of discipline." Finding *Sixteen Great Poems* (Abímbọ́lá,1975a) in Nigeria, participating in the ritual practices, and the spiritual discipline he observed created a model Fatóòjolá could follow a model based on his direct experience and observations. His journey connected his theoretical knowledge with actual experience in an indigenousness culture whose continuity goes back well past six generations. Fatóòjolá confessed his lack of understanding of the Ifá culture of practice,

> I never really had a sense of spiritual discipline. That's the reason the *Sixteen Great Poems* was such a big influence on me, because Bàbá Wándé Abímbọ́lá outlined the spiritual discipline of Ifá culture, which I had never seen. All I knew was Babaláwo's or father's of secrets . . . I didn't know anything else and how that comes about and how that person is trained and stuff like that. It impacted me.

Fatóòjolá learned how to apply his spiritual discipline in his daily life. During my fieldwork in Louisville, Kentucky, I stayed at Fatóòjolá and Ifájọ́kẹ́ Burton's home in a guest room on the third floor right across from their shrine room. Early each morning, before beginning their day's program or venturing outside, I would hear the rattling of their Ìrọ́kẹ́ or the clinging of their Àdáaṣà and the echoing of chants in Yorùbá and prayers in English, coming out of their

shrine room. Like everybody, Fatóòjolá knows people have good days and some bad days. His purpose in saluting his Òrìṣà in the morning was to bring balance into his day. As in his experience at the Ọ̀sé Méjì Shine in Nigeria, Fatóòjolá tries to wake up early each morning, gently rub his Ifá in his hands and say his prayers. "I wake up in the morning and I say a prayer because to me it's all about balance. It's all about alignment for me."

What made Fatóòjolá's initiation in Nigeria special or different compared to people initiated elsewhere, is that it was done by Dr. Wándé Abímbọ́lá, the *Àwíṣẹ Awo Ní Àgbáyé*, "the spokesperson for the Yorùbá religion and culture in the world" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997a, p. 26). Fatóòjolá said that he went from reading Abímbọ́lá's book to learning under him, and being able to ask him questions, "What was special about it is I had access to him." Fatóòjolá added, "I think that's very special and that to me completed my journey."

As long as I have known Fatóòjolá, he has activated his spiritual lens the same ways he always carries and uses his camera. He not only focuses on the material realities and necessities of life, Fatóòjolá balances these with his spiritual perceptions. He is very sensitive about keeping his physical self, personal space, and work space spiritually cleaned. Through spiritual baths, prayers, chants, or, propitiating the icons of the divinities, Fatóòjolá applies these practices to create a balanced and favorable life.

One of the days of my field work at Fatóòjolá's home fell on Ifá day. Fatóòjolá had prepared an *omiero*, a spiritual solution to bathe with. He prepared some for me when I was ready to shower. He gave me a green bowl to use to scoop out the omiero. It was the same green bowl he gave me to take spiritual baths at his home in Boston during the early 1980s when he was a practitioner in the Cuba system. This was a time when I was homeless and Fatóòjolá allowed me to stay in his photography studio.


*Figure 4.3. Fatóòjolá* Ajala Aukram Burton, Tony Van Der Meer, Frank Cabrera and Frank, Jr. at Ile TunTun Shrine in Havana, Cuba, 2007.

Fatóòjolá was always disciplined about his spiritual practices. The Nigerian Ifá/Òrìṣà experience has broadened his practice, allowing him to do what Heifetz (1994) described in *Leadership Without Easy Answers,* as "adaptive work" (p. 31). Connecting Fatóòjolá's practice with Heifetz (1994) ideas is to point out the leadership element in Ifá/Òrìṣà practice. Adaptive work is a way of addressing problems or challenges which "involves not only the assessment of reality but also the clarification of values" (p. 31). Despite the difficulties and frustrations working with other systems of practice and not doing his initiation in the United States, Fatóòjolá's initiation in Nigeria and his study, practice, and travel around the world, have deepened his discipline to apply his knowledge of the sacred in order to have balance from the profane, and to address aspects of chaos in the world. Fatóòjolá has been privileged to travel globally to other countries as well including China, Japan, South Africa, Brazil, and Cuba. He shared those experiences and excitement through his photography and videos, encouraging others

to travel as well. In 2007, Fatóòjolá and I traveled together to observe the experience of practitioners in Cuba. Figure 4.3 shows Fatóòjolá with Frank Cabrera, a Cuban babaláwo who embraces the traditional Nigerian Ifá/Òrìṣà practice.

Fatóòjolá said the challenge for him being initiated in Nigeria,

> was to rid myself of this deducted worldview that I was born [with], into a world view and cosmology that is really dense. I looked at my situation as an opportunity to begin to shed myself of some of the things that I had.

While he willingly took on this transformational challenge, he added that his "biggest challenge is [Yorùbá] language."

> I do understand that there's only but so much I can know and learn without . . . not knowing the language. The language is very key to understanding the Yorùbá religion. I'm calling it a religion because again that's a carryover. I think it's a way of life because there's so many different aspects to this.

It was Fatóòjolá's political activism and his concern about an exploitive, unjust, and unequal world that brought him to the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. "It's all about the harmony of our existence on this planet," he said. Searching for that balance is what eventually led Fatóòjolá to Nigeria to be initiated. Perhaps another influence on Fatóòjolá's wanting to see Nigeria as a place to be initiated, came from Lloyd Weaver. Weaver was another mentor of Fatóòjolá's. In his first trip to Nigeria in 1979, Fatóòjolá ran into Weaver who was a priest of Yemọnja, initiated in the United States by Ṣàngó Gumi Marjorie Bayne Quinones. Fatóòjolá and Weaver had a special relationship and Weaver had performed a "significant number of divinations" for him. Fatóòjolá had also learned a lot from Weaver and saw how he viewed Nigeria in an important way. Fatóòjolá pointed out that, "his [Weaver's] allegiances were to Africa, even though he was in the Lucumi system. He straddled both situations. He travelled back and forth."

Trying to balance the different systems of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice was one of the challenges that Fatóòjolá identified as an Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioner from the United States initiated in Nigeria.

Straddling both settings, as Weaver did, Fatóòjolá said, “the challenge for us is how do we coexist with that?”

Fatóòjolá sees the need to recognize the strong foundation that the Cuban Lucumi practitioners set in the United States. He also sees the need for those Lucumi practitioners to recognize the source of Ifá/Òrìṣà belief systems. He said, “That’s another challenge” and added, “You have people that are in this religion that want to practice it without giving due respect to where it came from.”

**Ìyánífá Ifájọ̀kẹ́ Nefertiti Burton, Playwright, Professor (Louisville, KY)**

*Figure 4.4*. Ìyánífá Ifájọ̀kẹ́ Nefertiti Burton.

After sitting through a short children’s play and discussion at one of the theatres at the University of Louisville, Kentucky, I went with Ìyánífá Ifájọ̀kẹ́ Nefertiti Burton to her office located in the same building as the theater, right around the corner. Our interview was held on September 13, 2015.

Ifájọ̀kẹ́ is the chairperson of the Drama Department. She is shown in Figure 4.4. In her office, behind her desk, was an *Ìrọ̀kẹ́* prominently sitting on her windowsill. Ìrọ̀kẹ́ is a paraphernalia of Ifá priest that denotes a sign of authority according to W. Abímbọ́lá (1975a). It

is used to tap on the divining board during divination or shaken in order to rattle a small bell inside the bottom. The tapping and rattling of the Ìrọ́kẹ́ punctuates the chanting of the Ifá priest. According to W. Abímbọ́lá (1975a) the Ìrọ́kẹ́ has a "very high ritualistic value (p. 18).

Ìyánífá *Ifájọkẹ́* Nefertiti Burton is part of a growing cohort of women from the United States initiated to Ifá in Nigeria. Ìyánífá is the female equivalent of a Babaláwo. The role of women in Ifá/Òrìṣà practice is marked with controversy in Nigeria as well as in the diaspora. Ifájọkẹ́ is optimistic but critical of women's role in Ifá/Òrìṣà practice. She felt that there is "a movement towards really expanding and increasing the level of respect that women practicing Ifá receive." In her critical point of view, "there is a great deal of fear of women in most religious systems around the world, and I think that that shows up in the Yorùbá system as well."

Ifájọkẹ́ addressed the issue of *Odù*, the divinity which only certain male Ifá priest can receive. She does not view the exclusion of women from receiving Odù as a discriminatory exclusion. Ifájọkẹ́ believes that the conversation around Odù being something women can't achieve,

> comes out of the fact that, as women, we're able to conceive and give birth, which men can't do, and I think that's around the world an issue for a lot of males or the male psyche, that there's something where they actually feel deficient, and so a lot of the ways in which they oppress us or diminish us to keep us out has to do with that fact, that there's capacity that we have men don't have.

The involvement of Ifájọkẹ́ into Ifá/Òrìṣà practice was through her husband, Fatóòjolá Ajala Aukram Burton, "He told me about it, introduced me to it." Ifájọkẹ́ felt that there was probably depth to her early exposure to the practice but that didn't come across from the people in the practice she associated with in Boston. During that time she said, "I did not get the rationale, intellectual side of things. I didn't get enough understanding to make it all make sense to me."

Ifájọkẹ́'s early experience and understanding with Santeria was viewed in ways similar to how people look at horoscopes, "You're creative and you like to dance, so you must be Ọ̀ṣun'—There wasn't any depth." She felt that her attraction to Ifá practiced in Nigeria and her influence by Wándé Abímbọ́lá gave her "some of the intellectual grounding" that she needed in order to make sense of the depth of the practice for her.

The choice to get initiated in Nigeria for Ifájọkẹ́ was more about her learning and studying with Abímbọ́lá: "It was really about that individual, I think, and what I felt like he offered me in terms of teaching, and of course, in studying." Ifájọkẹ́ would have done her initiation in wherever her Oluwo was. She didn't feel the need to go back to Nigeria for that purpose. She said, "It was more about maybe trying to get as authentic an experience of initiation as I could."

Like her husband, Ifájọkẹ́ enjoyed the quiet time after initiation; she said she "had absolutely no responsibility" during that period. Ifájọkẹ́ said that when she now tries to meditate, she thinks back to that time when all she had to do is "be quiet and reflect and pray, and that was probably the most beautiful time I can think of my entire life, really, that quiet time, that personal time, that personal space."

Ifájọkẹ́ felt that, over time, her journey to be initiated in Nigeria prepared her for the "level of achievement that was to come." Before her initiation in Nigeria, Ifájọkẹ́ said she didn't feel that she was,

> fully aware of my own capacity for growth and change and development. I think that's what it did more than anything else was laid the groundwork and gave me the confidence to know that I could achieve whatever it was that I set my mind to, whatever it was that was in my future, whatever it was that my orí was giving me to move forward.

The impact of Ifájọkẹ́'s journey to Nigeria from the first time she went with her husband in 1977, and when she was initiated in 2000, showed in her family life and professional life. The

book that her husband discovered in Nigeria had its markers on her as well. Not only did she agree to name their son after the main character in one of the *Sixteen Great Poems*, Ifájọ̀kẹ́ wrote, produced and directed a play based on one of the poems, titled*, How Orí Choose his Head*.

Ifájọ̀kẹ́ has received awards for her writing and directing plays. As an Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioner she has used that experience and knowledge to produce more than five plays rooted in traditional Ifá sacred literature. She said that her visits and initiation in Nigeria were, "an opportunity to learn." As an African American travelling to Nigeria, during each trip, she said: "I feel like there's opportunity for me to understand better who we are and where we come from."

Ifájọ̀kẹ́'s experience in Nigeria was not a romanticized one. She felt other African Americans often paint a picture where Africa is "set up to be ideal." She said that she was aware before going forward with her travel and initiation that there is "not any utopia for black people."


*Figure 4.5.* Ìyánífá *Ifájọ̀kẹ́* Nefertiti Burton at the Kentucky Center of African American Heritage.

One of the challenges for Ifájọkẹ́ during her initiation and travels to Nigeria was the contradiction of Africa being seen as a utopia, yet the frustrations of dealing with,

> some of the basic stuff like plumbing and getting gas for your car and being able to drive down the road with the police just standing in the middle of the road and stopping you and boarding your vehicle and asking for money.

Ifájọkẹ́ understands that saying this isn't a slight to Africa and that "contradictions are everywhere."

Ifájọkẹ́ said that what she learned from her experience being initiated in Nigeria was, "a lifelong journey of a learning of character-building, of strengthening myself so that I can help my family." She added that before her initiation she really didn't know what she expected to come away with other than, "it was very personal."

Ifájọkẹ́ was unable to compare how special her initiation in Nigeria was to practitioners initiated elsewhere. She said that from her knowledge of practitioners initiated in Kentucky, a lot of American "ritual aspects and conceptual aspects have been incorporated." Ifájọkẹ́ is respectful about how other people in the United States practice Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system but said,

> I do have to say that I have an attitude that what happens in Nigeria, especially among the elder priest or among those who have been trained by priest whose training goes back a generation or more, I feel like that it's important to hold on to those traditions. It's important to recognize how things were done, so that if indeed we do make changes, we understand what we're changing from and why we make the choices that we make.

Ifájọkẹ́ feels that although it may sound "pretty harsh." to her, some of the decisions to make changes in the initiation process in the United States are not necessarily "legitimate." She believes that to whatever extent practitioners can, knowing, researching, and making journeys to connect with the Ifá/Orișá belief system that goes far back as possible, is important:

> The fact that Ifá, for example, has been preserved through all these years by their very attempt to hold on to what was, means that it's unique and special and ancient. If we continue to just throw any old faith in there, I don't know what its going to be in the future. In some way, I tend to value the process, the systems that come from Nigeria in a way . . . I guess I value them more, but I give them special obeisance or a special kind of

> respect and appreciation that for me is not necessarily the same as the more contemporary versions of what happens around the U.S.

The challenges that Ifájọ́kẹ́ experienced in the United States as a practitioner initiated in Nigeria, deal with ecological concerns, media abominations in film and music, and continued self-development. Her ecological concern is around the proper disposal of ẹbọ, ritual sacrifice. She questioned how to dispose of ritual remains, "that's respectful to the way that we live now, and that is consistent with my personal concerns with ecology and sanitation."

Another challenge is the "sheer ignorance" in how the media "consistently degrade what it is that our religious system, our spiritual system represents." As a teacher who draws on the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system as a part of her teaching, research, and as a way of life, Ifájọ́kẹ́ said that it is really "painful," adding: "I'm in this battle all the time to reeducate and reclaim what it is that our religion represents." An example of Ifájọ́kẹ́'s point about the degrading media images that misrepresent aspects of the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system is the film, *Santeria: The Soul Possessed* by the director, Benny Mathews and Lions Gate Studio (Wood & Mathews, 2012).

One of the major challenges for Ifájọ́kẹ́ is her continued development outside of Nigeria. She is concerned about how to continue growing when you are in a "space and time where there's not really a lot of resources." She says she is concerned about what is immediately there for her,

> as a person in the U.S. who wants to continually grow and evolve and learn, it's a real challenge for me. Finding just personally the time and space, because I'm not in a situation where I can sit down at the feet of some learned Babaláwo and continue to learn more chants and odù's and more philosophy and be corrected in the ways that I'm doing what I'm doing.

**Babaláwo Babatunde Gregory Anderson**, **Drummer, Retired Civil Servant (Bronx, NY)**

*Figure 4.6.* Babaláwo Babatunde Gregory Anderson practicing on the drums.

The first time that I met Babatunde Gregory Anderson was during 1997/98 at a seminar on Ifá with the Àwíṣẹ, Dr. Wándé Abímbọ́lá in an apartment off of Grand Concourse Avenue in the Bronx, New York. It became clear to me then, based on our interactions, that he was into drumming. One night during a visit to Babatunde's home I had intended to interview him, instead we ended up playing the drums and Ifá bells.

Babatunde lives in a three-story Bronx family home with his wife, son, and daughter. He is seen drumming in Figure 4.6. On the ground level of his home is the space where he does his spiritual work. When you come through the side entrance of his home on the ground level, the Èṣù is behind the door. Walking through the hall, you pass the rest-room and a small kitchen and into the living room. On one side of the living room is a desk next to the window, covered with boxes. He also has his drums and shakerees on that side. Near the built-in glass-covered shelf case displaying African-made statues of Òrìṣàs, he has a white easel board with handwritten Yorúbá on it.

The other side of his living room has couches and, on the lid of a shelf built on the wall, are photos of boxing champions Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali; musicians, Miles Davis and Fela Kuta; and African American leaders Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Babatunde's shrine room is next to the living room. Inside, on the right side of the wall are his Òrìṣàs. On the other side are colorful displays of batiks with Òrìṣà images printed on them. Spread throughout the shrine room are books, files, and papers about the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system.

I interviewed Babatunde at his home on November 8, 2015. He was born in Washington, DC, and grew up in a household that was politically-conscious and active in the Civil Rights, and Black Power movements of the 1960s. Babatunde said that he was, "always on a spiritual quest for revolutionary and liberating theologies . . . just trying to understand life's mysteries and my inner visions." In 1970 he moved to New York. He stated that his initial involvement with the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system "started through drumming." Babatunde said "I had a conga drum and met many drummers here in New York City parks, streets, jazzmobile, workshops, and festivals." Also during this time of the early 1970s he met a Sango priest who taught him many things about drumming and took him to his first Cuban bembe in New York, a festival celebrating the Òrìṣà. At that bembe, Babatunde said he was, "amazed at the amount of cohesiveness and tightness around the drumming and rituals."

Babatunde had a "life changing experience" when he saw the Yorúbá play *Oba Koso* by Nigeria playwright Duro Ladipo and a full cast of Nigerian actors and musicians. In Figure 4.7, he points to the program bulletin from this play. Drummers from the jazzmobile as well as from all over the city went to see this play at the Felt Forum in New York City. It was about the Òrìṣá Ṣàngó who was the Aláàfin or king of the Ọ̀yọ́ Empire. Ṣàngó was also believed to be a great dancer and drummer. Babatunde attended the after-party and got autographs from some of the

people in the production. He didn't realize at the time that the Babaláwo in the production would become his Oluwo (Ifá teacher).


*Figure 4.7.* Babatunde Gregory Anderson showing an autographed program bulletin of the play OBA KOSO. This was performed in New York City in 1976.

Through his drumming, Babatunde met baba Yomi Yomi Awólọ́wọ̀, a priest of Yemọnja who had been initiated in the Cuban system. Baba Yomi, who has one of the largest African American Òrìṣà houses in New York, connected Babatunde with Cuban Babaláwo Pancho Mora (Ifá Moroti), the same babaláwo from whom Fatóòjolá Ajala Aukram Burton received divination. Babatunde eventually received his *One Hand of Ifá* from Mora in 1982. He was told by Mora that one day, depending on the will of Òrìṣà he also "could receive [be initiated to] full Ifá." Babatunde's spiritual quest, his passion for drumming, his connections with the Congo, Yemọja, and Ṣàngó priests, and, the Ba'iles Cultural Center in DC, as well as receiving his *One Hand of Ifa* from Pancho Mora, put him on the road to his eventual initiation.

A long series of events eventually led Babatunde to do his initiation in Nigeria. For many years he had travelled in the circles of bembes and was exposed to the Cuban Ifá/Òrìṣà system.

Through his contacts with the National Black Theater of Harlem, he was able to travel to Nigeria in 1990 to attend a Ọ̀ṣun festival. The National Black Theater of Harlem's founder Barbara Ann Teer, was also a priest of Yemonja and an artist initiated in Òṣogbo, Nigeria. She was one of the African American women pioneers— probably the first African American woman—to be initiated in Nigeria.

