

An Assessment of the Importance of Ifa Divination as Part of Igala Culture

Ayegba Abdullahi Adojoh

The General Igala Ambassador of Attah Igala, Founder of United Igala Kingdom, and the National Coordinator of The “Discovery and Reunification of Indigenous Igala People Across Nigeria and Beyond” Project of Attah Igala, Education and Research Unit, United Igala Kingdom, Attah Igala Palace, and Attah Idakwo Ameh Oboni Institute of History and Culture, Idah, Kogi State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This research work is aimed at studying the importance of Ifa divination among the Igala people. It was discovered that Ifa has various roles in our society such as; acting as a medium of communication between humans and the ancestors, studying of future happenings, finding out the causes of certain strange happenings in the society, revelations of the past, present and the future, and so on. It was also analysed that Igala has Ifa Ebutu; which involves the use of sand, Ifa Anwa; which involves the use of anwa tree fruit shells or pieces of calabash, Ifa Obi; which involves the use of four-lobes kola nut, Ifa Eyoko which involves the use of cowries, Ifa Egigo which involves the use of mirror and Ifa omi which involves the use of water. Ifa Ebutu is the common denominator of all Ifas as it can be used to interpret other types of Ifa like Anwa, Eyoko and Obi. It was concluded that Ifa till date played significant roles in the lives of Igala traditional believers in various ways. It was recommended that further works be done on Ifa anwa especially on the names of the sixteen elements (Odu Ifa), their meanings and their interpretations since the analysis was done on Ifa Ebutu in this work.

KEYWORDS: Divination, Edjo goddess, Egypt, Ichekpa, Ifa Ebutu, Igala

Corresponding Email Address

Email: unitedigalakingdom@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Igala is an ancient ethnic group of Nigeria and in about twelve countries outside Nigeria such as Kenya, Brazil, Cuba, Togo, Sierra Leone, Haiti, United Kingdom, etc though sometimes wrongly identified as Yoruba due to similarities in the two languages as well as the wrong history of the past which some Historians like Samuel Ajayi Crowther recorded that Igala ethnic group originated from Yoruba. This error is also promoted in some online dictionaries such as Merriam-webster.com which defines Igala as “a Yoruba-speaking people of the Niger at its confluence with the Benue in Nigeria”. Meanwhile, Igala and Yoruba are separate people or ethnic groups. In fact, Igala as a name of a tribe originated from Ancient Egypt and existed even before the unification of Lower and Upper Egypt around 3100 BC as confirmed by Petrie Flinders and other Egyptologists. The Name, Igala also remained even during their migration to the Benue valley (Taraba state) as confirmed by Palmer (1936), and it is the same name, Igala, that they are known with today. But Yoruba as a name of a tribe or group came into existences around 19th century during the agreement between the Oyo people and some Hausa group, before then, southwest had various groups such as Benin, Itsekiri, Igala, Nupe, Omo-Oduduwa, Aku, Egun, Ijebu, Anago/Igala, freed people from Sierra Leone after the abolition of slave trade, and others (Ayegba, *et al.*, 2020). In Nigeria, Igala is an indigenous tribe in about twenty nine states and the Federal Capital Territory.

Although some of them speak variants or different dialects of Igala language while some no longer speak Igala language, they are all connected with the same Igala culture and traditions irrespective of the locations across Nigeria. They also hold yearly general meeting with Attah Igala in his palace titled Igala National Congress in which representatives mostly traditional rulers and elders of various indigenous Igala communities within and outside Kogi state converge on Attah Igala’s palace in Idah, Kogi state to interact, and discuss on various issues on development, unity and progress of Igala people and territories across Nigeria and beyond. Igala originated from ancient Egypt, and they were reported by various ancient Egyptologists and archeologist to have ruled ancient Egypt from around 2130 BC – 2040 BC as the tenth Dynasty Pharaohs (Ayegba, 2020).

