

## ORALITY AND VISUALITY AS MEDIA OF COMMUNICATION IN AFRICAN DIVINATION

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**ABSTRACT** This study is intended to facilitate the basic understanding of Orality and Visuality as media of communication in African divination systems and to underscore their relationships with related ritualistic and oracular activities and/or actions, and to emphasize their importance within the context of an Oracle that makes statements about future events or about the truth. It is discovered that the Oral languages and Visual images are major components of divination used by the diviners to communicate to the gods on behalf of the people in the traditional African society. From the angle of orality it is discovered that African divination covers a whole corpus of literature consisting not only of straightforward injunctions to sacrifice, of meaningful and elaborate names and (sometimes) prose stories, but also of a body of allusive and complex poetry used in passing oracular messages to diviners' visitors. From visuality point of view it is established that seriated artistic compositions and mythic allusions to pristine primordial African cultural genres characterize African divination sculpture. In Yoruba divination trays (*Opon Ifa*), for an example, low relief zoomorphic, aquatic and anthropomorphic images, and geometric shapes encircle the divining surface. Above all it is concluded that some divination trays and other oracular apparatuses are depicted with equestrian figures and caryatid decorations to evoke legendary diviners and their worldly exploits.

**KEYWORDS:** Orality and Visuality, African Divination, Oracular Activities, Mythic Allusions, Divination Trays

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### INTRODUCTION

The Oral languages and Visual images are major components of divination used by the diviners to communicate to the gods on behalf of the people in the traditional African society. This is a factual statement that can be corroborated with the pristine primordial usage of *OPON Ifa*, *ODU Ifa* and *ESE Ifa* in the traditional Yoruba divination systems. The *OPON* is a tray that is artistically carved and decorated by floral designs, geometric shapes as well as aquatic, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic images. These designs, shapes and images are symbolic elements embodied with semiotic, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic meanings that the diviners translate into oral forms while delivering the messages from the gods to the visitors. The Yoruba Ifa literary corpus called *ODU* comprises of 256 parts. These different parts are also subdivided into verses called *ESE*, whose exact number is unknown as it is in constant change, but a thesis exists that "there are around 800 *ESE* per *EDU*" (UNESCO, 2005). According to the record retrieved from the UNESCO's archives "each one of the 256 *ODU* has its specific divination signature, which is determined through a procedure followed by the *babalawo*: diviner, using sacred palm-nuts and a divination chain".

"The *ESE*", which is considered as the most important part of Ifa divination, "is chanted by the priests in poetic language and the group of words that is repeated over and over again reflects

*Yorùbá*n (emphasis mine) history in dialectal structure, belief systems, Cosmo-vision and social issues that are contemporaneous to their society” (UNESCO, 2005). Pemberton III (2000) has, however, observed that “oral languages, apart from reflecting history of the black peoples, are also synonymous to rituals of African divination”. He emphasises that “in African societies rites of divination are performed when circumstances require it and they are intimately related to the daily ongoing lives of the peoples”. “These divination rites”, according to him, “are a response to uncertainties, concerns, anxieties, mishaps, conflicts, losses, deaths in the lives of families and communities”. This emphatic statement made by Pemberton III has also been expressed earlier in a related study by Geertz (1973) in which he states that “Divination within the realm of other rituality contents expresses the inescapability of ignorance, pain, and injustice on the human plane”. In the same study Geertz simultaneously denies ever saying that “the irrational prejudices alluded to in the above statement are characteristics of the world as a whole”. While studying the disciplines of Orality and Visuality that the divining occupation required this researcher discovers that most African diviners have forged unique scientific and theoretical pathways in their chosen career and he establishes the fact that these diviners are revealing new spiritual evidence in the quest to uncover the ancient origins and unifying principles of classical African divination systems.

### Conceptual Clarification of Key Terms

Before going further it is apposite to discuss the four key terms that are germane to our discourse in this study. They are Visuality, Orality, Communication and Divination. These words are connected with this intellectual discourse in a significant way and therefore there is need to clarify them conceptually in order to put them into proper use hereafter.

**Visuality** is mostly based on distinctions between three different modes by which we come to terms with reality: (1) visual perceptual and conceptual (2) artistic form and (3) artistic modernism. The *visual perception* is the basis of artistic creation. According to Lazzari and Schlesier (2008) “*visual perception* is the essential component when an artist is making his or her artwork...in a sense the artist is the first viewer of his or her artworks and vision is an essential factor for the broader audience that perceives his or her artistic images while the *visual conception* has to do with the rendition and description of every day genre observed by the artist”. The *visual conception* is also related to the forming of an artistic idea in the artist’s mind. For an example, the conception of images adorning the surface of *Opon ifa* is an idea that the artist projects and describes in his/her mind before final rendition. The *visual form*, that is, the formal elements such as line, shape, colour, texture, mass, volume, space and so on, is carefully considered and manipulated by the artist both to help *Opon Ifa* better fulfil its orality function and to enhance its visual appeal. The *visual modernism*, in its own case, takes shape within an already reconfigured field of techniques and discourses about visuality and observing objects such as images found on the surface of divination tray.

“**Orality**”, according to Gbadegesin (2012), “is the transmission of facts, values and fictions through oral means”. Gbadegesin further articulates this definition of the word: orality, when he stresses that “the griots’ chronicle of events, the sages’ myths, legends, cosmological ideas and proverbs, the storytellers’ folktales, and the verbal artists’ riddles and tongue twisters are the constituents of a people’s oral tradition”. He observes that “people who are using oral culture think and express themselves through narrative discourse”. This observation can be reinforced by Ong’s (1982) postulation that “out of necessity, people in primary oral culture conceptualized and expressed thought with relative close reference to the human world...and with a preference for the concrete rather than the abstract”. Gbadegesin also emphasizes that

