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# Management of Indigenous Knowledge (Ifa and Egungun) in Osun State, Nigeria

Tunde Idris Yusuf

*Federal Polytechnic Offa, Kwara State, yusuftundeidris@gmail.com*

Kayode Joseph Olusegun

*Federal Polytechnic Offa, Kwara State, kayodejosepholusegun@gmail.com*

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# **MANAGEMENT OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE (IFA AND EGUNGUN) IN OSUN STATE, NIGERIA**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Indigenous knowledge is home-grown knowledge that enables communities to make sense of who they are and to interact with their environment in ways that sustain life. It is knowledge that arises from life experience and which is passed down from generation to generation through words of mouth in the form of folklore, idioms, proverbs, songs, rite of passage and rituals. It equally covers the broad spectrum of life and therefore there are different types of indigenous knowledge ranging from people's beliefs, medicine, arts and craft etc.

Local and indigenous knowledge refers to the understanding, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings for rural and indigenous peoples, local knowledge inform decision making about fundamental aspect of day – to – day life. This knowledge is integral to a cultural complex that also encompasses language, (UNESCO, 2005).

Indigenous knowledge is based on, and is deeply embedded in local experience and historic reality and is therefore unique to that specific culture; it also plays an important role in defining the identity of the community. It therefore represents all the skills and innovation of a people and embodies the collective wisdom and resourcefulness of the community (UNEP)

## **INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN AFRICA**

Indigenous knowledge is still among indigenous (local) communities in many part of Africa. This knowledge has made it possible for the indigenous communities to live in harmony with their environment for generation on how to sustainable utilize their natural

resources using a variety of innovation to deal with environmental conservation and natural management. This knowledge, in line with African tradition has been handed down orally from generation to generation.

Documented literature on IK is limited in Africa. This knowledge is usually passed from generation to generation through traditional socialization processes by elders of indigenous communities. The reliability of this mode of information transfer is under threat in these modern times mainly due to the influx of western culture, high levels of interaction between different communities, as well as the passing on of the custodians of this knowledge. (UNEP)

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Indigenous knowledge (IK) can be defined as a body of knowledge belonging to communities or ethnic groups, shaped by their culture, traditions and way of life. The term is sometimes used interchangeably with traditional knowledge. Knowledge in general is described as being explicit and tacit, it is mainly tacit as it resides in people's heads and has for the most part not been codified. Indigenous knowledge has a number of unique characteristics:

- i. An individual does not own indigenous knowledge because it is a product of the culture, tradition and way of life of a community. It is thus community owned
- ii. It is usually passed orally from generation to generation; it is not codified or documented anywhere except in the minds of the community and the community's knowledge custodians, such as chiefs, traditional doctors etc.
- iii. It has a potential to provide (and has done in many cases) economic returns either to the community that owns it, or to the individuals who may have taken it away.

Indigenous knowledge is sometimes referred to as traditional or local knowledge and it refers to the long – standing traditions and practice of certain regional, indigenous or local communities. Indigenous knowledge also encompasses the wisdom, knowledge, values, norms and teachings of these communities. In most cases, indigenous knowledge has been orally passed from generation from one person to another. (Rousel, 2003).

At present, indigenous knowledge is seen as a pivotal in discussion on sustainable resources used and balanced development (Moahi, 2004). In the 50's and 60's, theorists of development saw indigenous knowledge as inefficient, inferior and an obstacle to development. However, in current development discourse, formulations about indigenous knowledge recognize the derogatory characterization of the knowledge of the poor and marginalized populations may be hasty and naïve. In contrast to modernization theorist, advocates of indigenous knowledge underscores the promise it holds for sustainable development (Roussel, 2003).

Ifa as an indigenous knowledge refers to the system of divination and the verses of the literary corpus. Yoruba religion identifies Orunmila as the grand Priest; as that which revealed oracle divinity to the world. Such is his association with the oracle divinity: in some instances, the term “Orunmila” is used interchangeably with Ifa.