2. What is Ifa

An Ifa is a device used for communicating with the spirits by humans. It is a device for determining secret things or finding out about something. It is a form of divination. Divination is the act of seeking after knowledge of future or hidden things by inadequate means that is usually supplemented by some power which is represented all through history as coming from the gods (Alamu, *et al.*, 2013). Ifa is also defined as the act or practice of communication between humans and the ancestors, gods

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and goddesses. The ancestors, gods or goddesses do not communicate with their reincarnate (adawa in Igala language or their rebirth), relatives or humans physically or face-to-face except through Ifa, dreams, signs and wonders. Some of these signs are in the form of forbidden or unusual things such as seeing of pouched rat (*Akoto*) in the day time, "crying" of night birds like Owls and bats, crowing of hen (an adult female chicken), endless barking of dogs, regular nights mewling of cats, sudden cracking of burial tomb, crying of fairies or bush babies (*Ichekpa*) around the house in the night, being harmed or killed in the dreams, falling into a pit in the dream, etc. All these signs or wonders are bad omen or indications that there will be a tragedy or serious problems soon, though some of them can be averted when the solutions are known earlier. But how would one know the exact interpretation of "crowing of female adult chicken or crying of bush babies (fairies) let alone knowing the solutions. That was what brought about Ifa among Igala people. The act of performing Ifa or Ifa divination is known as Ifa-ebo, and the priest of Ifa who performs the Ifa divination is called Abifa (Abo-ifa, meaning one who predicts from Ifa) or Ebifa (Ene ki a bifa, the one who predicts from Ifa). Ifa, a message on how to tackle the challenges surrounding nations and individual life (Ogunleye, 2019) can be applied to provide some solutions to problems. Ifa directs the consultant into proper direction (Olusegun, et al., 2010), the message which will then be delivered to the concerned person or persons.

3. Methodology

This work adopts historical and analytical approaches in order to discuss the role of Ifa among the Igala people in addition to the types of Ifa practiced by them.

3.1. Origin of world creation: The Perspectives of Ancient Egyptians and Igala

According to Egyptian perspective, the world or universe was originally of water and darkness. The great God, Amun or Ra, the god of sun, felt lonely and said it was time to create the world using his magic power. He commanded a hill to rise in the middle of the water. On it, he created Shu, the god of air and Tefnut, the goddess of moisture. While Ra continued to create or command other creatures to be in the world, Shu and Tefnut created Nut (sky goddess) and Geb (earth god), and these two (Nut and Geb) gave birth to Osiris (god of justice, agriculture and rebirth), Isis (goddess of love, Magic), Set (god of Chaos and war) and Horus (god of war, hunting, sky or distant vision). These gods and goddess beginning with Osiris ruled and guarded the world including teaching the humans in the area of agriculture and civilization until they died and pharaoh took over as the representatives of the gods. The god and goddesses also guarded him to rule as they were all around him in spirit especially through dreams.

According to Igala perspective, the supreme God was alone and decided to create the world which was just covered with ocean. He then commanded a hill to appear in the middle of the ocean, and then created air for life and moisture or water for life too. He then created the earth god (Ojo-ane) and sky goddess (Ojo-ale/Ate). The Ojo-ane is still being worshipped or celebrated yearly by Attah Igala till date. The shrine is located at Ofiji along Opuata-Angwa Ayegba road. These Ojo-ane and Ojo-ate later gave birth to the gods and goddesses such as Iye (Mother goddess), Ukpakachi (god/goddess of

marriage, love, lucks), Ichekpa (god/goddess of magic, healings, wonders), Oko/Ata (Male/head deities for protection, rulership, war). The supreme God then created/commanded all living things to be in pairs (male and female) and other things needed in the world by man. These gods and goddesses ruled the world, and after their death or changing to spirits, humans (Ata) took over as the representative of the gods and goddesses, and being guided by the spirits of these gods and goddess who he would communicate with always hence the wearing of earrings by ancient Pharaohs and Attah Igala. That is why many Attah Igala including Attah Idakwo Ameh Oboni II at one point or the other have said that they are the representative of God on earth.