“proverbs or maxims are convenient vehicles for conveying beliefs and cultural attitude in a society where oral culture predominates”. While discussing the complimentary role that written and oral language had played in human society, Thomas (1982) stresses that “writing is not the destroyer of orality, but it reacts or interacts with oral communication in a variety of ways”. She notes that “the line between written and oral language in a simple activity cannot actually be drawn very clearly”. In her summation, “orality is needed to produce writing and it has been used to produce powerful and beautiful verbal performance of high artistic worth” most especially in African divination systems. Oral literature is also very significant in *ifa* divination sculptures. For instance, some divination figures have been mentioned in *ifa* poems. Gbadamosi and Beier (1959) have noticed the fact that “One *ifa* poem praises the figure of *ejiofibe*”: the senior figure in all systems of *ifa* divination. It has also been expressed by Gbadamosi and Beier that “those who memorize and recite such poems are members of a highly trained and respected oracular profession”. Parrinder (1961) reiterates that “the *Ifa* diviners spend several years learning the *ifa* literary verses orally for their profession”. The minimum year he mentions is three. According to him, “the first is spent learning the names and structure of the *Odu* while second and the third are spent learning some of the literature of each as well as the actual practice of divination and its rituals”. Clarke (1939) and Abraham (1958) differently confirm that “sometimes seven or ten years are spent in apprenticeship to a qualified diviner”. The general opinion among these scholars is that “an *Ifa* diviner continues to learn and recite *ifa* verses as long as he lives”.

**Communication** is defined by Ate (2008) as “a process of passing thoughts, ideas, facts and feelings from one person to another”. To him “life is meaningless without communication and in the absence of communication human interaction would be impossible”. According to Daramola (2003) “communication as a concept parades a lot of definitions...it derived from the Latin word *communicare* meaning to share, and in French language it means *communis*: common”. Sybil et al (1990) observe that “communication serves as an instrument of social interaction that assist people to understand each other and to keep in touch with other people and to understand a given situation”. This researcher has, however, generated a view that “it as an instrument that the diviners use in communicating with the gods while mediating for people and while prescribing curative medicines for a given human health situation during the process of divination”. Murphy (1977) definition is more *apropos* to this present study of *the role of Orality and Visuality in African divination*. He states that “communication is a process that involves all acts of transmitting messages to channels which link people to the oral language and symbolic images that are used to transmit the messages”. According to him, “the means by which messages are received and stored are corresponding factors in communication process...and the societal rules, customs and conventions embedded in any given message can always be used to define and regulate human relationships and events”.

**Divination** is derived from the Latin word *divinare* meaning “to foresee and/or to be inspired by a god” (Peek, 1991), and according to Miller (2007) “divination is the attempt to gain insight into a question or situation by way of an occultic, standardized process or ritual”. Divination has been used in myriads of ways throughout human epic and in the continuous forward movement of divination the diviners affirm their interpretations of the way that an oracular ritual should move along a course by reading signs, events, or omens, or through averred relationship with a supernatural instrument. Divination can be seen as a step-by-step procedure with which to organize what appears to be disconnected. It is an unintended phase of human continuance in living, which can give sapience into a challenge that one is facing at a given period in time. Divination is different from fortune-telling. A disparity between them is that

divination has a more formal or ritualistic element and often comprise a more social character, usually in a religious context, as seen in traditional African medicine while fortune-telling is a more everyday subject for personal usage and advantage. Divination procedures differ by culture and religion. It should be emphasized here and now that divination is dismissed by the scientific community and sceptics as being superstition. The above emphasis can be explained in the realm of what happened in the second century Rome when a witty essay was devoted to the career of a charlatan, "Alexander the false prophet," who was trained by "one of those who advertise enchantments, miraculous incantations, charms for love-affairs, visitations for enemies, disclosures of buried treasure, and successions to estates" (Flower, 2008), but the efficacy of his oracular power was rout by the people residing in his immediate milieu at the time and despite this sullen of the occupations of 'Alexander the false prophet' most Romans still have a belief in prophetic dreams and charms.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theories

In order to put this study in the right perspective, semiotic theory and symbolic communication theory are adopted as the basic narrative structure for explaining the facts and figures collected during desk research. **Semiotics theorists** propose that the theory is a general philosophical approach to signs and symbols that deals with symbolic and linguistic functions in both artificially constructed and natural languages. The proponents are of the opinion that visual signs, symbols and images are tangible tools to communicate between artist and the viewer. The theory comprises the following areas of study: The syntactic, semantic and pragmatics. The Syntactic deals with the formal relations between signs and expressions in abstractions and between significations and the interpreters. The semantic deals with relations between signs and what they refer to, that is, the relations between the signs of a system, and human behaviour in reaction to signs including unconscious attitudes, influences of social institutions, and epistemological and linguistic assumptions. The pragmatics deals with the relations between signs and linguistic expressions and their users. According to Schultz, as noted by Webster (1961: 76), "Semiotics relates to the meaning or relationship of meaning of a sign or set of signs. It involves observing and interpreting signs; studying the relations of a sign to its referent and to other signs within a system; studying the connotations and ambiguities of words and their function in communication and propaganda; distinguishing between codes and messages, and between denotation and connotation". Also, semiotics deals with the "historical and psychological study and the classification of changes in the signification of words or forms viewed as factors in linguistic development and including such occurrences as specialization and expression of meaning, ameliorative and pejorative tendencies, metaphor and adaptation" (Webster, 1961:107). Reads (1960:61) states that: "semiotics system is exclusively the study of various types of discourse, which make use of language" However, Saussure (1857 - 1913) opposes this idea of exclusivity while proposing that it is not only sounds or marks on paper that can create meanings, but any distinguishable object can as well be used to create meanings. Sims (1991) supports Saussure's argument when he reiterates that colour can be used as an informational and directional code, distinguishing one object from another. He states that: "red, yellow and green are symbolic colours for traffic safety in big cities". The green light stands for "go" and red light stands for "stop" while yellow light stands for "get ready to start" or get ready to stop". Observably, it is the difference in hues that creates the meaning, not the actual colours themselves. Also, colour communicates certain cultural and symbolic ideas on

how to relate with or handle traditional ideals. In some cultures, white, red and green connote peace, danger and life respectively.

