

## A Critique of Maduabuchi Dukor's "Divination: A Science or an Art?"

O. A. Shitta-Bey

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria  
Email: [tilewa02@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:tilewa02@yahoo.co.uk), [olanrewaju.shitta-bey@lasu.edu.ng](mailto:olanrewaju.shitta-bey@lasu.edu.ng)

Received August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012; revised September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012; accepted October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012

In this paper, we examine Maduabuchi Dukor's article titled "Divination: A Science or An Art?", where he endeavours to demonstrate the character and nature of African science as well as explores the issue whether some practices in Africa can be accorded a scientific status. These tasks to explore and demonstrate the scientific nature of African practices led Maduabuchi Dukor to focus on divination as his working example; and specifically identified *Ifa* divination. In sum, Maduabuchi Dukor argues that African (*Ifa*) divination is or can be made a science through formalization and quantification. The main thrust of his argument is that with the aid of formalization and quantification, divination as practiced in Africa can qualify as a science. Our contention as regards this exercise by Maduabuchi Dukor runs from the beginning of the article through to the end of it. That is, our critique of the article concerns some suppositions employed to build up the argument that supports the claim that (*Ifa*) divination is a scientific enterprise. In other words, the premises and the conclusion so provided, we argue, are full of contestations; and it is these contestations that we showcased in this paper. It is important to make it clear that our contention has nothing to do with the thinking of Maduabuchi Dukor that *Ifa* divination is a science or can be made to be so; rather, our contention is the suppositions that he deployed to articulate his thought.

**Keywords:** African Science; *Ifa*; *Odu*; Formalisation; Quantification

### Introduction

For some time now, the practice of divination among the locals in Africa has been subjected to rigorous intellectual discourse; one of the several questions that have been raised about the practice is whether it is an art or a science, in other words, should divination be categorise as a form of art or should it be classified as a scientific enterprise? Categorically pertaining to this question, Maduabuchi Dukor, a renowned contemporary African philosopher, has contentiously responded. This response by Maduabuchi Dukor, however, is not without some fundamental problem.

Fundamentally, this paper visits and contends with some propositions and submissions articulated by Maduabuchi Dukor in his argument to demonstrate that the practice of *Ifa* divination among the Yoruba is not just a form of art, but it is equally a scientific endeavour or can be made to be so if properly formalized and quantified.

Specifically, the propositions and submissions of Maduabuchi Dukor being contended by this paper concern formalization and quantification as regard their capacity to determine the scientific status of practices like the Yoruba divination system called *Ifa*. Serving as the major source of example that Maduabuchi Dukor draws from, his views about *Ifa* that we contend in this paper cannot but be visited and addressed, because they are very important such that if not addressed could lead to unwarranted misunderstanding of the body of the Yoruba indigenous system of knowledge called *Ifa*.

Accordingly, the structure of this paper is organised into two (2) sections which excludes the introduction and conclusion. In a comfortable order, the first section is titled "An Exploration

of Dukor's 'Divination: A Science or An Art?'" and it explores the article of Maduabuchi Dukor on the matter of divination as a science. The second section is titled "A Critique of Dukor's Suppositions", and it deals with our own criticisms of Maduabuchi Dukor's suppositions.

### An Exploration of Dukor's "Divination: A Science or an Art?"

In Maduabuchi Dukor's view, some practices in Africa and divination in particular is (or can be made) a scientific enterprise. This point is made clear when he states that,

To better understand what African science is and to know whether some of its practises can be accorded a scientific status, let us examine divination as an example. I am inclined to believe that *Ifa* divination or divination in any part of Africa is a science or can be made a science through formalization and quantification (Dukor, 2010: p. 180).

Our point of contention in the above supposition shall be concern with the criteria of formalization and quantification as determinants of scientific enterprise, especially as regards the scientific status of (*Ifa*) divination. The truism of this claim we shall attempt to explore in our next section. But it is important to point out an important question concerning this claim here: do formalization and quantification determines the scientific status of any practice? If no, there will be no further discussion; but if yes, there is the need to find out *how* and possibly *where* the duo of formalization and quantification derive their character of determining what should qualify as a science.

