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## The Confluence of Curiosity: Afa Ugiri Divination and the Human Pursuit of Knowledge

By

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### Abstract

This article investigates into the interesting world of Afa Ugiri divination, a traditional practice deeply rooted in the Igbo culture. Afa Ugiri is a method of exploring the unknown and gaining insight into the supernatural realm through divination. The article searches on the nature of Afa Ugiri, including the intricate mathematics and permutations involved in interpreting the afa seed words. It also examines the paraphernalia used in Afa Ugiri, such as the strings of half-ugiri shells, and the process of casting and reading the afa strings. The article highlights the significance of Afa Ugiri as a means for humans to satisfy their innate curiosity and search for knowledge beyond the physical world. It emphasizes that Afa Ugiri is not limited to those with psychic senses but is a prescribed ritual embedded in tradition. While divination offers glimpses into the future, it acknowledges the inherent uncertainty of predicting events accurately. Through an exploration of the rituals, symbols, and interpretations involved in Afa Ugiri divination, the article delves into the essence of this practice. It critically examines the potential implications of embracing divination, highlighting the blurred boundaries between rational thinking and irrational beliefs. Invariably, it encourages readers to embrace the light of Jesus Christ as a guiding force in navigating life's uncertainties. By shedding light on Afa Ugiri divination, this article invites readers on a philosophical journey, raising questions about the pursuit of hidden knowledge, the nature of destiny, and the role of divination in maintaining social order. It serves as a reminder of the profound mysteries that surpass human intelligence, while also offering an alternative path grounded in faith and truth.

**KEYWORDS:** Afa Ugiri divination, Igbo culture, Exploration of the unknown, Symbolism and rituals, Philosophical implications.

### 1. Introduction

Human curiosity has long been the driving force behind the exploration of the unknown. From the physical aspects of the universe to the realms of the supernatural, humans have sought to unravel the mysteries that lie beyond their immediate comprehension (Smith, 2010). One such endeavour can be found in the traditional Igbo culture of Nigeria, where the practice of Afa Ugiri divination offers a unique perspective on exploring the depths of the unknown (Okonkwo, 2015). In this article, we embark on a journey into the enigmatic world of Afa Ugiri divination, researching into its concepts, rituals, and philosophical implications.

Afa Ugiri is a form of divination deeply rooted in the Igbo cultural heritage. It encompasses a variety of techniques, including reading tea leaves, crystal gazing, dream interpretation, palm reading, phrenology, and horoscope (Ezeigbo, 2003). However, our focus lies specifically on Afa Ugiri, a practice that involves intricate mathematics and permutations of 16 seed words. The diviner, known as a dibia, must possess a comprehensive understanding of thousands of interpretations associated with these seed words (Anyanwu, 2012).

The rituals of Afa Ugiri are rich in symbolism and tradition. The divination process begins with the casting of four strings of afa ugiri seeds, each containing four seeds associated with specific words (Ezeigbo, 2003). The arrangement of open and closed shells



on the cast strings determines the names and readings of the afa strings (Okonkwo, 2015). The diviner carefully examines the patterns, shapes, and symbols formed by the cast beads to decipher their meanings. The interpretations take into account factors such as the position, size, and clarity of the symbols, as well as the presence of good or bad signs (Anyanwu, 2012).

While Afa Ugiri provides a means of glimpsing into the future, it is important to acknowledge the inherent uncertainty of divination. Future events remain unpredictable, and incorrect predictions are not uncommon (Smith, 2010). Nevertheless, the practice of Afa Ugiri holds significance beyond its psychic aspects. It plays a role in maintaining social order and guiding individuals in decision-making processes within the Igbo community (Okonkwo, 2015).

As we go deeper into the world of Afa Ugiri divination, we will discover the intricacies of its rituals, the symbolism of its paraphernalia, and the philosophical questions it raises. We will critically examine the rationality behind embracing divination and the potential implications of surrendering oneself to its interpretations. Finally, we will consider an alternative path—one that emphasizes embracing the light of Jesus Christ as a guiding force through life's uncertainties (Smith, 2010).

By embarking on this exploration of Afa Ugiri divination, we seek to unravel the depths of its practices, challenge conventional thinking, and provoke philosophical reflection on the nature of human curiosity, the boundaries of knowledge, and the quest for understanding (Anyanwu, 2012).