The Ifa literary corpus called ODU consists of 256 parts, which are subdivided into verse called ESE, whose exact number is unknown as it is in constant growth (there are around 800 ESE per ODU). The ESE is considered the most important part of Ifa divination and are chanted by the priest in poetic language. The ESE reflects Yoruba history, language, beliefs, Cosmo-vision and contemporary social issues (UNESCO, 2005).

Believers deem Ifa as being nothing but the “truth”, functioning to the devoted as not only a system of guidance but one that fuses way of living with the psychological, providing them with a legitimate course of action that is genuine and unequivocal.

Egungun is a part of the Yoruba pantheon of divinities. In the indigenous religious system of the West African tribe of that name, the spirit is of central importance. It is the eventual end of all living beings and as such is regarded as the ancestral “collective”. Among the Yoruba, the annual ceremonies in honour of the dead serve as a means of assuring their ancestors a place among the living. The egungun is celebrated in festivals, known as Odun Egungun and in family ritual through the masquerade custom.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM/STUDY**

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) is a body of knowledge belonging to communities or ethnic groups, shaped by their culture, tradition, value, norms and way of life. Ifa and Egungun are traditional knowledge or sometimes referred to as Local Knowledge that encompasses every culture and tradition in most of the South West zone. Its management now becomes necessary in order to house the existing knowledge of their fore-fathers. It is a kind of knowledge that has been passed orally from one generation to another (Roussel, 2003).

This has hampered the management of indigenous knowledge (ifa and egungun) in south west of Nigeria in order to have effective management and proper documentation of the Ifa and egungun festival and how it can assist in generating archival records, store of indigenous records so that the survival of indigenous records can be achieved.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of this study is to investigate the management of indigenous knowledge (ifa and egungun) in south west of Nigeria and show its relevance to National development and also to find out the festivity of the indigenous knowledge under study. The study set to achieve the following objectives. They are:

- i. To trace the origin of Ifa and Egungun
- ii. To determine the relevance of both Ifa and Egungun in the community they are practiced
- iii. To also determine the benefits derived in its divination
- iv. To ascertain why both Ifa and egungun are been celebrated as festival
- v. To know the relevance of its celebration to the community and the nation at large
- vi. To study how the festival is been done
- vii. To also determine and study the management of the indigenous knowledge
- viii. To know the other types of indigenous knowledge practiced in the community
- ix. To determine how its divination process are been documented and managed
- x. To determine the merit derived ins studying Ifa and Egungun
- xi. To provide suggestions to the problems associated with the management of the knowledge generated by Ifa and Egungun
- xii. To enrich the archival centre(s) with rich historical resources of Ifa and Egungun

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions guide the researcher in the course of the study.

- i. How did Ifa and Egungun come to existence?
- ii. What is/are the relevance(s) of both ifa and egungun to the community they are being practiced?
- iii. What are the benefits derived in its divination?
- iv. How is the festival been done and why?

- v. What is/are the relevance(s) of this festival to the community and the nation as a whole?
- vi. What other type(s) of indigenous knowledge are practiced around?
- vii. How is the divination being documented and managed?
- viii. What are the merits derived in studying Ifa and Egungun?
- ix. What are the demerit for not consulting Ifa by the priest?
- x. Is there any specialty in Ifa and Egungun divination?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **CONCEPT OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE**

Indigenous knowledge (IK) can be broadly defined as the knowledge that an indigenous (local) community accumulated over generations of living in a particular environment. This definition encompasses all forms of knowledge – technologies, know-how, skills, practices and beliefs – that enables the community to achieve stable livelihoods in their environment.

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is unique to every culture and society and it is embedded in community practices, institutions, relationships and rituals. IK is considered a part of the local knowledge in the sense that it is rooted in a particular community and situated within broader cultural traditions. It is a set of experiences generated by people living in those communities (Kolawole, 2010).

Indigenous knowledge is based on, and is deeply embedded in local experience and historic reality and is therefore unique to that specific culture; it also plays an important role in defining the identity of the community. It has developed over the centuries of experimentation on how to adapt to local conditions. It therefore represents all the skills and

innovations of a people and embodies the collective wisdom and resourcefulness of the community.