Many years after his first trip to Nigeria, Babatunde attended a bembe and was asked by a priest possessed by an Òrìṣá, why he hadn't done his initiation yet. Until that time he had had no idea he was going to do his initiation. Babatunde said the Òrìṣá asked: "What is it that you're doing? . . . We've got things for you to do."

After that bembe, Babatunde called Nigeria to speak with the Babaláwo with whom he would eventually spend time with during his first visit to Nigeria: Chief Ifáyẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn. When Babatunde phoned Chief Ifáyẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, the first thing Ẹlẹ́buìbọn said to him was, "well, when are you coming?" Somehow Ẹlẹ́buìbọn had already known that Babatunde was planning to come to Nigeria. Due to things then going on in Babtunde's life he said, "I needed to make Òrìṣà because I felt like my life was a torn piece of cloth and I needed to get my own self together." A couple of months after that call, Babatunde left for Nigeria to do his initiation. Babatunde gave many thanks to his Oluwo, Chief Ifáyẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, who is now the *Araba* (father of Babaláwos) of Òṣogbo, Nigeria. Babatunde said that although he chose to do his initiation in Nigeria, "it was like it [Ǹigeria] chose me."

One of the highlights of Babatunde's journey to be initiated in Òṣogbo, Nigeria, was accompanying his Oluwo to visit the palace and meet with the *Atáọ́ja* (King) H.R.H Matanmi III. That just "topped it off for me," Babatunde said. The King congratulated him for making the

journey and being initiated into Ifá. The King gave Babatunde his blessing and told him that he should go out and be a "good representative of the tradition."

Babatunde's meeting with the King was a very pleasant one. He said despite the wonderful experiences, one of the challenges for practitioners initiated in Nigeria is that the, "Nigerian experience is basically a rugged experience." He added: "You have to be the type of person that can deal with the food change; it's a cultural change . . . It's much different than what you're accustomed to here in the United States."

The impact of Babatunde's journey to be initiated in Nigeria is "still awesome and guiding." He said that when you receive your Odù Ifá "that gives you a blueprint or an indication as to destiny, what it is that you should do." Babatunde said the change or impact that his initiation has on his life required "change" and "an adjustment of character." He stated: "Once you submit to your destiny and you refine your character, you become on the path of your life and understanding who you are and where you're going." The cultivation and refinement of character and ori is an ongoing process. Babatunde pointed out that initiation is "designed to shake your foundation at the core . . . it will start a profound journey into your own soul."

The main thing that Babatunde learned during his journey of initiation in Nigeria, and what he wanted to bring back to the United States, is that "there's another way to view life . . . other than the Western ideology that we've been taught." Babatunde said that the perspective he learned during his journey to be initiated offered "profound spiritual technologies and systems that are liberating . . . that are very relevant here in the United States in terms of identity, direction and purpose."

Like Ifájọ̀kẹ́ Nefertiti Burton, Babatunde was unable to speak about other peoples' experience of being initiated elsewhere. He said what made his initiation experience in Nigeria "a

life-changing event that continues to unfold . . . sometimes, it takes you out of your comfort zone, but always brings you back to a good place."

Among the challenges for practitioners initiated in Nigeria and their subsequent experience in the United States, is acquiring some of the materials needed to make *ẹbọ* or sacrifice. Babatunde said that some materials may be "difficult to acquire—or we have to be creative with suitable and efficacious subsitutes acceptable to *irunmale*." Some of the sacred items from Nigeria used in ritual sacrifice to the United States, may be difficult to pass U.S. Customs security. Babatunde viewed this as a problem of the imposition of Western culture,

> Western culture is pretty arrogant and it's always imposing itself and so you kind of are often diametrically opposed to the regular, every day forces of life. So, you have to know how to navigate those types of things. That's definitely a challenge here in the U.S.

The other challenge Babatunde felt is to "develop community here." He felt that practitioners of like minds, passion, and the desire to move forward, need to "organize and come together as a collective." He does not see these challenges as "insurmountable" but just "obstacles to nation building."

Babatunde said that after his initiation and return to the United States, he had expected to be welcomed "to the club." He realized, instead, that he was "kind of outside of the loop," according to the Lukumi practitioners he knew. He was thankful that he could find other practitioners like himself who were initiated in Nigeria, and study Ifá with Àwíṣẹ, Dr. Wándé Abímbọ́lá. Babatunde said of Abímbọ́lá's arrival to New York, "when the student is ready, the master appears."

*Figure 4.8.* Babatunde Gregory Anderson in a Cafe in Havana, Cuba.

Babatunde said that Abímbọ́lá gave him a "solid foundation to build on." He attended the Ifá classes in New York taught by Abímbọ́lá, one weekend a month for three years. During his studies with Abímbọ́lá, Babatunde said that in relationship to the Lucumi community, "I stayed in my lane." Figure 4.8 shows Babatunde listening to another Ifá priest in a Cafe in Havana, Cuba. He was familiar with the Lucumi system because he was a part of it and thankful to Baba Yomi, through Pancho Mora, who he received his Kofa (One hand of Ifá) from. Babatunde said that staying in his lane meant that his focus was to "study Ifá."

During August 2015, I travelled with Babatunde to Havana on a *People to People* visit. We were able to meet and interact with Cuban Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners. Babatunde noted that he had received a "lukewarm welcome" from fellow Lucumi practitioners in New York when he returned from his initiation in Nigeria. Yet, on his first to trip to Cuba he was warmly received by practitioners there and, along with myself, was invited to perform *ẹbọs* for one of Cuba's prominent babaláwos. Babatunde said that for him, this experience was, "a full circle moment." After completing that ẹbọ, Babatunde and I were treated to an elaborate meal set at a table for 10 people. The plates and dishes laid face down with silverware on the side. Large platters were

filled with different food items—chicken, fish, goat, rice, beans, avocado, and yam. Someone served our plates first before we all ate.

Babatunde is one of a few Ifá practitioners from the United States, initiated in Nigeria, who can perform rituals and chant Ifá verses in Yorùbá. He has retained by memory a good assortment of Ifá verses which has allowed him to function more within the oral tradition in the way practitioners do in Nigeria. As a musician, Babatunde also incorporates the playing of Ifá bells that are traditionally used in Nigeria, when Ifá priests chant during ritual performances.

After we got back to our room that evening in Cuba, from doing the ritual work and being treated to the special meal, Babatunde reflected on that experience. He described the difference between the Cuban practitioners in Cuba and those in New York: "The Cuban practitioners in Cuba were open to learn from us." This was a full reversal for him to be warmly accepted for his Nigerian experience and knowledge of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice from Lucumi practitioners. This was the same branch of practitioners in New York who had not embraced him warmly. When Babatunde and I left Cuba we stayed in Florida for several days and met with Babaláwo Aikulola Nathan Lugo, another Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioner from the United States initiated in Nigeria. This practitioner shared some experiences similar to Babatunde's and of some of my other interviewees. He was my next interviewee.

**Babaláwo Aikulola Nathan Lugo, Full-Time Ifá/Òrìṣá Practitioner (Hollywood, FL)**

*Figure 4.9.* Babaláwos Aikulola Nathan Lugo and Babatunde Gregory Anderson at a Cuban Restaurant in Hollywood, Florida.

When I arrived to meet with Aikulola Nathan Lugo, for an interview in January the first thing that I noticed was the palm trees lined up in front of his one story single home. Figure 4.9 shows Aikulola Nathan Lugo, along with Babatunde Gregory Anderson. Palm trees in Florida are not unusual. In the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà tradition in Nigeria, the sacred palm tree is called *ọ̀pẹ̀* Ifá where the sixteen palm-nuts used in divination come from (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1977). Ọ̀pẹ̀ is also another name use for *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* (Ẹlẹ́buìbọn, 1999).

Aikulola, the Yorùbá name that Nathan Lugo goes by, was offering a goat to Ifá on this visit. Babatunde Gregory came along with me to also participate in this ritual. There was also an Ifá initiate visiting from Brazil who assisted Aikulola with the preparations for the ritual. Aikulola is a well-trained and knowledgeable Ifá/Òrìṣá initiate who spent many years travelling to Nigeria studying the practice. He has been to Nigeria at least 20 times. Besides being an

English-speaker, he is also fluent in Spanish, Portuguese, and Yorùbá. He was given a Ọbàtálá Chieftaincy title in Ọ̀yọ́ and an Ifá Chieftaincy title in Òṣogbo.

At 41 years old, Aikulola is the youngest of those interviewed for this study. He functions as a full time Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioner. He performs divinations, gives One Hand of Ifá, officiates at naming ceremonies, and does full Ifá initiations. His home and shrine space is very organized, and neat. His shrine room is a large open space with photos, certificates, Òrìṣà paraphernalia, and Yorùbá calendars on the walls. On one side of the room he has bowls, containers, and pots used for spiritual work, lined against the wall. His Òrìṣà implements were set up against the adjacent wall.

There is a seven-foot bookcase on the other side of the room with shelves filled with books on Ifá/Òrìṣá practice and other African spiritual systems. His assorted book titles are in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Yorùbá. In the middle of the room before the back wall is a mat on the floor with his *òpọ́n* or Ifá divining board filled with *Ìyẹ̀rosùn* or sacred divining power, and his *ìrọ́kẹ́* nearby. Outside is a large backyard that wraps around the back and the side of the house. Aikuloa has a variety of special Ifá plants growing around the boarder of his yard.

In one corner of the yard is a cabin with sets of clean spacious cages where Aikulola keeps chickens and other birds. He has feeding bins and water tubs attached to those cages. Behind the outside back of his house is a sizable brick pit with a large *Èṣù* and *Ògún* placed inside it. Aikulola has set up an environment for his practice with the similar conveniences to perform ritual work that is found in Nigeria.

Well versed in odù Ifá Aikulola presented the goat to Ifá with prayers and chants in Yorùbá. He chanted one of the 16 méjí's from Èjì Ogbè to Òfún Méjì, along with chanting the obligatory two minor odù's that accompanied the offered sacrifice to ọ̀run or heaven. He prayed

for blessings and success of our meeting and relationships. He also chanted prayers in Yorùbá as he offered *oyín* (honey), *epo* (palm oil), and *otí* (alcohol) to the sacrificed goat and the Òrìṣà icons. He threw the obi (kola nuts) to confirm the acceptance of the sacrifice. The offering was accepted with obiyan*,* which is the best outcome that represents balance.

Two of Aikulola's apprentices came at the end of the offering and assisted with skinning and cutting up of the goat. Certain parts of the goat were offered to some Òrìṣà, and the *Ìyàmí* (great mothers also referred to as witches) with other parts divided up for food. When we completed the ritual I was able to interview Aikulola.

Coming from a Catholic Puerto Rican background, Aikulola was never baptized or,"felt much of a connection to Catholicism." When 10 years old, he started getting interested in the Òrìṣà. On the corner where he lived in the Bronx was a botanica. He would go into the botanica and smell the incense, see the Catholic images, and African statues, which all "looked very exotic" to him.

Aikulola's grandmother practiced a Caribbean style spiritism which was "the gate-way" for him to "learn about the almost clandestine African heritage of Puerto Rican culture." As he started to learn more, what he said "drew" him to Ifá/Òrìṣà practice, "was beautiful, culturally in tune with me. Artistically it resonated; philosophically it also seemed like a traditional empowerment, and an ancient one."

"Totally enthralled . . . by Òrìṣá tradition," Aikulola waited years before he found the right mentor. Although he had contacts with "people who practice the Cuban expression of Òrìṣà tradition" Aikulola finally made contact with a Nigerian babaláwo. He had divination performed for him which revealed that "initiation would be good" for him. In Figure 4.10 Aikulola is shown

in 2002 at a meeting in Boston of Ifá/Òrisá practitioners from the United States who had been initiated in Nigeria.

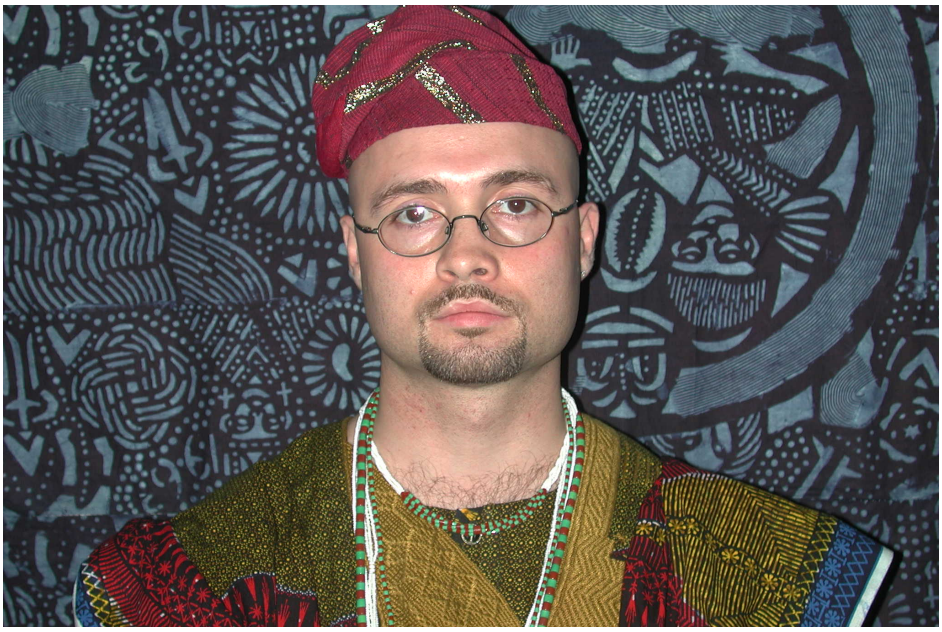

*Figure 4.10.* Aikulola Nathan Lugo, May 2002, at Boston meeting of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from United States initiated in Nigeria.

Aikulola was deliberate about his decision to be initiated in the African and not the Cuban or Brazilian traditions. He said, "Definitely West Africa was the place I needed to go because I only wanted to practice West African Òrìṣà tradition, not any other tradition."

After getting over the cultural shock of his first visit to Nigeria, the highlight of his journey to be initiated was the, "authentic experience" that Aikulola had wanted. He was in a world where, "you don't have McDonald's." It wasn't that Aikulola was expecting or wanted McDonald's; it was the realization that he was in West Africa a place different than the conveniences he was used to. Aikulola's very presence in a different culture on the continent that he had only read about and imagined, was a highlight of his journey,

> I was in West Africa, and thinking: "Wow, I'm really here, I'm in Yorùbáland, just like I've read in the books, just like I've studied and spent all this time focusing on this culture. I'm at the place where the Òrìṣà laid the foundation in the world."

Aikulola used the word "growth" to describe the impact or change his journey of initiation had on his life. He said with Òrișá and Ifá in his life, "it definitely has given me a focus, given me a path, direction, and saved my life." Aikulola added that without his initiation, "I don't know what I would have done."

Through his language acquisition, knowledge of plants, poetry, and travelling around the world, Aikulola said that he has "learned and . . . grown" because of the impact of his initiation to the Ifa/Òrișà belief system. He has travelled to many different parts of the world; Cuba, Mexico, Spain, Venezuela, and Brazil; he said it was because of "Òrișà, because of Ifá."

What made Aikulola's experience to be initiated in Nigeria special or different is that his initiation was in, "the place where the culture began." He emphasized that,

> It's [Ifá/Òrișà practice] been retained, it's not like it's been wiped out like many want to have people believe. It's an unbroken chain . . . the language has been retained, so [has] all the poetry, the prayers, the incantations, the recitations, the drumming, it's all done within the context of the Yorùbá language and any of its dialects, so that's unique. All the drumming, the songs, everything that people are chanting and are drumming, the priest, the priestess, and the youth, as well as the elders, know exactly what they are saying . . . it's really creating something magical.

Aikulola said being initiated in Nigeria is not like getting initiated elsewhere, "Everything is right there, where it all began . . . So you don't have to interpret it or read the history book about it. You can prepare yourself, but you're actually living it there."

Aikulola said what was challenging for him during his journey to be initiated in Nigeria was being, "a foreigner, and being fair skinned." He said, "You have to know how to navigate." According to Aikulola, one of the challenges in the United States for practitioners is going through customs. He said, "you feel like you're a second-class citizen. You are being treated like a criminal, because you went to Nigeria."

According to Aikulola, practitioners of the Òrìṣà traditions in the United States are, "used to what they are used to . . . They don't have the same perspective that we do." He added: "Sometimes having a basic dialogue can get pretty sticky. It can be challenging mixing with other Òrìṣà people that don't practice your own tradition."

Aikulola identified a sense of "isolation" for practitioners from the United States who go to Nigeria to be initiated and return. Figure 4.11 shows Aikulola Nathan Lugo sitting on the mat at his shrine in Hollywood, Florida. Aikulola said that practitioners don't necessarily come back to a "supportive community." He added, "it's not always a hospitable environment to come back and think that you have an automatic friendship, because we're both Òrìṣà worshipers."


*Figure 4.11.* Aikulola Nathan Lugo at his shrine in Hollywood, Florida.

According to Aikulola, between those practitioner from the United States initiated in Nigeria and those who were initiated in the United States, or, Cuba, there are a lot of "dynamics" and "differences" that come into play. He felt that the experience for some practitioners initiated in Nigeria are subjected to a certain level of ostracism in the United States, that make a lot of

people want to “convert over to [the] Cuban tradition.” Aikulola found this to be very challenging. He said,

> You think, “wow, go to Nigeria or Benin Republic, to Yorùbáland, in general West Africa, and you’re surrounded by a whole bunch of people all worshiping together, laughing, dancing, arguing.” Then you come back here, and it’s a sense of isolation.

Aikulola said that he has made connections with people initiated in different Òrìṣà traditions in the United States, “that are more open minded,” but he said he has heard some comments at a prominent cultural center by practitioners initiated in other Òrìṣà traditions, “that can really tear down someone’s spirit.” Aikulola said, “They ask you, oh, you got initiated? Where? Nigeria? Oh, well you know, it was practically dead over there until Martha Vega and us from the Caribbean Cultural Center brought back Òrìṣà to Nigeria.”

Although Aikulola was “livid” at those remarks, he said, “now, tables have turned.” He pointed out that, “People are able to see all the sorts of activity going on in Yorùbáland with [the] Òrìṣà community, and a whole bunch of people are going back to Yorubáland.” Aikulola also pointed out that even the “hardcore Cubans” are “sending money to Nigeria to receive our icons.”

Aikulola is one of a few practitioners from the United States who has not only travelled to Nigeria many times, he is also one of the few who has a proficient knowledge of Ifá/Òrìṣà ritual practice based on the culture in Nigeria, ẹṣẹ Ifá or, odù verses, chanting, plants, and Yorùbá language fluency. There is another practitioner from the United States that I interviewed for this study who also falls in the same category as Aikulola; a female practitioner, Ajiṣẹbọ Michelle Abímbọ́lá.

**Ìyánífá Ajiṣẹ̀bọ Michelle Abímbọ́lá, Apètèbí Ifá (Atlanta, GA)**

*Figure 4.12.* Ìyánífá Ajiṣẹ̀bọ Abímbọ́lá making preparations for *Ọwọ́ Ifá Kan* (One Hand of Ifá) ceremony in Atlanta, Georgia.