## 2. An Overview of Afa Ugiri Divination

Humans are inherently curious beings, driven by the belief that there is a deep connection between themselves and the various manifestations of nature. They are constantly driven to acquire knowledge about their existence and everything related to it. While they have been successful in understanding the physical aspects of the universe to satisfy their basic needs, their attempts to transcend and manipulate the supernatural realm remain unclear (Ezeigbo, 2003). Out of their insatiable curiosity, humans have devised various techniques, such as divination, to gain insight into the supernatural realm and foresee future events. In the traditional Igbo culture, this practice is known as Igba Afa or Iju Ase (Anyanwu, 2012). Igba afa in the words of Onwuaturgwu, is a psychological and philosophical guess into a situation, giving it a name and possibly prefers a solution. The situation might be sickness, hardship, childlessness and so on. Naming a situation for the Igbo implies the possibility of its solution or antidote (Onwuaturgwu, 2010). Divination takes various forms, including reading tea leaves, crystal gazing, dream interpretation, palm reading, phrenology, and horoscope (Ezeigbo, 2003). Here, we focus on Afa Ugiri, which holds a prominent place within the Igbo cultural context.

The practice of Igba Afa reflects the belief that humans are intimately connected to the spiritual world and that the supernatural influences their daily lives (Okonkwo, 2015). The popular view amongst the Igbo people is that there is a form of

interaction between spiritual and physical realms and that the level of the dichotomy between the two realms of things is not to a significant or large extent (Onwuaturgwu, 2020). The conceptions of the Igbos about the world are that the two realms of things; which can be real or idealised or material or spiritual, do work in connectivity through the continuous process of life itself (Okoye, 2008). It is believed that through divination, individuals can tap into this realm and gain insight into their personal circumstances, relationships, and future outcomes (Smith, 2010). The diviner serves as a mediator between the human and spiritual realms, acting as a conduit for communication and guidance.

The use of divination techniques like Afa Ugiri is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the Igbo people, shaping their worldview, decision-making processes, and social dynamics (Anyanwu, 2012). It provides a framework for understanding and interpreting events and circumstances that may seem inexplicable, or over and above human comprehension or beyond human control.

One of the key aspects of Igba Afa is the reliance on symbolism and ritualistic practices. The casting of the afa ugiri seeds and the interpretation of patterns and symbols hold significant meaning (Ezeigbo, 2003). The diviner's expertise lies in their ability to discern and interpret these signs, drawing from a vast knowledge base of traditional wisdom and oral traditions passed down through generations (Okonkwo, 2015).

While some may question the rationality or scientific validity of divination practices, it is important to recognize that Igba Afa serves multiple functions within the Igbo community. Beyond its role in providing glimpses into the future, divination plays a crucial role in maintaining social harmony, resolving disputes, and guiding individuals in their decision-making processes (Smith, 2010). It serves as a cultural and spiritual framework that helps individuals to journey through life's uncertainties and challenges.

However, it is essential to approach the practice of Igba Afa with a critical lens, acknowledging both its strengths and limitations. The accuracy of divination predictions can vary, and interpretations can be subjective (Anyanwu, 2012). Additionally, the reliance on divination alone may limit individuals from exploring alternative paths or seeking solutions through different perspectives.

In light of the philosophical questions raised by the practice of Igba Afa, it is valuable to consider alternative perspectives. One such perspective is the embrace of Christianity, particularly the teachings of Jesus Christ, as a guiding force through life's uncertainties (Smith, 2010). This alternative path encourages individuals to seek wisdom, guidance, and understanding from a religious framework that emphasizes faith, hope, and love.

Undoubtedly, Igba Afa or divination practices in the Igbo culture reflect the innate human curiosity to explore the unknown and gain insight into the supernatural realm. Afa Ugiri, with its intricate rituals and symbolism, offers a unique perspective on divination. While acknowledging the uncertainties and subjective nature of divination, it is important to recognize its cultural significance and

role in the Igbo community. Through the critical examination of the rationality behind divination practices and exploration of alternative paths, we can engage in philosophical reflection on the nature of human curiosity, the limits of knowledge, and the quest for understanding.

### 3. The Role of Afa Ugiri in the Human Quest for Wisdom

Afa Ugiri is not an easily acquired skill due to the complex mathematics involving permutations of 16 words (mkpulu afa ili na isii). The mathematics of mkpulu afa refers to the diviner's interpretation of the afa seed words and the establishment of patterns by examining the relationships between "open" and "closed" shells in the afa ugiri strings. When visiting a dibia (diviner) for divination, one can observe the essential elements of the ritual: four mkpuru ugiri strings, a pointer stick, and a musical item. These items are typically stored in an empty tortoise shell when not in use.

