

# The Salient Issues in the Yorùbá Indigenous Health-related Verbal Art

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## Abstract

*This paper addresses some important issues relating to how, in Yorùbá culture, one finds a socio-mythical approach in their health-related belief system. A combination of sociological theory and the mythological approach (e.g. Koiva and Vassiljeva, 1995) are thus contrapuntally explored in this study. This approach also benefits from the psycho-analytical perspectives (e.g. Guerin, et al, 1979:155), since it is sociologically related. The salient issues considered to be very paramount to an average Yorùbá man which we discuss are: child-bearing, protection against malevolent spirits, roles of the benevolent spirits, longevity, wealth, culture/tradition, and death. It is found that Yoruba adopt these various inter-related divine-human belief systems to enhance their well-being and prolong their lives.*

## Introduction & Theoretical Issues

The Yorùbá indigenous verbal art in healthcare delivery system is made up of various phenomena in relation to the Yorùbá worldview. The focus here is content analysis of the body of verbal art with particular focus on their thematic meaning and implications, and how the messages are conceptualized and interpreted within the Yoruba cosmology and social context. In this sense, the discussion is based on the messages in the Yorùbá verbal art regarding health-related issues. The major themes that are considered in the paper include child-bearing, protection against **ajogun** (malevolent spirits), roles of the **òrìṣà** (divinities), longevity, wealth, culture/tradition, and death. Each of the themes is discussed in relation with the Yorùbá belief system, as it is shown, in the various health-related verbal art in this paper. While a lot of theories have been propounded, in this domain not all the theories are considered appropriate in this paper. The socio-mythical approach

which is explored in Orímóògùnjé (2004) explains how myths are used to explain certain hidden phenomena in the Yorùbá society. This approach which is designed from three literary approaches, handles the sociological, mythological and psycho-analytical aspects of a given literary text. This idea of being eclectic in the analysis of literary text has been suggested by various scholars like Irele (1982), Yai, (1982) and Olátúnjí (1984:112-119).

The socio-mythical approach adopted in this study benefitted from the insights espoused by some scholars. Friedrich Schleiermacher , for instance, characterizes myth as a "historical representation of the supra-historical" divine. The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski considered all myths to be validations of established practices and institutions (e.g. Kaberry, 1945 *The Dynamics of Culture Change*) and Redfield's (1948) *Magic, Science and Religion* .

Similarly, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown examined how myths emphasize and reiterate the beliefs, behaviors, and feelings of people about their society (e.g. M. Fortes, (1969), *Kinship and the Social Order*. Claude Lévi-Strauss' studied all myths, not by examining common motifs and elements of the stories, but rather by focusing on their formal properties. He has called attention to the recurrence of certain kinds of structures in widely different traditions of folk literature (D. Eribon (1991), *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*).

The reasons for employing the socio-mythical approach in this discussion are enumerated as follows. The verbal arts in general and those used in Yorùbá indigenous healthcare practices in particular are products of society, and they are used by, and for the people in the Yorùbá society. Some of the Yorùbá verbal arts are mythical allusions in which myth can be used as a tool to unveil the hidden issues. Therefore, it paves the way for getting acquainted with valid information on issues like how diseases are caused, prevented and treated in the context of cultural tradition. We can then regard the approach as the embodiment of illumination over mysteries found in the various verbal arts among the Yorùbá. Furthermore, it has been observed that some of the Yorùbá verbal arts are tools that can be used to work on the socio-psychological condition of the people who directly benefit from the performance of the verbal arts under study. Since the

socio-mythical approach accommodates the social aspect of other theories (mythological, sociological and structuralist approaches) as tools for the understanding of verbal arts in Yorùbá traditional healthcare delivery system, the sociological aspect of the approach is hereby discussed.

### **Methodology**

The set of data used for this study was collected during a fieldwork done between 1997 and 2004 in South-West Nigeria. This methodology was supplemented with library research to examine critical literature on relevant aspect of the study. A qualitative analytic approach was then adopted in doing content analysis of the various aspects of the Yoruba verbal art that highlight the notions of child-bearing, protection against malevolent spirits, roles of the benevolent spirits, longevity, wealth, culture/tradition, and death.

### **Child-bearing**

The Yorùbá, like all other races in Africa, place high premium on children. Children are believed to be the gifts from **Olódùmarè**. This belief prevents them from counting the number of their children, thinking that **Olódùmarè** would regard such an act as a spite on him and an act of being ungrateful and insatiable. There are various excerpts in the data used to exemplify the importance of children in the Yorùbá traditional setting. Hence they name their children **ẹ̀bùnlọmọ** (the child is a special gift) and **Olúwaníífúnnilọmọ/ Olórunnííşọmọ** (It is God that gives/creates child).