## **INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION**

Indigenous knowledge refers to the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous groups in matters related to agriculture and environmental management, medicine and health, art and language. Traditional cultural expressions are also part of indigenous knowledge. These expressions include, but are not limited to: music and song, stories, symbols, dances, rituals, architecture, arts and crafts (Idowu, 2010).

Indigenous knowledge (IK) and Traditional cultural Expression (TCE) are represented in library and archival collections, but often library and information science (LIS) professional make no attempt to put them into a cultural context. In support of intellectual freedom, we skillfully catalog, digitize and display information so that the public can access. A noble goal but as Olurode (2007) notes:

*“. . . indigenous claims for greater protection of indigenous knowledge systems and cultural materials lie, albeit perhaps only superficially, at night-angles to some of the core objectives of libraries and other information services, such as; freedom of speech, intellectual freedom, diffusion of knowledge, research and learning, access to information and preservation of cultural heritage”.*

For indigenous communities, indigenous knowledge and traditional cultural expressions are not “things” that exist separately for their culture. The discord with library and information science system lie in the orientation of the field towards a scientific logic of ‘information retrieval’ and ‘information access’.

## **IFA DIVINATION AND ETIQUETTE OF IFA DIVINATION**

The Ifa divination system was added in 2005 by UNESCO to list of the “masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity”. Performing Ifa divination is called ‘Ifa dida’ or Idafa (or dida owo and ounte ale). Idafa/Ifa dida is performed by a babalawo or iyalawo or iyanifa (an initiated priest or priestess). Babalawo can be translated as ‘father of the secrets’ while “iyalawo” (mother of secret) or sometimes “iyanifa” means mother that has Ifa (i.e. its blessing). The babalawo or iyanifa provides insights about the current circumstances impacting the life of a person requesting this information and provides any necessary information to and the individual.

Initiation into Ifa requires rigorous study, a babalawo must learn and understand each of the 256 chapters (ODU) of Ifa. The minimum of four verses will of necessity include ‘ebos’ and ‘oogun’ (medicine) that are embedded and relevant to each of the verses, plus other issues that compliment divination. An accomplished babalawo must know about ten verses of each of the 256 chapters of Ifa (256 odu ifa). Regardless of gender, whoever aspires to practice Ifa must have this qualification. In essence, ifa practice does not preclude a woman provide such woman acquires that required qualification. Odu – a special orisa can only be received by a babalawo who decides to perform the special initiation that will allow him access to Odu. A woman cannot be initiated into Odu. This is because since she already has a womb, she has no need to receive Odu. (See appendix)

## **PROCESS OF IFA DIVINATION**

Special instruments are used to assist in the divination to transcribe Orunmila’s wisdom through the diviner. The items used for divination include:

- i. A group of sixteen ‘ikin’ commonly known as sacred palm nuts which are used to create binary data
- ii. A dust from the Irosun tree (Iyerosun)

- iii. A vessel for the seeds (Ajere Ifa)
- iv. A divination tray (Opon Ifa)
- v. A tapper instrument (Iroke Ifa)
- vi. A fly whisk (Irukere Ifa)
- vii. Beaded belts for the babalawo/iyanifa to wear (this is not required). Another form of divination is with the 'Opele', though 'ikin' is considered superior.

### **EGUNGUN FESTIVAL IN YORUBA LAND: A SYMBOLIC HERITAGE**

The Nigerian custom is the symbol of identity of the country since her independence, and this has greatly contributed to her magnificent popularity in the continent and tremendously given her the name "Giant of Africa". Nigeria is a country rich in petroleum as the major source of revenue but the contribution of the Nigerian custom in tourism can not be taken for granted. Many Nigerian customs today have turned to both national and international tourist centre fetching the country huge amount of revenues. Some of the tourist attractions includes Obudu hills, Osun festival, Egungun festival, Argungu fishing festival, e.t.c.