In the rendition of his own understanding of *Ifa* divination in Yoruba thought, Maduabuchi Dukor believes that the custodian of wisdom and knowledge among the divinities in Yoruba theology (called *Orunmila*) is the child, the deputy, and the oracle of *Olodumare* on earth. To avoid miscomprehension of his believe, Maduabuchi Dukor himself posits that “in Yoruba thought, *Orunmila* is believed to be the child of *Olodumare*, his deputy and oracle on earth” (*ibid*). Anyone with accurate information concerning Yoruba theology will be sure that there is a lot that is wrong with this supposition. Again, it is important to take note of this point as it constitutes one of the issues we shall address in our next section.

Another important supposition, which we think, calls for mentioning is the one that concerns the outcome of *Ifa* divination. In the first instance, he submits that “according to the editor of *Orunmila* Magazine (a bi-annual magazine of the *Orunmila* Youngsters of Indigene faith of Africa), *Ifa* is not a magic and if applied correctly through the use of any instrument of divination, the outcome will be certain” (*ibid*). On this same issue of the outcomes of *Ifa* divination, the professor also posits that “the editor of *Orunmila* magazine and the chief priest of *Ifa* contend that divination can be thought and that if correct procedures are taken, there will be correct result” (*ibid*: 181). What we should take note here concerning the outcome of *Ifa* divination, as supposed by Maduabuchi Dukor, are the words *certain* and *correct*. That is, our emphasis concerning the issue of outcome is on the words *certain* and *correct*.

In his attempt to justify *Ifa* divination as a science, Maduabuchi Dukor further supposes that:

*Ifa* divination has certain fundamental principles from which an advanced science can possibly sprung. *And that* a number of propositions ... are axioms or postulates in the divination. They include 1) Cowries as sign of well-being; 2) Seed as sign of new baby; 3) Broken plate as a negative sign; 4) Bone as sign of death; 5) Stone as sign of long life and; 6) Principles of similarity and contiguity (*ibid*).

Whatever relevance that is to be derive from this supposition, we do not know and it is not part of our contentions in this paper. But what we do know is that this supposition invokes a serious contention that will also be part of our focus in the next section.

In addition, Dukor equally supposes that an *Ifa* priest also qualifies to be addressed as a scientist. In fact, for the professor, he (i.e. the priest) is either called a native scientist or a priest. Whether he is addressed as a scientist or a priest is not our contention here, but what is expected of this priest is our concern. According to Maduabuchi Dukor, an *Ifa* priest is expected to commit to memory some over a thousand verses. In his own words,

*Ifa* has 256 symbols known as *Odu*. 16 are the major *Odu* and 240 are combinations (minors). An average native scientist or a priest is expected to memorise at least one thousand three hundred and sixty verses (*ibid*).

As with the suppositions we have pointed out above, the problem with this too shall be looked into in our next section. However, it is important to have a clue of what and where the problem may be with this supposition just like we have been doing with the past ones.

In the supposition, one will notice that the professor did

mention 16 major and 240 minor *Odu* to sum up to 256 *Odu* as the total number of symbols in *Ifa*; and suddenly, the professor talked about committing at least 1360 verses to memory by an *Ifa* priest. The contestation likely to be raised here is obvious, but we shall address this, as earlier said, in our next section.

The grandiose of all suppositions in Maduabuchi Dukor’s article, for contestation by this paper, appears when he states that “the 16 major *Odu* and the 240 combinations represent scientific laws” (*ibid*). More clearly and in a diagrammatic manner in the preceding pages, the professor assumes to have demonstrate the scientism of *Ifa* divination by way of presenting the symbols of the 16 major *Odu* and reducing same to other kind of symbols he so created. The problem that arises from this scientism of *Ifa* divination through diagrammatic representation will be fully treated in our next section.

To close this section, it is worthy to state that so far we have identified six suppositions by Maduabuchi Dukor in his article entitled “Divination: A Science or An Art?” Although, there are other suppositions in this same article that call for questioning; but for certain constraints, we shall limit our scope to the six suppositions identified above. In to avoid ambiguity in our contestation, we shall attend to each supposition sequentially as presented above.