The Yorùbá believe that the child is a sign of one's continuity in life. This is depicted in an **orin-ìrẹmọlẹkún** (lullaby):

*Orí mi má jẹẹ n fiyáà mi sáyé lọ*  
*Orí mi má jẹẹ n fiyá mi sáyé lọ*  
*Bílé ayé ti dùn tó ò*  
*Orí mi má jẹẹ n fiyáà mi sáyé lọ*  
*Ojọ mo bá kú*  
*Omọ láá gbé mi sin*  
*Orí mi má jẹẹ n fiyáà mi sáyé lọ*  
*Orí mi má mà jẹẹ n káàkúrun*  
*Orí mi má jẹẹ n fiyáà mi sáyé lọ<sup>1</sup>*

5

*My primordial head, let me not die before my mother*  
*My primordial head, let me not die before my mother*  
*In this conducive world*  
*My primordial head, let me not die before my mother*  
*The day I die* 5  
*My children will bury me*  
*My primordial head, let me not die before my mother*  
*My primordial head, let me not die childless*  
*My primordial head, let me not die before my mother.*

It is also asserted in Yorùbá belief that the whole world is owned by those who possess children. To them, one who is childless only exists, but does not live. This idea buttresses the fact that the concept of celibacy or being without a wife or husband is alien to the Yorùbá society. Prior to the advent of Christianity, whoever chose to stay without being married was usually regarded as an **òkóbó** (an impotent man) and **akíríboto** (a woman whose genital is not open). The excerpt below is an extract from natal songs, which expresses the Yorùbá view that the world is controlled by those who have children:

*Ọlọmọ ló layé*  
*Bàbá lokè kó fún mi ọmọ*  
*Mo d'Èkó,*  
*Mo dé'Ìbàdàn,*  
*Dókítà tó ñ ọmọ kò sí o,* 5  
*Ọlọmọ ló layé,*  
*Baba lokè kó fún mi ọmọ<sup>2</sup>.*

*The enjoyment of this world belongs*  
*to those who have children.*  
*Heavenly father, give me children*  
*I've been to Lagos*  
*I've been to Ìbàdàn*  
*No doctor is capable of creating children* 5  
*The enjoyment of this world belongs*  
*to those who have children.*  
*Heavenly father, give me children.*

The Yorùbá see a child as one on whom the parents can depend when they are old, hence the Yorùbá aphorism *bòkété bá dàgbà, ọmú ọmọ rẹ ló ń mú* (when the big rat is aged, it sucks the breast of its offspring). Meaning that one depends solely on children at old age. This point is emphasised in some natal songs rendered in the meetings of the expectant and nursing mothers in orthodox hospitals:

*Èmi á tójú rẹ*  
*Èmi á tójú rẹ*  
*Ọmọ á ra káà fún mi o*  
*Iṣé ọmọ pọ*  
*Iṣé ọmọ pọ* 5  
*Ọmọ á rakáà fún mi<sup>3</sup>*

*I will take care of him/her*  
*I will take care of him/her*  
*The child will buy me a car*  
*One's responsibility on the child is much*  
*One's responsibility on the child is much* 5  
*Children will buy me a car.*

The verb ‘**tójú**’ (take care of) is in general use, in this case, it may be in the area of health management or guarding a child jealously like something precious to one. Among the Yorùbá, children are considered very precious. Therefore, the idea of having children is paramount to an average Yorùbá whose mind has not been westernised. Let us look at another excerpt of natal songs that exhibits how precious the children are among the Yorùbá:

*Ìlẹ̀kẹ̀ lọmọ,*  
*Éé gbọ̀dọ̀ já o.*  
*Ìlẹ̀kẹ̀ lọmọ,*  
*Éé gbọ̀dọ̀ já o.*  
*Akọ́bí ọmọ mi,* 5  
*Éé gbọ̀dọ̀ kú rará.*  
*Ìlẹ̀kẹ̀ lọmọ,*  
*Éé gbọ̀dọ̀ já o.<sup>4</sup>*

*A child is a string of beads,*  
*It must not lose.*

*A child is a string of beads,  
It must not lose.  
My first child,  
Must not die at all.  
A child is a string of beads,  
It must not lose.*

5

Just as women hold their string of beads in high esteem for the beauty it gives to the body, the Yorùbá regard their children as a fountain of joy and beauty for the parents. Women would not like to lose their beads which give them beauty, likewise they make it a point of duty to see that their children are properly prevented in order not to lose them. Losing their children means, losing their beauty before their demise. Also, tampering with their children is tantamount to tampering with the source of their well-being and good health at old age. These types of songs add to the joy of the mothers and make them feel fulfilled in life. It also endows them with psychological peace of mind by making them hopeful that they have a child who will continue their lineage after them. Thus, children make them feel less stressed-up. This, we believe, can either cure, suppress or prevent them from having psychological problems. The importance of children in the Yorùbá society is also stipulated in other genres such as **orin-Ìbọ** (liturgical songs) and **ẹ̀ṣẹ-Ifá** (Ifá verses). The Yorùbá believe that begetting children is as good and necessary as seeking for protection over them.