Egungun festival is part of the Yoruba religious system sometimes referred to as "orisa". Egungun is celebrated in festivals and the rituals through the custom or masquerade. An elder from the egungun family called "Alagbaa" sometimes presides over the ancestral rites, but egungun priests are the ones in charge of invoking the spirit of the Ancestor and bringing them out. The invocation is done when the egungun worshippers dance, drums, and possessed by the ancestral spirits, that they beat everybody they see with their Whips. They believe using the Whip against people could help to clean the community from wickedness. After this, the egungun priest advice, warn and pray for their spectators, and people give them money which evidently results to the priests becoming richer.

Egungun is otherwise known as the masked ancestors of the Yoruba kingdom which assures the people that the dead are among the living. The chief priest of egungun that does invoke the spirit of the ancestors is called “Alapini”. The festival is celebrated annually in the Yoruba kingdom, in almost all the towns and cities and this has tremendously contributed positively to the Nigerian economy, and also helped to foster unity among indigenous people.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Issa (2007) opined that research design is meant to provide a detailed explanation on the procedures to be used in carrying out the research; that is the master plan to be followed in the conduct of the study. Research design therefore is that logical model inferences regarding casual relations among the variables that are being investigated.

The research design adopted for this study is the survey research method. It enhances the gathering of data on the management of indigenous knowledge (Ifa and egungun) in southwest of Nigeria.

The interview was conducted on 10 Ifa and Egungun priest. The interview was personally carried out by the researcher with the assistance of an ifa priest. Also personal observations done by the researcher also go a long way in gathering relevant information to compliment the response of the respondents.

## **REPORT OF INTERVIEW**

The interview was conducted with different Ifa priests in Ogun and Osun State. The interview report illustrates the real outcome of the research work which is the management of indigenous knowledge (Ifa and egungun) in the southern of Nigeria.

**QUESTION 1:** What is Ifa and how does it came into existence?

**ANSWER:** Ifa according to a chief priest in Ile-Ife is the word that came from Olodumare through Orunmila and these words appear in the Odus in Yoruba land. Ifa is something we cannot appreciate to the extreme because it appears in various ways. In Ifa, we can find its corpus (Odu), in Ifa we can also find those words we are speaking.

But another priest sees Ifa differently as everything that has to do with life. He believed that for everything to be going smoothly, it is because of the existence of Ifa, and it came to being through Orunmila, Agbonmiregun.

**QUESTION 2:** What is/are the importance of Ifa to the community and the nation at large?

**ANSWER:** The Ifa priests unanimously agreed that Ifa is something that secures the family of the diviner, the community it is worshipped and the nation at large. A priest stated that in ifa we can find '*Ikin-ifa*', '*opele*' and '*Akaragba*'. Ikin-ifa is what is worshipped and it stands for ifa itself that we called *Odu* and '*Odu Apere-ifa*' is what we worship. When it is worshipped, it brings peace of mind, improved cultivation for farmers, safety for the nation, successful in business, improved income, high mortality rate and lots more.

Some other chiefs also agreed with him but added that ifa serves as giver of good things if properly consulted the way it should.

**QUESTION 3:** Why is ifa festival being done?

**ANSWER:** The main reason for Ifa divination or worshipping is to give thanks to Olodumare, for making us to see the new odun Ifa day. We witnessed the previous ones and even the present one and also to see more of it, so that things can go well with the Babalawo and all that has participated in the divination of Ifa.

The festival is also done to bring all Ifa priest together as one and consult the ifa on the new motto or the year, the messages and taboos.

**QUESTION 4:** Who and how is the date of the festival chosen?

**ANSWER:** According to an ifa priest, the date of the festival must be in June but the actual day may not be known. Another priest further explained that in Ile-Ife, Ifa festivity is done every '*Itadogun*'. Also is usually worshipped every five days and mainly the market days in Ife. The reason behind this market day was not given due to what he claimed to be 'traditional' and cannot be said without adequate consultation. It is these days that will be used to choose the day of the general festivity usually called 'Odun Ifa Agbaye' or 'Odun Oke Agbonmiregun'.

**QUESTION 5:** Who are those present at the festival?

**ANSWER:** Thank you. This ifa festival is just like the known Mecca of the Muslim where every Muslim goes to worship Allah. All Ifa priest throughout the world converge in Ile-Ife for this festivity for just 3 days. When the time for the divination arrives every ifa priest throughout the world must come together in order to know what ifa has in stock for the new ifa year.