After Ajiṣẹ̀bọ Michelle Abímbọ́lá organized the bowls and ingredients to prepare and consecrate the *ọwọ́ Ifá Kan* (One Hand of Ifá) rituals for the visitors from Chicago, she chanted along in Yorùbá with her husband, Dr. Wándé Abímbọ́lá. Ọwọ́ Ifá Kan is also referred to as *Kọ́fá* which means to "study Ifá" (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997a, p. 86). Before the ceremony she had prepared some Yorùbá food; ebá and fish stew, for us to eat. During the ceremony their seven year old precocious son came in the room begging for her attention. Ajiṣẹ̀bọ engaged her son in the ritual by allowing him to add some of the ingredients into the bowl. She then allowed him to assist counting out the Ikìn, the scared Ifá palm nuts. As he counted the Ikìn and placed them in the bowl, he did so by their Yorùbá names,

Àrun Ọ̀ṣìn (for the first five)

Àrun Ọ̀rà (for the second five)

Ẹ̀ta Ògúndá (for the next three)

Èjì Ìrẹtè (for the next two)

Òkan sọ sọ Ìfí dan (for the next one)

When Ajiṣẹbọ, and Dr. Abímbọ́lá's son finished counting, they joyfully said, "*Eku se*," a Yorùbá greeting that means "thank you for your hard work." Content with the attention from his mother, father, and other ritual participants in the room, their son sported in silence a beaming smile. Ajiṣẹbọ Michelle Abìmbọ́lá is seen preparing ritual ingredients for an Ifá/Òrìṣà ceremony in Figure 4.12.

The observation I shared about Ajiṣẹbọ is only a small window view of what an apẹ̀tẹ̀bí is. The wife of a babaláwo who assists him in his Ifá work is an apẹ̀tẹ̀bí (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997b). During my observations and interview with Ajiṣẹbọ on October 11, 2015, she had to fit me in between tending to her energetic seven-year-old son, cooking, hosting guest, and her assistance with the ritual work for the practitioners visiting from Chicago.

When Ajiṣẹbọ was about the same age as her son, as a child she was "obsessed with stories of slavery and the diaspora." Growing up as a child, she was a "voracious reader." She said that since she was a little girl it was her "orí" that led her to get involved with the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system even before she "knew what Ifá was."

Whenever Ajiṣẹbọ visited her grandmother she would become possessed when she went by the ocean nearby. She didn't understand it at the time but she would fall asleep on top of the water. Ajiṣẹbọ said,

> These songs would come to my mind that I call upon the ancestors to help free the ones that died in the water. I mean, anytime I was in the ocean I would be praying for the people who did that arduous journey and the people who didn't make it across.

At eight years, this was where Ajiṣẹbo's life was leading her. Growing up as a young White woman, she was trying to figure out what role she could play,

> in advocating for the world to be a more just place . . . I really didn't know how to do that but I knew the longing to right the wrongs of the world came from a place much deeper that myself. My orí refused to accept slavery and racism as the norm.

It was during a semester Ajiṣẹbọ spent in Kenya that she was exposed to ideas that used, "spirituality as a tool of resistance against colonialism and imperialism." She met and spent time with young Rastafari people at the University of Nairobi. It was there she witnessed how people fused "spirituality and struggle for human rights."

Ajiṣẹbọ was "disappointed and disenchanted" with the different Rastafari communities when she got back to the United States. Unlike her experience in Kenya, the focus in those communities was "more on music and ganja, and less on freedom and human rights." When she returned from Kenya, Ajiṣẹbọ was looking for that "same level of feeling [where] people in the natural world, non-human world were respected." During this time she was working on her undergraduate thesis. It was a self-designed major which was a "combination of religious studies, gender studies, and African studies."She didn't realize that what she was writing about was actually Yorùbá religion. She titled her paper, "Motherland Spirit: African Religion in the Diaspora."

When Ajiṣẹbọ started studying Yorùbá dance at the Dance Complex in Cambridge, Massachusetts she started "learning through the movements" of her body "what the Òrìṣà were." During this time, she was working on her Master's Degree in Applied Linguistics, with an emphasis on multicultural education and ritual language. She continued to pursue the idea of African spirituality as a form of resistance to racism and oppression.

Through her academic research Ajiṣẹbọ was able to uncover, and learn about the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system; and it wasn't until she began taking dance that she "learned what Ifá was." Ajiṣẹbọ said that during that time she had a "hunger."

> I was just so hungry and desperate for finding a community of people who felt the same way I did and people who were really committed to living an African lifestyle that challenged some of what I believed were the wrong ideas of the Western lifestyle, but really didn't have any place to latch onto.

Ajiṣẹbọ heard "on the grapevine" that Dr. Wándé Abìmbọ́lá was doing a workshop. She had read a lot of his work doing her undergraduate thesis. She said, "okay I have to meet this man" in hopes that she could find an answer to living in a community of practice that addressed her spiritual quest. She made contact with the Boston community of Òrìṣá practitioners, *Ilé Àṣẹ Ṣàngó Éwéléré*, where Dr. Abìmbọ́lá would be in attendance at their Ọṣun festival. Ajiṣẹbọ showed up uninvited with her daughter that was just a little over a month old. This was "out of character" for Ajiṣẹbọ. She said that she realized at that time, "my orí [was] leading me to where I needed to go." Soon thereafter, she and her daughter received their one hand of Ifá and Ògun.

*Figure 4.13.* Apẹ̀tẹ̀bí Ìyànífá Ajiṣẹbọ Michelle Abímbọ́lá performing a ritual task.

While Ajiṣẹbọ was still taking dance classes at the Dance Complex she was "working four jobs, two full-time, two part-time" saving up what she considered to be "a whole lot of money." In Figure 4.13 she is seen performing a ritual task. Ajiṣẹbọ had paid someone who was going to take her to do initiation in Cuba. She said, "I knew that my life required me to go

through that initiation ceremony among the Òrìṣàs and I didn't quite know which Òrìṣà or what that would look like, but I knew it was required."

After she had paid her money for her initiation, she was told that her daughter "wouldn't be welcome." to go with her. This was a "really big problem" for Ajiṣẹbọ. She said, "In the end, that money was forfeited and I never went to go do my initiation in Cuba." In hindsight, Ajiṣẹbọ felt that the "Òrìṣà was looking out" for her "because I really didn't belong in the Cuban system."

Ajiṣẹbọ stated, "I waited a long time after meeting a Yorùbá community practitioners until it [initiation] came up in divination that I would either marry a babaláwo or be an Ìyànífá. I thought, "why do I have to choose one? In the end, that odù came true years later when I went to Nigeria to be initiated."

Ajiṣẹbọ said that her initiation in Nigeria was "really through a process of default." She knew she had to be initiated and the Cuba plan didn't work out for her. She said that because of her "relationship with the Àwíṣẹ́," Nigeria "was the place where the opportunity was the most tangible." Also in her case Cuban babaláwos would not initiate a women to Ifá.

The highlight for Ajiṣẹbọ's journey to be initiated in Nigeria was the actual day of the initiation. She was very impressed with the small children who assisted in "performing rituals and chanting." Ajiṣẹbọ said that throughout that whole day she felt like she was "being taken to a place that I had been searching for, for my whole life."Ajiṣẹbọ added,

> I remember when they were shaving my head I felt like I had reached Nirvana. I just felt so fabulous and wonderful and peaceful, and then we went to the river and the two elder women who stood behind me did the rituals that needed to be done at the river. I would never forget those women and the feeling of those rituals being performed at the river on my head was just the best feeling. I don't even have words to describe it but I just felt like, "Okay, now you're where you need to be. Ifá has completed you."

*Figure 4.14.* Apẹ̀tẹ̀bí Ìyànífá Ajiṣẹbọ Michelle Abímbọ́lá.

Ajiṣẹbọ said reflectively, paraphrasing something her husband said, that the goal of the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system "is to help people understand who they are." After her ceremony in Nigeria she said that she "finally understood what that meant and what that looked like." Figure 4.14 is a photo of Apẹ̀tẹ̀bí Ìyànífá Ajiṣẹbọ Michelle Abímbọ́lá.

Ajiṣẹbọ said that her journey to be initiated in Nigeria has impacted or changed her life because, "Ifá became my life and I think that Ifá always was my life." Although she continues to work on herself, she said that after initiation "I began to understand who I am and why I am that person and what do I have to do to be the best at what I was supposed to do."Ajiṣẹbọ stated very clearly that, "Ifá is not peripheral to my life. Ifá *is* my life."

The challenges that Ajiṣẹbọ experienced during her journey to Nigeria to be initiated were "two-fold . . . from an interpersonal angle." She had just been married to Dr. Abímbọ́lá and was trying to find her place in the family, "I was trying to figure out how was I going to be part of this family and what would my role looked like and how would I pay the proper respect to the people who were there before me."

There were assumptions because Ajiṣẹbọ was an American. She explained: “people think you’re a millionaire. I’m not a millionaire, but I am aware of my privileges.” She said that a challenge was, that “people would ask for money that I wasn’t able to give them.”

It was also a challenge because Ajiṣẹbọ is a “linguist . . . very good at languages.” She said: “Yorùbá is a very hard language to become fluent at . . . That was a real struggle for me. My colloquial Yorùbá is not as good as my ritual Yorùbá.” Overall, Ajiṣẹbọ felt that her challenge was “finding one’s place and the challenge of wanting to fully comprehend what was going on.” She felt that a lot of people from the United States have a similar challenge “to become proficient in their practice.” But because of her life with the “Àwíṣẹ, that was not my challenge. My challenge was to be disciplined enough to learn what was right before me.”

Ajiṣẹbọ said that the most important thing that she learned from her journey to be initiated in Nigeria, was that she “was on the right path —it was confirmed by Ifá and the Òrìṣà . . . Yes, this is actually what you’re supposed to be doing.” She pointed out that in the United States Ifá/Òrìṣà practice “seems like a subculture and something so clandestine; but not there [Ǹigeria].”

In the Cuban Lucumi System people are initiated to another Òrìṣà before they are initiated to Ifá. Ajiṣẹbọ said, “In Nigeria that is not a requirement.” Because she went straight to Ifá for her initiation that also became a challenge for her in her travels to do spiritual work as an “Ìyánífá in the African diaspora, especially in the Spanish speaking African diaspora.” This challenge was addressed by the late Aṣípade Ògúndíyà Abímbólá Ìrókò who performed the rituals and made the arrangements for her to receive a title in the Ògún community, Iyá Idi Ògún Ọ̀yọ́ Alááfin. Through this process, the community authorized her to practice as both and an Ògún priest.

As a practitioner initiated in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief in Nigeria, Ajiṣẹbọ said that one of her challenges in the United States was "being a White person in this religion." She said she recognize that the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system is "built upon the greatest worship of the ancestors of Africa."Ajiṣẹbọ said as a White person in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system she doesn't "have a problem with that in her own mind." It is because of Ifá verses sha has learned that speak to that she stated:

> It's a challenge for me because I know that a lot of people who are deeply involved in this religion do struggle with that idea. I feel like I have to always be careful not to offend people and not to reproduce racist structures in my practice. I have searched the literature of Ifá for more information about the inclusive nature of the Yorùbá religion and the ancient relationships and responsibilities for people from my own ancestral background, probably more than most people, I'm immersed in the religion because it's my way of life and it's my home and I live with the Àwíṣẹ.

Although some practitioners have struggled with the idea of White people involved with Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà practice in the United States, one of my other interviewees shared his experience of working in the United States against racial segregation during the 1960s. In 1963, C. Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson left college and went to the South to join the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He was one of the SNCC workers who was brought to Mississippi to help organize the massive national funeral of Medgar Evers to "bring attention to killings of Black people in Mississippi." In the next section, the thoughts and practices of Babaláwo C. Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson further emerge from my interview with him.

**Babaláwo C. Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson, Retired Professor, Healer (Harlem, NY)**

*Figure 4.15.* Babaláwo C. Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson, Standing on his balcony in Harlem, New York, overlooking the Hudson River.

I interviewed C. Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson on October, 18, 2015. After I took my shoes off to enter Awólọ́wọ̀'s co-op apartment on the 23rd floor in Harlem—he can be seen there in Figure 4.15—I saluted his èṣù behind his door. He took my coat and offered me something to drink. As we talked while he was making tea for me, I sat in the living room which seemed like a miniature art gallery. The walls of his living room were full of African masks and carvings from different countries. There was a piano in the living room, and a case with books near his couch. There was also a white cat in the living room that took an interest in me.

While he was going back and forth in the kitchen, Awólọ́wọ̀ noticed that I was rubbing my arm and shoulder. After he inquired about it, I told him I thought it was a rotator cuff issue. Awólọ́wọ̀ suggest that he do acupuncture on my ear in order to help soothe some of the pain in my arm and shoulder. I agreed. He sat down on a chair near a round table that had some crystals on it. Before he began to give me acupuncture, Awólọ́wọ̀ performed a little ritual, first pulling out a small medallion-like object on a string and waving it over a little black book as he read silently. When he was done he closed the book and put the medallion away. He then retrieved his

acupuncture supplies and prepped my ears with a cotton wipe with alcohol. He then hit three points in each ear with his needles.

Almost immediately, upon inquiring about my well-being, the role that Awólọ́wọ̀ played was a healer. He offered me the medicine he thought would bring me relief. Awolalu (1996) referred to medicine as "any substance or substances that are used in treating or preventing disease or illness" (p. 72). According to Awolalu, "medicine, as conceived by the Yorùbá, involves medicament as well as prophylactic" (p. 72). Awólọ́wọ̀'s professional skills as a acupuncturist or what Awolalu (1996) would categorize as a "medicine-man" (p. 72) include "curing, alleviating and preventing diseases as well as restoring and preserving health" (pp. 72–73).

Awolalu (1996) pointed out that in the Yorùbá context, the medicine-man, "in many cases, he is a diviner, a priest" (p. 72). As a priest, Awólọ́wọ̀ incorporated his skill as an acupuncturist, and his sense of Yorùbá ritual healing to help restore me to better health. He fits into what Awolalu described:

> The medicine man tries to combine the power in the medicinal preparation with some other power which is invoked and without which the medicine is worthless. Thus, when the Yorùbá speak of *Oògùn* (medicine), this usually embraces the normal medicinal preparation and charms. A medicine man goes about his task in a systematic and ritualistic manner—he invokes the tutelary spirit of Ọ̀sanyìn (the divinity controlling medicine), he pays homage to the spirits and the ancestors who have made the preparation before him, and he makes necessary offerings soliciting spiritual blessings on the preparation. All this is in the realm of religion. Then, he goes further to utter incantations which are magical in character. But some other observers may argue that the incantations are to be passed for prayer and that everything done is done in the realm of religion to make the medicine efficaious. (p. 74)

During the time that Awólọ́wọ̀ prepped and placed the acupuncture needles in my ears, we continued conversing until he had finished. He then prepared the tea. Before drinking our tea

he removed the needles from my ears. After tea and having more conversation we went in the back to his shrine room to do the interview.

Awólọ́wọ̀'s shrine room had large bookshelves virtually covering his walls. The shelves were stacked with books. Near the window in one corner of the room stood his Osun staff. He kept his Ifá and orí icons placed on the shelves of a tall case. His Ògbóni, another Èṣù, and his sarabona were spread on the floor up against the wall below the window. Near one side of the wall were several large copper bowls on the floor. Awólọ́wọ̀'s shrine included a mix of Ifá/Òrìṣà, other African, and Eastern traditional icons. In Figure 4.16, Babaláwo C. Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson is shown standing next to his sacred Ifá/Òrìṣà icons in his Harlem apartment.

It was a combination of factors that led Awólọ́wọ̀ to be involved in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. Since 1957 when he was in the seventh grade, the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, the Russians' Sputnik, and the emergence of Kwame Nkrumah leading the Gold Cost in Africa to independence into the modern state of Ghana, Awólọ́wọ̀ was interested both in "politics" and "cultural spiritual aspects." As a teenager he was "supporting the struggles that were going on in the South from the sit-ins to the freedom rides." He also had "grown up in the Anglican Church" and participated in the children's and adult choir. For Awólọ́wọ̀, "the spirituality of the church was expressed through its music. He described how the political and spiritual connection shaped his interest,

> When we were on the picket line, when we went to the court house, when we were in jail, it was the songs that we sang that really stimulated the spirit of people. For me there was no distinction between spiritual inspiration and social struggle. That was my formative years.

*Figure 4.16.* C. Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson standing before some of his sacred Ifá/Òrìṣà icons. Photo taken in Harlem, New York.

As a young activist Awólọ́wọ̀ paid attention to the decolonization that was occurring in Africa and began to see what he "understood political to be" and his "more cultural concerns."An example of this was his "sense of progressive political struggle and his cultural energy coming from the Yorùbá people in Nigeria." Awólọ́wọ̀ was impressed with the party in Nigeria led my Chief Obafemi Awólọ́wọ̀, "He was a real progressive" who was a "Christian and a socialist."

In 1963 when Awólọ́wọ̀ was in Harlem, he met Oseijeman Adéfúnmi, who became the Ọba of Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village in South Carolina. At that point Awólọ́wọ̀ said he put "two things together." He was connecting his understanding of the political decolonization of Africa, particularly in Nigeria, and the cultural energy of the Yorùbá, and then eventually meeting an African American pioneer of the Yorùbá belief system who was influenced by the Yorùbá spiritual practice in Nigeria.

In 1964, Awólọ́wọ̀ had a divination done for him by Adéfúnmi, and was also married by him in 1965. During that time Awólọ́wọ̀ was hired out of graduate school to teach in the CUNY

system at Queens College. He and his wife also ran a Harlem office on 125th street. Awólọ́wọ̀ said that not only was there "all kind of political activity, [there] was this cultural flowering with music and dance and largely because of its influence throughout the diaspora largely with the Yorùbá emphasis."

Awólọ́wọ̀ was told by Adéfúnmi, after divining for him, that if he didn't "become a Yorùbá priest" he would "die." That didn't sit well with Awólọ́wọ̀. He felt that, "If I could survive Mississippi I think I'd survive that." This wasn't the first time that he was warned of negative consequences if he didn't get initiated. In the 1970s he ran into some one he met previously when he was attending Yale University in New Haven, Asunta Serrano. Serrano, a Puerto Rican Santeria, was initiated in Puerto Rico in 1960 (Brandon, 1997), also became Awólọ́wọ̀'s godmother. Serrano told Awólọ́wọ̀ that if he "didn't become a Yorùbá priest, and Òrìṣà priest immediately [he] would never accomplish anything" in his life.

The advice given to Awólọ́wọ̀ by Adéfúnmi and Serrano to get initiated or face calamities, didn't impress him. Awólọ́wọ̀ said, "I was not easily impressed and I was not easily drawn in." When he was in graduate school he was offered an "ordination as a Baptist preacher." but he refused. When Awólọ́wọ̀ was in high school, he used to hear Malcolm X speak in New Haven, Connecticut on Tuesdays, where he was also urged to join the Nation of Islam. He wasn't interested. Awólọ́wọ̀ said, "I'm not just someone who follows other people. I've never been that way. I tend to think for myself."

Awólọ́wọ̀ did eventually join with Ed James who became his godfather in *Palo Mayambe*, a Congolese spiritual practice that is often fused with Santeria practices. During that time, besides being a *Palero*, or, a Congo Priest, Ed James was "the oldest Sango priest in the [Ǹew York] city." Awólọ́wọ̀ was initiated into Palo Mayambe under Ed James. Awólọ́wọ̀ said,

"In the movement I was always helping people." The purpose of him becoming a Congo priest was because "It was set up for protection and for healing. "Awólọ́wọ̀ who at that time was studying acupuncture and soon became an acupuncturist said,

> My focus was not so much on the social aspect but on the spiritual aspect of healing people. Whether it was with acupuncture or whether I was doing Congo divination and working with the spiritual imbalances with the person, energetic with acupuncture. Spiritual imbalances with Palo . . . I didn't feel any lack because I wasn't an Òrìṣà priest.