### **Protection**

Yorùbá verbal arts used in the indigenous healthcare practices depict various kinds of havoc being wrought through malevolent spirits. According to Abímbólá (1977<sup>b</sup>:xix), the malevolent spirits are **ikú** (death), **àrùn** (disease), **òfò** (loss), **ẹ̀gbà** (epilepsy), **ọ̀rà̀n** (trouble), **ẹ̀pẹ̀** (curse), **ẹ̀wọ̀n** (imprisonment) and **ẹ̀ṣẹ** (calamity). But to our chagrin, some divinities are presented as **ajogun** (malevolent spirits) in some health-related excerpts. This is to tell us that the Yorùbá have realised from the onset that no being is a saint and that every creature is bound to behave funnily at times. The Yorùbá believe that protection against the afore-mentioned malevolent spirits is tantamount to the promotion of good health. In any procedure of indigenous healthcare practices, they hold the opinion that one needs to use the verbal arts that are capable of controlling the malevolent spirits. The two ways they

(malevolent spirits) can be curbed are by calling their primordial names and making reference to the ‘contract’/bond that usually leads to reproach from the chanter. The reproach always reminds them of their limits, their do’s and don’ts. The primordial names constitute an important part of the content of some of the verbal arts used in Yorùbá indigenous healthcare vocation. The primordial names feature in **oríkì** (verbal salutes), **ofò** (incantations), **Àyájó** (myth-like incantations), **ibà** (homage) and **èbè** (verbal propitiation). Now, let us examine the excerpt below drawn from **àyájó**:

*Olúoró*  
*Akínoró*  
*A-mòjà-òkun*  
*Oniyèè-òkinni*  
*Olúoró lorúkọ tí à á p’Oṣó* 5  
*Akínoró lorúkọ tí à á p’Ajé*  
*Amòjà-òkun lorúkọ tí à á pe bàbá wọn*  
*Oniyèè-òkinni lorúkọ tí à á pe yèyé wọn...<sup>5</sup>*

*Olúoró*  
*Akínoró*  
*A-mòjà-òkun*  
*Oniyèè-òkinni*  
*Olúoró is the name of wizards* 5  
*Akínoró is the name of witches*  
*A-mòjà-òkun is their father’s name*  
*Oniyèè-òkinni is their mother’s name...*

The primordial names above are used for evoking supernatural powers capable of solving the nightmare problems that could lead to being plagued with diseases. There is usually a ‘contract/bond’ between the character(s) in some of the excerpts in **àyájó** (myth-like incantations) used for cure, prevention and protection. The following excerpt is a typical example:

...Òrúnmilà ní kí wọn ó sàà mú nńkan ìpín-ùn wá. Níjọ nàà ni wọn bọ́nú igbó. Wọn já ewé kan, wọn ní ‘Ewée kín rée?’ Òrúnmilà ní ‘Ewé abéròdéfẹ kọun?...<sup>6</sup>

...Ọ̀rúnmìlà insisted on a bond between them. That very day, they plucked a leaf from a thick forest. They asked ‘What type of leaf is this? Ọ̀rúnmìlà said, ‘Is this not abéròdéfẹ leaf?’...

**Abéròdéfẹ** leaf is a seal for the agreement between Ọ̀rúnmìlà and the malevolent spirits. The **abéròdéfẹ** leaf reminds them of the ritual agreement between them and Ọ̀rúnmìlà, and this makes the mutual respect obligatory. The contract at times leads to reproach, as it is shown in the continuation of the first excerpt shown above on this same theme:

... Nígba tí ẹ̀ dókè-bèrèbèrè-yẹ̀ẹ̀ a-biké-şónşó; èyí táráyé ò leè gùn, téré ọ̀run ò leè gùn; ẹ̀ bí Ọ̀rúnmìlà ẹ̀ kégbe pè lójó náà. Ọ̀rúnmìlà ló ọ̀mọ Ọgbè-tó-gbélé-sá pé kó gbée yín kojá lọ sóde isálayé. Àfẹni àdánù ni yòò dojú ijà kọmọ olóore. Àfẹni àdánù. Èmi lágbájá ọ̀mọ Olóore yin ọ̀jọ kinni rée, ẹ̀ má ẹ̀ dojú ijà kọ mí<sup>7</sup>.

...When you got to a sloppy-hunch-back-like snare that could be climbed neither by the people on earth nor the celestial people; it was Ọ̀rúnmìlà you consulted. Ọ̀rúnmìlà then summoned the offspring of Ogbè-that-ran-away-with-the-house to convey you to the earth. Only the braggart would attack the offspring of his/her benefactor. Only the braggart. I, so-and-so, the offspring of your primordial benefactor, I am before you, do not attack me.

It is believed that this sort of reproach will compel the addressees to shelve their evil machination, so that the troubled person will be healed and relieved from the ailment he/she might have sustained from the malevolent spirits. Furthermore, the role of the ancestral spirits is needed in search of protection in the health-related issues.