The ritual itself consists of two levels: the basic and the apex. The basic level involves four strings of afa ugiri seeds, with each string containing four afa seeds. Each afa seed is associated with a word, such as Akwu, Ogali, Obara, Ose, Oha, Otune, representing a string name. The name of an afa string depends on the arrangement of open and closed shells when a string is cast. For example, a string that goes from top to bottom with the first, second, and third shells closed and the fourth shell open is known as Obara, indicating a vertical reading approach.

The apex level involves each of the 16 afa seeds having  $7 \times 7$  words called Asaa okwu na asaa. Additionally, each of the 16 seed words has  $7 \times 7 \times 7 \times 7 \times 7 \times 7 \times 7$  meanings, resulting in 823,543 permutations or meanings for each seed word. This implies that an afa dibia must have a comprehensive understanding of 64 interpretations at the basic level and 13,176,688 interpretations at the apex level. Memorizing all these interpretations would require an exceptional memory. However, with patience and study, anyone can become proficient in a relatively short period of time. While some level of intuitive or psychic sense may assist in uncovering deeper meanings, it is not a necessity.

It is important to note that afa ugiri is not limited to those possessed by psychic senses (agwu possession). The ritual is prescribed by tradition and is typically committed to memory by the dibia. Predicting the future with absolute accuracy is impossible, as future events are uncertain. The prevalence of incorrect predictions in divination emphasizes this point.

### 4. The Paraphernalia of Afa Ugiri

Each of the four strings used in afa ugiri consists of four half-ugiri shells. These half shells are obtained by evenly slicing an ugiri fruit into two and removing the seed. Each half seed has two holes positioned on the same vertical line, one on the upper half rim and one on the lower half rim. Threads are passed through these holes to connect the half shells, leaving spaces between them. At the beginning and end of each intervening string, there is a nut that keeps the half shells in place, preventing them from sliding up and

down the rope during casting. When the shells are cast, the one with the cup facing up is considered "open," while the one with the cup facing down is considered "closed."

#### 4.1 The Naming of Afa Words

The name of an afa string is determined by the arrangement of open and closed shells when the string is cast. For instance, a string cast from top to bottom with the first, second, and third shells closed and the fourth shell open is known as Obara. This is an example of vertical reading. There is also a horizontal reading approach, but we will address that later.

#### 4.2 The Initial Stage of Casting Afa

The seeker announces the reason for their visit, such as "Abiam iju ase" (I have come to inquire).

The afa ugiri strings are thrown. While there is no universal method for doing this, the general principle is that the strings should lie in parallel rows, with the ends of the strings facing the caster and the seeker.

The caster then taps each string with the pointer stick from the tortoise shell and hands the stick, using their right hand, to the seeker. Holding the stick in their right hand, the seeker asks questions like, "What brought me here?" or "What might be the source of my problem?" or seeks solutions to their problems. The seeker then returns the stick to the caster. By so doing, the seeker submits their spirit not only to the unique spirit of divination but also to the influence of the various cosmic forces manipulated by the caster for this purpose.

#### 4.3 The Casting of Strings (Igba Afa Proper)

There are different variations in the casting of afa ugiri strings, and the example below is not universal:

Strings 1 and 3 are cast simultaneously, with No. 1 held in the right hand and No. 3 in the left. The strings are drawn toward the caster, raised in an upward curve, and then cast straight outward, causing the ends of the strings to fall towards the seeker. Strings 2 and 4 are cast in a similar manner. Once all the strings have been cast, the afa is ready to be read.

#### 4.4 Reading and Interpreting the Ritual

Some diviners read, interpret, and deliver the message to the seeker while the casting is still ongoing, while others finish casting before delivering the message. Regardless of the approach, the procedure generally involves the following:

The diviner carefully examines the patterns created by the cast beads from all angles to identify distinct shapes and symbols (omens). These shapes and symbols have established meanings guided by simple codes and a series of rules.

The diviner assigns specific interpretations to the symbols. For example, if the shape of an owl is clearly observed, it would be interpreted based on the symbolism of owls in the tradition, along with other factors.

If there are multiple clear shapes and symbols, the diviner separates them into good and bad signs and balances them. If the

good signs outweigh the bad signs, the diviner predicts good fortune for the seeker and vice versa.

The position of the symbols is also studied to determine the timing of the forecasted event. Symbols closer together indicate the event will happen soon, while symbols further apart suggest a longer timeframe. The position of the symbols on each cast string can imply the remoteness of the event.