Earth god (Ojo-ane) picture

3.2. Origin of Ifa

The world was first ruled or guarded by various spirits (gods and goddesses) in form of humans then as they were created by God almighty to guard and guide the male and female he had created as well as how to make use of the resources available for their betterment. These gods and goddesses also had various roles ranging from security, fertility, agriculture, good health, magic, wonders, death, love, reproduction, etc. At a point, these gods and goddesses died and became spirit. Humans could no longer communicate with them physically but they worshipped them in their temples or shrines. They had various priests through whom others like the Attah or head of Igala talked to the gods and goddesses. When the head or Attah in particular and other people he was ruling started having problems and seeing different signs and wonders which were very strange to them, he had to go to the temple of the gods and goddesses of signs and wonders and complained to them through the priest in charge of the gods and goddesses. That was how the gods and goddesses started making the priest to understand some things through vision and in a dream and started interpreting some signs to the humans or Attah as well as the possible solutions given by the spirits. That was the origin of humans seeing vision and interpreting them.

But, even with this, there was no way humans can communicate immediately or instantly with the gods and goddesses to find out about something. The leader again went to the temple of the gods and goddesses in charge of signs and wonders (including magic) to appeal to them for the medium between them for instant or immediate communication to enable him (Attah) find instant causes of problems as well as their solutions to allow him rule peacefully. That was when the gods and goddesses of wonders, signs and magic possessed their priest and he was given the description, methods, and interpretations as well as instant enquiry capacity from the gods and goddesses by humans. He started practicing what he was shown like dreams by writing of those things on the ground and rocks. He could write them on rocks using ink/liquid from wood or on the ground or sand accordingly and say their names and their meanings correctly. This was the origin of Ifa among Igala. The process of drawing or writing the elements or things given to the priest on the sand or rock was were the name *Ifa* originated from. "Fa" means to write it and "Ifa" means "he writes it" though another school of thought revealed that "I" was later added to the "Fa" to make it Ifa as Igala are fond of adding letter "I" to words not having any vowel at the beginning. In other words, the interpretation is

done from what was written on the ground or sand. The gods and goddesses of wonder, signs and magic in Igala is *Ichekpa* (bush babies or fairies). They were the ones that gave who humans *Ifa* to use in communicating with the spirits or those who cannot be seen physically. Till date, they (bush babies) still give people they like different powers or gifts such as curing herbs, rain making, intelligent in school, good luck, continuous prospering in business, etc. An *Ichekpa* is human-like form living in the bush or forest though smaller in size. They are spirits, hence cannot be seen except the powerful hunters and those they feel like showing themselves to but in a snappy or sudden way. It is worthy of note here that *Ifa* is the first form of writing in Igala or by Igala people. The person who practices or understands how to make and interprets *Ifa* is called *Ifa* priest.

3.3. Relationship between the head of *Ifa* in ancient Egyptian and Igala Kingdom King

The king of the ancient Egypt was known as Pharaoh while that of Igala is *Attah*. Both of them have many similarities. While Pharaoh means "The Great house", *Attah* (*Ata*) as an ancient Egyptian word means "The Great one or father or elder". Both *Attah* Igala and ancient Egyptian Pharaohs wear earrings.