### **Ancestors/Divinities**

The Yorubá are ardently religious, and their high reverence for the Supreme Being has made them to have various divinities as intermediaries that can intercede for them before **Olódùmarè**. These



intermediaries are referred to as ministers by Ìdòwú (1962). They believe that some of these divinities do play vital roles in indigenous healthcare practices to mankind. Among the divinities, **Òsanyìn** is believed to be the tutelary divinity of medicine. **Òṣun** is another divinity that uses water for curative and preventive purposes. The liturgical song below depicts this medical quality in **Òṣun**:

*Ìyá ọmọ-ọ̀n mi bá mi ẹ.*  
*Ipá mi ò da ẹ.*  
*Ìyá ọmọ-ọ̀n mi bá mi ẹ,*  
*Ipá mi ò da ẹ.*  
*Àgbo kára ó le biribirí,* 5  
*Kó má lèlè òkúta.*  
*Àgbo kára ó dẹ wẹdẹwẹdẹ*  
*Kó má didẹ ọ̀gẹdẹ.*  
*Alápá yagi bí aládàá,*  
*Bá n tẹlẹ orù,* 10  
*Bá n jáwé olóore sómi.*  
*Ọ̀yẹ tí n yẹkú,*  
*Ọ̀yẹ tí n yẹ àrùn,*  
*Yẹkú yẹrùn lóri LÓmitútù ọmọ tóo fún mi.*  
*Ìyá ọmọ-ọ̀n mi pegedé.* 15  
*Ó fi gbòrò jẹkà.*  
*Ó pegedé<sup>8</sup>.*

*The mother of my child kindly assist me,*  
*I cannot do it all alone.*  
*The mother of my child kindly assist me,*  
*I cannot do it all alone.*  
*The concoction for a strong body,* 5  
*But not as strong as a stone.*  
*The concoction for a soft body,*  
*But not as soft as a banana.*  
*One whose hands devour trees as if she holds a cutlass.*  
*Send your divine power to the pot of the concoction.* 10  
*Add nourishing herbs to the water.*  
*The evader that wards off death,*  
*The evader that wards off disease,*  
*Ward off death and disease from LÓmitútù, my child.*

*The mother of my child is excellent  
She is outstanding.  
She is excellent*

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Òrúnmilà, the divinity of divination is also versed in the field of healthcare delivery system. Hence the verbal salutes to him goes thus *Òdùdù tí du Orí Ìlémèrè, k'óri Ìlémèrè ó má baà fọ, A-ji-pojọ-ikú-dà* (The great guardian that protects the head of Ìlémèrè, to protect it from getting broken, One who wards off death).

The ancestors are also believed to set guiding spirits over their loved ones on earth. This belief makes the Yorùbá sacrifice to their progenitors, and the ancestors, in turn, are expected to shower blessings on their descendants. The following excerpt from an àyájọ depicts the roles of some divinities in boosting the good health of man:

Ó n sísẹẹ bí ẹni tí kò lára. Ó n rìn rán-un- ràn-un bí ẹni tí kò níyẹkan. Bí iṣẹ bá sẹni láṣẹẹjù, ẹbí ẹni a kọni lọmọ rẹ. A dífá fún Ọkànrànṣẹ ní ojọ kìn-ín-ní, nígbà tó n ti Ìkòlé ọrun bọ wá sí Ìkòlé ayé. Ọrúnmilà ní “Kí ló dé tóo n sísẹẹ bí ẹni tí kò lára tí kò níyẹkan?”. Ọrúnmilà ní kí ó lọ wẹ iṣẹ rẹ dànù sínú ibú omi. Ó ní kí ó máa sọ fún Olúgbọn pé mo ríre lóníí; ó ní kí ó máa sọ fún Ajerò pé mo ríre lóníí; kí ó wá sọ fún Ọràngún Ilé-Ìlá pé mo ríre lóníí. Ire tó sọ̀nù, ire dé; ọlá tó sọ̀nù, ọlá dé; ọmọ tó sọ̀nù, ọmọ dé; ríríṣe tó sọ̀nù, ríríṣe dé; àìkú tó sọ̀nù, àìkú dé<sup>9</sup>.

He is wretched as if he has no relatives. He wanders aimlessly as if he has no nest of kin. If one is too poor, his relatives will desert him/her. Ifá divination was performed for Ọkànrànṣẹ on that day when he was coming from the heavenly Ìkòlé to the earthly Ìkòlé. Ọrúnmilà asked “why are you so wretched as if you have no relatives and nest of kin?”. Ọrúnmilà said he should go and have a ritual bath in the depth of a river to ward off his wretchedness. He should be telling Olúgbọn that he has been successful; he should be telling Ajerò that he has been successful; he should be

telling Ọ̀ràngún of Ìlá that he has been successful. The lost goodness has been retrieved; the lost honour has been retrieved; the lost children have been retrieved; the lost prosperity has been retrieved, the lost longevity has been retrieved.

