

# The Concept of Truth in Yoruba Indigenous Religion in Relation to Peace Building

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## Abstract

In African traditional societies, harmonious relationship is anchored on truth and this is the basis of every form of social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. However, when the culture of truth is compromised, peaceful coexistence becomes unachievable and life becomes meaningless. It is in this perspective that this paper examines the role of Yoruba indigenous religion and its cultural understanding of truth in relation to peace building and conflict resolution. The study highlights how the Yoruba traditional approach to truth integrates spiritual, moral, and pragmatic dimensions, fostering a sense of accountability and reconciliation among conflicting parties. Central to this approach are indigenous institutions like the *Ọba* (king), *Babaláwo* (diviners), and council of elders, who serve as mediators through rituals, divination, and dialogue. These institutions help to ensure that resolution processes align with cosmic and societal order. The Yoruba belief in the

interconnectedness of individuals with the spiritual and natural worlds enhances the emphasis on restorative justice over punitive measures, making it a valuable tool in modern peace building efforts. The study employs a phenomenological and critical approach in underscoring the need for conflict resolution in African societies. This paper further explores how Yoruba cultural values of truth-telling, empathy, and tolerance can address contemporary conflicts by fostering mutual understanding and healing. It argues that incorporating these indigenous methodologies into global conflict resolution paradigms provides a culturally sensitive and holistic approach to achieving sustainable peace.

**Keywords:** Indigenous religion, culture of truth, peace building, conflict resolution.

## Introduction

Yoruba indigenous religion and culture of truth telling as a weapon of arbitration and judicial system refers to a cultural and traditional cum religious conflict resolution system. Despite modernization of oath taking with Bible and Quran, the Yoruba indigenous religion and culture of truth telling has been veritable in resolving domestic conflicts, land disputes, inheritance and social problems in Yorubaland. The paper is particularly relevant in terms of the findings relating to the principles and practices of the Yoruba indigenous religion and culture of truth in the arbitration and administration of justice. The paper observed that justice involves holding everyone responsible for their behavior in the contemporary society but justice can only be achieved when the judicial people are ready to say the truth and nothing but the truth. It is however evident that the issues of westernization influences truth and justice especially as it affects our culture and have tainted much of the indigenous practices of the Yoruba.

In Nigeria today, too much dependence has been placed on modern and formal channels of conflict resolution such as the judiciary, civil society, the press, arbitration center and the administrative panels. It is obvious that these channels alone have not and cannot effectively deal with the rising rate of social and political conflicts in highly urbanized setting like Nigeria, not to talk of the people living in the rural areas of the Nigeria (Ojelabi, 2013). In fact, formal channels' responses in some cases have aggravated the conflict

situations. The rising number of cases in our law courts can bear testimony to the fact that the approaches hitherto adopted in conflict prevention and management in Nigeria are insufficient. Some of our visits to customary, magistrate and high courts show that these courts are bombarded with civil, domestic, business and criminal cases. Informal alternative dispute resolution institutions on Radio and Television and some state mediation centre also continue to entertain more cases. In spite of all these, conflicts of various types continue to be on the increase. Interpersonal lineage and inter-lineage conflicts have not abated. One conclusion that can be drawn from the rampant conflicts in Nigeria is that modern day conflict management methods are insufficient. This corroborates Zartman's (2000) observation that the persistence of violent conflicts in Africa indicates that modern methods, are also defective in facing the challenges. The methods are often faulted for their foreignness and non-African nature and for ignoring the wisdom of traditional African conflict management practices. What we discovered is that ever since the introduction of the colonial (statutory) courts, some persistent problems have clogged their administration of justice like the undue delay before the courts' decisions are reached, because of adjournment and technicalities involved while some have argued that the ritualistic adherence of the statutory courts to the cosmetic procedural technicalities fuels instead of resolving conflicts. The cost of litigation in the courts is prohibitive such that many are unable to afford and ultimately, adjudication in the courts tends to widen the

misunderstanding between the parties as against the reconciliatory approach of indigenous arbitration (Dzurgba, 2006). The recent revelations about Nigeria judicial system and corruptions will make every man with right thinking to agree on the revisiting the traditional methods of conflict resolution as a way out for the betterment of the country.