Ifa (Wadjet, Edjo and Ejo) or Divination: Divination is the practice of determining the hidden things or cause of events. It is also the practice of communicating with the gods or deities. Ink was mainly used in Ancient Egypt to draw the divination elements on objects for interpretation. It was learnt that writing them on sand makes it easier to erase than ink on object. That was how sand oracle called *Ifa Ebutu* in Igala commenced in ancient Egypt where Igala originated from. The name *Ifa* was from the Igala word "Fa" which means draw, and as usual, Igala would always add "I" to the beginning of most words starting with consonants. That was how "I" was added to Fa making it *Ifa* till date. *Ifa* was used by Pharaohs to communicate with the gods and goddesses. *Attah* Igala uses *Ifa* to communicate with the ancestors as well as the gods and goddesses too. The goddess of *Ifa* in ancient Egypt was called *Wadjet* in Roman language and *Edjo* in ancient Egypt while that of Igala is *Ichekpa* in Igala language. The title of the person in charge of *Attah* Igala's *Ifa* is called *Ohio* *Attah*. Further interactions with *Ifa* spirits (gods/goddess) led to the revelation other *Ifas* such as cola nuts, mirror, water, calabash, in Igala land today. The goddess of *Ifa* in ancient Egypt is called *Wadjet* in Roman language and *Edjo* in ancient Egypt, *Ejo* in Igala and snake in English. In ancient Egypt, there was also a priest in charge of *Edjo* or divination.

In both cases- Igala and ancient Egypt, their believes was that the humans interact with or communicate with ancestors, gods and goddesses through the *Ifa* spirit and the ancestors, gods and goddesses that were said to be humans before they died then take their problems to God almighty and bring the solutions to them through the *Ifa* too.

4. Types of *Ifa*

There are about six different types of *Ifa* in Igala but they common one is the one written or done on sand. It is called *Ifa Ebu* (*Ifa* done on the sand or sand *Ifa*). The *Ifa Ebutu* is a common denominator to other *Ifas* as it can be used to interpret them. Some types of Igala *Ifas* are *Ifa Ebutu*, *Ifa Anwa*, *Ifa Eyoko* (Cowries), *Ifa Obi*, *Ifa Egigo*, and *Ifa omi*.

Ifa Ebutu: It is the *Ifa* divination done on sand. The sand used for this *Ifa* is not just ordinary sand but sand gotten from stream, river then dried or from junctions where three roads or seven roads meet. The sand are occasionally given wine by pouring small quantity of wine on the ground in front of the *Ifa* sand either during divination or before divination. The collection of the sand from the stream was to allow the water spirits accompany it for brighter interpretation and clear message delivery. The junction is also believed to be the meeting point of different spirits; hence, collecting the sand from such location makes the *Ifa* sand powerful, "speaks" very well and makes its interpretation easy with the aid of the accompanied spirits from the road. The dry sand is put on animal skin or mat during divination. The processes of the *Ifa Ebutu* divination will be explained later.

Ifa Anwa: This type of *Ifa* is made up of array or row of small pieces of calabash connected together with a rope. It was originally made from the fruit of a particular tree which resembles *Iroko* called *Anwa* in Igala language. The dry fruit opens into two like groundnut shelf but it is as big as the palm of an adult. It is also very heavy, hence the adoption of lighter replacement, the calabash. They are four rows and one row is made up of four pieces of calabash. The interpretation is based on how each of the pieces opens or closes in the four rows. The incantation or voice message is made into the *Okwute* by the person seeking for information from it. The *Okwute* is a small but strong bone of animal. It is used just like the modern day microphone in which it is talked into. After talking into the *Okwute*, the *Okwute* is then used to touch some of the rows and columns calabash pieces which are the *Ifa anwa*. After that, the *Ifa* will be cast or tossed in a way that they will form lines as they were but the opening and closing is determined by the spirit in order to deliver the message which the *Ifa* priest or *Abifa* will interpret.

Ifa Eyoko: This type of *Ifa* divination is performed using cowries. The cowries are mostly four in number. They are carried in the hand and incantations made into them, then gently thrown or cast down on an animal skin or mat. *Eyoko* is the Igala name for cowry. Cowry were used as money in those days, hence the name, *Eyo-Oko*, meaning pieces of money (*Okoko* in Igala language is money in English).