The Yorùbá believe that the support of the divinities and the ancestors for mankind could lead to good health in life. The excerpt above relates how Ọ̀rúnmilà alleviated the abject life of Ọ̀kànrànṣẹ̀ on his way to earth. The assistance of Ọ̀rúnmilà positively enhanced the health of Ọ̀kànrànṣẹ̀ in the primordial time. The vital roles played by the ancestors in the life of their descendants as regards taking adequate care of their health is usually stipulated in **ẹ̀ṣẹ-Ìfá** (Ifá verse). Their view on this issue is discussed in the excerpt from **Ìròsùn-méjì** below:

*Ewéjé awo Ọ̀de Ẹ̀gbá*  
*Ewélúsì awo Ọ̀de Ìjẹ̀sà*  
*Ẹ̀jìdà-ò-so-dùgbẹ̀ awo Aséyìn-in-mòkín*  
*A dífá fún Ayé*  
*A bù fún Ọ̀mìmì* 5  
*Yóò gbè ó o*  
*Baba ẹnì kì í gbenú tì*  
*Yóò gbè ó o*  
*Yeye ẹnì kì í gbenú tì*  
*Yóò gbè ó o* 10  
*Ikin ẹnì kì í gbenú tì*  
*Mímì ní í mìnì*  
*Ọ̀mìmì kan kì í panì.<sup>10</sup>*

*Ewéjé, the Ifá priest of Ẹ̀gbá*  
*Ewélúsì, the Ifá priest of Ìjẹ̀sà*  
*Ẹ̀jìdà-ò-so-dùgbẹ̀, the Ifá priest of Aséyìn-in-mòkín*  
*Ifá divination was performed for Ayé*  
*The divine lot was cast for Ọ̀mìmì* 5  
*He will support you*  
*One's father cannot but support his children*  
*She will support you*  
*One's mother cannot but support her children*  
*He will support you* 10

*One's divine nuts cannot but support his devotees  
It only shakes one  
Òmìmì does not kill*

The ancestors, otherwise known as **òkú-òrun**, are referred to as ‘**baba**’ and ‘**yeye**’ in the excerpt above while the ‘**ikin**’ in this context, is a metonymic name for Ifá. It is stated in the accompanying narrative to the excerpt above that both the ancestors and the divinity (**Ifá**) bailed **Ayé** out of his predicament, when he was being troubled by **Òmìmì** (the shaker). **Ayé** was instructed to perform sacrifice, and he was jealously supported by his ancestors and Ifá. The Yorùbá believe that the support of the divinities and the ancestors for mankind could lead to longevity in life. That is to say, their support enhances good health that usually reduces the rate of mortality. Their view on this issue is discussed in the succeeding theme. Anything short of their (divinities’ and ancestors’) support, according to the Yorùbá belief, brings calamity that claims the lives of people in their youth. The **Òmìmì** mentioned in the above text represents the hullabaloo in the life of man. The text is used to strengthen the mind of the client not to relent efforts in battling with any constraint in life. This is a psychological healing mechanism designed for the people of the society, so that, anyone that heeds this advice will automatically share in this belief that the ancestors don’t close their eyes on the problems of the living. It is worth mentioning, as it is exhibited below, that the Yorùbá cherish old age in a great deal, therefore, they are always in pursuance of it through the health-related verbal art.

### **Longevity**

The Yorùbá cherish old age, most especially the one that accompanies prosperity and success. The usual saying on the issue of long life goes thus *ká gbó gbóó gbó bí Olúwo ịsáájú, Ká dàgbà dàgbà dàgbà bí Olúwo ịgbàun-gbàun* (may we be as old as the primordial Olúwo, may we live long as the Olúwo yester years).

It is observed that the Yorùbá pursue things that could make them live long. They believe that certain food, shelter, contentment, good manners and a host of others are responsible for longevity. All these bring psychological peace of mind to mankind; and where this phenomenon exists, there is the tendency for one to live long. To them,

anything that has the above mentioned quality, is referred to as medicine that is useful in the healthcare management to mankind.

The Yorùbá also believe that, good manner, that is, how one comports him/herself positively is an enough way of taking care of one's health. Hence **Odù Òtúrá Oríkò** in **ẹsẹ-Ifá** stipulates thus:

*A-fikánjú-jayé ò kádún*  
*A-je-wàrà-wàrà tí í ̀sológun ò d̀ola*  
*A dífá fún Jééjé*  
*A bù fún Ìwàpèlè*  
*Ká fi jééjé jayé loògùn ogbó* 5  
*Ogbó ò loògùn*  
*Ká hùwà pèlè loògùn ató*  
*Ató ò loògùn<sup>11</sup>.*

*An impatient man cannot survive a year*  
*The greedy-grabber soldier cannot*  
*live to enjoy the booty.*  
*Ifá divination was performed for JÉéjé*  
*The divine lot was cast for Ìwàpèlè*  
*Meekness is the only medicine for old age* 5  
*Longevity has no other medicine*  
*Level-headedness is the only medicine of longevity.*  
*Longevity has no other medicine*