**Symbolic Communication theorists** view art as a sign written in its own distinctive visual language. “Communication through art, therefore, implies that both the sender and receiver of the message may have understood the same basic language” (Buser, 2006). This may also presupposes the fact that the receiver of a message must understand the visual language of the sender for communication to take place. There is also a case in which the cultural background of the sender is different from that of the receiver; the understanding of the message, in this instance, will only take place through symbolic representation. This is the major reason why art is most times classified as a universal language. Like any other mode of communication visual art is dynamic. This is why both the sender and receiver must operate within a fluid context in which the significance of visual images and signs is constantly changing. “To a great extent, the vital context surrounding the visual language gives the artistic signs their meaning, just as the meaning of a spoken language is derived from its immersion in the surrounding culture” (Buser, 2006). Symbolic communication theorists also view art as an important part of human communication. This view has been reinforced with a simple analogy derived from the concept of a Highway Sign that can tell motorists the distance that lies ahead. This is a typical symbolic communication that human beings come across in the process of their daily exercise. The visual artists convey a different kind of information from signage, pictorial and textual examples in that the signs created by him/her may be textured with memories and coloured with emotions to give a rich meaning.

Visual art is analogous to the several levels of experience someone has in friendship and in order to understand the actual interpretation of the concept of *symbolic communication* within this context, we can use a definite poetic line such as: “Your love for her radiates like a red rose” to appropriate the function of visual communication in the realm of human friendship. The visual image of a *red rose* is highly significant in any human relation and the word like “a *red rose*” in this poetic verse, just like a visual representation of an object as: “*red as a rose*” is a simile that depicts a symbolic love message, which represents passion and intimacy. This poetic line radiates personal life experience of lovers and shows that poetry and visual arts depend on classics of everyday experience. Reference to the poetic *power of love* is not foreign to the art of divination as this concept has been espoused by Plato in his work titled *The Symposium*, which was documented by the Regents of the University of California in 1971. According to Plato

The whole *art of divination*, which is  
the *art of communion* between gods  
and men (is) concerned only with  
the salvation and healing power of love...  
Wherefore the business of divination is to  
see to these loves and to heal them, and  
divination is the peacemaker of gods and  
men, working by a knowledge of the  
religious or irreligious tendencies which exist  
in merely human loves

This statement by Plato, however, presupposes the fact that the symbolism of poetry and visual art can communicate humans’ love-life experience in layers of meaning that are interwoven with emotional association. These fundamental signs and symbols as well as the conceptualized human daily

experiences, which are discussed in the light of semiotics theory and symbolic communication theory, need to be critically examined in the study of Orality and Visuality in African divination system.

## RELATED LITERATURE

For many decades, the study of African divination has seen a significant development within the context of African belief system and the volumes on this subject of African divination have been remarkable. Reputable scholars have drawn the attention of interested readers to the importance of divination in the traditional African society. Such scholars include: Bascom (1943), Frobenius (1948), Ortiz (1951), Cabrera (1954), Holy (1960), Idowu (1962), Fagg (1963), Sowande (1964), Sowande (1965), Babalola (1966), Abimbola (1968), Ayorinde (1968), Bascom (1969), Goldwater et al (1969), Odugbesan (1969), Willet (1971), Roberts (1984), Brenner (1985), Homberger (1995), Jordan (1996), Roberts (1996), Strother (1998), Abiodun (2000), Abimbola (2000), Devisch (2000), Jordan (2000), LaGamma (2000), Mack (2000), Peek (2000), Pemberton III (2000), Miller (2007) and Flower (2008).

In addition to these myriads of works, other related articles have appeared in academic journals and most scholars who pursued research in this area of African Divination have divergent views. They perceived the content and subject of African divination from different windows; each groping for solutions to the problems facing the study of this area of knowledge differently. In response to the superficiality of the previous studies this researcher will pay attention to the understanding of Orality and Visuality in terms of their usage and relevance in African divination systems. The study will explore the possibilities of similarities and differences in African divination system. From this latter approach it will be permissible to address the issue of cross-border study of divination in terms of the oral texts and visual images of African peoples and also to address the issue of cross-cultural studies among them. This study will also focus on a broad subject by studying the structure of languages and the stylistic analysis of images used in African divination.

## METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through existing information from books, journals, magazines and the Internet. The data were subjected to scrutiny in order to ascertain their veracity and validity. After verifying and validating the genuineness of the materials, they were then synthesized and interpreted using descriptive and iconographic methods of analysis.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### **Cross-cultural and Cross-border Differences and Similarities in African Divination**

In the desk research carried out by the researcher it was established that cross-cultural and cross-border differences and similarities occur in the method that the diviners adopt in manipulating oral languages and in rendering visual images during the process of divination. Pemberton III (2000) notes this occurrence when he reiterates that “unlike other Africans that adopt the use of oracular powers, in Yorùbáland ifa divination rely on a system of oracular signs, which are interpreted by the diviner called *Babalawo*: the priest of Ifa divination”. He

avers that “oracle is similarly consulted in all African societies when important decisions are to be made”. As referenced earlier in a 2005 document issued by the UNESCO “the Yoruba people in the sub region of West Africa make use of an extensive corpus of text in *Ifa* divination”. Among the *Yorùbá* (emphasis mine) ethnic group the word *Ifa* refers to legendary figure *Orunmila*, who is regarded as the deity of wisdom and intellectual development. Observably, the divination systems of these Yorùbá people in the South-Western Nigeria are different from divination practices of the Benin (Edo) people in the Mid-Western part of the country. In the oracular tradition of Benin, for an instance, there is a belief that “divination is performed in heaven to determine the outcome of an earthly visit of the gods” (Ibie, 1986). This is different from the historical version of the Yorùbá divination tradition. While the Yorùbá use extensive corpus of texts through the *ODU* and *ESE ifa*, in Benin tradition “the divination system or way of knowing is”, according to Daryl (2010), “referred to as the *Iha Ominigbon*”. This latter oracular element or symbol is the indigenous medium of communicating to the gods among the Edo speaking people of Nigeria.