Awólọ́wọ̀ worked with Ed James because he was into "a lot of things which were not strictly Yorùbá." In his training as a sociologist Awólọ́wọ̀ was around certain circles of his godfather Ed James, but he said, he,

> was always looking at the social situations that I'd been in terms of social structures, in terms of social relations, notions of vertical organization as opposed to horizontal organizations. Everything I knew about small groups which I used to teach.

Awólọ́wọ̀ had many relationships with a variety of Ifá/Òrìṣà priest who were involved in different systems of practice. His godmother Serrano brought him to Pancho Mora to receive his warriors. He received his *One Hand of Ifá* from Carlos Coyaso, an old Cuban babaláwo in the Bronx, and Chief Dayọ̀ Ológundúdú, a Nigerian babaláwo.

It was also Carlos Coyaso, who connected him with a Ọba from the town of Iperu Remo in Ogun State, in Ijebu land in Nigeria. Awólọ́wọ̀ met with the Ọba who was organizing an Ògbóni society in New York; Awólọ́wọ̀ was invited to join the society.

Awólọ́wọ̀ travelled to Nigeria to do his initiation into the Ògbóni society and also received a chieftaincy title while he was there. He later realized that he couldn't hold the title he was given if he didn't do his initiation into Ifá. He said, "My attitude towards Ifá [in Africa] was different than my attitude towards Òrìṣá practice [in the United States]."

The following year, at the age of 50, Awólọ́wọ̀ went back to Iperu Remo, Nigeria, to be initiated to Ifá. He said, "I thought at 50 I needed to commit myself to something I could never

possibly . . . I could never master." The process to Awólọ́wọ̀'s involvement into the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system, and his eventual initiation in Nigeria was a long time coming. He explained that when he decided to finally get initiated,

> I knew that Ifá was so deep that it would take several lifetimes. I would never get bored, it would hold my interest because there was a lifetime or learning. Since I had started late at fifty rather than at six which would have been traditionally, I had my work cut out for me. I went back the following year. I received a higher chieftaincy title but I went to Igbodu and did my rituals and came back. That's how I came to Ifá, kind of a circuitous route.

Awólọ́wọ̀'s decision to do his initiation in Africa wasn't a slight to doing it anywhere else, even though when he returned for Africa, the first question by practitioners initiated in the diaspora was: "Why would you go to Nigeria? Why did you do that?" Awólọ́wọ̀ said that he would start laughing because "it was clear that they were saying, 'why didn't you go to Miami or why didn't you go to Havana?'" In explaining his choice, Awólọ́wọ̀ said: "Well, number one, going to Nigeria was important to me as a descendant of Africans. Given everything that I developed in my consciousness since the mid-50s was all about Africa."

In one situation Awólọ́wọ̀ was very "incensed" about the view some Lucumi practitioners initiated in the diaspora, have about Nigeria. He recalled going to City College to view Marta Vega's film about Ifá/Òrìṣà practice in Cuba, *When the Spirits Dance Mambo*. Awólọ́wọ̀ said, "this young babaláwo . . . was claiming that Havana was the Mecca of Ifá. I was the only person in the big auditorium that yelled 'bullshit!'" To Awólọ́wọ̀, this is why going to Africa was important. He added,

> Why would I want to make Ifá any place except in the place where Ifá was from. Plus it never occurred to me especially after the experience that I could have. That experience, that incredible experience in Igbodu full of babaláwos from nine to ninety chanting [my odù] all night, even though I couldn't understand the language, the energy I got immediately. I can't imagine having that experience [in Cuba]. Everybody there [in Nigeria] was a Yorùbá speaker, it was a traditional society.

Awólọ́wọ̀ said that the highlight of his journey to be initiated in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system in Nigeria was "the initiation itself. It was the whole experience—really the whole experience." He then pointed in the direction of his door, where his Òbgóni chieftaincy title was, and stated: "Remember: when I went back to go to Igbodu, I was going back to receive that chieftaincy title you see on the door."

The journey to be initiated in Nigeria changed and impacted Awólọ́wọ̀'s life because, he said, it enhanced his work as a healer. "It put not another, but more arrows in my quiver, more tools for me to use as a healer." Awólọ́wọ̀ said that he now has "recourse to an incredible tradition which not only was, is, elegant in the same way that a mathematical formula can be; or, a physics problem solved can be elegant." Further pointing out the impact of his initiation in Nigeria, he said,

> Ifá gives me a constant and it still gives me a constant sense of awe and amazement. I always tell people, well, I don't know much Ifá but what I know because of my commitment, because of my awe, because of my consciousness. When I work, seriously, people's lives are changed.

The challenge for Awólọ́wọ̀ during his journey to be initiated in Nigeria, was language. He said that in navigating the journey in Nigeria,

> I knew that I could do this, that I could do everything and I did everything enthusiastically . . . Of course one challenge is that I didn't really know the language, but I am, you know, I'm not a clairvoyant but I'm a moon-child, I'm highly intuitive and I've developed as an organizer, I'm able to read people, read their gesture.

What Awólọ́wọ̀ learned from his journey, and wanted to bring back to the United States, was the involvement of children. Referring to his experience in Nigeria, he said, "There were always children around." As a result, Awólọ́wọ̀ got his son involved in his spiritual work and eventually brought him to Nigeria to be initiated. Awólọ́wọ̀ emphasized that in Nigeria, "a family who wants a child to be successful will save money and have the child initiated into Ifá." He said that Yorùbá people in Nigeria who want to be successful in business or, anything else, "will go to

Ifá because the process itself puts you in another dimension. It puts you in another space and you have now access, if you so choose, to energies in you and around you which are very powerful."

*Figure 4.17.* Babaláwo C. Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson in his shrine in Harlem

Awólọ́wọ̀ wanted to bring back the lesson from his spiritual journey in Nigeria that Ifá can help a child get a sense of who and what they are. They can learn what the weaknesses, and strengths of a child are, in order for "the parents and community to guide the child." He said Ifá can help a family to find out, "what is their [child's] destiny; what is their mission. What do the parents need to know about this person's character to help them to realize their destiny and to have a full and happy and productive life" Figure 4.17 shows C. Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson in his shrine in Harlem, New York.

What made Awólọ́wọ̀ journey to Nigeria to be initiated in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system special or different, was witnessing a direct cultural practice that "links to ancestral wisdom." He said that for him, the question was always, "what can I learn, what is the wisdom? What is the ancestral wisdom?" adding: "I was looking for ancestral wisdom and I was looking for how I could link through my ancestors now. This is one of things that Ifá/Òrìṣà religion does very well, helps to link people to their ancestors."

One of the challenges that Awólọ́wọ̀ identified as a practitioner in the United States who was initiated in Nigeria, was that of being a "lone worker . . . In Nigeria, and in the Lukumi tradition you are in a 'community of worshippers' . . . there's a division of labor in terms of rituals." Practitioners initiated to Ifá in Nigeria, find that when they come back to the United States, "they are not coming back to a community . . . there's the danger of being simply a lone worker." Awólọ́wọ̀ said that the absence of a community of worshippers can be problematic and challenging,

> Ifá is a practice that needs interaction between its practitioners, that's how we share, that's how we learn. I think probably the biggest difficulty is that for the most part you are not coming back to a community, so there's a lot of responsibility of the initiate to learn in any way they can by themselves in conjunction with other Ifá priest always expanding knowledge but it's more difficult.

Awólọ́wọ̀'s inclusion of his son into Ifá/Òrìṣà practice is one of the primary ways of community building and passing the practice on to the next generation. Other practitioners interviewed for this study like Adeyemi Michael Lythcott, have their families involved in the practice. Adeyemi's family members are not only involved in Yorùbà Ifà/Òrìṣà practice; they are also part of a rich legacy to the practice, as well as having a significant historical connection to Africa.

**Babaláwo Adeyemi Michael Lythcott, Legacy Consultant (Marlboro, NJ)**


*Figure 4.18.* Plaque dated 1740 from Township Historic Commission at front of Babaláwo Adeyemi Michael Lythcott's home in Marlboro, NJ.

Entering the home of Adeyemi Michael Lythcott, the first thing that stood out to me was the historic presence of the building. On the front side of his house is a plaque with the date 1740 on it, noting that it is declared a historical site by the Marlboro Township Historic Commission, in Marlboro, New Jersey. Adeyemi's home was in existence before the founding of the United States of America. He is not only connected to a legacy in the United States, Adeyemi also has a rich legacy that connects him to West Africa. Figure 4.18 shows a plaque, dated 1740, declaring Adeyemi's home to be a historic site.

At the age of 12, Adeyemi traveled to West Africa with his late father, Dr. George I. Lythcott. His father was a leading pediatrician, and researcher in West Africa as the regional director helping to combat smallpox and measles (Saxon, 1995). Adeyemi's father was later appointed in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter as the Administrator of the Health Services Administration in the Department of Health and Human Services and an assistant Surgeon General (Saxton, 1995). Adeyemi was also the spouse of the late Barbara Ann Teer, founder of

the National Black Theatre of Harlem, one of the pioneering institutions in the United States that promoted Ifá/Òrìṣà practice in the United States by a practitioner initiated in Nigeria. Adeyemi's is part of the legacy of Yorùbá practitioners that created the National Black Theatre in Harlem, and who promoted Yorùbá cultural practices. In 1972, Barbara Ann Teer was one of the first African American women initiated to the Òrìṣà *Ṣàngó* in Òṣogbo, Nigeria, and was also initiated to Ifá some years later.

Ulli Beier (1980), on his first visit to the United States in 1972, attended a performance at the National Black Theatre. He said his first experience of seeing a Black theatre performance was a "surprise . . . the play developed into a plea for the rejuvenation of Black society and the saviour who appeared to rescue the beleaguered community was—the goddess Oshun!" (p. x). Even though the presence of Lucumi practitioners and Oseijeman Adéfúnmi's Yorùbá Temple were in Harlem, practitioners in the National Black Theatre brought a different experience, and the idea of the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system to a broad base of people in a different way.

When I entered the historic home of Adeyemi, I was given a Yorùbá greeting by him and a visiting Ìyanifá who had recently been initiated in Nigeria. It was Ifá day, and they were both dressed in white and had just completed doing a ẹbọ. His living room and dining room was decorated with original African, and Cuban paintings, photographs, artifacts, and family mementos. On the dining room wall was a lit framed photo of his father wearing his surgeon general uniform. On the side wall was an old rifle from Nigeria that dated back to the 1800s, as well as an old hand gun that rested on a shelf.

*Figure 4.19.* Babaláwo Adeyemi Michael Lythcott's ancestors' wall in his home shrine in Marlboro, NJ.

Adeyemi took me upstairs to show me around his home and the room where I would spend the night in. He introduced me to his wife, and then took me to his shrine room where I saluted his Ifá. In his shrine room in one corner was his ancestor shrine. He had photos of women ancestors on one side of the corner wall and men on the other (See Figure 4.19).

The following day (November 8, 2015) I conducted my interview with Adeyemi. Even before his interest in Ifá/Òrìṣà practice, Adeyemi already had experience living in Nigeria. Before Nigeria, he lived in Ghana where his father was first stationed by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the regional director of the "20-country eradication program" for smallpox and measles. Adeyemi lived in West Africa for seven years with less than half that time in Nigeria. Once his father accepted the job in West Africa, Adeyemi said,

> we went to live in Ghana in 1962. We lived there for four years. I stayed for two and then I transferred to a boarding school in Nigeria in Ibadan. I did my 3rd and 4th form at Achimota in Ghana and I did my 5th form 0 levels and lower 6th at International School of Ibadan. We lived in Ghana for four years and in Nigeria for three.

Adeyemi came back to the United States to attend Oberlin College, but would return to Nigeria during the summer. He would visit his close friends who were either in Ghana or Nigeria. One was Jerry Rawlings, who eventually became president of Ghana. When he attended school in Ghana, he also had the honor of meeting President Kwame Nkrumah a couple of times. Figure 4.21 shows Adeyemi Michael Lythcott's Ghanaian driver's license.


*Figure 4.20.* Adeyemi Michael Lythcott's Ghanaian drivers license in 1964.

During his stay in Ghana, Adeyemi said that he "didn't find a real spiritual outlet; nothing grabbed me in Ghana." He said it was in Nigeria, "that the same kind of feelings that I was having as a child around priesthood began to emerge." As a baby, Adeyemi was baptized "in a very unusual circumstance" His baptism happened on the 300th anniversary of the Carmelite Convent, Discalced Carmelite order. The priest who baptized him, his brothers and sisters, and who also married his parents, "became a bishop, then an archbishop and he was later made a cardinal; John Cardinal Wright."

> The Carmelite nuns are completely cloistered. You don't see their faces in public. Their faces are shrouded if they come out . . . it was determined at the Vatican that to celebrate . . . their anniversary, they would take a male child behind the cloistered wall and baptize him in the image of Christ. No man ever crosses a Carmelite cloister, except a priest.

Adeyemi was selected to be the child baptized behind the cloistered wall in the image of Christ. He said, “My mother told me that she took me to the convent. They had a bassinet laid out for me and one-by-one, the nuns came and lifted their veil and looked at me in the bassinet and went by.” According to Adeyemi he felt “destined . . . from then.” As a very young child he said he “always had an internal drive to want to be a priest.”Adeyemi’s family thought he was going to be a Catholic priest. At 12 years, he said, “I actually left home after the 8th grade and went to a Benedictine monastery to live . . . to study, to begin my journey into a Catholic priesthood.”

The feelings that Adeyemi had about becoming a priest were re-awakened in him in Nigeria. It was his trip to Òṣogbo when he was in high school that sparked that feeling again. He spent the weekend at Suzanne Wenger’s house. Wenger was an Austrian artist who moved to Nigeria with her husband Ulli Beier. After separating from her husband she moved to Òṣogbo, and as an initiate of the Obatala, Sonpona, and Ogboni groups she help to “repair and rebuild dilapidated shrines” (Probst, 2011, p. 46). Adeyemi said of his stay at Wenger’s house, “I had a night of just completely magical dreams” adding, “I think being driven to a spiritual calling is something that is not an intellectual process.” It was that experience that lead him to his “first curiosity about first Ọṣun then Òrìṣà.”

Even though Adeyemi was initiated in 2001, long after his experience with Susan Wenger and the visits in 1974 and 1977 with members of the National Black Theatre of Harlem, he chose to be initiated in Nigeria because he had grown up in West Africa. He said that in Nigeria,

> the religion is for the people. There was no secret handshake. If you dipped wrong on this one, it was not a sin. You didn’t have to know all of the protocols . . . the priest belonged to the people, the religion belong to the people.

Adeyemi and members of the National Black Theatre of Harlem (NBT) would go to the Bronx once a week and participate in ceremonies with Lukumi priestess Asunta Serrano. He said they were "really warmly welcomed by Mama Sunta." But "the rest of the people in the house did not make us feel welcome. It was as if we didn't know the secret code. We were full of spirit; we were full of Nigeria." At the time, according to Adeyemi, "there was no urgency or need for the priesthood" Before each production that the National Black Theatre performed, members did "energy rituals." Adeyemi and members of NBT had created their own sense of community, spirit, and had their own kind of ritual practice in play. Adeyemi's experience in Nigeria and his interest in the Nigerian Yorùbà Ifá/Òrìṣà spiritual practices impacted how he felt about some of the other systems,

> We were dealing with spirit. The only *ilẹkẹ* we had was the NBT bead. NBT membership had a red and yellow bead with a black ball on it. That's how I became attracted to and connected with Òrìṣà. We tried the Cuban thing. There was no resonant harmonic. There was no grab. We explored the Haitian relationship. It was wonderful, but none of us pursued those roads. It was always when can we get back home [to Nigeria].

The highlight of Adeyemi's journey was "being in Nigeria and being initiated." A number of very "powerful and significant babaláwos happened to be in Òṣogbo at that time and wanted to take part." Adeyemi said, "It was a very, very wonderful collection of elders to bring me into and then be initiated in Igbódù."

After narrating a story about the Atáọ́ja, the King of Òṣogbo—who had called on Orunmila to help cure his sick son—Adeyemi said it was this myth of how the grove in the Osun River eventual came into existence. He stated, "I was initiated in that grove. I tore off my old clothes and left them in that stream. I bathed in that stream and was reclothed and saw odù [in that grove]. That was the highlight."

Adeyemi said that he has met people who think that getting initiated and receiving Òrìṣà "is like going to the Òrìṣà aisle at K-Mart and saying, 'I'll get one of those. What's that blue one? You say that's Ogun? Okay, let me have that one.'" In an effort to explain the different roads of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice in the diaspora, Adeyemi said, "Ifá is a living oracle." He continued:

> The healing that has to happen in our country and the roads of Òrìṣà that we need are by necessity, not better than, but different than that which was needed during the time of slavery in Cuba, during the time of slavery in Puerto Rico or Brazil or Haiti. [My] trip to Nigeria is not in spite of, it's in light of. Those that would try to draw division between the priest and the practitioners in the diaspora are pulling down something on their head they don't want to be pulling down. The trick bag that our people are in, requires all the wisdom of all the odù, but applied in the context of who we are, where we've been, what we're facing, where we got to go.


*Figure 4.21*. Adeyemi Michael Lythcott, at his home with a photo on the wall of his father, former U.S. Assistant Surgeon General, Dr. George I. Lythcott.

They were no particular challenges that Adeyemi experienced during his journey to be initiated in Nigeria because his "journey began well before [his] Òrìṣà journey." However, there was a challenging experience that happened many years before his initiation took place. Of that

challenging experience, Adeyemi said, “from that day, my life changed.” In Figure 4.22, Adeyemi Michael Lythcott is seen discussing his experiences in Nigeria, with a photo on the wall of his father, a former U.S. Assistant Surgeon General, Dr. George I. Lythcott.

One of the most famous artists and traditionalists in Ghana in 1962 had been his art teacher. When Adeyemi reached for a paper his teacher was handing him with his left hand, Adeyemi said, “This man backhanded me out of my chair against the wall” adding, “Even in the British system in Ghana in 1962, the masters were not allow to hit students.” Adeyemi response to being backhanded acrossed the room was “What? My daddy don’t hit me like that.” He continued with this story:

> I marched out of his class room and walked to the head master’s office and calmed me down. He said, “Look, I’ll give you . . . ” and he said, “No, he wasn’t supposed to hit you.” He said, “But you’re going to be here at least two years.” He said, “Now let me tell you what happened and why.” He explained to me the left hand is an insult and why it’s a taboo in societies that don’t have running water. Your left hand is your personal hygiene hand, . . . After he did that and fixed me a little glass of squash, he said: “Now look, I’m going to give you two options.” He pushed the phone to me. He says, “if you press this issue, I’ll have to discipline him and I might have to fire him.” He pushed the phone to me and he said, “Either I want you to call the embassy right now or I want you to march back into that man’s class and stand in front of everybody and apologize for reaching with your left.” I was raised to stand on my rights so I’m out of Oklahoma in ’62 and Jim Crow fighting for my rights, but it was a moment that I said, “There’s something else going on here.”

Adeyemi went to his dorm after the meeting with the school’s headmaster. His next art class, he went back and stood in front of the class and apologized to his art teacher for reaching with his left hand. “That was the day my friends gave me my first African name.” His classmates changed towards him and began treating him differently. “They were treating me because I did not call the embassy and stand on my God-given, constitutionally-protected American rights, but . . . chose to respect a system I didn’t understand.” Adapting to that situation had prepared Adeyemi for whatever cultural challenges that his return to be initiated in Africa might bring.