From the foregoing, we can see that the theme of longevity, which is depicted in **ẹsẹ-Ifá (Ifá** verse), is a phenomenon that can be gained through good behaviour. That is why this genre is used in healthcare practices among the Yorùbá. Therefore, they make it a point of duty to gain longevity by taking good conduct into consideration in their healthcare delivery system. Almost all the health-related verbal arts discuss this issue, though it is highly reiterated in **ẹsẹ-Ifá (Ifá** verses), **ofò** (incantations), **àyájó** (myth-like incantations), **èbè** (verbal propitiation) and **iwúre** (supplicatory blessings): The following example is extracted from **ofò**:

*À-gbó-hewú*  
*À-gbó-hùgbà*  
*À-gbó-hurun métèèta ipàkó*

*Alára, ayé ló bá mi*  
*Ayé ni yóò fi mí sí lọ* 5  
*Ajerò-kín-òsà, ayé ló bá mi*  
*Ayé ni yóò fi mí sí lọ*  
*Ọwàràngún-àga, ayé ló bá mi*  
*Ayé ni yóò fi mí sí lọ...<sup>12</sup>*

*Longevity-with-grey hairs*  
*Longevity-with-experiences*  
*Longevity-with-three-hairs-in-the-occiput*  
*Alára met me on earth*  
*He shall pass on before me* 5  
*Ajerò-kín-òsà met me on earth*  
*He shall pass on before me*  
*Ọwàràngún-Àga met me on earth*  
*He shall pass on before me ...*

The royal personalities mentioned above in the excerpt are powerful and eminent among other Yorùbá royal bodies. These chieftaincy titles mentioned have been in existence from time immemorial, ever before the chanter was born, and will definitely continue to exist, even after the demise of the chanter. Therefore, it is deduced from the excerpt that the mention of these chieftaincy titles only connotes how long the chanter will enjoy old age. The longevity is cherished if accompanied with affluence, that is, the admirable old age attracts money to sustain it.

## **Wealth**

The Yorùbá take wealth as an important means of boosting one's health. They believe that the poor are being plagued with various diseases. Their opinion is exhibited in an **ẹṣẹ-Ifá (Ifá verse)** of the **Odu Òfúnṣẹ́** thus:

*Òfún lẹ́ṣẹ́ lẹ́ṣẹ́, awo ilé Ońlẹ́ṣẹ́*  
*Difá fún Ońlẹ́ṣẹ́*  
*Tó jí ní kùtùkùtù*  
*Tó loun ò màrùn tó ń ṣoun<sup>13</sup>.*

*The tall and slim **Òfún**, the **Ifá** priest of **Ońlẹ́ṣẹ́***  
*Performed **Ifá** divination for **Ońlẹ́ṣẹ́***

*Who woke up early in the morning  
But knew not the nature of his sickness.*

Ońlẹ́ẹ́şé, the protagonist of the excerpt above, claims to be healthy, but the people around him are not convinced. He does a lot of things that require physical vigour, they still tell him that, he is sick. On the long run, he is asked to bring twenty thousand cowries, equivalent to five Kóbò (5k), which he cannot produce. Thereafter, he is told that he is not healthy, since he is unable to bring money. He is also told that whoever is poor is not enjoying good health, because thinking of his condition can also give a psychological problem. A Yorùbá adage that corroborates the opinion of the characters of this story goes thus *àìlówó lówó baba ijayà, àìlówó lówó baba tẹ̀nitẹ̀ni, owó n bẹ̀ nilé baba àlàáfìà ara* (lack of money leads to fear, lack of money leads to embarrassment, abundance of money brings good health).

The first illustration from **Ifá** divinatory poetry explains that money (wealth) is very important as regards health issues in every household and society at large. Furthermore, the adage quoted above illustrates that whoever lacks money is definitely prone to diseases (that are psychological) such as cardiac arrest and high blood pressure. Therefore, the Yorùbá usually guard against the state of being wretched by working towards the life of affluence through the use of **àwúre** (luck-bringing charms) incantations. The issue of death in line with the Yorùbá tenet as reiterated in the health-related verbal art is also discussed in this paper.

## **Death**

The Yorùbá do not regard death as the end of struggle, but a transition between the terrestrial world and the celestial abode. **Odù Òyẹ̀kúùşé** in **Ifá** literary corpus attests to this belief as presented below:

*Ká-má-tètè-kú awo ilé aláyò  
Àitètè-kú-ìşé awo ibàníjé  
Bíkú-bá-dé-ká-yin-Olúwa-lógo awo olóòótó  
Èéşé tíkú fíì pani?  
Ire ni amúniwáyé fíkú şe  
Omi tí kò şàn síwájú  
Tí kò şàn séyìn*

5

*A domi ògòdò òun ègbin  
 Omi n gbé wọn lọ rere  
 Omi n gbé wọn bọ rere 10  
 Olókúnrun ká relé lọ gbáwò tuntun wò<sup>14</sup>.*