Ojelabi (2013) asserts that these weaknesses handling styles. There existed indigenous methods of have led to a near-total loss of confidence in the conflict resolution and peacemaking in Nigeria before statutory courts, and a corresponding increasing resort the colonial era (Ogunleye, 2012). This method of to the recommendation of indigenous arbitration for resolution, peacemaking and peace keeping thus form the society. Hence the need for this paper to account the bedrock of development in any society (Fayemi, for the sustained interest in the concept of truth in the 2009).

indigenous method of arbitration with a view to ascertaining how best the justice can be encouraged, improved or put to wider and more effectual use to the benefit of the people of Nigeria towards peaceful resolution of disputes.

### **What then is Conflict?**

Conflict can be defined as war, battle, struggle, opposing ideas or belief, disagreement, argument, quarrel etc. Conflict may arise when there are socio-cultural and economic problems, domestic alteration, and power struggle in political arena from opposing camps, disturbance, and dispute over interest on land as well as inequality in the people's status in life and many more. In the world today, no country can escape conflict. Its management is one of the most difficult, yet important jobs for conflict manager if the country will welcome their ideals and the corrupt situation of the country will allow them to face the reality and speak the truth. Regardless of the type of government in power, conflict is recognized as a fact of life, and so

the issue is not whether to have it but how to resolve it. If conflict is not carried to an extreme, it can generate beneficial effect to the country. It can serve as a mechanism for fine turning the country's goals. Whenever the word peacemaking is mentioned, it is an indication that there was a conflict between two or more parties. Conflict can be resolved using two broad handling methods; adversarial and non-adversarial

Many factors produce conflict for both the individuals and groups, Generally speaking, conflict emerges when two or more persons (or group) seek to possess the same objective, occupy the same space/place or the same exclusive position, play incompatible roles, maintain incompatible goals, or undertake mutually incompatible means of achieving their purposes. It is, therefore, clear that the root of most conflicts if not all, is the type of incompatibilities of purpose as well as sometimes the method of attainment of even compatible goals.

The development of technology, the requirement of space as well as changing taste all over the world has made humans more nomadic even than before. In fact, there is a saying based on scientific projection that the future of humanity is the future of nomads. As man moves from one place to another, being a product of his own environment, culture and peculiar experiences come into contact with another man whose experience could be so different as to

almost, become incomprehensible to man. One point assumption that under a normal circumstance the becomes very important when man is confronted with human mind is able to understand a phenomenal by any form of conflict in his society. It is in recognition observing it and through experimental refinement. of the obvious fact that societies today are According to this theory, a black colour is black cosmopolitan.

### Decay in Value system in Nigeria

The decay in the value system in Nigeria is at the concept of "truth". Hence, the Yoruba would national embarrassment. Nigerians now feed fat from describe a truthful (honest) person as "*e ni ti kò pe* deceits and it is increasingly becoming more difficult *dúdú ní funfun*" (he who does not call black, white). to find Nigerians willing to boldly come out to defend The position of the critical realist is that the adjudicator the integrity of their institutions or speak out in should not take what they see or hear by their face protection of the nation. As long as the truth is not told value or be misled by their perception. They should dig or prevented from being told, sustainable development deeper for inner meanings. This is probably why the would continue to elude us as a nation. This is an Yoruba sometimes consult *Ifá* oracle or ask the people interesting paradox that should be critically considered involved to swear an oath for the explanation to certain as we reflect on the problem we are facing today in our things even when the meanings are humanly obvious. country. It is unfortunate that truth is now so bitter to The point we have made above is that the Yoruba say. Saying the truth or establishing truth has to do course to both the naïve and critical realist schools to with proving beyond reasonable doubt that what a establish the truth of a matter. On the other side, naïve person is saying is right or borne out of sincerity. realism believes that a black can produce a white There are some steps for attaining this goal in the colour if given privilege of the doubt. An appropriate Yoruba belief system. But the first step for working Yoruba adage that drives this notion home is that one around this involves delving into extant knowledge on that says "*nínú ìkòkò dúdú ni eko funfun ti ñ jáde*" (the the nature of truth. whitish solid pap comes out of a black pot). *Omo ti ekùn ba bi, ekùn ni yóó jo* (the offspring of a leopard