A convenient summary of strikingly beautiful variant to the study of divination systems in Africa could be found in Mack’s (2000) article on divination in Madagascar, Brenner’s (2000) article on the importance and influence of *Khatt ar-raml* (the Islamic sand-writing) on sub-Saharan divination systems, Homberger’s (2000) article on the use of mouse oracle among the Guro in Cote D’Ivoire and Devisch’s (2000) essay on the use of split-drum and body imagery as medium of communication among the Yaka in Congo. All these aforementioned essays are contributions to Pemberton III (2000) volume on *Insight and Artistry in African Divination* and their review in the subsequent paragraphs of this present study is highly *apropos* to the discourse on cross-cultural and cross-border differences and similarities observed in African divination systems. Mack (2000) discusses the divination systems among the Malagasy tribe in Madagascar. He affirms that “the divination among this tribe is futuristic in nature; this is because it is mostly informed by astrological importance”. He sees a contrasting situation in the astrological divination systems among the Malagasy of Madagascar and the Luba tribe in Central Africa. According to him, “in Luba’s divination system the past is conflates into the present while the Malagasy divination system projects the present into the future”. Pemberton III (2000), however, sees this comparative essay by Mark as one that indicates “the extent to which divination systems are expressions of the cultures within which they operate”. Brenner (2000) focuses on the significance and cultural influences of the systems of divination of non-African, Islamic sand-writing cultures on “indigenous religious practices in sub-Saharan Africa”. He notes these important cultural influences in the “variant systems of divination practice among different tribes in Africa such as the usage of: (1) *sikidy* in Madagascar (2) *hakata* among the Shona (3) *cien* among the Mande in modern Mali and (4) *ifa* and *fa* among the Yorùbá and Fon speaking peoples. Brenner notes that “among these different cultural groups a unique structure of sign is transmitted, incorporated and adapted into local cultural situations in which a distinctive interpretive catalogue and dialogue is created”. Homberger (2000) draws attention to the mouse oracle that “was probably developed by Guro ancestors in Cote D’Ivoire”. According to him, “divination is done by the Guro mainly with the help of mice kept in a double-storied wooden or earthen pot and ten small bones that are moved by the mice and the placement of the bones are interpreted by the diviner”. Devisch (2000) reveals how Yaka people in Kinshasa and in Kwaangoland of south-western Congo seek the “diagnosis of the diviner for chronic illness or misfortune”. He succinctly describes the process of divination in which the diviner approaches the oracle and does a lithe and lively dance to the rhythm of a slit-drum that he beats with a light drumstick. He envisions how the diviner enters into “a trance and begins to evoke the cackling of a laying hen...following this inchoate

expression are esoteric and melodious speeches and chorus of persons participating in the consultation". According to him, "this oracular system articulates itself in the register of a desire and the body; infusing the register of the signs and speech with a passionate and imagery perception of the world" (Devisch, 2000:119).

## **Structure of Oral Language in African Divination, Conceptual Analysis of Orality in African Divination, and Functionality and Stylistic Tendency of Visuality in African Divination**

### **Structure of Oral Language in African Divination**

Language is a major form of human communication and it is a vital tool in identifying an ethnic group. Ethnic groups in different parts of the world have developed their indigenous language and "this indigenous language holds the key to the concepts that are special and inherent within a particular ethnic group and culture" (Lucas, 2012). Most of the indigenous languages that were developed world-wide are ancestral legacies that have latent meanings and symbolic suggestiveness behind them. The myriads of indigenous languages that have been developed by most nations of the world had been used to capture ideas, value systems and cultural affinities. It has been observed by Lucas (2012) that "most people commit more subtle errors using one word within a language system when another will capture the ideas more precisely...This is because every word has shades of meaning that distinguish it from another word". He gives an example of *Thesaurus*: a reference book in which words with similar meaning are grouped together to give the following words as synonyms (1) Learning (2) Knowledge (3) Erudition and (4) Scholarship; meaning-what is or what can be known by an individual or by humankind. Noticeably, all the words are almost referring to acquisition or possession of an idea or knowledge, but they have different shades of meaning. *Learning* applies to knowledge acquired especially through formal, often advanced, schooling. *Knowledge* applies to facts or ideas acquired by study, investigation, observation or experience. *Erudition* implies the acquiring of profound, recondite, or bookish learning while *Scholarship* implies the possession of learning characteristic of the advanced scholar in a specialized field of study or investigation. The above examples are implicative within the context of African divination system in the sense that most African diviners are bound to be rich in the *learning* and *knowledge* of human nature and they become *erudite* through many years of oracular training that will reinforce their *scholarship* in oral languages and visual imageries during ifa divination process.

In order to articulate the messages from the gods to the people orally during divination process most diviners have been resorting to the use of vivid, animated language. They use this effectively by engaging in *imageries* and *rhythms* that are full of vigour and spirit. The *imagery* is a method in which the diviners create word pictures that can let their visitors hear the messages from the gods as clearly as when they hear and listen to the songs of birds in the early morning dew; they use imagery in much the same way to make their ideas come alive. Three ways in which the diviners can generate imagery are by using concrete words, simile and metaphor. Concrete words are the words they choose to enhance the clarity of language they speak. The concrete words are, therefore, the key to effective use of imagery in African divination tradition. "The concrete words have been used to call up mental impressions of sights, sounds, touch, smell and taste...they are used to create images that pull visitors irresistibly into the messages being delivered by the oracle man" (Walters, 1993). Simile is another means they have been using in creating imagery. Simile is an explicit comparison between things that are essentially different yet have something in common. It always contains



the words “like” or “as”. Metaphor is another element that has been used by diviners to create imagery in their oral presentations. They use it to create an implicit comparison between things that are essentially different yet have something in common. It should be stated clearly here that metaphor does not contain the words “like” or “as” as is in simile. But when used effectively, metaphor, like simile, is an excellent way to add colour to oracular presentation, to make abstract ideas concrete, to clarify the unknown, and to express feelings and emotions in divination process.