*Longevity is embraced with happiness  
 Longevity in poverty brings sorrow  
 We should embrace death in good faith  
 Why man is mortal?  
 Death is a benediction from the Creator 5  
 A stream that neither flows out  
 Nor flows back  
 Becomes a stagnant pool of obscene  
 with impurities  
 A river carries them away steadily  
 A river brings them back steadily 10  
 The bedridden should die and bring back new life.*

The text above explains the Yorùbá belief in the re-incarnation in which death is not seen as the terminal point for man's existence, but a means to transcend to heaven in order to drop all impurities such as diseases and poverty that threaten good health, and return in new found health when the re-birth occurs. Despite this world-view, the Yorùbá are still skeptical about the death that comes at youthful age. The prayer against such a death is the primary focus of some natal songs, through which mothers do make their wish against untimely death known:

*K'èmi mọ ẹ mọmí asán, àmín o  
 K'èmi mọ ẹ mọmí asán o  
 K'Èlẹ̀dàá mi,  
 K'Èlẹ̀dàá mi mọ jẹ́ k'ómọ mi kú  
 K'èmi mọ ẹ mọmí asán<sup>15</sup>. 5*

*May I not become a mother in vain, amen  
 May I not become a mother in vain.  
 May my Creator,  
 May my Creator prevent my child from dying  
 May I not become a mother in vain. 5*



The addresser of the above excerpt wishes not to experience the death of any of her children, and as well, not to beget nincompoop children as suggested in the deeper meaning of her prayer *may I not become a mother in vain*. This is just to corroborate the belief of the Yorùbá that death should not knock at their doors until when they are old and are able to leave promising children behind. This view is corroborated in their popular prayerful aphorism *kíkú ó tó pàyá àkókó, kòmọ àkókó ó ti tógii sọ* (*before the death of mother wood-pecker, may its younger ones have strength to peck wood* ).

This can be regarded as a socio-psychological mechanism of continuity among the Yorùbá. In Abímbólá (1968:28-34), the Yorùbá mythological origin of the phenomenon ‘death’ is discussed. It is stated that death starts killing every Creature because his mother (who steals a goat’s head) is severely beaten in the market of **Èjìgbòmẹkùn**. In the same text, taken from **Odù Ọyẹkú Méjì**, a solution is proffered to the problem of death. It is implied that a lot of sacrifice can be performed to avert the wrath of death. **Ayùnrẹ** tree consults the diviners to find out what it should do, so that it won’t be killed by death like others. Sacrifices are prescribed for it and it offers them all and is not killed. The interpretation of this mythological actions in the light of contemporary period in general and the context of our focus in particular is that if one gives priority attention to finding solution to his/her health problems and keep to prescribed rules of healthy living, then he/she shall enjoy longevity. The Yorùbá belief that when a paramount attention is given to one’s health, one can easily avoid death. This notion is similarly presented in Abímbólá (1975:105-157) where Ọrúnmilà escapes premature death as a result of his obedience to his diviners. The following extract from an **ẹṣẹ-Ifá** in **Odù Ìrẹtẹ Méjì** also illustrates the importance of health in getting rid of untimely death:

*Jejejege abẹ,  
Girigiri ọkọ,  
A difá fún Ọrúnmilà,  
Wọn ránṣẹ ikú p’Èdú lórun.  
Èdú ì bá ti dórun,  
Àgbò ni ò mọrin.  
Àgbò ò mọrin,  
Ni ò jẹ n ráyè bá’kú lọ<sup>16</sup>.*

5

*A sharp knife,  
 Abundance of spears,  
 Ifá divination was performed for Ọ̀rúnmilà.  
 When a deadly message was sent to Èdú from heaven.  
 Èdú would have died, 5  
 But the ram could not walk.  
 The ram's inability to walk,  
 Has prevented me from dying.*

The above excerpt narrates the story how Ọ̀rúnmilà escapes untimely death through the sacrifice he performs as a way of taking his health into consideration. In the accompanying narrative, an emissary of death is sent to Ọ̀rúnmilà to come to heaven. He mounts the ram used as the sacrificial substitute to go with the emissary. The emissary becomes impatient and leaves Ọ̀rúnmilà alone because the ram cannot walk faster as expected. The outcome of this action is that Ọ̀rúnmilà continues his life after the departure of the emissary of death. Besides this phenomenon, culture that encompasses all other issues is seen as a vital compendium in this paper.

### **Culture**

In the Yorùbá verbal arts used in the indigenous healthcare practices, culture is highly recognised. A breach of cultural practices, according to the Yorùbá belief, can bring disorder and epidemics to the society. Let us examine the following excerpts of health-related verbal lore ájá found in **ẹ̀ṣẹ-Ifá (Ifá verses)** that exhibit the serious setback that one may encounter through a deviant attitude towards a well-established tradition.