### Theories of Truth

Two major theories of truth have been would naturally be like the leopard. This means that a advocated by psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud: child would naturally be like the parent or the **Correspondence theory.** *Eni tí ó ñ pe Ìròkò* (a town) environment). The correspondence theory is associated *ní ìròkò* (a tree)". When a person calls black, white or with a school of thought known as "realism". The vice versa, it means the person is not being truthful. In school has two angles: naïve realism and critical other words, both the black and white colours are realism. In naïve realism, things are interpreted as easily observable. The correspondence theory posits naturally perceived. Hence, black is black; a thief is a that truth consists of the degree of correspondencethief and a man who cannot look straight into the eyes between an object and its description. It is based on the

of his interrogators is said to be guilty of what he has coherence theory). This has to do with the ability of people to argue one's cases very well before the judge been accused of.

## 2. Coherence Theory

This takes us to the second theory of truth: the "absolute truth" (as evident in correspondence truth) coherence theory. The position of this theory is that which could involve some divinatory rites and oath truth emerges largely in the context of our rational taken. A man steals a chicken, he is caught and the acceptability and explanation of the world around us judgement is passed against him in Yoruba court. The In other words, truth can be established through logical case is taken to a Western court of law and he is freed arguments or circumstantial evidence. Though the on the account of the case against him not being correspondence theory only allows for one proved beyond reasonable doubt. A Yoruba adage explanation, the coherence theory provides for more interprets this kind of paradoxical situation than one true description of the world. In other words, mischievously in the following terms: "Òyìnbó kò this quality of philosophical argument might be took'olè, ijáfara ni kò fẹ" (the white man does not abhor weak for a western legal system, yet it shows that the theft but slackness). This belief system must have Yoruba cultural world too recognizes the importance of informed an aspect of Ibadan *oriki* which describes the coherence theory. The coherence theory sees objects city as "Ibi olè gbé ñ jàrè olóhun (a place where a thief beyond what they are and tries to construct meanings wins an argument over the rightful owner). This *oriki* around them within the framework of existing beliefs does not present Ibadan people as thieves as some system. Lawyers devote the best part of their training people have literally interpreted this *oriki*. It simply learning how to operationalise this theory. The Yoruba calls attention to the fact that it was in the city of traditional dispute settlement system is not too ignorant Ibadan that the Yoruba people first encountered the of this theory but not in the extended form known to western judiciary system which makes it possible for the Western legal system. It could be said for example an obvious thief to walk away from justice on the that the Yoruba probably depend on this theory in the account that of the fact that the case against him could assertion "Àjé ké lánàá, omo kú lónì; ta ni kò mò pé not be proven "beyond reasonable doubt". Even now, àjé àná ló po mo je (a witch cried out yesterday, then many people are still surprised by how those who child died today. Who does know that it is witch that openly rig elections, steal state funds, commit murder cried yesterday that killed the child today By and commit other heinous crimes are taken to courts implication it means when one has vowed to do only to regain their freedom a moment later based on something (especially evil) and it eventually happens legal technicalities. This kind of situation is aptly without doubt such person caused the havoc) One captured by a Yoruba proverb: *òkánjúwà ñ dàgbà*, significant way in which the Yoruba legal culture *ogbón ñ rewájú* ("the greedy is advancing in age, and differs from the Western one is the absolute their avarice is advancing in sophistication"). dependence of the latter on legalese (flowing from