**QUESTION 6:** What is the role of the chief ifa priest (Araba Agbaye) in the festival?

**ANSWER:** Araba Agbaye in the '*Apetu*' i.e. the appeaser, the final consulter. He is the person that interprets any divination of the ifa and finds solution to the general problem that may arise. Yes! The Appeaser. He is the great appeaser of Ifa. He locates or detects any problem first and tries to find solution to it by appeasing the god. He is the person that replaces '*Orunmila*'. When consulted, the Ifa will now say which of the oracle to worship be it '*Esu*', '*Ogun*', '*Ijani*', '*Obatala*' and so on. There is an odu ifa that backed this up named

*'Ikan worin'*

*Ikan worin*

*Adifa fun Orunmila*

*Ni'jo ti o hun lo je oloja la wujo*

*Sigbo irunmole*

*Odifa f' Ogun .....*

This is the reason why Orunmila is usually called 'Eleri – Ipin, atun ori eni ti o sun won se'.

**QUESTION 7:** What is the tag of this year 'Odun Agbonmiregun'?

**ANSWER:** The tag for this year festival after using 'Ikin-Ifa' is 'Ogbe-Iyonu' and Ifa told us on this 'Ogbe Iyonu' that we should be patient as seen in one of the verses

*Pele lojumo nmo*

*Igba pele ki n fo*

*Awo pele kii ya*

*Eri kankan loju amuyan*

*Amuyan loruko ka pe a jo*

*Eni a se kankan .....*

**QUESTION 8:** How do you document processes, revelations and happenings that were revealed by Ifa when it is consulted?

**ANSWER:** Document? Ifa is a traditional knowledge and it is being transferred orally for years now. The only time we document is when the Ifa priest think he has to maybe when someone come for consultation and the methods or process used have to be recorded.

According to another priest he said that there is no original documentation of its records yet. He claimed that all the corpus i.e. Odu, Ikin etc are transferred orally and those things that are recorded were not the primary things to be documented and kept for future use.

**QUESTION 9:** Are you now saying that there is no documentation of the process yet or what?

**ANSWER:** I can say for now yes but we have started to document every single thing about Ifa and its divination except those processes that were used to solve customer's problem.

**QUESTION 10:** How do you keep or preserve those documented records?

**ANSWER:** We use traditional method. A box is constructed and those documents were kept inside. Then traditional medicines like 'kafora' and so on will be poured on them in order to preserve them for future use.

**QUESTION 11:** Do you think there is need for documentation of all records on Ifa so that the traditional knowledge will not die?

**ANSWER:** Effort is being made to have a control method of ifa divination. But as you know, ifa is traditional and before anything can be done, it has to undergo consultations. But as for the records of solving problems, it varies, it depends on the method or process the ifa priest or babalawo adopts. All the same, I believe if by next ifa year you come, you will get a more positive answer.

**QUESTION 12:** What is role of Ooni of Ife during the festivity?

**ANSWER:** He (Oni of Ife) is the Oba of the town and regarded as the number 1 man, so before and after the festival, all the ifa priests will dance to his palace to formally bring the year festivity to opening and closing.

### **PERSONAL OBSERVATION OF THE WORLD IFA FESTIVAL 2012**

The Orunmila Barami Agbonmiregun, the World Ifa Festival was held on Saturday June 2 – 3, 2012 at Oketase – The world Ifa Temple, Ile-Ife. This festival celebrates the New Year for all the traditional Yoruba practitioners.

The World Ifa Festival was attended by many from within Nigeria as well as other countries all over the world. The rituals began in the early morning and continued into the following day. This year ODU is OGBE IYONU/OGBE OGUNDA, IRE AJE.