*Ìpòntí ajá jìn-un jìn-un.  
 Babaláwo ajá ló ẹ̀'Fá f'ájá,  
 Lójó t'ájá ó solé nù,  
 Tí yóò sàpò iyà kọ.  
 Ìgbà tí ajá solé nù, 5  
 Igbe lajá n kẹ̀ kiri<sup>17</sup>.*

*The internal ear of the dog is deep  
 The Ifá Priest of the dog cast Ifá for the dog  
 The day the dog lost his tradition*

*And embraced troubles  
When the dog lost his tradition  
He started barking all about.*

5

In the excerpt above, the dog is presented as one who neglects its culture, and dearly pays for its action. That is why the dog barks and howls till today. This happens to the dog because of its disobedience and becomes a victim of rabies as the accompanying narration to the excerpt shows. Also, it is illustrated in an **ẹṣẹ-Ifá (Ifá verse)** in **Odù Òtúrá-Orífà** that neglecting one's culture can cause calamity to a whole community:

*Baba móri balẹ!  
N ò móri balẹ,  
Ilá móri balẹ  
Ilá Kó.  
Baba móri balẹ!  
N ò móri balẹ  
Ikàn móri balẹ  
Ó wẹwù ẹjẹ  
Baba móri balẹ!  
N ò móri balẹ  
Àgbànréré móri balẹ  
Ó yòwo lóri ʃanranʃanran  
A dífá fún Ayélẹgún  
Tí ó sọ 'dè rẹ nù  
Tí gbogbo ayé yóó máa bá a wá a kiri...<sup>18</sup>*

*Elder, bow!  
I will not bow,  
Okra bowed  
It got stringy  
Elder, bow!  
I will not bow,  
Garden-egg bowed  
It became over-ripped.  
Elder, bow!  
I will not bow,  
Roan-antelope bowed*

*And became long-horned  
Ifá divination was performed for Ayélègún  
Who lost his Ifá ritual beads  
While all and sundry were compelled to search  
for it...*

15

The accompanying story to the above **Ifá** verse states that Ayélègún, an **Ifá** priest, decides not to worship **Ifá** again, and also disengages himself from participating in all sorts of ritual. He even throws away his **idè**, the devine beads that make people recognise him as an Ifá priest. There comes a pandemonium in the whole community, the community experiences a great epidemics, all because the tradition that upholds the health of the community has been neglected. Ayélègún is thereafter advised to turn a new leaf by embracing the neglected tradition for normalcy to be restored. It is shown that the whole community does not enjoy good health until Ayélègún eventually reconciles with his culture. The excerpt is a verbal art that can be used, along with the prescribed sacrifice, for healing in any society that finds itself in a state of commotion. Apart from its use, it also illustrates that one should respect custom and tradition in order to avert misfortune.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we observe that there are songs that boost the joy of the mothers and make them feel fulfilled in life by endowing them with psychological peace of mind. This, we believe, can either cure, suppress or prevent them from having psychological problems. Likewise, it is deduced in this paper that the Yorùbá believe that protection against the afore-mentioned malevolent spirits is tantamount to the promotion of good health. Furthermore, there is a psychological healing mechanism designed for the people of the society. It is generally believed that the ancestors do not close their eyes to the problems of the living or are not unaware of their travails here. It is discovered that the Yorùbá always make it a point of duty to gain longevity by taking good conduct into consideration in their healthcare delivery system. It is not a gainsay that the Yorùbá usually guard against the state of being wretched by working towards the life of affluence through the use of **àwúre** (luck-bringing charms) incantations. The intent look at the health-related genres among the Yorùbá reiterates that tradition and culture that uphold the health of the community must not be neglected. It is clear

that the Yorùbá believe that when paramount attention is given to one's health, one can easily avoid unnecessary and untimely death.

### **Endnotes**

1. This is one of the natal songs collected in the pursuance of Ph.D. degree between 1999 and 2003.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. This incantation was extracted from the Ph.D. Thesis (Orímóògùnjé, 2004)
6. As in no. 5.
7. This is the concluding part of no. 5.
8. This is a natal song from Òṣun shrine collected from the informants between 1999 and 2003 as data for Ph.D. (Orímóògùnjé, 2004).
9. Ibid as in nos. 5-7.
10. This excerpt was collected from Awo Adébóyè Fátóògùn, in Ìlobùú, Òṣun State, in 1984.
11. This was collected from Professor Wándé Abímbólá in 1982.
12. Ibid as in nos. 5-7.
13. The excerpt was collected from Awo Àyàno in Ilé-Olorò, Ògbómòṣò in 1999.
14. This is extracted from the Lecture note of YOR. 872: Ifá Literary Corpus taught by Late Professor Afólábí Òlábímtán in the Department of Linguistics, African and Asian Studies, University of Lagos, Akòkà I 1988/89 academic session.
15. Ibid as in nos. 1-4.
16. Ibid as in no. 10.
17. This excerpt was collected from Awo Adémólá Fábùnmi, Ìwàyà, Lagos in 1989.
18. Ibid as in no. 11.

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