Ifa Obi: This type of *Ifa* divination is performed using four lobes or cotyledons of broken kola nuts. The Kola nut used for this *Ifa* is the one with four divisions or cotyledons when broken. It is popularly called *Obi* Igala, meaning Igala Kolanut. It is also called *Obi Ibo-egwu* (*Ibegwu*), meaning the kola nut of the ancestors. In Yoruba, this type of *Ifa* is called *Obi* divination. The *Ifa Obi* is done by *Ifa* priest just the same method as the *Ifa Eyoko*. *Obi* is an Igala word for Kola nut.

Ifa Egigo: This type of *Ifa* divination is performed by looking into a mirror by an *Ifa Egigo* priest. *Egigo* is the Igala name for mirror, hence the name, *Ifa Egigo*.

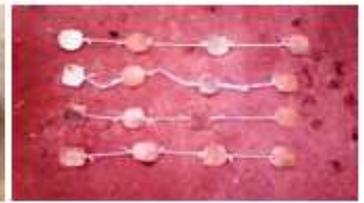
Ifa omi: This type of *Ifa* divination is made by looking into water in a small container such as calabash or its likes by an *Ifa omi* priest. *Omi* is an Igala word for water.

But irrespective of the type of *Ifa*, they major methods of learning them or becoming a priest of *Ifa* is through

apprenticeship, gift by the spirits or inheritance. The learning of Ifa through apprenticeship is the process in which one goes to stay with an Ifa priest for a period of time between one and three years. The learning of Ifa through the gift by the spirits is when a man or woman is thought the Ifa divination by the spirits of the goddesses or gods with her or the gods or goddess which the person is an incarnate. The person will become an Ifa priest suddenly without receiving any training or knowledge of Ifa from any human. The Ifa priest through inheritance is the one in which one inherits the knowledge from his or her parents or relatives. This person must have stayed with the Ifa priest as he or she practices it for some times (years). When such a person dies, the son or daughter can continue the Ifa while the late Ifa priest will continue to “open” his or her eyes to see and interpret the Ifa better and better until he or she becomes very perfect.



Ifa Obi



Ifa Anwa



Ifa Eyoko



The Shrine of Era-ane deity at Ofiji, Idah, Kogi state

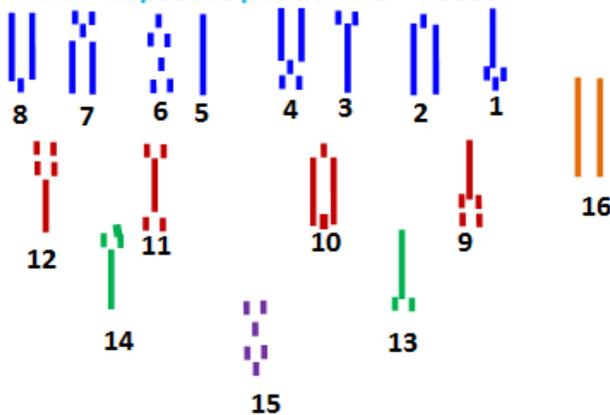
5. Elements of Ifa Ebutu and how Ifa Ebutu divination is done

There are sixteen elements of Igala Ifa Ebutu. These elements have different names some of which are strange language of the spirit, but they all have their various meanings. The names of the elements of Ifa is referred to as Odu Ifa in Igala. The sixteen elements of Ifa Ebutu according to their number or rank and their meanings are 1. Anikocheje (god), 2. Olaika (Male), 3. Etemetedali (At the top or movement) 4. Ayibiyala (goddess or water goddess, or mother) 5. Ateliki (Child), 6. Okwubaja (To see or visible), 7. Alehumola (Female), 8. Alumukwu (Death, Blood), 9. Inachaja (Joy, laughter), 10. Achika (Father) 11. Atamahi (Grave, four legged object e.g. goat, car), 12. Onuchudali/Omuchudali (Witch or Wizard, light skinned person), 13. Otuba (Sadness) 14. Inikiladi (talk, quarrel, enmity), 15. Okwubadala (lies, deceit) 16. Ajema (Gathering, multitude, many).