**The act of Cross Examination**

In one of his widely cited works, Olaoba (2008)disputants is trying to mislead the panel of judges, called attention to the act of cross examination in the oath-taking is recommended. This is a popular Yoruba legal system. This involves subjecting the tradition in most African society. In Igboland (most accused person as well as the accuser to series of especially, in Abo, Oguta, Onitsha and Osomari), a questions aimed at identifying gaps in the evidence person who swears by land to support his claims in a provided. There are several ways for establishing truth dispute and does not suffer negative consequences in the context of the two theories advanced above. thereafter is believed to have said the truth in the Commitment to saying the truth is also enhanced by course of dispute settlement (Nzzimiro, 1972). This oath-taking before the presentation of evidence. Like appears to be a popular tradition in Igboland given the the western tradition, the onus falls on the plaintiff to revelation of how those who came to swear to oath at prove his cases against the defendant. To do this, he Okija shrine and fails to keep the terms of the could be asked to swear before the accused person is agreement die mysteriously and their bodies deposited asked to follow suit. The swearing here usually has to at the shrine (Ellis, 2008).

do with the person under oath asking that some evil Some truths are difficult to unravel by mortals; things happening to him if any attempt is made to it takes the immortals to unravel them. In this case, a mislead the panel of judges in the course of presenting man commits an offence that offends the sensibility of his evidence. Calling attention to this, Bascom (1969)the entire community and perfectly covers up the trail. observed that:

A plaintiff may be made to answer to *Ògún*, the god of iron, touching his tongue on an iron object while asking to die if he is not telling the truth, or to drink from the ground at the *Ògbóni* house while swearing on the earth.

He could be struck by thunder and killed immediately or afflicted by a strange sickness and all efforts to heal him would prove abortive until a divination is carried out that reveals that he is being punished by the gods and that the healing process would only come after he has confessed to the crime. Sacrifices could be recommended to cleanse the person as well as the community. The sacrifices usually incorporate some elements of punishments and reparation. The foregoing notwithstanding, the Yoruba *Ifá* literary corpus (the sacred text of Yoruba culture) acknowledges the fact that the truth of a matter might still be elusive and

justice could be miscarried. This fact is the main focus of (Oke, 2007) in *Odù Ògúndá-Ìrosùn* in *Ifá* which says:  
 Unlike the Western system, the oath is usually not administered at the beginning of the case. The disputants are assumed to be *omolúàbí* and given the privilege of doubt to tell the truth at the beginning of the procedure but once it is realized that one of the

*Orí yéye ní Mòguń, tàì sẹ̀ ló pò nìbẹ̀.  
 ló dífá fuń Ògúndá, tí yí ó peran,*

*Tí yó fẹ̀jẹ̀ yí Ìròsùn lénu’.*

*Ifá wí pé “Ire àìkú”.*

*Ifá wí pé “Kéléni ó rúbọ,*

*Kí wọ̀n ó má ti òràn mo láisè o.*

Meaning:

There are too many heads

at *Ògún’s* shrine or, in the mythical

town called *Mogun*.)

Many of the heads are of innocent persons.”

Cast for *Ògúndá*,

Who would kill an animal,

And smear *Ìròsùn’s* mouth with its blood.

*Ifá* Oracle prescribes a sacrifice, lest

someone is falsely accused and convicted.

That is to say that most of those who had been given slaughter the goat, letting its blood make a trail to capital punishment in the community did not deserve the entrance of his brother’s bedroom where he to have been executed. This claim is elaborated in the deposited the dead goat after smearing the sleeping *Odù* with the following story.