What Adeyemi learned from his journey to Nigeria was that he wanted to bring back to the United States the idea, “we don’t walk this planet alone.” He said, “The most powerful thing that I learned to come to understand was the power of having ancestors . . . If we just simply acknowledge them, acknowledge their journey, their sacrifice, their gifts, they become.” Recognizing that he stands on the shoulders of his ancestors, for him was “the immediately most useful and profound thing.”

Adeyemi said that, of course, he wanted to bring back his learning about odù [Ifá]/As a trainer, curriculum developer, and business consultant, Adeyemi said he is like “a diagnostician for an organization . . . For an organization or, in fact, for a body of people or even an individual.” But, he explained, “a babaláwo is like . . . Ifá is a diagnostician and odù is the prescription . . . if the babaláwo knows how to extract and apply.” Even though Adeyemi is not a ritual specialist like Babaláwos Aikulola Nathan Lugo, Babatunde Gregory Anderson, or, Apẹ̀tẹ̀bí Ìyánífá Ajíṣẹ̀bọ Michelle Abímbọ́lá—who were interviewed for this study—he said:

> I don’t sit [divine for people on] the mat, every professional engagement that I have, every corporation I sell into, every new class of students that I get, every situation I’m trying to face where I’m trying to bring healing to our people, I read it [odù]. Even though I have standard curricula, my curricula are always customized, based on the odù that Ifá gives me for this particular group of young men and women that I’m dealing with. Nowadays, most of my students are ex-offenders. Most of them have been making their living in the underground economy. I’m doing a job training program. They want to get in the above-ground economy. Most of them have the complete pathologies that young Black people get in the ghetto in these undernourished, underserved [communities]. I pour libation to the ancestors; I call their ancestors names before I start. I say, “look, I’m going to hoe my row and I’m calling you now to stand behind your children in this room who have never acknowledged you. Open up their minds and their hearts.” You should see what happens. That’s how I use Ifá.

The challenges that Adeyemi experienced in the United States are around “blood sacrifice” He never has had a direct problem with it, but said he is “careful not to attract the interest of my neighbors.” Adeyemi has also allowed his Facebook page to “become Yorùbá

centric;" He explained: "I post photographs from all of my journeys to Nigeria." He said that he has heard feedback that he lost work because "potential clients have looked at that and have thought it weird or something." Figure 4.23 depicts Babaláwo Adeyemi Lythcott with the Atáọ́ja, King of Òṣogbo, in Òṣogbo, Nigeria.

*Figure 4.22*. Babaláwo Adeyemi Michael Lythcott with the Atáọ́ja, the King of Òṣogbo in Òṣogbo, Nigeria. Photo courtesy of Michael Lythcott.

At 67 years old, Adeyemi has put two children through Ivy League colleges, both of whom he described as "extremely well-launched in the world." He is not bothered about the scrutiny of his Facebook page on which he still posts. He believes his work speaks for itself. He said he is "a vessel for this work . . . That's how I roll; that's my role"

**Ìyánífá Ifálobá Mawakana Onífádé, School Principal, Ifá Apprentice (Boston, MA)**

*Figure 4.23.* Ìyánífá Ifálobá Mawakana Onífádé, assisting with ritual work in the author's shrine in Boston, Massachusetts.

Ìyánífá Ifálobá Mawakana Onífádé like Babaláwo Adeyemi does not divine on the mat for clients; but it is a role that she wants to play. As a practicing babaláwo who divines and does ritual work with people in my community, Ifálobá has apprenticed with me since her initiation in Nigeria in 2010. It was a journey that I had accompanied her on.

Coming out of the branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners initiated in Nigeria, Ifálobá is the youngest of my interviewees in terms of years involved in the practice, and when initiated. She is also the only practitioner interviewed who had no prior exprience in the Cuban branches of the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. Over the past 18 years I have participated in Ifálobá's divinations as an apprentice with Àwíṣẹ Wándé Abímbọ́lá, in Boston and, also, in her initiation into Ifá in Ọ̀yọ́, Nigeria. I assisted her, and her husband receiving their One Hand of Ifá, the naming ceremony, in Kofá's of her children, and Ifálobá's Yorùbá wedding ceremony. I have divined for Ifálobá and her family for many of important decisions and, events in her life, from the passing of her father

to pursuing business and professional goals. She is seen in Figure 4.23 in Boston, assisting with ritual work. Figure 4.24 shows her with her family preparing for a ritual.

Thompson (1984) pointed out that it is typical when traditional Yorùbá people "encounter change or challenge . . . to call on Ifá to place his or her individual problem in perspective" (p. 33). Citing Dr. Wándé Abímbọ́lá, Thompson said, "Ifá divination is performed by the Yorùbá during all of their important rites of passage such as naming and marriage ceremonies . . . In tradtional Yorùbá society, the authority of Ifá permeated every aspect of life because the Yorùbá regard Ifá as the voice and wisdom of the ancestors" (pp. 33–34). As a practitioner from the United States, Ifálobá has consistently consulted Ifá throughout various junctures in her life.

*Figure 4.24*. Ìyánífá Ifálobá Mawakana Onífádé with her family preparing for a ritual in Boston.

Before interviewing Ifálobá, I shadowed her for the day at her school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is a principal at a small alternative high school. The school shares the lower level of the building with an elementary school. The building was unusually quiet for a public urban school. Ifálobá introduced me to students, teachers, and staff throughout the day. She

allowed me to sit in on a meeting with one student, her teacher, and guidance counselor. They were meeting about trying to make up absences from class. I also sat in on an interview with a new student and his mother. The student was interested in being accepted at the school. Ifálobá also allowed me to sit in on a general school meeting with all the students, teachers, and staff.

Ifálobá conducted the meeting with the student trying to make up missing classes, like a divination. Like a priest marking the odù on the ọpọn board for their client to diagnose the issue, she listened carefully to the student's story and patiently solicited feedback from the teacher and guidance counselor. With the input of all the parties present, she wove together the prescription to be followed in order to resolve the matter. Figure 4.25 shows Ifálobá, in her role as principal of the alternative high school consulting with the student about making up classes to graduate.

*Figure 4.25*. Ìyánífá Ifálobá Mawakana Onífádé consulting with one of her students.

I was able to observe how Ifálobá connected her spiritual practice as an Ifá priestess with her professional work as a school principal. The following day, December 22, 2015, I visited her home to interview her. She said the way that she uses Ifá is acknowledging that "people need to

heal," and, "knowing that people are coming from their own pains and their own experiences." Ifálobá stated that as a practitioner "you want to figure out what's happening and if there's way to address their trauma and their experiences that could move them forward to transform." In her work as a principal Ifálobá also said there's a notion as to "how do you use the characteristics of the Òrìṣà in your everyday practice?"

As a student at Tuskegee University, Ifálobá was involved in the Kemetic belief system. Once she had graduated and moved back to Boston, she was looking for a Kemetic spiritual house there. Unable to find Kemetic practitioners in Boston she was introduced to the Ifá belief system. She said she found the Òrìṣà and the Kemetic deities to be "very similar." Ifálobá said, that after being involved with Ifá for around 10 years, "I felt that I was ready to commit myself to further training in terms of healing and in terms of working on good character, Ìwá pẹ̀lẹ́."

Ifálobá made a very conscious choice as to where she wanted to be initiated, stating, "I felt that I wanted to be initiated in the home of Ifá." She chose to travel to Ọ̀yọ́, Nigeria. "I wanted the experience of traveling to Nigeria. I've never been to Africa before and I decided this would be a great pilgrimage to actually go and journey back home to our ancestor's homeland."

One of the challenges that Ifálobá experienced during her initiation in Nigeria was the same as her experience as a practitioner in the United States: her access to the language. As a non-Yorùbá speaker, Ifáloba said the challenge was trying to understanding the language without "translations [being] readily available." She was concerned about how, to continue to learn Yorùbá in the United States.

Living in the United States, Ifálobá felt that one of her challenges was about the interpretation of the Ifá poems. She was concerned about the difference of culture experiences in

Nigeria and the United States. Ifálobá had questions about those differences and how they can be applied in the United States,

> Sometimes there could be a cultural conflict. So, If they [Ifá] say, "You will have children and many wives," it's like, is that applicable to who we are here in the United States? And so how do we make sense of what that can mean and what's the interpretation? How do you apply it to the current times?

Ifálobá said the journey to be initiated in Nigeria changed or impacted her life in "a lot of different ways." When she went back to the United States she missed Nigeria and said she was "actually feeling homesick . . . a testament of just connecting with our ancestral energy and having that sense of home in Nigeria." Ifalobá added:

> The other impact was realizing that there's more work to be done. It's a matter of, once you get initiated in Nigeria and you have that authentic experience, then when you come back to the States you realize that now your initiation has just begun. I think the other impact is that I'd actually received another spiritual gift. So once I came back from Nigeria I was able to get information from ancestors who wanted to give information to the people who were still living. That was a spiritual gift I did not have before I went to Nigeria.

I have witnessed the "spiritual gift" that Ifálobá brought up in her interview. On several occasions when she had apprenticed with me during a divination session, I observed Ifálobá writing down some notes and asking the person getting divination about what she wrote. The responses were affirmative and very enlightening for them. Ifálobá's idea of what she refers to as an "authentic experience," also connects to her notion of home and Nigeria being the birth place of Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system, practice, and different compared to people initiated in places other than Africa,

> I think that one of the most important takeaways is that when you get initiated in Nigeria . . . it's like the most authentic process because you are in the birth place of Ifá and you do not have to recreate some of the different sections of the different journeys within the initiation process . . . sometimes if you're not in Nigeria or in a tropical place you have to recreate the growth. You have to recreate certain processes that happen in initiation . . . so I think that that's one of the ways that I thought it was really authentic to be there.

What also made Ifalobá's spiritual journey in Nigeria authentic or different, compared to being initiated outside of Africa, was hearing the Ifá verses in Yorùbá. She said it was,

> a lot different from hearing stories in Spanish or in Creole or in other languages . . . just hearing the Yorùbá language in its purest state when you're going through that [initiation] process and having someone translate, I think is also very powerful.

Ifálobá said what she learned from her journey to be initiated in Nigeria and wanted to take back to the United States, was understanding that "initiation is a process." She also said that in Nigeria she was told that initiation was "just a beginning, and that when you go back home you have to re-initiate yourself and that is when you start to learn and study." Figure 4.26 shows Ìyánífá Ifálobá Mawakana Onífádé after her initiation in Ọ̀yọ́, Nigeria.

*Figure 4.26.* Photo of Ìyánífá Ifálobá Mawakana Onífádé after completing her seventh day during her initiation in Ọ̀yọ́, Nigeria.

**Topics From the Interviews**

The interviews that were conducted with Ìyánífá Ifálobá and the other ìyánífás and babaláwos brought up discussions about issues of who should be included or excluded as

practitioners or initiates into the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system, and practice. According to Chang (2008) "topics refer to specific subjects pertaining to people, places, ideas, or activities" (p. 132). Some of those topics brought up in this study involved ideas of race, gender, and sexual orientation. There are a variety of different views on these topics by Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners from the various systems of practice. Some of those topics remain hotly debated in closed circles, and sometimes open ones.

**Race, gender, and sexual orientation.** Given the tensions and rifts about various forms of discrimination in mainstream United States society, it is important to consider how such matters arise and are dealt with in Ifá/Òrìṣà.

***White people in Ifá.*** During a panel discussion at an *Ifá* conference in 2008 at Harvard University, the question of White people participating in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system led to an explosion of rage and frustration by a young African American practitioner who was initiated in Nigeria. It seemed that one of the triggers that ignited his response was the presentations by White scholars on Ifá/Òrìṣà practice. Standing in the back of the auditorium the young priest raised his hand when the question and answer session opened up. After he was called on, with an intense tone, and frustration he stated,

> The very fact that I am here, that my skin is this light is proof that something needs to change. It's proof that we have to have this conversation. What are we going to do differently? We cannot continue in this same direction. The Àwíṣẹ [Wándé Abímbọ́lá] talked about Ifá yesterday, Ifá today, Ifa tomorrow, but 200 years from now, on the path that we are on, the Yorùbá tradition will not belong to the Yorùbá people. It will not. Ọ̀rúnmìlà will not be black. Ọ̀rúnmìlà will be white. It is a very important thing to understand. This is something African Americans know through and through. We live with the oppressor. We know the oppressor so well, and I am so tired, I'm tired of this shit. I'm so fucking tired of this shit, and this is not a Christian conference so I can cuss my ass off. Fuck that shit. I'm tired of this shit. We have to take accountability for our own tradition. We can't give this away. Otherwise it will not be sacred. It will not be maintained and we—it will be taken from us—it will be used against us, after we been convinced that it was never ours from the beginning. Just like they are doing in ancient Kemet [Egypt]. You don't see black people. It's not us now. Who will be representative

> of this culture 200 years from now? It will not be us. We have to put some restraints on this shit. (Unidentified Speaker, 2008)

During this young priest's statement, there were some light clapping as well as some who gasped at the kind of language he used. What his comments represented is a resentment of White practitioners and scholars involved in the practice. The participation of White practitioners and scholars in Ifá/Òrìṣà practice is not new. This similar sentiment emerged in the 1960's with Oseijeman Adéfúnmí, the founder of the Yorùbá Temple in Harlem, New York around his differences with the Cuban Ifá/Òrìṣà system. Hucks (2012), citing Arthur Hall, also pointed out that "African American practitioners in the 1960s were very much concerned that 'White Cubans owned the Orisas [and that]for White Cubans to "own" an African religion was 'absolutely ridiculous'" (p. 153).

The same sentiment still exists among some African American practitioners. Those interviewed for this study, recognizing the existence of White supremacy, and white skin privilege, are cautious about dismissing Africa, and Black people as the founders of the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá tradition. Babaláwo Babatunde said that "Ifa seems to be Africa's gift that is given to the world." Babatunde had no particular issue with White people's involvement in the practice. He said that his concern was that Black people are exposed to it in the United States: "White people can learn Ifá, but our particular focus with human beings is black people right here."

Ifálobá expressed the need for White practitioners to be clear on the origins of Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà practice; "I just want to make sure that White allies are acknowledging the origin. That this is an African religion." She said that she was alright with their involvement as long as they aren't "trying to co-opt it and to redefine it" adding, "I judge them based upon their character and if they are interested in developing and helping to heal this world then I support that." Babalawo Aikulola shared some of Ifálobá's views. He said he too has "no problem with people of other

ethnicities practicing Òrìṣà tradition so long as they honor and love African culture, African people" (A. N. Lugo, personal communication, January 2, 2016)." Aikulola also said other ethnicities have to "understand the intricacies, have an understanding of human experiences, and respect the context of the culture and not try to change it" or "assert power."

As a White female Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioner, Apètèbí Ajíṣẹbọ has had discussions with people who don't believe that White people should be allowed as practitioners into the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. Babaláwo Awólọ́wọ̀ felt that kind of exclusion of other ethnicities negates Ifá being a "world religion" because "Ifá is too sublime to be merely a tribal or a local tradition." (C. Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson, personal communication, October 19, 2015). Ajíṣẹbọ believes that White people practicing Ifá/Òrìṣà tradition in the diaspora,

> have to be really careful . . . White people, having grown up with the advantages of institutional racism, need to be really, really be conscious and really careful that that system isn't being perpetuated in their spiritual practice. (A. M. Abímbọ́lá, personal communication, October 11, 2015)

As a White ìyánífá, Ajíṣẹbọ views herself as a "cultural, and spiritual activist."She has done anti-racist work and is aware of her positionality as a White woman in the practice. Ajíṣẹbọ said,

> You can't practice an African religion in the context of so much evil against African people without trying to do something to shift that balance. I think it's a really careful path that people have to tread. You want to be a good and competent and well-informed Ifá practitioner. You want to know how to work with all the Òrìṣà. You want to honor all the ancestors. Even though we have an understanding that all humans' ancestors were originally African, that doesn't change the fact that the ancestors of the White people in this diaspora have done too much evil against black people in America and in the diaspora. (A. M. Abímbọ́lá, personal communication, October 11, 2015)

***Women in Ifá.*** Ajíṣẹbọ is also positioned in Ifá/Òrìṣà practice as a woman Ifá priest. In the Afro-Latino diaspora system there is a hostility around the inclusion of women in Ifá (M. Abímbọ́lá, 2016). Besides her role as an Ifá priest, she is also a scholar. In her article, "The Role of Women in the Ifá Priesthood: Inclusion Versus Exclusion," Ajíṣẹbọ also pointed out,

> The idea of Ifá as an inclusive nature of religion is central to its belief system. One could even assert that the inclusive nature of Yorùbá religion demands that no person, regardless of race, gender, class, location, or other facets of identity, be excluded from the practice of Ifá religion. (M. Abímbọ́lá, 2016, p. 249)

In one of her trips to Cuba, Ajíṣẹbọ said that a Cuban babaláwo looked her straight in the eyes and said, "You do not exist."Asserting that Ìyánífás do exist, Ajíṣẹbọ raised the question, "When there are ìyánífá in Nigeria, how is it that, in the diaspora, it's a controversial subject?" Ifájọkẹ́ Burton felt that there is a movement in place towards expanding, and increasing respect for women practicing Ifá. She felt that rejecting women as Ifá priests will only harm its growth:

> I feel like at the point where the equality of women is recognized in our religious system around the world, I think that it is going to be of great benefit to us because I think that that is going to be a big help in stabilizing our religious system and bringing respect to it, because you can't marginalize 50% or more of practitioners and expect that the religion can flourish. (I. N. Burton, personal communication, September 13, 2015)

Ifájọkẹ́'s husband, Fatóòjolá Burton, who doesn't have a problem with women initiated to Ifá, said, "if you are a true student of Ifá, *Osetura* is a principle Odù . . . it teaches us the importance of women" (F. A. Burton, personal communication, September 14, 2015). Fatọ̀ọ̀jolá saw the inclusion of women in Ifá as a natural thing that is inscribed in the sacred literature of Ifá. Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson pointed out the important symbolism that shows women's inclusion in the iconography of Ifá, asked, "What's the bird at the top of every Oba's crown, what's the top of Osun's staff, Osanyin's staff?" (A. C. Johnson, personal communication, October 18, 2015). Awólọ́wọ̀ was referring to the birds as the "mystical power of women" (H. Drewal et al., 1989, p. 38). According to H. Drewal et al., "the substances guarded by the bird-mothers can either protect or destroy the person who wears the crown" (p. 38).

Aikulola Lugo also saw the importance of the inclusion and centrality of women in Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system. He said their existence is in all the sacred aspects of the various Òrìṣà

priesthoods. He pointed out that there are women diviners, and they can do "practically everything a man can do within our tradition." Aikulola also expressed that,

> Women are the back bone of our culture . . . we believe that the world is a parallel spirit realm as well as a physical realm, and while men have physical power, women have spiritual power that is natural and you just can't do anything without women.

***Gay people in Ifa***. Awise Wándé Abímbọ́lá stood before a room of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners during a panel discussion at the World Òrìṣà Congress at the University of Ilẹ Ifẹ́ in 2013. He was addressing a comment about homosexuality made by Ṣọlágbadé Pópóọlá, a Nigeria babaláwo in response to Ajìṣẹbọ's paper, "Ifá, a Paradigm of Inclusivity: On Oyinbo, Women and Gay Rights." Abímbọ́lá said that was a discourse that practitioners need not engage in. He emphasized the principles of good character and began chanting,

*"Eni a rere la n wa o*

*Eni a rere la n pe*

*Eji Ogbe gba wa se*

*Gba wa se o*

*Eni a rere la n wa o."*

This means:

"We are looking for a few good people

We are only looking for a few good people

Eji Ogbe bless this person

We are looking for a few good people."