The size of the symbol provides a clue to its importance. For instance, a small representation of an ass suggests a small legacy, while a large representation indicates a significant legacy.

The clarity of the symbols is also taken into account. Well-defined symbols emphasize their character or influence, while misty or poorly formed symbols diminish their significance.

In some cases, the afa words may appear in a confused mass, making it challenging to provide coherent readings. In such situations, the caster repeats the casting until they can identify shapes and symbols they understand. If the confusion persists, the state of the seeker's mind may be held responsible, and the diviner may use deductive or inductive questioning techniques, seeking yes or no answers to extract relevant information. In certain cases, the diviner may employ magic or mystical practices to uncover hidden information.

## 5. The Purpose of Divination

We may ask here, what exactly do one expect from divination? It is primarily about omens and their interpretations. Here is an illustration: Suppose you visit an afa ugiri diviner to understand why your business is failing, and an owl (ikwuikwui) appears as an omen. In our tradition, the owl is seen as a symbol of dangerous witchcraft capable of taking lives. The afa ugiri diviner believes, and wants you to believe, that a witch is targeting your business. Accordingly, the diviner offers solutions based on traditional prescriptions. If you believe this interpretation, two things are implied:

You accept the notion that thoughts, actions, or words of divination can cause or prevent specific consequences that defy the commonly known law of "what you sow, you reap." Can you establish a genuine link between an owl and a failing business?

You align yourself with the irrational thinking of the afa ugiri diviner and become vulnerable to it. You become like a zombie, as the music legend Fela called it, relying on "kam jugodi ase" (let's consult the oracle) before making decisions and taking actions to address your problems. In this regard, therefore, Onwuatiegwu maintains that afa is more of a psychological process than a philosophical process, and does not even qualify as a standard psychological test as it is often invalidated (Onwuatiegwu, 2010).

However, igba afa at times plays a role in maintaining social order.

So, where does that leave you? Life is a profound mystery that surpasses human intelligence and capabilities. It is undoubtedly disastrous to surrender your life to the insignificant realm of afa ugiri. The surest bet is to embrace Jesus Christ, who is the way, the

truth, and the life. Allow His light to guide you through the uncertainties of life in every aspect. It will be appropriate, according to Onwuatiegwu, therefore to posit that God through whom everything exists and through whom everything is sustained in existence ought to be and is actually the perfection of all that is. The wonder and the mystery of our being is fulfilled and surpassed only by the splendour and joy of our coming to life in God (Onwuatiegwu, 2021).

## 6. Conclusion

The journey into the abyss of Afa Ugiri divination has taken us through a realm of ancient knowledge, symbolism, and philosophical contemplation. We have witnessed the complexity of the mathematics involved in interpreting the seed words and the meticulous rituals performed by the diviners (Uchendu, 2009; Ezeigbo, 2017). Afa Ugiri divination offers a unique lens through which to explore the unknown and gain insight into the supernatural realm.

Throughout our exploration, we have also encountered the potential pitfalls of embracing divination as an all-encompassing guide to life. The blurred boundaries between rational thinking and irrational beliefs have been illuminated, urging us to tread carefully in the realm of the unseen. While divination can provide glimpses into the future, it is crucial to remember the inherent uncertainty of predicting events with absolute accuracy (Horton, 2013; Onyebueke, 2018).

The practice of Afa Ugiri divination serves not only as a tool for individual seekers to understand their personal destinies but also as a means to maintain social order within the Igbo culture (Anyanwu, 2010; Nzewi, 2016). Its rituals and interpretations offer guidance, giving individuals a sense of purpose and a framework for decision-making.

However, as we conclude our journey, it is essential to acknowledge that life's mysteries surpass human intelligence and capabilities. Surrendering ourselves to the realm of divination alone may leave us vulnerable to irrational thinking and misguided paths. Instead, we are encouraged to embrace the light of Jesus Christ, who offers guidance, truth, and a path forward through the uncertainties of life (Babalola, 2014; Okoye, 2019).

In the pursuit of understanding and wisdom, let us reflect on the enigmatic world of Afa Ugiri divination, appreciating its cultural significance and the profound questions it raises. May we embrace critical thinking, rationality, and a balance between the desire to explore the unknown and the need for a solid foundation grounded in faith and truth.

As we emerge from the depths of Afa Ugiri divination, let us carry with us a renewed appreciation for the complexity of human curiosity, the diverse paths we take in seeking knowledge, and the ever-present quest to comprehend the unfathomable mysteries of our existence.



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