In a certain mythical town there lived two the head of the goat in *Ìròsùn’s* bedroom entrance. brothers, *Ògúndá* and *Ìròsùn*. There were also the king When the goat was declared missing the following and other towns people. On the way to their farm each morning, the king sent his servants out to search for it, day, the two brothers passed by the shrine of *Ògún* vowing that whoever had kept the goat in his or her which served as the public execution ground, and custody, not to talk of having injured or killed it, which was therefore always littered with many human would suffer the death penalty. Following a tip-off heads. One day as they passed by the shrine, *Ògúndá* from *Ògúndá*, the king’s servants found the dead goat remarked that most of the heads at the shrine were at the entrance of *Ìròsùn’s* bedroom. They also noticed those of persons who were not guilty of any capital the bloodstains on *Ìròsùn’s* clothes and lips. He was punishable offence. His brother objected, arguing that woken up and made to carry the dead goat on his head everyone who was beheaded at the shrine must have to the king’s palace where the townspeople and a jury deserved the capital punishment. The debate between were already waiting for the trial of the alleged killer the two brothers continued for a long while, with of the king’s favorite goat. The case was speedily *Ìròsùn* always maintaining that ‘to be punished is to be disposed of, as there was an overwhelming

guilty’, while *Ògúndá* maintained that ‘punishment does not imply, confirm or establish guilt’. To drive his point home, *Ògúndá* mentally constructed a possible situation in which an innocent person was convicted of a capital offence, as in a set-up, miscarriage of justice, or flawed judicial procedure.

### Exegesis of the story

In the story, the king had a favorite pet goat that was treated like a human member of the royal household. It was well fed and given royal respect by everyone in the town. One day, *Ògúndá* trapped the goat. He waited until night fell and his brother had gone to sleep after getting very drunk. He then man’s mouth with its blood. He went further to stick

preponderance of evidence against the accused, withsystem. The second generation of rights probably was perhaps none in his support. As already decreed by thenot necessary in the pre-colonial Yoruba society as the king, the penalty was death by beheading at the shrinepeople experienced 100% employment; only lazy of *Ògún*. people were unemployed. The only group that could be

As *Ìròsùn* was being led to the shrine, *Ògúndá*said to have been denied their economic rights were emerged and sought the permission of the king to sayprobably slaves (*eru*). Even then, slaves in the pre-something. He declared to the consternation of thecolonial Yoruba society enjoyed some rights (Ojetayo, people that it was he, and not *Ìròsùn*, who killed the2013). It was in support of this that a Yoruba adage king's goat. He further informed the audience that hesays *bí a se bé rú la bó mo* (a slave came to earth the had set his brother up in order to prove the point thatsame way the freeborn was born). Another says *ònà ló* very many of those previously executed at the shrine of *fìn erú ni baba* (a slave has a father but in a distant *Ògún* were possibly innocent of the charges leviedlocation). The two adages call attention to the need for against them and for which they were convicted andslaves to be treated with dignity. Many of them ended condemned. By extension, he wanted to prove twoup becoming legitimate members of their owners' points: (i) that the judicial systems in the communityhomes.

led to the death of several innocent people in the past**The Right of the People**

and (ii) that capital punishment is bad and should be In the pre-colonial Yoruba society, people knew discontinued. The king became remorseful and askedtheir rights. The rights of the kings were different from the *Ìrosùn* be set free. This *Odu* is not againstthose of their subjects. Where a king exceeded his punishment for crimes committed but largely seeks torights, the people had institutions for calling him to establish the ever-present possibility of error in anyorder. Whereas in the western world, the justice judicial process. The story helps us to identify anothersystems gives prime attention to the rights of significant source of truth in Yorubaland: theindividuals; in the Yoruba system the emphasis is on confession of a third party. It is possible to add to this,the protection of communal interest. This evidence or testimony of a third party most especiallynotwithstanding, the system still accommodates the an eye-witness. This is why disputants are usuallyprotection of private interest and of course this is to the encouraged to approach the throne of judgment withextent that as far back as the pre-colonial period, the their witnesses. Arising from the above story is thepeople were interested in the debate of abrogation of proverbial saying "*Orí yéye ní Mògún; tàisè ló pò*capital punishment. This is partly what the *Odu nibè*. *Ògúndá* (earlier cited) is all about.