After chanting, Abímbọ́lá expressed that if gay people have good character, or ìwà pẹ̀lẹ́, then perhaps there may be something others could learn from them. The audience applauded his comments. Pópóọlá and Oyèsànyà (2008) believe that the practice of a gay life style is not

acceptable to mankind. He views non-heterosexual sex as perversion—and that includes oral sex, cybersex, and phone sex. Pópóọlá and Oyèsànyà's ideas are not welcoming to gay practitioners. Ifálobá Onífádé believed that Ifá practitioners should not become the "bedroom police." She said,

> I support gay people, transgender, bisexual [practitioners] . . . I think there is a rightful place for anyone who wants to develop ìwà pẹ̀lẹ́, who wants to be part of what is just in the world, who wants to heal the world . . . I don't think they should be discriminated [against] base upon their sexual orientation." (I. M. Onífádé, personal communication, December 22, 2015)

Babatunde Anderson felt that is was not for him to judge gay practitioners or their interest in being initiated into Ifá. One of the practitioners in this study performed a gay wedding. Adeyemi Lythcott's sister and her partner wanted a Yorùbá wedding and he said, "I married them; a lesbian wedding in Provincetown, Massachusetts" (A. M. Lythcott, personal communication, November 8, 2015).

Ajíṣẹbọ Abímbọ́lá echoed some of what many of the participants in the this study stated: "If we want to really end all prejudice and discrimination in the world, how can we choose to discriminate against just one little specific group of people? It doesn't make any sense." Ajíṣẹbọ understood the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà philosophy of inclusiveness as the "opposite of the Western idea of exclusiveness." She believed that Ifá is the final arbitrator of who is initiated,

> If Ifá says, "yes, I want that person," who am I as a mere human to say, "No, no, no. You can't have him." That's not my job. I think it's irrelevant. I think that if we are really committed to the cause of freedom in the world, it has to be without any qualifications.

The branch of Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners from the United States who were initiated in Nigeria, are confronted with a variety of challenges. Questions of race, gender, and sexual orientations are among those challenges. This branch is not alone in addressing these challenges. Based on the interviews in this study, the practitioners have an open minded and constructive view on these topics. Their patterns of belief on race, gender, and sexual orientation represent an inclusive view compared to the exclusive views among some practitioners in the United States.

Some of the other patterns of the branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from the United States initiated in Nigeria, also distinguish differences in their cultural practices in relationship to other systems of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice in the United States.

**Patterns**

According to Creswell (2005), shared patterns are "a common social interaction that stabilizes as tacit rules and expectations of the group" (p. 444), and the group can share "any one of a combination of behaviors, belief, and language" (p. 444). Fetterman (2010) believes that "patterns are a form of ethnographic reliability . . . patterns of thought and action repeat in various situations and with various players" (p. 97).

**Behaviors specific to those initiated in Nigeria.** Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from the United States initiated into Ifá in Nigeria, wear the same color patterns of Ifá beads, and, as a general practice, all of the various systems of practitioners wear beads. The Nigeria Ifá colored beads are also worn by practitioners initiated in the diaspora or those who received their One Hand of Ifá that identifies with the Yorúbá system of practice in Nigeria.

The initiation of women into Ifá and their reception of full sets of *Ikin Ifá* is a common practice in Nigeria. Women receiving Ifá and a full set of ikin, is not a general practice in the Cuban system in the United States, and Cuba. The inclusion of women as full Ifá practitioners is a part of the behavior patterns of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from the United States initiated in Nigeria. Women Ifá practitioners can divine, perform *ẹbọ*, and participate in the initiation rituals of other initiates. The only prohibition that women Ifá initiates have is that of seeing the Òrìṣà Odù.

Ìyánífá's Ajiṣẹbọ, and Ifájọkẹ are both examples of very competent women Ifá initiates from the United States initiated in Nigeria who can divine and perform ẹbọs in the Yorùbá

language. Ajiṣẹbọ has also participated in a variety of initiation rituals. Her proficiency in ritual practice is at a level greater than many male practitioners in the United States, Cuba, as well as, Nigeria.

A behavioral pattern that was also evident by all the practitioners interviewed for this study was the adoption and usage of Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà names. Practitioners of this branch or those identified with the Nigeria Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system sometimes take on a Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà name from their divination process or initiation.

**Belief.** Shared belief patterns of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners in this study from the United States initiated into Ifá in Nigeria also have some different ideas compared to other Ifá/Òrìṣà systems of practice about the impact of Ifá/Òrìṣà belief. The Òrìṣà orí represents a fundamental belief pattern among this branch of practitioners, particularly those in this study. According to W. Abímbọ́lá (1975a), orì is one of the most important Òrìṣà

> [It] is the essence of luck and the most important force responsible for human success or failure. Furthermore, orí is the individual's personal divinity who governs his life and communicates on his behalf with the major divinities. Whatever has not been sanctioned by a man's [persons] orí cannot be approved by the divinities. (p. 390)

Babatunde Gerald Anderson believes that getting initiated "takes a certain seriousness and dedication and straightforwardness" (B. G. Anderson, personal communication, November 8, 2015). He likens initiation to an investment in one's self, and one's orí, "The more you invest in your orí . . . your orí is going to begin to favor you." Ajiṣẹbọ stated that it was her orí that led her to get initiated in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system: "My ori has been leading me since I was a little girl and I think that my ori was leading me there [to Ifá] before I even knew what Ifá was" (A. M. Abímbọ́lá, personal communication, October 11, 2015).

Another pattern of belief found more prominently in the branch of practitioners from the United States who were initiated in Nigeria, or the Nigerian Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà system, is Ìwá

Pẹ̀lẹ́. Ìwá Pẹ̀lẹ́ is part of the regular lexicon of the Nigerian-affiliated branches and has been virtually absent in the Cuban system. Ifájọkẹ́ Burton pointed out how devotion to Ifá/Òrìṣà practice is important, she said it goes with a "commitment to development and good character [Ìwá Pẹ̀lẹ́]."

The ritual process of initiation for practitioners is a key event and exceptional occurrence. To practitioners in this study, there was a sense of authenticity because the initiation rituals took place in Yorùbáland and were conducted in the indigenous language. Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson said during his initiation in Nigeria, that there were Babaláwos "from nine to ninety chanting all night . . . Everybody there was a Yorùbá speaker, it was a traditional society" (A. C. Johnson, personal communication, October 19, 2015).

Ifálobá Onífádé believed the notion of authenticity meant "it's true, it's rich . . . it's a way to embrace the original sense of the religion" (I. M. Onífádé, personal communication, December, 22, 2015). The environment, location, and language all played roles to make the experience of practitioners from the United States initiated in Nigeria, an event or occurrence that moved them on to a new direction.

**Opportunities From the Practitioners' Perspectives**

This branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from the United States initiated in Nigeria who were interviewed for this study saw opportunities for the practice, and practitioners as a result of their experiences. Fatóòjolá Burton viewed healing as an opportunity, saying "Ifá provides a path for us to find ways to heal ourselves first" (F. A. Burton, personal communications, September 14, 2015). He wants to "be able to provide people with alternative ways of healing themselves" because "Ifá is a very powerful tool in doing that." Fatóòjolá sincerely believes that Ifá will mend our broken world but said that Ifá is,

> going to need people like us [Ifá/Òrìṣà initiates] to help do it. It's going to come out in many ways. It's going to come out in medical science, it's going to come out in culture. It's going to come out in music . . . People are going to have different roles to play.

Like Fatóòjolá, Ifálobá Onífádé agreed with the different roles that Ifá/Òrìṣà initiates must play, and the different ways to influence people. As a mother of two teenagers she said, "we really have to take a concerted effort to teach young people about Ifá and find interesting and innovative ways that they will learn about Ifá and what the principles are" (I. M. Onífádé, personal communication, December, 22, 2015). To accomplish this, Ifálobá said babaláwos, ìyánífás, and other practitioners,

> have to be creative [because] there's an opportunity to do that if we're willing to cross over the boundary of a generation and see how Ifá can relate to their lives, whether it's through the arts, whether it's through song. How do we connect the young people?

While the question of opportunities was a difficult one for Awólọ́wọ̀ Johnson, he felt that the notion of Black pride, and the identification with Africa must be maintained, "continuing what was started in Harlem in the 60s when people like Leroi Jones moved uptown from the East Village . . . and the Black Arts Movement started" (A. C. Johnson, personal communication, October 19, 2015). He said people like the Ọba of Ọ̀yọ́túnjí Village, Oseijeman Adéfúnmí did a revolutionary thing by wearing "African attire because it was an identification." Awólọ́wọ̀ said, this enabled Black people to have "a sense of themselves as new world Africans but as Africans who still have access to this ancestral tradition."

The sense of visibility and identification with an African sensibility that Awólọ́wọ̀ expressed was also shared by Ajiṣẹ̀bọ Abímbọ́lá. She said she,

> hoped that the world is changing enough so that that need for the religion to be hidden can become less, so that when we take classes in religious studies at a university, for example, there will be a class on Yorùbá religion in Africa and the diaspora, without that being an unusual course of study. (A. M. Abímbọ́lá, personal communication, October 11, 2015)

Ajiṣẹbọ stated that practitioners should be the examples in their own practice that will illustrate what opportunities are possible.

> Our life should be a model for it. In my own odù, it talks about how after you committed yourself to Ifá, your life would turn around . . . Those are the opportunities that as our own lives become so much better once they've been dedicated to Ifá and the Òrìṣà, other people will see that that's a possibility for them, too. (A. M. Abímbọ́lá, personal communication, October 11, 2015)

Adeyemi Lythcott felt that one of the opportunities that Ifá could provide is "a sense of community" adding, "once you connect a people with something that is tangible, that produces tangible, positive results in their lives, it does a couple of things" (A. M. Lythcott, personal communication, November 8, 2015). Adeyemi said that tangible connection to Ifá "minimizes those feelings of helplessness, and hopelessness." Babatunde Anderson is very hopeful about the future of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice in the United States and the growth of the practiced as an opportunity. "I'm optimistic and I'm also encouraged of the future of practicing in the United States because I see it growing."

Babatunde said being initiated in Ifá "has definitely expanded the world view" creating "opportunities to communicate and develop internationally." He felt that initiation "can expand our cultural exchange" adding, "That's a great opportunity, expanding cultural exchange." Aikulola Lugo also acknowledges the expansion of cultural exchanges. He said that people already have "access directly to West Africa through internet, phone, and travel" (A. N. Lugo, personal communication, January 2, 2016).

Aikulola also acknowledges that practitioners from the United States who have been initiated in Nigeria, are "still a new community" and "have a lot of work to do." He saw an opportunity for "bridging the gap" because "a lot of people are travelling back and forth to

Nigeria, and now, are also bringing some Nigerian into the states." Aikulola also regarded practitioners getting to learn Yorùbá language on a deeper level, as an opportunity:

> In several places in the United States actually do Yorùbá language. Yorùbá language, to me, is important, at least to some level, for some people, to be able to go deeper within the tradition, and even build a better dialogue with our folks back in Yorùbáland. (A. N. Lugo, personal communication, January 2, 2016)

Aikulola added that the Ifá/Òrìṣà practice is very "vast and deep . . . no one person can know it all. It's impossible." He thinks that it is very important for people to be "trained in all different priesthoods, all different Òrìṣà."

Ifájọkẹ́ Burton's perspective on opportunities for practitioners in the United States initiated Nigeria, is on reversing the damage to the natural environment. She said practitioners must help "build community [and] rebuild who we are as especially African people, but as a society, as the human race" (I. N. Burton, personal communication, September 13, 2015). Ifájọkẹ́ saw the human race being in danger and have "suffered immensely from the worst of what humans can be and do." To her Ifá/Òrìṣá practice "is about community" and,

> If we want our progeny, our future generations to be here and to be able to live a decent life, to be able to breathe and drink water and all the rest of that, that we really need to practice this religion that brings all of that to bear, good character, respect for all the divineness of nature, we could really pull together. That, to me, is the opportunity is to survive and thrive as human beings on this planet.

**Discussion**

The participants in this study all showed a sense of well-being and accomplishment in their lives, which they attributed to their initiation and practice in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. This acknowledgement was also made in recognizing the struggles that continue in addressing ongoing obstacles that periodically emerge in their lives. Their journeys of initiation to Nigeria were experiences where they observed and learned things that impacted and changed their lives in successful ways. Achieving their success was not based on receiving a magical wand; instead,

it involved their participation in ritual practices inclusive of their spiritual sacrifices, reflections, and the discipline to put in the needed work to make their goals manifest.

As one of the newer branches of Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system representing practitioners from the United States who were initiated in Nigeria, participants in this study brought new understandings, knowledge, challenges, and opportunities to the practice in the diaspora. Participants in this study are some of the practitioners who are taking up a progressive public discussion on issues of race, gender, and sexual identity as an attribute of their understanding, knowledge, challenges, and the opportunities they see based on their experiences in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system.

The findings in this study pointed to a concern of practitioners interviewed about the inclusiveness of women, White people, and gay practitioners involved and inititated in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. Ifájọkẹ́ Burton believes that by marginalizing women practitioners—who are 50% or more of the belief system—you can't "expect that the religion can flourish." According to Ifájọkẹ́ the global recognization of the "equality of women" in Ifá/Òrìṣà practice will be of "great benefit" in "stabilizing" and "bring respect" to this spiritual system. Aikulola Lugo illustrated Ifájọkẹ́'s points. He too believe the inclusion of women as an important "backbone" of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice and culture.

Practitioners in this study also believed in the inclusion of White practitioners in the practice, although they cautioned White practitioners from dismissing Africa and Black people as the orginators of the system. Ifálobá Onífádé believes in judging White practitioners by their "character" and "interest" in "helping to heal this world," and not attemptng to "co-opt" or try to "redefine" the practice. Ajiṣẹbọ Abímbọ́lá, a White Ìyánífá, warned that although "all human ancestors were originally African," this doesn't negate the "evil" done to Black people by the

“ancestors of White people.” Ajiṣẹ̀bọ Abímbọ́lá also believes that the “inclusive nature” of Ifá is “central to it’s belief system” (M. Abímbọ́lá, 2016, p. 249). Awólọ́wo Johnson concurs with Ajiṣẹ̀bọ Abímbọ́lá. He believes that the exclusion of other ethnicities also prevents Ifá being a “world religion.”

Despite the belief that a gay life style is not acceptable to mankind (Pópóọ́lá and Oyèsànyà, 2008), findings in this study were inclusive of gay practitioners. Adeyemi Lythcott officiated “a lesbian wedding” for his sister and her partner. Ifálobá Onífádé said she believes gay practitioners should be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation.

These findings around the inclusion of race, gender, and sexual orientation are important in the United States because this is a nation that was founded on the exclusion, and oppression of non-White people. Practicing these policies of exclusion, catagorize Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners and the belief system as narrow and oppressive. Practicing these kinds of exclusionary policies contradicts the philosophical and ethical beliefs of Ifá/Òrìṣà principles of Iwá Pẹ̀lẹ́. Dismissing the practice of good character, and deliberately engaging in a practice of exclusion, only limits the growth, and development for Ifá to heal the many wounds inflicted on humanity. This also limits opportunities for change in our fragmented world.

All of the practitioners in this study have witnessed some of the fragmentation and experienced some form of alienation from practitioners initiated into other branches of the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system in the diaspora. Despite the experiences of practitioners in this study, they were mindful, and appreciative of the contributions made by other systems of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice in the diaspora. They saw their initiations in Nigeria as a different experience, rather than a better one. Practitioners in this study also recognized the challenge of building unity among the different communities of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners in the United States.

Some of the patterns found in this study revealed healthy practices that were inclusive of women practitioners. Besides women being initiated into Ifá, or receiving their One Hand of Ifá, it is a common practice in the traditional Nigerian system that they receive a full set of (16 to 21) ikin. In the Cuban system, women in general are not intiated into Ifá. Women practitioners who receive their One Hand of Ifá are only given one ikin.

Women Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from the United States initiated in Nigeria also can divine, perform ẹbọ, and practicipate in initiation rituals of other initiates. The existence of the Òrìṣà orí represents a fundamental belief pattern among practitioners initiated in Nigeria, and those in this study. I have not seen the use of orí as an Òrìṣà, and icon in the Cuban system. It is however recognized and used by Cuban practitioners who have adopted the Nigerian system of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice. Also the spiritual principle of Iwá Pẹ̀lẹ́ is part of the regular lexicon of the Nigerian affiliated branches and have virtually absent in the Cuban system.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have presented the findings of my observations and interviews of participants in this study. Eight participants were interviewed to learn about their experiences as practitioners from the United States who all took a spiritual journey to be initiated in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system in Nigeria. The observations and interviews were designed to understand what the challenges and opportunities are for these practitioners.

This chapter presented a profile of each participant during their journey to be initiated in Nigeria with the focus on their challenges in Nigeria and their challenges as practitioners in the United States. It also included the impact and change they experienced during their journeys, and some of the lessons they wanted to bring back to the States.

This chapter also looked at the participants' ideas about race, gender, and sexual identity. As an ethnographic study, it examined the patterns that emerged from the interviews among the participants. Additionally, in this chapter participants discussed some of the opportunities they saw for the practice in the United States as practitioners in this newer branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system.

## Chapter V: Implications From and for Leadership and Change

In this chapter, I reflect on the implications of leadership and change for Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from the United States initiated in Nigeria. I will also look at how my research as a priest practitioner and scholar practitioner has changed me in addressing some of the challenges and opportunities for this new branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners. The chapter concludes with a brief look at the study's limitations and some thoughts on what future studies should be considered.

### Adaptive Change and Ifá/Òrìṣá Practitioners

Yorùbá philosophy is that conflict is always the order of the day (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997a); this implies that change is related to how those conflicts are navigated. It is about adapting to the way conflict requires that changes be made. Conflict can be something we experience physically, psychologically, and spiritually. It can be something that disrupts, or, creates obstacles in our ideas, emotions, feelings, interest, behavior, and attitudes. The Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system relies on divination as an adaptive tool to address conflict. It uses divination to find ways to change the conflict, or, to bring some balance to our disequilibrium. It is through performing sacrifice or *ebọ* that change, or, balance can occur.

Heifetz (1994) views leadership as a process of "adaptive work" (p. 22). The process of divination and performing *ebọ* in Ifá/Òrìṣà practice is adaptive work. According to Heifetz, adaptive work, "consists of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs, or behaviors" (p. 22). Heifetz's model is consistent with traditional Ifá/Òrìṣà practice which can be viewed as a highly adaptive system of leadership and change both for individuals and social groups. As Heifetz pointed out, "The exposure and

orchestration of conflict-internal contradictions-within individuals and constituencies provide the leverage for mobilizing people to learn new ways" (p. 22).

The rituals of initiation are part of a process that helps the initiate to begin internalizing changes regarding the values, beliefs, and behaviors of the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. They also prepare initiates for learning new ways of addressing conflicts and changing the outcomes. This process also allows Ifá/Òrìṣà initiates who are properly trained, to provide leadership in the spiritual transformation of newer practitioners. Initiation also refocuses initiates whose main purpose is not on performing ritual work for other practitioners; instead, it helps them to navigate the obstacles and conflicts in their personal or professional lives.