It is apposite to say that language has a rhythm that is created by the choice and arrangement of words. The ifa diviners exploit the rhythm of language to enhance the impact of their words. They use words that take on an emphatic rhythm that reinforces their message: using the rhythm and flow of language to enhance meaning. There are four basic stylistic devices that have been used to improve the rhythm of oracular presentation in the pristine primordial African divination system, these are: (1) Parallelism (2) Repetition (3) Alliteration and (4) Antithesis. *Parallelism* involves a similar arrangement of a pair or series of related words, phrases or sentences. Examples can be deduced from similarly words in Yorùbá language parlance: *Rich (Oloro) and Poor (Akuse)*, *Intelligent (Ologbon) and Ignorant (Omugo)*. The effects of parallelism are best illustrated by seeing what happens when it is absent. *Repetition* is a reiteration of the same word or set of words at the beginning or end of successive clauses or sentences. For example: (1) *If not now, when?* Repetition usually results in parallelism. It also unifies a sequence of ideas, emphasizes an idea by stating it more than once, and helps to create a strong emotional effect. *Alliteration* is a repetition of the initial consonant sound of close or adjoining words. It is this third device that diviners have been using to enhance the rhythm of their oral presentations. By highlighting the sounds of words using *alliteration*, they catch the attention of their visitors and this makes their messages from the gods easier to remember. *Antithesis* is a juxtaposition of contrasting words used by diviners in parallel structure. From the foregoing it can be summed up that the imagery in African divination process are mostly sharp and poignant and the rhythm are always strong and insistent.

### **Conceptual Analysis of Orality in African Divination System**

For convenience sake, the researcher focuses more on the concept of orality in divination tradition and native system of knowing among the Yorùbá, his people in the south-western Nigeria and those of Benin in the mid-western Nigeria. This decision is informed by the fact that he has greater access to materials on the Yorùbá Ifa divination system and the Edo oracular system: *Iha Ominigbo*, and this is also due to his closeness to the two cultural roots. From his myriads of investigations on the use of oral language and oracular incantation in Yorùbá ifa divination system he discovers that *Ifa* covers a whole corpus of literature consisting not only of straightforward injunctions to sacrifice or of meaningful and elaborate names and prosaic stories, but also of a body of allusive and complex poetry. The extreme fluidity of the literature available has made it possible for this researcher to predict the outcome of changes in the diviners’ oral presentations most especially when they merged and added new words. He has noticed that most of these merged words are mostly accepted as authentic and authoritative by ifa devotees. Bascom’s (1943) thesis can be used to background this claim made by the researcher as he basically notices that “in spite of lack of fixity and comprehensiveness, it remains true that the *Ifa* utterances form part of a conventional and vast scheme hugely conceived one that is known and recited by serious and highly qualified specialists, but which has not yet been systematically collected in written form compared to the scale of its oral conception”. Bascom also notes that “the Yorùbá oral traditions focus on legends, myths and

proverbs”. He measures this through “defining features, social functions, philosophical relevance and limits within the context of the term he calls *un-freedom*”. These oral traditions of the Yorùbá have been used to enrich the social and moral life of the people and to ensure the continuity of their culture. They have been used to express the ideals and values of the *Yorùbá* communities, to teach young generations the oral history of their ancestors with various techniques to handle them and to help them improve their self-awareness by giving them the information they need for understanding their identity. It is deduced from our probing into the roots of Yorùbá oral poetry that its various themes of love, life, praise and death are especially relevant in the realm of *ifa* divination.

As opposed to the way Bascom’s perceives and conceives oral tradition in Yorùbáland, Gbadegesin (2012) has observed certain conflicts in the way the Yorùbá express their feelings of justice and injustice in oral language. According to him, “the Yorùbá have moral standards regarding the dispensation of justice...they are also aware of the reality of human frailty and the corresponding partiality and injustice that can result”. He uses two opposite proverbs to illustrate this apparent conflict. The first is: *A gb’ejo idi kan da, agba osika ni meaning* “A person who makes a judgement after hearing only one side of a case is a most wicked judge”. The second aphorism he has used is: *Eniti ko ni baba ni’gbejo, bo ba ro ejo are, ebi ni i je* meaning “A person who has no mentor on the judgement throne will lose even if he has a clean and just case”. These aforementioned aphorisms are also important dictums or sayings that diviners use in describing aspects of Yorùbá life in an interesting or wise way. Drewal et al (1989), in their own case, had focused attention on the way the head (*Ori*) is given attention to in Yorùbá divination system. For an example, a Yorùbá diviner will always start his oracular incantation by appraising the quality of his head saying:

Ori mi Apere, ori mi apesin,  
 Ori mi ajifowoje,  
 Ori mi ajifi gbogbo ire lo  
 ...gbemi debi ire.  
 Ori mi apere, ori mi apesin  
 Kamu ewure dudu kafi bo ifa  
 Kamu aguntan bolojo kafi bo opele  
 Ori mi apere, ori mi apesin,  
 Nibo ni orisa wa nigba ti ori ngbeni,  
 Ori lababo, aba fi orisa sile  
 Ori gbe mi. Ori la mi.  
 Ori ma pada leyin mi

The *Ori* in the above *Odu* is positioned as the competent Creator *Apere*, that is, **He** who is faster in aiding one than the Orisa. According to Drewal et al, “the centres of experience such as taste, sight and sensory and sound in the head are the: eyes (*Oju*), ears (*Eti*), nose (*Imu*) and mouth (*Enu*)”. They position the head as the “leader of all” (*olori*), which serves as a universal human metaphoric expression. They see *Ori* as the leader of the body that gives the picture of a person, that is, his or her identity or essential nature and character (*iwa*). They classify *Iwa* as *aperi-inu*, the *ori ode* or *ori ita* (outer or physical head) and cite an example from human daily activities saying: “when you dress well it presupposes that your outer head is clean, orderly, well-prepared and beautified and you are presenting a positive, good self image”. “This”, according to them, “is the outer expression of the *ori inu*, the spiritual self, a person’s destiny or soul”. It is worthy of note that “**Apari-inu** (outer head) represents character while

**Ori Apere** represents destiny”. This is why an individual in Yorùbá society believes in the saying that *Ori mi ma sai gbe mi de ibi ire mi* meaning “My head please lead me to my destiny”.