## A Critique of Maduabuchi Dukor’s Suppositions

Maduabuchi Dukor’s first supposition is that (*Ifa*) divination is a science or can be made a science through formalization and quantification. And like we earlier raised the question that on what ground, if there is any, is formalization and quantification qualifies to determine what should pass as a science or not? To this question, we don’t think that there is any good (even bad) answer. How be it, probably the professor meant to say that divination, like formal logic (since we also have informal logic), when formalized can acquire the status of a science; and that when it is consistently built-upon, it can also have a theory of quantification as we have it in logic. However, we are not sure if this is what the professor meant to actually say; but then, we should remind ourselves of the controversies surrounding the scientific status of logic itself. Thus, even if the professor meant what he actually said, then formalization and quantification (which are the hallmarks of logic) cannot stand to determine or qualify *Ifa* divination as a science.

To the second supposition, that *Orunmila* (the god of wisdom and knowledge in Yoruba belief system) is both the child and deputy of *Olodumare* as well as *Olodumare*’s oracle on earth. This is neither true nor false, but half true and half false because of the way it is been stated. Our contention here seems ambiguous, therefore, let us re-state it as: Maduabuchi Dukor is wrong to have identified *Orunmila* as the deputy of *Olodumare*, but would have been right if he posits that *Orunmila* is one of the deputies (or a deputy) of *Olodumare*, because all *Orisa* (i.e. the arch-divinities) are deputies of *Olodumare*. In other words, *Orunmila* is just one of the deputies, he is not the deputy. This view is supported by the submission that

The divinities (called, variously, IMALES or IRUN-MALES, or ORISAS in the *Ifa* corpus) were the first creations of *Olodumare*; and that they were created by Him in His capacity as *Eleda*, for the primary purpose of assisting Him in the management of the planetary system (Akintola, 1999: p. 52).

Indicative in the submission above is that the divinities were created by *Olodumare* to assist in theocratic governance of the universe. That they are to assist suggests that they are deputising *Olodumare*, which make them all the deputies of *Olodumare*. Hence, it is utterly wrong to adduced *Orunmila* as the deputy of *Olodumare*, to be more precise, it is better to state that *Orunmila* is one of the deputies of *Olodumare*.

As regard been the child of *Olodumare*, this is totally wrong because in Yoruba belief system and culture, it is popular to hear the people say *Olodumare k'obi mo, Enikan k'obi*, that is *Olodumare* begets no child (ren), and no one begets *Olodumare*. In addition, there is nowhere in Yoruba oral scriptures where it is stated that *Orunmila* is the child of *Olodumare*. Hence, *Orunmila* is not the child of *Olodumare*.

The third point like the first in the supposition under consideration, *Orunmila* is not the only oracle of *Olodumare* on earth, therefore, it is wrong to say that *Orunmila* is the oracle of *Olodumare* on earth, rather it is better to say that *Orunmila* is one of *Olodumare's* oracles on earth. This is why Abimbola states that "*Ifa* is, of course, famous as a divination god although he is not the only god connected with divination" (Abimbola, 1976: p. 10).

Without much ado, anyone will notice that the problem with the supposition been considered is the problem of semantic and misconception. Thus, in dealing with Yoruba belief system, it is important to be very careful with the way we express issues, otherwise, one may be articulating an important view in a wrong way. Correctly stated, therefore, 1) *Orunmila* (and any divinity or person) is not a child of *Olodumare*; 2) *Orunmila* is one of the deputies of *Olodumare*; and 3) *Orunmila* is one of the Oracles of *Olodumare* on earth.

Concerning the outcome of *Ifa* divination, Maduabuchi Dukor creates a confusion when he uses "correct" to describe the outcome of *Ifa* divination in one paragraph, and uses "certain" in another. One is not sure which one is the appropriate one to use between "correct" and "certain" to describe the outcome of *Ifa* divination, except we may want to guess that the professor permits the use of the two interchangeably; that is, the words *certain* and *correct* are synonymous with respect to the outcome of *Ifa* divination, provided that Maduabuchi Dukor grants the permission to do so.

This is the best that can be assumed of the professor usage of the two words in the context that they appeared. Our contention here, is not about which one is the appropriate one to use between *certain* and *correct* in describing the outcomes of *Ifa* divination; but that it is utterly wrong to describe the outcome of *Ifa* divination as either *correct* or *certain*, for correctness or certainty is mostly avoided in the practice of *Ifa* divination itself, how much more its outcome.