Ìyánífá Ifálobá Mawakana Onífádé is an example of one whose practice has helped her to navigate conflict. She illustrated this with the example of when she took on her new position as a principal. When she got the job, she said,

> I got a divination and the Òrìṣà [to] cling to regarding my success is Ọ̀ṣun and so when we think of some of the characteristics of Ọ̀ṣun, one is honey. So, it's always good to have the sweet words that you can utilize when you're going into a situation. . . . And so, whenever I walk into a situation, I try to sit back a little bit and figure out what is the best way to approach this.

As a principal, Ifálobá works with students as well as adults who are not practitioners or believers in Ifá/Òrìṣà spiritual system. She has recognized that the people she works with need, as she said, to "heal" and are coming to the school with their "own pains and experiences." Ifálobá said that, "as a practitioner you want to figure out what's happening and if there's way to address their trauma and their experiences that could move them forward to transformation." She added, "That's how I use Ifá."

Although Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system is a global phenomenon and is practiced by different ethnicities, it is rooted in the African diaspora whose history is tainted by colonialism, and racial

and sexual exploitation. It is also ironic that practitioners in the United States who live in one of the world's most technologically advanced societies, travel to Nigeria, a nation ravaged by the violence and corruption of imperialism's aftermath and underdeveloped by Western colonial powers (Rodney, 1972), to acquire spiritual tools to deal with the conflicts imperialist culture—historical and contemporary— creates. This is one of the challenges that Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners face: "how to cultivate and sustain learning under conditions of complex, rapid change" (Fulan, 2001, p. vii).

Ìyánífá Ifálobá Mawakana Onífádé is also a good example of how to deal with the challenges that practitioners face while working under what Fulan (2001) wrote of as complex rapid change. She said,

> Another way that I utilize Ifá in terms of being a principal is the sense of there's the order of chaos. Knowing that every day I go into the schoolhouse, chaos is the order of the day. So not to be dismayed by that, but to find out how to look at it as a solution based process.

As a system of leadership and change, the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system can provide spiritual leadership particularly for women, and people with different sexual identities of African descent, who have been marginalized in society. The three women practitioners interviewed for this study are examples of how the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system, as a system of leadership and change, can provide spiritual leadership. Ìyánífá Ifájọkẹ́ Nefertiti Burton said that growing up she didn't come "from a religious family," and wasn't "set or based in any kind of particular religious tradition." Ifájọkẹ́ is now the Chairperson in the Drama Department at the University of Louisville, Kentucky. She is an award winning playwright, authoring stories rooted in traditional Ifájọkẹ́ iIfá sacred literature. She said what Ifá did for her:

> more than anything else [it] laid the goundwork and gave me the confidence to know that I could achieve whatever It was that I set my mind to, whatever it was that was in my future, whatever it was that my orí was giving me to move forward on.

Ìyánìfá Ajiṣẹbọ Abímbọ́lá was a single mother who was "hungry and desperate" to be a part of a community of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice. She was also swindled out of the money she paid to practitioners in the United States to be initiated in Cuba. Despite those experiences, Ajiṣẹbọ, is now a very competent practitioner and fluent in the Yorùbá language in ways that stands out more than male practitioners throughout the diaspora. She is also a scholar and a practitioner who was appointed as one of the *Aṣojú Àti Àsà Yorùbá*—the ambassadors of Yorùbá religion and culture—in 2013 by the late Oòni of Ifè, Oba Okùnadé Síjúadé Olúbùṣe II. The appointment of Ìyánífá Ifálobá as the principal of her school is another visible example of how a woman in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system has been aided in her spiritual journey.

Initiated practitioners of Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system can also provide effective leadership, according to Fulan (2001), by making "people feel that even the most difficult problems can be tackled productively" (p. 7). The process of internalizing the belief that one can successfully deal with conflict and obstacles in their lives exists within the Yorùbá concept of orí. In the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system, orí is an important divinity that makes it possible for a person to allow or accept change. W. Abímbọ́lá (1976) made the connection of orí's leading role in the change process stated,

> Ifá is merely a mouthpiece, an intermediary between the inquirer and his [or her] orí and the gods to the supplicant and carries the sacrifices made by the latter to orí and the gods. The role of the gods is to aid orí in leading every person to his destiny in life. Whatever a man's [or woman's] orí has refused to approve cannot be granted by any other god. (p. 115)

This has been also my own experience. My involvement in Ifá/Òrìṣà practice has had a transformative impact on changes made in my life since 1978. It has shaped my leadership as a practitioner, a scholar, and an activist engaged in Black social movements in the United States.

**My Personal Transformative Changes in Becoming an Ifá/Òrìṣá Practitioner**

As a young activist since 1975, I was exposed to, and began working with, Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners without knowing it. It was during my first divination in 1978 that I was able to make the connection. Even then, I only had a sketchy understanding about the system.

It wasn't until 1983 when I got more of an understanding of the practice related to the Cuban system. The practitioners that I was initially exposed to were also activists deeply involved in the Black Liberation Movement. These activists had their share of obstacles and conflicts in their lives. It was also their spiritual practices that successfully guided them through the storms of their particular dilemmas. Their guidance led me into the direction of the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. Even though they were involved in the Cuban system of practice, they were aware of, and searching for, the knowledge about the practice in Nigeria.

Through the spiritual leadership of these political activists, I saw an example for me to address the conflicts and obstacle in my own experience, ones that had been suffocating me as a young father in a failed relationship. This conflict was compounded by trying to navigate undergraduate school while being a political activist in company with a movement under political repression. In 1983 I received my *warriors* in the Cuban system. I received them from a Cuban santero who had reactionary ideas about the Cuban revolution. Despite the contradictions of his ideas and my political involvement, the spiritual practice brought some balance and hope into my life.

My involvement with the practice during this period was at a time when I was homeless, dealing with a lot of anxiety about visitations with my children, and wondering what the future would bring. After getting involved with the Cuban system of practice, I saw that things began to open up for me. I found a job with the South End Press, a small radical press collective. I also got

an overnight job at a group home for developmentally disabled adults. These jobs enabled me to purchase a house. Eventually I left the South End Press and got another job at the Boston Community Loan Fund and went back to school to receive my Master's of Science in Community Economic Development.

After completing my Master's degree I began teaching in community leadership programs. These programs were affiliated with Roxbury Community College, and the University of Massachusetts (Boston), which offered college credits to participants who successfully completed the program. I left the Cuban spiritual house in 1993 after the priest hung up the phone on me because he was displeased that I was in contact with other members who left the group. That year, conflicts and obstacles became more intense and I eventually lost my house to foreclosure.

During 1994, I occasionally ran into uninitiated practitioners in the Cuban system who were not affiliated with any spiritual house or Òrìṣà priest. Many of us decided to come together and meet with a couple of Òrìṣà priests who had been initiated in Nigeria. Those priests eventually brought Dr. Wándé Abímbọ́lá to their home to conduct a series of workshops on Ifá/Òrìṣá, and ancestor practices.

Dr. Abímbọ́lá's workshops were inspiring and informative. They filled the gaps of what had been missing in my Cuba experience. Abímbọ́lá's method of teaching allowed for questions, engagement, and the sharing of experiences. In my past experience with the Cuban priest, we would sometimes get admonished for asking questions. Dr. Abímbọ́lá validated our experience and encouraged questions. He knew the Yorùbá language as a natural speaker; he knew the sacred stories in the odùs; and he could clearly explain the cosmology, philosophy, and ethics of the Ifá/Òrìṣà system based on its origins in Ilé Ifẹ̀, Nigeria. Sinclair (2007) pointed to the kind of

process Abímbọ́lá used, as one that is "helping people to tap into and validate their experiences, as well as equipping them with theoretical concepts to do this; [it] is an important part of freeing them to rethink what leadership means and might mean for them" (p. 66).

After receiving my kofá from Dr. Abímbọ́lá in 1995, I began to teach at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, in the Africana Studies Department. In 1999 I eventually did my initiation with Dr. Abímbọ́lá in Ọ̀yọ́, Nigeria. Like the participants interviewed in my research, I found that Ifá/Òrìṣà practice opened up doors that helped me successfully address the conflicts and obstacles in my life. It has also helped in developing my potential as a practitioner, and in my work as an activist, and scholar. As well, like the participants in this study, addressing some of the challenges of having a different experience of being initiated, has led to opportunities to move the practice forward.

Although the global connections of the Internet and social media have opened the portals to access new information from practitioners of the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system in Nigeria, that still does not make up for directly observing, participating, and learning in the indigenous environment of the practice. Practitioners in the United States need not only to stay in contact with practitioners in Nigeria, but also to continue visiting there to deepen and expand their knowledge of the culture. There is a need in the African diaspora to be more proficient about the language, the music, the dances, the poetry, herbal medicines, and the rituals. The source and the center of that knowledge is still Nigeria.

My vision of the impact this research can have is manifold. I would like to do the following:

- document and share the experiences of the branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from the United States who have embarked on a spiritual journey to Nigeria, to be initiated into the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system;
- make this research available to scholars, practitioners of all systems of Ifá/Òrìṣà practices, and for people who have a general interest in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system;
- identify Ifá/Òrìṣà practice as a system of leadership and change that can help make their lives successful;
- have practitioners, scholars, and, people with a general interest in this practice understand the connections of Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system to the ideas of leadership and change;
- encourage the development of regional and national network of practitioners initiated in Nigeria to share their experiences in building local communities of practice;
- foster local and national conversations to bring about a constructive change in respect for the different systems of practice in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system; and
- continue my professional development as a practitioner, and scholar by being engaged in academic and practitioner venues to learn as well as share my research.

I see my research in this dissertation as appealing to practitioners in the various systems of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice. I also see it as a document that places on record, particularly those practitioners from the United States profiled in this study who embarked on a spiritual journey to be initiated in the homeland of Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. I see this research filling a gap about the experiences of practitioners, adding to the extant literature about Yorùbá practitioners who became part of a new branch of practitioners in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system; a system of initiation inclusive of people of different gender, race, and sexual orientations. This research is built off of

the innovation and scholarship of Dr. Wandé Ábímbọ́lá's work who is a world respected Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioner and distingushed scholar. It is primarily the practice, and scholarship of Dr. Ábímbọ́lá that has laid the cosmological, philosophical, and ethical foundation for the development of this most recent branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners.

It is through this research that my status in my community of practitioners will include that of a scholar in the Ifá/Òrìṣà practice. This new status in the community can be instrumental in opening the doors to address the challenges of isolation that practitioners initiated in Nigeria, experienced when they returned to their communities in the United States. It can also address the the issue of respect for women initiated into Ifá, as well as their full inclusion in ritual practices, as well as others regardless of their gender, race, or, sexual orientations. This can help build communities of practice that are welcoming and respectful of the diversity of practitioners and initiates in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system.

**Moving Forward**

The branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from the United States, initiated in Nigeria, brings another layer of experience to the practice. The incorporation of their experiences into practice is a demonstration of leadership from a personal objective and is a way for them to make meaning for others. Sinclair (2007) identifies leadership as "both an intensely personal and relational process of constructing meaning and purpose" (p. xix). Leadership should not be about dictating to others, or commanding their loyalty. It's not about ostracizing people because of their relationships or affiliations with others. Practitioners initiated in Nigeria have an opportunity to engage in leadership that shifts the paradigm away from the kind of leadership that confines or restricts relationships. The development of many of the practitioners in this study, including myself, illustrates a moving on from some of the differemces with the Cuban system of practice

in the United States. It is a move towards a more inclusive kind of practice and leadership development, inspired by spiritual journeys of initiation in Nigeria.

Sinclair's (2007) idea of leadership has implications for leadership and change for the branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners initiated in Nigeria. According to Sinclair, the "purpose of leadership should be to liberate" (p. xix). Her idea is also a fitting change for this branch of practitioners to address some of the challenges they have experienced and to put those in practice. Sinclair pointed out,

> Good leadership aims to support people (including leaders themselves) to make thoughtful choices about what to do and how to influence. Leadership can liberate us from confining or oppressive conditions-imposed by structures, others and ourselves. Rather than being used as a means to compel compliance and conformity, to dominate or prescribe, leadership can invite us to imagine, initiate and contest. Proceeding with a liberating intent requires leaders to be acutely conscious of power relations, to commit to using power and authority ethically, not competitive self-interest or to control others. (p. xix)

The leadership implications for the branch of practitioners in the United States who were initiated in Nigeria, operate on two levels of influence: the influence it has internally on practitioners in their local communities, and on associate practitioners; and its external influence in the broader community, and in fields of healing, artistry, education, and administration, among others areas. The Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system provides a sacred space for people who are wounded by the impact of oppression, social inequities, social and relationship conflicts, and the pursuit of successfully achieving personal goals and dreams. Practitioners who are initiated and competent diviners can spiritually assist people interested in navigating against the negative developments in their lives, while helping them bring forth positive developments.Throught the process of divination, competent Ifá/Òrìṣà diviners can help people to identify their concerns and ways to positively address those concerns successfully.

What I have learned from the participants in this study is that all had a positive disposition about how they where to take on a task or achieve a goal. Despite the obstacles or challenges in their way, in pushing forward, they were reflective, self-critical, and conscious of how they did or didn't implore their Iwá Pẹ̀lẹ́. As a part of their daily rituals, they would ask their orí to bless them, understanding that no divinity can bless one if their orí does not accept (W. Ábímbọ́lá, 1975a). The participants where also adaptive in finding ways to make the blessing of their success manifest. They also understood that the narratives of Ifá/Òrìṣà blessings of success exist in the past, present, and, the future (W. Ábímbọ́lá, 1977). The conceptual and philosophical understanding and practice that participants in this study had about orí, and their understanding and practice about principles of Iwá Pẹ̀lẹ́, are reflective of the patterns that came out of the findings. I learned that it was the spiritual discipline, ritual practice, and the incorporation of Ifá/Òrìṣà conceptual, philosophical, ethical ideas, and principles that made practitioners successful in the different endeavors or professional fields that they were engaged.

Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system is open and inviting to the newcomers, as well as to experienced practitioners, because it is not a system that is based on proselytizing, and preaching to people. It is a dynamic system that helps people to connect with their ancestors and get in touch with the sacred things of life and to help them live their lives in authentic ways. This is directly connected to the kind of leadership that Ifá/Òrìṣà system can offer. It is an inclusive leadership that is centered around the needs of participants helping to address their concerns and dilemmas. It is a leadership that is transformative, one that helps people realize their authentic selves and the sacredness of all of humanity. It is a leadership that ensures that they can overcome the challenges and achieve the positive goals they envision and which inspire them. These are some of the elements that makes Ifá/Òrìṣà leadership different from some of the other faith traditions

**Developing Communities of Practice**

The experiences of United States practitioners coming back from being initiated in Nigeria, have been ones of isolation from those initiated in the diaspora. In some cities throughout the United States practitioners initiated in Nigeria have created what Wheatley (2005) called "communities of practice" (p. 172). These practitioners have developed networks to build relationships and share ideas about their practice and experiences. The implications of this community building for leadership and change, reinforce Wheatley's notions:

> Communities of practice demonstrate that it is natural for people to seek out those who have the knowledge and experience that they need. As people find others and exchange ideas, relationships develop and a community forms. This community becomes a rich marketplace where knowledge and experience are shared. It also becomes an incubator where new knowledge, skills, and competencies develop. In corporations, many of the core competencies (the core skills that are the organization's unique strengths) develop within these informal, self-organized communities, not from any intentional strategic or development strategy. (p. 172)

In Boston, we have set up study groups that allow for the community of practice to be open to share and learn from the least experienced to the more advanced practitioners. We have attempted to create a supportive environment for all levels, and ages of practitioners. Forming communities of practice is another way for leadership and change to manifest in practice. According to Wheatley (2005) this process of education and practice is one where,

> people learn very quickly when they have a need for the skills and information. If it will change their lives, if it will help them accomplish what is important to them, then everyone can become a good learner. We learn complex competencies and knowledge in a matter of weeks, not months or years. And people learn best in community, when they are engaged with one another, when everyone is both student and teacher, expert and apprentice, in a rich exchange of experiences and learnings. (pp. 172–173)

**Relational Practice**

Sinclair 's (2007) and Wheatley's (2005) ideas about leadership and change connect with Fletcher's (2001) concept of relational practice, particularly as these all relate to the challenges and opportunities of the branch of Ifá/Òrìṣá practitioners initiated in Nigeria. Practicing

leadership that liberates, instead of confining, and forming communities of practice requires a relational process and practice. Although Fletcher's ideas are an intersection of feminist poststructuralism, feminist sociology, and relational psychology, they challenge how organizations "disappear the feminine and potentially transformational aspects of new ideas" (p. x). Some forms of Fletcher's relational practice such as "mutual empowering," (p. 55) and "self-achieving" (p. 65), are skills that facilitate forming communities of practice.

Initiated practitioners of Ifá/Òrìṣá engaged in forming communities of practice must be able to apply skills that can engage others in learning and contributing to the process. Fletcher (2001) meant this in the call for mutual empowering, the "act of enabling, or contributing to, the development of another" (p. 55). Another important skill is knowing how to continue to develop and maintain relationships with others in achieving mutual interest. Fletcher referred to this as "using relational skills to enhance professional growth and effectiveness" (p. 65). She saw this skill as also about "making an effort to quickly repair potential or perceived breaks in working relationships was one way of maintaining healthy connections" (p. 65).

The experiences of practitioners initiated in Nigeria and returning into an unwelcoming culture in the United States, and receiving a cold shoulder from practitioners in the Cuban system, has not stopped this branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from developing and influencing its spirituality into areas of artistry, healing, administration, and other arenas. This also applies to Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners not getting entrapped into struggles of other faith traditions positioning themselves, or proselytizing as the chosen ones.

Practicing Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system as a system of leadership that liberates, can be instrumental for practitioners engaging in a practice that is reflective of an authentic form of spiritual transformative practice. Despite the chauvinism among some Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners in

the United States directed at practitioners initiated in Nigeria, some who were initiated in both Nigeria and the United States are engaged in a practice that is more transactional than transformative. In this, I mean a transaction that solely involves the "give and take" (Burns, 2003, p. 24) of money for services. The transformative practice goes beyond the transaction, it "involves active people, engaging in influence relationships based on persuasion, intending real change to happen, and insisting that those changes reflect their mutual purposes" (Rost, 1991, p. 123). This form of transactional initiation creates more challenges for moving forward the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system and reverses the idea of the belief system also being a system of leadership that liberates.

**Transformative Spiritual Practice**

One of the core attractions to Ifá/Òrìṣà from my experience was that it provided an alternative view of the world, different than the view I received growing up in a predominant White, male-dominated, Christian and capitalist society built on slavery. This imagery was one that needed changing as Hucks (2012) pointed out:

> Because of the egregious apparatus of dehumanization visited upon African Americans throughout most of American social history, African Americans have consistently sought resistance strategies to rehumanize their social and spiritual selves. Within the context of Yoruba religion, these strategies included transforming images of Africa; reconfiguring national identity, creating new histories, identifying new origins, rethinking cultural norms; producing textual legacies; and reconstructing religious meaning. (p. 312)

The change that I was looking for was also one that would change the view of the world I grew up understanding. The transformation that I needed was what Burns (2003) considers as "basic alterations in entire systems—revolutions that replace one structure of power with another" (p. 24). That kind of transformation according to Burns,

> is to cause a metamorphosis in form or structure, a change in the very condition or nature or a thing, a change into another substance, a radical change in outward form or inner

> character, as when a frog is transformed into a prince or a carriage maker into an auto factory. (p. 24)

Burns (2003) saw this process of change as based on "transforming leadership" (p. 24). This type of leadership opens the opportunity for practitioners initiated in Nigeria, to engage in a transformational spiritual practice. Observing and learning a system of practice in its indigenous environment is an important experience that is different than that of practitioners initiated in the diaspora. Yet, Mezirow and Associates (2000) believe that "The *form* that is undergoing trans*form*ation needs to be better understood; if there is no form there is no transformation" (p. 48). Mezirow and Associates assert that "at the heart of a form is a way of knowing" (p. 48).