Drewal et al have also emphasised that “dressing ori ita well will definitely affect the spiritual inu as well, but it can also hide or misrepresent inner head which supersedes, determines and shapes the outer one”. This latter statement can be used to support a prayer in Yorùbá: *ori inu mi ko ma ba ti ode je* meaning “may my inner head not spoil my outer one”. After appraising the concept of the head, Drewal et al also pay attention to the abstract principle of ‘human character and beauty’. They stress the concept of Iwa, l’ewa meaning “good character is beauty”. In Yorùbá social parlance good character is synonymous with beauty. A beautiful person that does not have good character will not be given due respects in the society. In short, good character is in individual existence’s agreement with the philosophy and nature of beauty in the Yorùbá social context. Abiodun (1983) buttresses the concept of Iwa with an Ifa literary verse that personifies it to be the wife of Orunmila he says, “Iwa was perceived as a woman with bad character and Orunmila decided to divorce her, but he consequently consulted the oracle who asked him not to leave Iwa, in order not to throw away a good character”. This orality has a place in a popular Yorùbá language usage that: *ma so iwa nu* meaning “one must not throw away a good character”. Abiodun (1983) also alludes to this particular ifa verse within the context of artistic creation saying: “Iwa is an exclusive word for human alone...it is therefore absurd to say: *Iwa ere yi dara* meaning “the character of this carved image is good”. This, therefore, presupposes the fact that Iwa (character) is exclusively applicable to human beings and should not be confused with Ewa (beauty) as does by Drewal et al (1989) when they misconceived Iwa (character) as in human behaviour and Ewa (aesthetics) as in artistic creation, in an extremely misleading twisted language.

Oshitola’s (1983) thesis can be used to corroborate Drewal et al arguments on the concept of *Ori*. He explains the basic functions of the centres of humans’ life experience: tastes, sights, senses and sounds, which are derived from the head elements such as the (1) eyes (*Oju*) (2) ears (*Eti*) (3) nose (*Imu*) and (4) mouth (*Enu*). *Oju* (the eye) in the light of human existence and he concludes that “when the eye is not functioning well the human beauty diminishes”. The Yorùbá have the belief that *gbogbo ohun ti oju bari ko ni enu nso* meaning “it is not all that the eye sees that the mouth pronounces”. According to Oshitola, “the eye (*Oju*), which is an aspect of *Ori* allows “the light with which human beings see everything clearly to enter...humans know and see things through the light that enters the eye.” It is apposite to support this claims with the fact that human beings have both visible, outer eyes (*oju ode*) and the inner knowing eyes (*oju inu*) that give insight. The ear (*eti*) is used to hear what is happening and if a person is deaf then he or she must develop other senses of body in order to learn, and this is what the Yorùbá refer to as *iluti*. Oshitola refers to *Iluti* as “ability to ‘hear’ or learn and/or comprehend as in ‘hearing message clearly’ or ‘understanding’ messages accurately”. This classical allusion to *iluti* by Oshitola has a metaphorical belief in “hearing” more than “seeing” and it can still be used to appraise the philosophical expression that: *gbogbo ohun ti eti ba gbo ko ni enu ma so* meaning “not all that the ear hears that the mouth will pronounce”. The nose (*imu*) is used “to notice or detect evil or to apprehend a ‘cruel person’ (*enia buruuku, ika*) or to appreciate a ‘good/positive person’ (*enia to da*) and to notice ‘sweet delicious smell’ (*oorun to da, oorun didun*) as well as to notice ‘bad/bitter smell’ (*oorun kikan, Oorun buruuku*)” (Oshitola, 1983). Concerning the *imu* (nose) an *Odu Ifa* says:

A difa fun Awenu  
A dia fun Eji odi

Ti idi ba nba idi sun,  
Ariwo ekun a gba igi **imu** ni sisun

This implies that: “when an ittybits is sleeping with another ittybits the sound of cries or moans will make the nostrils run”. Another popular saying of great importance in Yorùbáland is: *Ika to to si imu la fi nro mu*. This saying literarily means “one must use the right instrument to accomplish the right task”. It can be used to advice the people in authority “not to put the square peg in the round hole”. The mouth (*Enu*) is used to “deliver a message”. There are several Yorùbá sayings that support the concept of **Enu**. Examples are: (1) *kii enu mi maa pa mi* meaning “Mind your pronouncement” or “be careful with what you say” or “May my mouth/words not destroy me” and (2) *eyin l’ohun – bi o ba bale, koo se ko* meaning “words (oral statement) are like eggs, when they are recklessly uttered they cannot be repaired or taken back as a whole”. All these presuppose that *Oro Enu* (the utterances) is very powerful and one has to be weary of what he says before saying it. Biblically, the word (*oro*) was used by the Almighty God in creating the universe and this same word can be used in destroying the same universe by negative human beings. A pleasant word can lead one to succeed in life and a bad word can also lead one to destruction. The *Oro Enu* (utterances) can lead one to prosperity and the same *Oro Enu* can make the once rich person to become poor. One *Odu ifa* that can be used to contextualize *Oro Enu* goes thus:

Etura obara, Etura arawara  
Fi enu mo enu  
Fi ete mo ete  
A difa fun iwofa alabato  
Fe lori oku gbigbe lori obi  
Ifa ni gbogbo on ti oju bari ko  
Ni enu ma so

This *ifa* verse literarily translates that “it is important to remember that all that the eyes see the mouth cannot say...if the mouth fails to heed this warning, problems will manifest for the mouth...when the mouth says all of what the eyes see then the mouth will tear like a cloth”. This presupposes the fact that if one fails to take precaution he/she can find him/herself in a very bad situation. An aphorism can be used to clarify this precautionary measure: “Until the rotten tooth is pulled out, the mouth must chew with caution”. Another *Odu, Eturupon meji/ ologbona meji Ifa* says:

Enu roro paro  
Enu roro sa e  
Enu mujemuje Nibiti otito ku si

The above *Odu* literarily translates that “not all that the mouth says is the truth because words can be used to trick people by lying and deceiving them...One can also use the *Oro* (word) to show honour and dishonour.