In addition, these elements can also be interpreted in different ways when they change their locations. For instance, when Ajema which is at number sixteen appears at number thirteen, it becomes money instead of multitude or many people. When Olaika which is at number two changes to number seven, if the Ifa is about a lady on whether to determine if she has “known a man” or not, having Olaika at number seven indicates that she has already known a man and no longer a virgin. When Alumukwu at number eight appears at number ten, a male elder is likely to die soon, etc.

But unlike Ifa Anwa in which the incantation is said or done into the Okwute before using it to touch the Ifa, the case of Ifa Ebutu involves one making incantation into the palm of the right hand and then using the palm to partly clean or rub the four or more Ifa elements written on the sand. The Ifa priest then makes four dash- dash lines with all having different lengths. These are done four times to get a new four elements which will be the major elements of Ifa in that performance, and these four elements are used to make the complete sixteen elements, that is; having twelve more as their derivatives known as the children in Igala context. These sixteen elements will be interpreted by the Ifa priest based on their appearance as coordinated by the Ifa spirit based on the message of the gods, goddesses or the ancestors.

The sixteen elements of Igala Ifa Ebutu (sand Ifa) in their respective positions or “houses”



The names of the elements of the Ifa Ebutu

1. Anikocheje
2. Olaika
3. Etemetedali
4. Ayibiyala
5. Ateliki
6. Okwubaja
7. Alehumola
8. Alumukwu
9. Inachaja
10. Achika
11. Atamahi
12. Onuchudali
13. Otuba
14. Inikiladi
15. Okwubadala
16. Ajema

6. Uses or importance of Ifa among the Igala

Some uses or importance of Ifa are as follows:

A. To investigate the causes of things:

When one is sick and he or she has taken some medications and the sickness still persists for two or more days, he or she would ask for the reason. In some cases, it might be as a result of the sin of the person. Some men do what is forbidden in their clan just because they are no longer in the village. Some wives also do what is forbidden because they or their husband no longer have hands in Igala tradition. They are not always lucky as some would be brought back to the village with terrible sicknesses and their people in the village had to start investigating through Ifa divination, and when the causes of the sickness are known, they do what is said or revealed by the Ifa priest, and the person lives again though some die if he or she refused to speak the truth until the sickness becomes very terrible, investigations revealed. Aside this, when strange things like regular barking of dogs, crowing of adult female chicken (hen), crowing of adult

chicken (cock) when it is not yet 12 am midnight or above, crying of bush babies (fairies) around homes, “crying” of owl or bat, having of terrible dreams, etc around homes, the head of the house would investigate the reasons behind them. The Ifa will tell what was responsible for such forbidden and strange happenings. Furthermore, some Igala used to sacrifice cock to their ancestors yearly, and when this is done, they will cut the bottom of the cock to see the appearance of the “testicles” which are supposed to be white. So, when the colour is black in part or whole, it means the ancestor have rejected the sacrifice or something is about to happen which they want the person who gave them the sacrifice to be aware of. In Igala, it will be said, Imukpabie, meaning it has spoilt. This will be investigated on why the ancestors rejected the food. It is like your father rejecting your food in real life, and you have to ask him why, isn't it? So, the ancestors would be asked on the reason for the rejection and this can only be done through Ifa. After knowing the reason, they would now be given another sacrifice and the “testicles” will be white when there is no further problem.

B. To seek solutions to problems:

In those days, wars were common. Tribal leaders consult the gods and goddesses through the Ifa for the way to win the war. When rain is not falling or bad sickness is coming closer to the communities around, the leader would seek the face of the ancestors on what to do. That was how many ancient Kings did and ruled their people safely or undefeated in wars.