The *Ògúndá* story told above suggests that the This shows that the Yoruba were familiar with call for cancellation of capital punishment startedthe need to abrogate capital punishment even long among the Yoruba people long before the people'sbefore the Universal Declaration on Human Rights was contact with the white man or the United Nationpassed in 1948. The point must equally be made that

the judicial system in the western world is largely that hit the rock were conducted in the Church of God retributive leading to punishment. The focus of this where holiness and righteousness is claimed to exist. classical or retributive justice is on the process of Why then marital conflict? It is as a result of seek and calling the guilty to account, and punishing them for hide game in the house by not telling the truth to one their wrong-doing. But a reconciliatory justice system, another by having secret account and secret affairs. which is popular amongst African people, aims to do Friends use their fellow human being for money ritual more than deter criminal or antisocial acts. It seeks to purposes. It is common in our daily newspaper of boys “provide a systematized definition of social right and killing their girlfriend for rituals. Who do you think wrong, from which grows an underlying shared value: can be trusted today in Nigeria? The people in the that the justice system applies to all of us, that it acts corridor of power are also not telling the truth. The fairly, that we can trust it. This is much more than Judges are after money. The country is not safe. Unless grudging coexistence (which may depend solely on we go back to the drawing board to see where we behavioural change: we used to kill you, now we have missed it, the country cannot move forward. It is only to tolerate you), and approaches positive coexistence” truth and righteousness that can exalt a nation. The (Howard, 2004). Within the framework of Africa’s government should use open policy. Let them tell us reconciliatory justice is what could be called the truth and nothing but the truth. Let us preach and “Restorative justice system “where the focus falls more practice truth and things will work better for us as a on the victim and the hurt, than on the offender and thenation.

crime; where ways to “restore,” or compensate for, the It has been noted severally that the Yoruba are hurt are sought; where, crucially, priority is given to essentially pragmatic (Idowu, 2005). Hence, they are the subsequent restoring of relationships between often guided by principles and practices that have previously victim and offender communities (Newman, 2002). worked well for them. Such successful precedents become Zartman (2000) too is of the opinion that restorative canons of shared values that are set up as standards of justice is better understood “as a compensation for social interactions and morality. In many cases, such loss, not as a retribution for offense”. This moves the precedents become linguistically immortalized as proverbs conflict management systems outside the narrower other expressions of folklore, such as stories (Oladiti, confines of crime-and-punishment. 2006). In this work, attention had been focused on the

For us to have peace and reasonable sustainable truth and the law that occur in the context of the truth development, we must take the issue of truth telling tradition among the Yoruba of Nigeria, to highlight and seriously. The couple does not tell the truth and it articulate the ideas of truth for those who occupy top makes their home becomes hell. You hear about the positions in public service, which the Yoruba have always wife killing the husband, the husband killing the wife cherished and advocated. The fundamental lessons, virtues which is very common in our contemporary society and values articulated in this work can be profitably The worst part of this issue is that most of this weddingharnessed for the promotion of improved governance,

political peace and public service delivery. And more generally, the precepts of truth articulated above, and similar ones, can be developed into educational materials for national orientation and sustainable development.

## Conclusion

This paper therefore has tried to show that the notorious mismanagement of the public sphere by most African leaders and public officers in post-colonial Africa is not inherent in either the cultures or the nature of African people. The menaces of inept governance and public mismanagement appear most likely to owe their origin and perpetuation to a widespread lack of proper cultural understanding and a deep lack of education in the nature and principles of truth, especially among the political and professional elites on the continent.

This research work recommends, among other things, an implicit Yoruba indigenous text on truth. It is quite possible, and indeed to be expected, that other tribes in Africa contain similar and other valuable implicit texts from which could be articulated credible indigenous ideas for theories of good governance, sustainable development, and efficient social organization that will be most readily comprehended by most African people and also possibly adoptable in other societies. It is only when we are ready as a nation to change our perspective about truth and we are ready to face the reality and fact, it is then that our country can move forward.

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