Hence, it is interesting to note that *Ifa* divination is some sort of prediction, and because it is, one can only talk about good or evil outcome of the prediction. It is in line with this that Abimbola submits that,

It is the belief of the Yoruba that if the prediction of *Ifa* is good, a sacrifice will help further to make it come to pass, and that, if the prediction is evil, a sacrifice will help the client to dispel the evil (*ibid*: 35).

The fourth supposition, by Maduabuchi Dukor, for contestation is the statement that "... a number of propositions ... are axioms or postulates in the divination" and these axioms and

postulates are listed as 1) cowries: a sign of well being; 2) seed: a sign of new baby; 3) broken plate: a sign of negativity; 4) bone: a sign of death; 5) stone: a sign of long life, and the last being what he called; 6) the principles of similarity and contiguity. Wherever Maduabuchi Dukor must have gotten this information from, we do not know and neither did he informs us of the source of this information nor did he quote any authority. Hence, it is important to put the record straight.

It is a fact that some *Ifa* diviners make use of some materials in course of their practice like cowries, bones, fish, stone, sand, and other sort of materials, but whatever these things meant or symbolised cannot be ascertain. However, what we do know from oral conversations with some *Ifa* diviners is that the services of some of these materials are employ to symbolised different things at different times, and this is not necessarily as supposed by Maduabuchi Dukor in his article. Thus, these representations should be discarded in their totality. In fact, as regard materials being employed by *Ifa* diviners, Abimbola submits that

Different kinds of materials are usually required for sacrifice by *Ifa* priests. These materials include cooked food and raw foodstuffs, cloths, live animals including goats and rats, fishes, birds, plants, leaves and roots of plants, sand and stones etc. (*ibid*: 36).

On the fifth supposition, there is the problem of correlating 1360 verses to be memorise by an *Ifa* priest with the 256 *Odu* as stated by Maduabuchi Dukor. That is, what correlation exists between the 256 *Odu* correctly stated to be contained in *Ifa* and the 1360 verses so mentioned alongside with it. In plain language, there is serious ambiguity in this supposition; and if we pretend to understand what is been said, then we will still raise the question that how many verses there are? Since the professor uses the expression "at least 1360 verses".

To put the record straight on this, some scholars have rightly inform us that an average *Ifa* diviner is expected to commit to memory at least sixteen verses of each of the 256 *Odu*, meaning that rather than the 1360 verses as supposed by Maduabuchi Dukor, it should be 16 verses of each *Odu* multiply by the 256 *Odu* in *Ifa* corpus. The total we shall arrive at is 4096 verses. Hence, instead of the wrong supposition of at least 1360, an *Ifa* diviner is expected to commit to memory at least 4096 verses. The point being made here is clearly articulated by the following submissions:

There seems to be no fixed number of *Ese* (i.e. *verses*) which each trainee must learn before he qualifies for initiation, but most of my informants confirm that in ancient times, nobody would be respected as a good *Ifa* priest unless he has learnt by heart at least sixteen *Ese* each of the two hundred and fifty-six *Odu* (*ibid*: 19-20).

and

... the trainee shall have learnt the recitation, scope and meaning of, at least, sixteen (16) verses of each of the 256 *Odu*s and *Omo-Olodus* (Akintola: 35).

On the total number of verses in *Ifa*, Akintola has this to say

... it takes about one thousand six hundred and eighty (1680) verses for each of these 256 apostles of *Orunmila* to express his own gospel. On this basis, the whole of the *Ifa* corpus would comprise about four hundred and thirty

thousand and eighty (430,080) verses (*ibid*: 13).

Away from the fifth to the final supposition by Maduabuchi Dukor, as listed in this paper, we have come to the grandiose of all suppositions. As earlier noted, he submits that “the 16 major *Odu* and the 240 combinations represent scientific laws”. Our question is: In what sense does the totality of the *Odu* represent or constitute scientific laws? And we think, this is what Maduabuchi Dukor endeavours to demonstrate when he laid down the signatures (what he called symbols) of the 16 major *Odu* in their order of seniority (rather than significance as he called it).