C. To examine the future:

Till date, some people investigate traditionally before they join any elective race. In the olden days, people don't marry anyhow. They assess the future of the marriage. This is done before they approach the family of the lady for her hand in marriage. Some people in those days consult the gods or the ancestors before travelling.

D. To communicate with the gods and goddesses or the ancestors:

Sometimes, people have bad dreams, or dreaming and be seeing a relative who was already dead, maybe the father. Sometimes, not all he told the person in the dream that he or she would remember in the morning or when the person wakes up. Sometimes, it could be in the form of warning. Of course, no way to tell your late dad that you forgot some of the things he told you in the dreams or that you were not clear or asking for more clarifications. The only way to communicate with him is through the Ifa. He would surely send the message to you through the Ifa, and will be delivered to you by the Ifa Priest. You have the opportunity of asking your late father again and again through the Ifa. That was how our people communicated with Ibegwu (ancestors) in those days, and still happening among the believers till date.

E. To seek for information from the ancestors:

In those days, and still till date according to my investigations, when one is fighting for an important position like trying to be the traditional ruler of their community or clan, they consult their ancestors (father, grandfather,) on what he or she should do to be the one that would be crowned the ruler or to be favoured. They also consult the

ancestors regularly on how to rule the community with peace, and ensuring development.

F. For general guardians, peace and progress in Igala land:

At a particular time, some communities may be experiencing some strange happenings such as social vices, sudden deaths here and there, death of youths, different tragedies in the community, the community head or elders of the community would go out individually or in group to consult the gods and goddesses of the land as well as the ancestors on how to stop all such problems and ensuring a lasting peace among them.

G. For the revelation of the past, present and future:

Ifa reveals what has happened in the past. Sometimes, it might be coincidence. The person consulting the Ifa may be asking for another thing but additional information will come up. It is common to hear of some people been told of the things they did in the past or did for them in the past maybe a covenant made by their late father on them but not yet redeemed, and how it is affecting them presently and what that will do to them in the nearest future if the covenant or pledge to such god or goddess is not redeemed. Ifa can reveal what is about to happen to someone soon, either good or bad. Ifa can reveal to one that he or she is about to get married even when no such sign is there. Ifa can reveal to someone that someone very close to him or her is about to die even if there is no sick person closer to him or her at that period. From my investigations, they would all happen except further investigations are carried out and the solutions or remedies were followed accordingly.

H. To reveal secret happenings or things:

There is nothing on earth that can be hidden from Ifa. This is because there is nothing that can be hidden from the god or spirit in charge of Ifa. It is only Ifa that can reveal any secret thing done by anyone in the society, at home or anywhere when enquired of.

7. Conclusion

This work has studied the major types of Ifa of Igala people such as Ifa Ebutu which involves the use of sand, Ifa Anwa which involves Anwa fruit or pieces of calabash, Ifa Obi which involves a four-lobes kola nut, Ifa Eyoko which involves the use of cowries, Ifa Egigo which involves the use of mirror and Ifa Omi which involves the use of water. It also studied the origin of Ifa as well as the uses or importance of Ifa to Igala people such as to find the solutions to problems, revealing of secret happenings or things, finding the cause or causes of something, assessment of the future, revelation of the past, present and future happenings, etc.

From this analysis, it can be concluded that Ifa is one of the major aspects of Igala culture right from the beginning of the world till date, and that it was given to Igala by the Igala god and goddess of magic, sign and wonder called Ichekpa (“bush baby” or fairies). It can also be concluded that Ifa has various uses among the Igala people till date, and it still practiced by a few Igala traditional religion believers in the society till date.

8. Recommendation

It is recommended that more studies be carried out on the names and meanings of the remaining Ifas such as Ifa anwa,

Ifa Obi, and Ifa Eyoko. It is also recommended that the believers of Igala traditional religion who are in our society today should make use of Ifa technology to detect and eliminate some odd things such as crimes, corruption and their likes in our communities.

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