The *ofun* (the throat) is sometimes associated with the gods in the traditional Yorùbá divination system this is why it is said that: *ona ofun ni ona orun* meaning “the passage to heaven is the throat”, which **takes daily sacrifice**. The latter statement can be used to analyse a Yorùbá saying: *Orisa bi ofun osi ojojumo lo ngbebo* meaning “there is no god that compares to the throat, which takes its own sacrifice on daily basis” whereas “other gods take their sacrifice periodically”. There is also a saying that *Enu ti igbin fi bu orisa oni lati fi wo kuru* meaning

“the mouth that the snail uses in cursing the gods is the same it will use to appease to them”. Above all else, the Yorùbá have the belief that the mouth (*Enu*), the conveyer of oral statements, is the major instrument that is used to make wishes come true. This is what is referred to as *Afose* in the traditional Yorùbá spiritual parlance. The presence of abundant medicinal ingredients, with special powers, such as shrubs, leaves, spirits, herbs, chameleon and birds in the immediate milieus of the Yorùbá has given credence to the power of spiritual efficacy of orality in African divination system. All the aforementioned medicinal ingredients are the major paraphernalia of African divinity and they have authority from *Olodumare* to empower words in order to have special power of *ase* that makes things come to pass immediately or to bless or curse. Abiodun (1983) observes that “sound reinforces and intensifies the voiced *ase* of the diviner”. The invocations of the diviner and the recitation of the *ese* and *Odu Ifa* are of great significance and the two in conjunction with the power of words (*afose*) can make things come to pass. This simply signifies that sounds are essential ingredients used in the efficacy of *afose*. Abiodun also notes that “in Yorùbá society a multi-sensorial mode of understanding is embedded in the concept of *iluti*: the ability to hear, communicate, and remember hence the capacity to learn and to be educated”. Significantly, “*iluti* determines whether or not a work of art is alive and responding, that is, effectively evocative”. Simply put, in Yorùbá society sensorial mode of understanding has a great role to play in the production and reproduction of social, cultural and artistic practices.

From a different cultural perspective, it is observed that in Benin tradition a “native system of knowledge called *Iha Ominigbo* is used in displaying indigenous oral presentations to analysis and organize social oracular elements such as (1) *itan-Ominigbo*, that is, ‘Ominigbon-folktales’ (2) interpretative analysis of *erhia*, which stands for deep meaning (3) interpretive analysis of *erhia*, which stands for plain meaning and (4) *ese*, which represents the sacrifices and subsequent solutions to the obstacles that approaches one’s way of ingress or egress” (Daryl, 2010). There is a belief in Benin social system that this indigenous system of knowledge has analytical procedure that can be used in understanding its latent meanings. This analytical process involves a deciphering component and analysis of the *erhia*, a deep meaning to a more easily understood mode of the *erhia*, a plain meaning interpretation of the oracular coded messages. The sacred oracular language that is used within the context of this system of knowing has symbolic affinity with zoomorphic signs, objects and divinities’ characters that represent certain principles, concepts, information, knowledge and sense of excitement that the oracular folktales wish to pass onto the listener. In addition to the sacred oracular language that is employed, “the *Iha Ominigbon* has an indigenous way of knowing the latent that is not so obvious aspects of the Edo culture and the universe” (Daryl, 2010).

### **Functionality and Stylistic Tendency of Visuality in African Divination**

Seriated composition and mythic allusions characterize *Ifa* art in Yorùbáland. Stylistically, the Yorùbá divination trays: *opon Ifa* has low relief images, which encircle the divining surface called *Oju Opon*. In some *Ifa* trays a large frontally designed face may be centred at the topmost part. Some Yorùbá diviners refer to this massive frontal face as *Esu Elegba*: the divine mediator or messenger between humans and spiritual forces while others simply refer to the image as *oju opon* meaning “the face of the tray”. As mentioned in a statement above, the *Ifa* divination trays in Yorùbáland are stylistically rendered using seriated compositions that have multiple proportions and perspective. Beside these basic compositional features mentioned the artists that carve the *Opon Ifa* also focus on “explicit orientation and they mostly lay emphasis on four directions, four quadrants in-between the four directions, and the centre of the tray. The four

directions refer “to the cardinal points at which the diviner sits while facing the east with the frontal face of the tray placed in the opposite direction to him” (Oshitola, 1983). Observably, the *Ifa* shrines and rituals are oriented on east/west axis in which the entrances to shrines and groves face the east; the direction which is historically believed that *Orunmila* (the father of *Ifa*) took when coming to the world. These cardinal points and astronomical concepts have become deeply rooted in *Ifa* and other Yorùbá belief systems. It can still be emphasized here and now that “in the Yorùbá divination trays there is a compositional interplay of circles and intersecting lines, which symbolize the unity of the Yorùbá and also represent the universe (*aye*), which is populated by diverse, autonomous forces and the outer-world (*orun*) that expresses the intersection of cosmic realms at the metaphorical crossroads (*orita meta*) and the cardinal points-the four directions” (Abiodun, 1983).

According to Oshitola (1983), “divination trays are carved by the artists to evoke legendary diviners and their worldly exploits”. He has used one of his divination trays that has ‘eight sections plus one’ to explain the legendary exploitations of certain pristine primordial diviners. He reiterates that: “the diviners invoke each section as they “open” the tray at the beginning of a consultation...The main or largest “face of the tray” (*oju opon*) is oriented opposite the diviners...The part nearest the diviners is the *ese opon* (foot of the tray) and at the right hand side is *ona kanran* (a straight path) while the left hand side is *ona murun* (a direct path)”. He says that “these ancient forefathers worked and left their name in the annals of African divination systems”. “The *ona murun*”, according to him, “is one of the hardworking, ancient diviners who became so famous to be remembered till today in African divination genres”. *Ona kanran* (straight path) is also noted by him “to be famous for his straightforwardness”. The state of being straightforward has earned the forebears of the Yorùbá the metaphorical attributes of openness, honesty, and trustworthiness. He refers to the upper right quadrant of the tray as *alabalotun* (the one who accomplishes tasks with the right hand) and the upper left as the *alaselosi* (the one who accomplishes tasks with the left hand). The lower right of the tray he names: “*ajiletepowo* (an early riser who sits down and prospers) while the lower left he calls *afurukeresayo*, (the one who has a diviner's fly whisk and is happy). The additional section of the tray that is situated at the center he refers to as the “leader” of the tray. This, according to him, is where the verses of *Ifa* are marked and it is called the *eriladeopon* (the center of the tray and the meeting place that crowns all the paraphernalia of the *Opon Ifa*). “The *Ifa* tray (*Opon Ifa*) is a wooden drum that combines imagery and sound... When an *Ifa* priest strikes the center of the front surface *erinladeopon* with the pointed end of a divination tapper *iroke* the sound reverberates in order to communicate between this world and the next” (Oshitola, 1983). It has been observed that when the diviner strikes his *pa'kin*: the sixteen *ikin* *Ifa*, and marks the *Odu Ifa* signature that is placed in a camwood powder *iyerosun* on the tray, a sacred sound is produced. The sound of the tapper on a drum-tray is usually followed by the sharp clack of the *ikin*, which alerts the cosmic forces. The sacred sounds and the images on the *opon Ifa* are initiated to create a transcendent, evocative experience of art.