Although practitioners from the United States embarked on a spiritual journey to be initiated in Nigeria, their challenge, or, opportunity for engaging in a transformational spiritual practice as leadership requires more of a change in learning and applying what we know—and how we know it—as suggested by Mezirow and Associates (2000): "Thus, genuinely transformational learning is always to some extent an epistemological change rather than merely a change in behavior repertoire or an increase in the quantity or fund of knowledge" (p. 48).

The challenges of practitioners from the United States separating from their normal world and experience, initiating in a ritual of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice in Nigeria, and then returning to their normal world, represent a significant experience of the "three stages of ritual" according to Warm (2011, p. 86). Warm also views this experience as a "journey of transformation" (p. 86). This transformative process, or, initiation is only the beginning stages of initiation. After these rites of passage in the Ifá/Òrìṣà practice in Nigeria, the babaláwos generally chant this verse:

> "We have initiated you into the secrets of Ifá.
>
> You should re-initiate yourself." (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1976, p. 24)

That advice, encased in the odù Ifá, suggests that a person must hold on to the experience, its meaning and values as they embrace it. It also suggests the internalization of the same in order to maintain sanctity of those values. The Ifá/Òrìṣà practice, like leadership, does not work like a magic wand. The practice means putting in the work needed to bring chaos and conflict into balance, creating an alignment that will make our lives successful.

The practitioners interviewed for this study are also examples of transformative leaders in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. They are successful in their lives and have transformed themselves from stages of challenges to those of opportunties. They have also developed positions where they can be helpful to fellow believers and non-believers alike.

Ìyánífá Ifájọkẹ́ Burton is representative of someone who grew up non-religious yet into an academic who influences how people think about African spiritual ideas and philosophy. She does this with the plays she writes that are grounded in the sacred Ifá literature. Ifálobá has transformed from a victim who was swindled out of her initiation money to a competent practitioner and a international representative of the Ifá/Òrìṣà practice. She is a person who after college was searching for a spiritual practice eventually found the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. She has used Ifá to guide all the important phases of her life: a Yorùbá Ifá wedding; Yorùbá naming, and One Hand of Ifá ceremonies for her children after their birth; and, the successful professional transition from a teacher to a school principal. Ifálobá has incorporated Ifá into all the important decisions she made in her life as a practitioner, and uses its philosophy and ethical ideas to help others bring balance to their lives as well.

Babaláwo Fatóòjolá Burton has transformed from a young political activist and father who survived the dangers of the U.S. government's counter intelligence program (COINTELPRO) and became a visual artist and educator who has travelled around the world

documenting his experience. In addition to successfully raising four children with two completing their Ph.D degrees, and in semi-retirement, he is the Director of the Kentucky Center for African American Heritage. Besides the influence on his family, and his community, Fatóòjolá was a major influence in my life and other believers in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system.

C. Awólọ́wò Johnson is also a Babaláwo who came out of an era of political turnmoil. His experience in the Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements has equally transformed his life as well as his development in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. Even as a retired sociologist, Awólọ́wò is forever an educator and healer who is a stalwart political, social, and spiritual advisor to many. Awólọ́wò was transformed as a young man interesting in Pan Africanism and African spirituality into one of the wise elders in this branch of the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system.

Adeyemi Michael Lythcott is another brilliant Babaláwo whose development was shaped by his early years living abroad in West Africa. It was his experience in Òṣogbo, Nigeria where his transformation began to blossom within the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system. Adeyemi became a member of the National Black Threatre of Harlem of which his late spouse, Ìyánífá Barbara Ann Teer, founded. The National Black Threatre of Harlem was instrumental in promoting the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system in their plays; their building is still decorated with displays of Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà icons and motifs. As a consultant, Adeyemi works with a maginalized population whose work history is rooted in the illegal economy. In his efforts to prepare this population for legal work, Adeyemi begins his training sessions with teaching his trainees how to acknowledge their ancestors and invoke their spirit to help clear a path to a new beginning and new life for them. His transformative efforts are engaging people unfamiliar with the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system and getting them to focus on the sacred as they leave the profane behind.

I remember Babaláwo Aikulola Nathan Lugo as someone who had been recently initiated in Nigeria and was searching for more knowledge about Ifá/Òrìṣà practice after his first year. Aikulola is now one of most proficient practitoners in the United States who was initiated in Nigeria. He now initiates and trains new practitioners. As a fluent Yorùbá speaker, he is an example of what sacrifice, study, and discipline can do for practitioners who want to develop their Yorùbá language skills in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system.

Lastly, Babatunde Gregory Anderson as a teenager, fascinated by the drums, was led into circles of practitioners in the Cuban system. This fascination eventually led him to Africa and eventually to being initiated into the Nigerian branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice. Through his quiet study and practice Babatunde has become a competent ritual specialist who can perform rituals based on the method of chanting the sacred odu in Yorùbá. He has also been affiliated as a diviner for a women's rites of passage program, aiding in their transformation to culturally competent women grounded in a sisterhood of support and good character.

**Authentic Experience**

One of the concepts that emerged from this study concerned the idea of an authentic experience. In their article, "Authentic Leadership Development: Getting to the Root of Positive Forms of Leadership," Avolio and Gardner (2005) stated: "A focus on authenticity requires attention to a sense of self experienced by the actor" (p. 320). Avolio and Gardner also cited Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow on the origins and history of authenticity, saying that they had "focused attention on the development of fully functioning or self actualized persons, i.e., individuals who are 'in tune' with their basic nature and clearly and accurately see themselves and their lives" (p. 319).

In "Bringing Your Whole Self to Work: Lessons in Authentic Engagement from Women Leaders," Roberts (2007) viewed authenticity as being inclusive of one's moral underpinnings. She stated, "the notion of authenticity had become a symbol of self-knowledge and moral integrity . . . *Authenticity* refers to the degree of congruence between internal values and external expressions" (p. 329). The experience for participants in this study who were initiated in the homeland of the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system, in the center of Yorùbá culture, is as true as it gets. This experience speaks to Roberts' idea of moral integrity in the participants' quest for authenticity. A part of this moral integrity for participants, was making their own decisions as to where they chose to be initiated, and withstanding the challenges that came with this. This process is fundamental to becoming an authentic leader as Roberts pointed put:

> Authentic leaders are comfortable in their skin; They know where they come from and who they are, and they know how to use their backgrounds to build a rapport with followers. Authentic leaders are not threatened by people with other origins; they welcome them. They are sensitive in communicating their origins and are aware of the differences in cultural attitudes toward their backgrounds. Authentic leaders know how to strike a balance between their distinctiveness and the cultures in which they operate. (p. 349)

**Limitations of This Study**

There are several limitations of this study to be noted. The first is that Nigeria is only one place in Africa that Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from the United States go to get initiated. Babaláwo Aikulola, one of the participants in this study, is fond of phrasing origins as the "West African Òrìṣà Tradition" because of the active presence of the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system in that entire region. There are practitioners from the United States who are also initiated in that region outside of Nigeria. This study did not include practitioners with that experience.

This study only included a sample of eight practitioners, all of whom were initiated into Ifá. While eight is not an unusually low number for in-depth qualitative studies, as is well known,

generalization from any small sample should be limited and cautious (Baker and Edwards, 2012). Qualitative studies are intended to probe meaning not generalize. This study did not deal with the experiences of practitioners who were initiated into other Òrìṣà societies. There are a vast number of practitioners who worship many different Òrìṣà, and many of those members are also initiated into societies that propitiate their particular divinity.

In this sample of my study there were also no LQGBT practitioners initiated into Ifá in Nigeria. There were also no contrary views of practitioners interviewed for this study regarding differences on the race, gender, and sexual identity questions. Those different views exist among practitioners from the United States initiated in Nigeria. Also in this study I did not include younger practitioners under 40 years of age. There was one candidate under 30 years old who I wanted to include but she was out of the country during the period of my field work. While this omission weakens the applicability of this research, I don't think this will be a deterrent for a younger audience from reading this study.

In my original research design, I included a participant I understood to have contrary views about race, gender, and sexual identities of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners. As a result of personal misfortune and family illness that practitioner was not able to participate in the study within the fieldwork deadline. I was however able to anonymously include a practitioner from the United States who had strong contrary views on the practice of White practitioners. It is important to illustrate that there are challenges within this branch of Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system regarding the participation of White practitioners.

**Future Studies**

Flowing from the consideration of this study's limitations are several ways in which the practice of Ifá/Òrìṣà as brought to the United States, could be the subject of worthwhile further

research. Future studies should examine the experience of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners from the United States who were initiated in other parts of the West African region. Some of the richness that the practice and philosophy have to offer is based on the diversity and adaptiveness of Ifá/Òrìṣà practices across different geographic settings. While Ifá/Òrìṣà is rooted in the homeland of the Yorùba, other cultural groups are thought to have appropriated aspects of the religion into their own world-views (Olupona, 1993). Much might be learned by seeing how these historical borrowings of Ifá/Òrìṣà changed (and were changed by) neighboring African peoples.

Olupona (1993) felt that a "neglected area is comparative work involving Yoruba and crypto-yoruba religions, i.e., the indigenous religions of peoples who are known to have borrowed heavily from the Yoruba, e.g. the Fon, the Ewe or Rini (Edo)" (p. 264). It may be that variants not studied here have much to offer a broadened understanding and practice for practitioners based in the United States who were initiated in Nigeria and in the Western hemisphere.

It would also be useful to undertake an examination of practitioners who were initiated to the other Òrìṣà societies besides Ifá. There are some differences in the culture of practice between each Òrìṣà society, and differences between all of the Òrìṣà societies as a whole and that of the society of Ifá practitioners. These differences are even more distinguished in the diaspora.

In Chapter IV, the topic of women practitioners was a recurring matter raised by my interviewees, male and female. More focused examination of the experiences of women initiated into Ifà and the particular challenges they have in the diaspora, would be another possible study of great interest. African American women and other women of African descent have been getting initiated into Ifá in increasing numbers. Yet, there are controversies in the diaspora about what they can and can't do. Additionally and again, as observed by some study participants here,

an examination of the experience of LQGBT practitioners merits future study. Another line of inquiry would be to research the diversity of practitioners initiated into Ifá/Òrìṣá belief system and the kind of relationships exist with the interactions of those communities of practice. This could also include the dynamics of race, gender, and sexual orientation that are navigated in those communities.

The question of what roles Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners are playing to address the social inequalities in their communities would be another worthy study. I have argued throughout that the effects of initiation in Nigeria of such practitioners are not only political but communal. This should be looked at empirically.

Lastly, a future study should be pursued on how Ifá/Òrìṣā practitioners from the United States who were initiated in Nigeria, are continuing to deepen their ritual practices using the Yorùba language, odù Ifá verses, drumming, dance, and Ifá medicine. How do they sustain the work long after they return from initiations in Nigeria? Compared to the origin and existence of the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system, the practice in the United States and throughout the diaspora is relatively new. The development of this newer branch of practitioners in the United States who are taking spiritual journeys to Nigeria to be initiated, has widened the experiences and culture of practitioners in the diaspora. This has created new challenges and opportunities to explore, document, and learn from, in longitudinal studies.

**Last Words**

In this closing chapter, I have discussed some of the limitations I saw of this study and offered some suggestions for future studies on Ifá/Òrìṣà practice based on what I learned from this study and some further issues and questions that need to be addressed in this belief system. The ideas put forth of Ifá mending our broken world (W. Abímbọ́lá, 1997a) strikes at the core of

this challenge and opportunity, which my study has been motivated by and seeks to enrich. It has brought out the nature and the issues of leadership and change required in order for such a transformation to occur. It is a transformation needed not just in a world of perpetual chaos but within the community of Ifá/Òrìṣà practitioners themselves.

What this study reinforces for me is the complexity of the Yorùbá Ifá/Òrìṣà system. I have learned that as the culture of Ifá/Òrìṣà practice grows and develops into new cultural environments, it confronts its own complex challenges, and dilemmas. The question of inclusion has always been an issue at play. K. Ábímbọ́lá (2006) said the Yorùbá people are a group that is culturally "found in a unique set of religio-philosophical beliefs" (p. 25) that they "organise, regulate and moderate their day-to-day lives" (p. 25). The Yorùbá are an assortment of different ethnic groups united around spiritual principles, philosophical, and ethnical beliefs. The Yorùbá historically has generally been accepting and respectful of differences. There are different kingdoms in Yorùbáland. In Ilẹ́ Ifẹ̀, the King is referred to as the *Ọòní*; in Òṣogbo as the *Atáọ́ja*; and in Ọ̀yọ́, the King is called the *Aláàfin*. This is an example of the cultural differences that are respected included throughout Yorùbáland.

As a result of my research and involvement in the Ifá/Òrìṣà belief system, I have learned to be more accepting of difference, and to learn and understand what those fundamental differences are. Professionally I have applied this by creating a respectful environment in the classroom where gender, race/ethnicities, and class, often intersect. As a practitioner exposed to a broad community of people I have learned to listen to and help, without judging people who were also from different gender, race/ethnicities, and class backgrounds. Some of the issues included relationship, and family problems; social and economic issue; and, within the pass 15 years, the trauma experienced as a result of Hurricane Katrina, the Earthquake in Haiti, and the rampant

brutality and killing of unarmed Black women, children, men, and other people of color by the police, who so often have gotten away with this with impunity. Of late, I have worked with young activists involved in the Black Lives Matter movement who are devastated by the social injustices that they are witnessing and experiencing. They are looking for spiritual guidance that can help them process and change the disorder.

What I have learned from all of this is that the Yorùbá belief that chaos is always the order of the day, is correct. The process of healing from the pain, trauma, and disorder is in struggling with recognizing and confronting these issues with a stratergy to transform ourselves; and, making the neccessary sacrifices in order to be successful in winning victories for ourselves and humanity. The Ifá/Òrìṣà belief systems have the spiritual tools that can help people do the adaptive work (Heifetz, 1994) neccessary to make the changes in oursleves and community.

# Appendix

## Appendix A: Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| *Àjẹ́:* | The "Great Mothers," women with supernatural powers, also refered to as witches |
| *Aláàfin:* | The title for the king of Ọ̀yọ́ |
| *Ajogun:* | The negative forces that are in conflict with humankind |
| *Àṣẹ:* | A term that means "so be it." It is also the force that makes things come into existence. |
| *Atáójа* | The title of the king in Òṣogbo |
| *Àyé:* | Earth |
| *Bàbá:* | Father |
| *Babaláwo:* | Father of the secrets of divination, an Ifá priest |
| *Centro:* | A spirtitual mass in the Cuban system |
| *Collare:* | The Spanish word for colorful spiritual beads that priest wear |
| *Dida ọwọ́:* | The process of learning how to use the divining chain to perform divination |
| *Ẹbọ:* | Sacrifice |
| *Egúngún:* | Ancestors. In Nigeria the masquaraders are representations of the ancestors |
| *Ẹ Kàarò:* | A formal Yorùbá greetings that means good morning |
| *Ẹlẹyẹ:* | A term for birds, a symbol of Ọ̀ṣun, Iyami and other powerful women |
| *Ènìyàn:* | Witches,can also mean person |
| *Ẹsẹ̀:* | An Ifá verse/poem |
| *Ẹṣẹ̀:* | Foot |
| *Guerreros de santo:* | The Spanish term for Ọrìṣá icons that practitoners in the Cuban system receive from their godparents |
| *Ifá:* | The divinity of wisdom in charge of divination. Also know as Ọ̀runmìlà |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ìlẹ̀kẹ̀:* | Colorful spiritual beads that priest wear |
| *Ilẹ́ Ifẹ̀:* | The birth place of Ifá/Ọrìṣá practice |
| *Ijala:* | A Yorùbá oral literary style of Ifá/Ọrìṣá chanting |
| *Ikin:* | Ifá sacred palm nuts that babaláwos divine with |
| *Iremoje:* | A Yorùbá oral literary style of Ifá/Ọrìṣá chanting |
| *Itan:* | A Yorùbá oral literary style of telling stories of the Ọrìṣá |
| *Iwá Pẹ̀lẹ́:* | Good character, the fundamental principle of Ifá practice |
| *Iyanifa:* | A female Ifá priest |
| *Ìyàmì:* | The "Great Mothers," women with supernatural powers, also refered to as witches |
| *Kofá:* | A sacred ritual of Ifá when a practitioner receives their One Hand of Ifá, the sacred palm nuts |
| *Obi Abata:* | A system of Kola nut divination made popular in the United States by Afolabi Epega |
| *Odùduwà:* | The founder of Ilẹ́ Ifẹ̀ |
| *Odù:* | The sacred stories of Ifá, comprised of 256 signatures and chapters |
| *Orí:* | A person's spiritual inner head |
| *Oríki:* | Oral literary style of Ọrìṣá leneage chanting |
| *Ọrìṣá:* | Divinities in the Yorùbá belief system |
| *Olódùmarè:* | The Yorùbá Supreme Creator |
| *Olófin/Olófin Ọ̀run:* | Another name for Olódùmarè, the Yorùbá Supreme Creator |
| *Ọbatálá:* | The Ọrìṣá of white cloth |
| *Ògun:* | The Ọrìṣá of iron and war |
| *Ọòní:* | The title of the king of Ifẹ̀ |
| *Òrànmíyàn:* | A relative of Odùduwà; His was the Aláàfin of Ọ̀yọ́, and believed to be the greatest warrior of Yorùbáland. |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ọ̀run:* | Heaven |
| *Ọ̀run Odò:* | Heaven below, in the crust of the earth; The final resting place of the Ọrìṣá |
| *Ọ̀run Okè:* | Heaven above, where the Ọrìṣá decended from |
| *Ọ̀runmìlà:* | Another name for Ifá |
| *Ọ̀ṣun:* | A female Òrìṣá who was with the first set of Òrìṣá sent to earth by Olódùmarè. She is also regarded as the principal divinity of the town of Ọ̀ṣogbo |
| *Ṣàngó:* | Son of Òrànmíyàn, the Òrìṣá of lighting and thunder |
| *Tẹ̀fá:* | Initiation ritual into Ifá |
| *Warriors:* | Ọrìṣá icons that practitioners in the Cuban system receive from their godparents |
| *Yemọja/Yemaya:* | The Ọrìṣá of the Òògùn river |

## Appendix B: Permissions

All photographs in this dissertation were taken by and are owned by the author with the exception of Figure 4.23 (Babaláwo Adeyemi Michael Lythcott With the Atáọ́ja, the King of Òṣogbo in Òṣogbo, Nigeria). The following email from Baba Adeyemi Lythcott provides the permission for use of this.

**From:** Michael J Lythcott <[redacted].com>
**To:** tony vandermeer <[redacted].com>
**Sent:** Tuesday, February 14, 2017 03:45:02 AM EST
**Subject:** Photo Permissions

Dr. Van Der Meer:

With this email, I give you permission to publish the attached photos in any and all matters connected to the publication of your dissertation.

The photo with the Ataoja of Oshogbo was taken with my personal camera. Permission to use the photo of me and my then wife, Barbara Ann Teer has been granted by The National Black Theater; Sade Lythcott Chief Executive Officer.

Please be in touch if you need further information.

Baba Adeyemi Lythcott

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