In order to achieve his goal of making *Ifa* divination to acquire scientific status, Maduabuchi Dukor created symbols that are not self explanatory in anyway. In what he called his programme or system, we also realised that what he presented as formalization of the signatures of the major *Odu* is very ambiguous, and therefore, very difficult to comprehend. In fact, it must be stated that the signatures of the *Odu* in their original forms are easier to understand and construct more than the formalized programme by Maduabuchi Dukor. The signatures of the 16 major *Odu* in their original formality are presented thus (see Abimbola [1976]; Salami [2002]; Akintola [1999]):

| 1) <i>Ogbe Meji</i>   |    | 2) <i>Oyeku Meji</i>  |    | 3) <i>Iwori Meji</i> |    | 4) <i>Odi Meji</i>        |    |
|-----------------------|----|-----------------------|----|----------------------|----|---------------------------|----|
| I                     | I  | II                    | II | II                   | II | I                         | I  |
| I                     | I  | II                    | II | I                    | I  | II                        | II |
| I                     | I  | II                    | II | I                    | I  | II                        | II |
| I                     | I  | II                    | II | II                   | II | I                         | I  |
| 5) <i>Irosun Meji</i> |    | 6) <i>Oworin Meji</i> |    | 7) <i>Obara Meji</i> |    | 8) <i>Okanran Meji</i>    |    |
| I                     | I  | II                    | II | I                    | I  | II                        | II |
| I                     | I  | II                    | II | II                   | II | II                        | II |
| II                    | II | I                     | I  | II                   | II | II                        | II |
| II                    | II | I                     | I  | II                   | II | I                         | I  |
| 9) <i>Ogunda Meji</i> |    | 10) <i>Osa Meji</i>   |    | 11) <i>Ika Meji</i>  |    | 12) <i>Otuurupon Meji</i> |    |
| I                     | I  | II                    | II | II                   | II | II                        | II |
| I                     | I  | I                     | I  | I                    | I  | II                        | II |
| I                     | I  | I                     | I  | II                   | II | I                         | I  |
| II                    | II | I                     | I  | II                   | II | II                        | II |
| 13) <i>Otua Meji</i>  |    | 14) <i>Irete Meji</i> |    | 15) <i>Ose Meji</i>  |    | 16) <i>Ofun Meji</i>      |    |
| I                     | I  | I                     | I  | I                    | I  | II                        | II |
| II                    | II | I                     | I  | II                   | II | I                         | I  |
| I                     | I  | II                    | II | I                    | I  | II                        | II |
| I                     | I  | I                     | I  | II                   | II | I                         | I  |

Thus, we posit that the signatures of the *Odu* in their original formality qualify *Ifa* divination as a science, provided that formalization and quantification are capable to determine what should pass as a science or not.

## Conclusion

As noted, thinking of Maduabuchi Dukor is that *Ifa* divination, and some other kinds of practice indigenous to Africa, can be made to acquire the status of a scientific enterprise; and in the first section of this paper, we examined some fundamental suppositions of Maduabuchi Dukor that were employed to articulate this thought. These suppositions, in the order in which they have been treated above, are that 1) through formalization and quantification, *Ifa* divination (and indeed, some other practices indigenous to Africa) can be made a science; 2) *Orunmila* is the child of *Olodumare* as well as his deputy and oracle on earth; 3) when *Ifa* divination is properly applied, the outcome of such is always correct or certain; 4) in the process of divination, some materials are employed to symbolised specific signs; 5) an average *Ifa* diviner must memorised at least 1360 verses of *Ifa*; and 6) the 256 *Odu* of *Ifa* are scientific laws.

For the purpose of clarity, our criticisms of these suppositions in the second section of this paper followed the same order that the suppositions are presented. Thus, we argue that 1) it is doubtful that formalization and quantification, even if properly stated, can determine the scientific status of any practice; 2) *Orunmila* is not a child of *Olodumare*, *Orunmila* is one of the deputies and oracles of *Olodumare* on earth, and not just the deputy and oracle of *Olodumare*; 3) since *Ifa* divination is a sort of prediction, the outcome can only be describe as good or evil, and not as correct or certain; 4) materials employed in the process of divination do not symbolised any specific signs as supposed by Maduabuchi Dukor; 5) an average *Ifa* diviner is expected to commit to memory at least 4096 and not 1360 verses as supposed by Dukor; and 6) if by virtue of formalization and quantification alone, the 256 *Odu* of *Ifa* in their original forms are easier to understand as scientific laws than Dukor's programme.

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