The representation of equestrian figures on *agere ifa* as motifs is prominent in Yorùbá divination sculptures. Their representation suggests the fact that the carvers of the *ifa* sculptural genres have been fascinated by the images of warriors on horses. Abiodun (2000) alludes to this representation when he says that “the Yorùbá military leaders’ use of horses was a crucial factor in the determination of the strength of their armies and its usage was also seen as a symbol of leadership, power and success in the traditional Yorùbá society”. Abiodun, in his thesis on the usage of horse-rider as motifs, could not ascertain the exact time that this artistic tradition appeared in *ifa* divination sculpture, but he reasonably assumes that “it probably

coincided with the introduction of the horse into Yorùbáland and most importantly with its active use in the military, political and economic lives of the Yorùbá”. The visual imagery of horses and the riders must have left an indelible mark on the psychic of priests, diviners and the artists who contributed immensely to their inclusion as equestrian-figural motifs on *agere ifa*. This inclusion has, however, brought into the *ifa* corpus the verse on *The Horse, Its Rider and Orunmila* that goes thus:

The Verse:                   Mo ni esin la o ma a gun sawo  
                                       Esin la o ma a gun sawo o  
                                       Esin la o ma a gun sawo (Abimbola, 1968:22)

Translation:               We *ifa* priests will ride on horseback as diviners  
                                       We will ride on horseback as diviners  
                                       We will ride on horseback as diviners (Abiodun, 2000:185)

The use of horse rider in *agere ifa* is metaphoric in nature as there are no physical depictions of horse men in traditional military uniforms engaging in real war on the battlefield, capturing slaves and bringing home plunder, but it simply and literally depicts the *ifa* priest on a horse as a diviner who performs the usual oracular rituals with power and dignity.

Other prominent depictions in Yorùbá divination sculptures are kneeling figures and caryatid decorations. Typical examples of these depictions are in the collections of the Museum and Laboratories of Ethnic Art and Technology of University of California in Los Angeles. Two prominent figures from these collections are (1) figure of a kneeling woman holding her breasts in figure 1 and (2) a richly decorated cup with scenes of divination and unusual presence in figure 2. Odugbesan (1969) has related the gesture of the kneeling woman in figure 1 to the mode of greetings in traditional Yorùbá life. This signifies submission to constituted authority and salutation within the Yorùbá social context. According to Odugbesan, “this salutation mode, however, rightly fits the practice of divination in which the discipline of bowing to demands of authority, sacrifice and honour are major criteria...while at work the diviner acknowledges the greetings of kneeling visitors by tapping on the divination tray”. The caryatid designs on *agere ifa* in figure 2 are centred on the image of the diviner who is seated on a mat with left foot extended and bent to the right against the body. “The image holds the sixteen sacred palm nuts in his hands and his divination tray placed before him, with the head of *Esu* properly sited opposite” (Thompson, 1970). Iconographically, the dignified repose of the diviner is counterbalanced by strange figures to his left; these figures include those of (1) a stooped-shouldered hunchback with cane (2) a one-legged *Esu* with tailed headdress and calabashes of magic power (3) a thunder-god devotee, brandishing the axe of his cult, in right hand and holding with the other hand the foot of a kicking dancer and (4) a visitor, fastening a child on her back with wrapper, seated to the right of the priest. “These figures”, according to Thompson (1970), “appear to represent avatars of uncertainty, to be healed or controlled by the wisdom of the diviner”.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Typical examples of African divination images, outside Yorùbá divination tradition, are depicted in figures 3 and 4 below. These two striking divination artifacts that are owned by *Buor*: the *Lobi* diviners are collections from Burkina Faso. The artifacts are called *bateba*. Meyer (1981) states that the two images “represent *Thila*: the spirits who assist their owners and others seeking their aid”. Meyer, (1991:92-93) also claims that the two images are used in protecting a person's welfare or that of the community by the instructions the diviners give or the demands they make...saving persons from hunger, sickness and death, and protecting them against witchcraft and sorcery”. “*Thila* may be owned by persons other than diviners, but when misfortune befalls the owner or he becomes anxious for reasons he cannot comprehend as a result of a spirit's activity, the figures are taken to a diviner for consultation regarding what demands the spirits or the gods are making upon the owner” (Meyer 1981:41-46).



Figure 3



Figure 4

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of data was reduced into three basic steps: (1) identification of orality and visuality in African divination to disclose characteristics of their manifestations (2) recognition of the characteristics of these manifestations when disclosed and (3) explanation of the characteristics of the manifestations. The three major issues advanced in the analysis of the data are the following: The first is on cross-cultural and cross-border differences and similarities in African divination systems and it is established that there are variances in the method that the diviners adopt in manipulating oral languages and in rendering visual images during the process of divination. The second is on the structure of oral language in African divination systems where it is discovered that most diviners resort to the use of vivid, animated language to articulate the messages from the gods to the people orally during divination process and the orality process has been used to (a) enrich the social and moral life of African people (b) to ensure the



continuity of their culture (c) to express the ideals and values of communities (d) to teach young generations the oral history of their ancestors with various techniques to handle them and (e) to help them improve their self-awareness by giving them the information they need for understanding their identity. The third is on the functionality and stylistic tendency of visuality in African divination systems in which conclusion is made that divination trays are stylistically carved with seriated compositions that have multiple proportions and perspective, geometric shapes, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic and aquatic figures as well as flora motifs, which are used to articulate messages from the gods to the diviners' visitors and to evoke legendary diviners and their worldly exploits.

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