This simply implies that in this ifa year, Ifa is telling devotees to be patient (suuru). Money will come to those that make the proper sacrifice in the new ifa year but they must be careful of some embarrassment that may be associated with the good fortune. It was also revealed that Ifa devotees must take care of their destiny in the new ifa year. They must feed their head for it is the head that will bless them in the New Year. There may be fighting but a practitioner of the Ifa should not fight. Also, a lot of children will be born this year. There will be many ‘dada’ children born. The children will bring very special blessing with them. It is then important to feed Agbonmiregun so that the blessings of the ODU will manifest. It is also important to feed ‘OGUN’ and the head.

Ifa also revealed that if an insult comes out they should not be quick to anger. The hand should be rubbed with the stomach to keep calm and do not be quick to be upset. They should be careful of friends; they will have the tendency of given bad advice. Ifa devotees should not drink in excess in the new ifa year. They should also be careful of the words that fall from the mouth, and should do not curse.

Ifa also revealed that they should have to know where they are going. The secret should be kept in the mind and not to trust anybody.

*Akaka ni gbenagbena igi loko*

*Ikadu le fi pe korokoro bi esin*

*Ba yan la yan ju olowo re ni ke si*

*A difa fun ma kogun omo alara*

*Alukin fun ma kogbon omo ajero*

*Adifa fun abiwape ni se omo bibi orunmila*

*Won ki gbogbo won rubo abiwape*

*Nikan loru ebo*

*Agba oni suuru ohun gbogbo loni*

*Adifa fun orunmila to sawo lo ode iwo*

*Won ko rubo orubo ebo*

*Orunmila oru bo*

*Iya kan iya kan ti orunmila je lode iwo ki*

*Won ma pe ni iyawo*

*Kukuduku petenaki agberin igbado*

*Igbado agberin a difa fun onigunmoye*

*Omo adakolowo remon won ki onigunmoye*

*Rubo onigunmoye ru ebo o seun.*

Finally, the world ifa festival 2012 was a glorious day for all ifa priests as many of them were joyous that the festivity happens in their presence. The festival was attended by many priests and tourists all over the world. The 2 – day festival witnessed the evolution of traditional knowledge as new members were initiated.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The interview questions and personal observation were made based on the management on indigenous knowledge (Ifa and egungun) festival in the south west of Nigeria. Therefore, the summary of the findings are stated below:

- I) Ifa has been seen different things but the end point was that it has to do with human life.
- II) The divination of ifa is importance to the priest and the environment or community it is found.
- III) Also, ifa festival was done in order to appreciate and thank Olodumare for keeping the people till another Agbonmiregun year
- IV) The festival of ifa is usually done in June and worshippers or ifa priests do attend the ceremony all over the world as it marks the new ifa year.
- V) The documentation of ifa divination process has been passed orally all these years from superior to subordinate. The only form of documentation done is the prescriptions done for clients, which are documented in order to have a reference point when another client comes for the same kind of consultation.
- VI) It was also discovered that the documents were preserved traditionally using traditional medicine like 'kafora' to preserve the material.

- VII) The festival has to be done on yearly bases in order to mark the new ifa year thereby divining or making consultation for the do's and don'ts of the new ifa year.

## **CONCLUSION**

On the account of summary of the findings presented above, the following conclusions are hereby drawn.

The documentation and management of indigenous knowledge especially the divination of Ifa and egungun has not been encouraged. Even with the traditional method of preservation, the process has not been justified compare to the developmental era we are in now. This knowledge has to be documented and managed so that records or events of the past can be used as the frontier of knowledge of the present in order to benefit these that will be coming in the future.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the summary of the study, findings and the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are made:

- I) The Ifa and egungun priest should come together and reason within themselves for the need for documentation of their divinations for future references.
- II) Both oral and written documentation should be done so that if by any means the person with the oral knowledge dies, the written knowledge will remain and vice-versa
- III) There should be a documentation centre where recorded knowledge would be kept for future purpose.
- IV) The professional record manager should be employ because a mismanagement of document is like an already lost document.
- V) The traditional method of preservation should be accompanied along side with the modern method so that effective preservation and conservation would be guaranteed and at long mm modern technology should be adopted.

- VI) The recorded knowledge can also be digitize or put into print so that people can know the importance and relevance of the indigenous knowledge to the community and the entire nation at large.

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