

throws it on the mat, making a “U” shape on the floor, so that four nuts fall on each side. The nuts will expose either convex or concave sides, thus displaying sixteen possible forms of the “signature” of Ifá. Each signature stands for an *odù* (divinatory sign or symbol), and each *odù* is linked to several verses of oral poems that interpret it. The diviner then recites the *odù* that appears in the divination castings. The client listens carefully, and after the recitation comments on whether any of the poems is relevant to his illness. At this stage the client may reveal to the diviner the nature of his inquiry. The diviner will interpret the text and, through further questioning, arrive at a definite cause of his client’s problem. The diviner will prescribe the appropriate remedy, usually a sacrificial ritual and the use of medicinal herbs.

Although the most frequently employed form of divination involves the use of the *òpèlè* chain, a more prestigious and elaborate form of divination, the *ikin*, involves the use of sixteen palm nuts. The diviner takes the palm nuts from a beautifully carved divination bowl into one hand. He then attempts to grab with his other hand most of the palm nuts in his first hand, leaving one or two. He marks the result of the exercise in the powder in the divination tray. When one palm nut is left in the other hand, the diviner makes two marks, and when two *ikin* are left, he makes one mark. When no palm nuts remain, he makes no mark. This process is done several times until the diviner can make four signs on each side of the tray. Each divination session produces an *odù* divination sign out of the 256 possible signs. The process of reciting the *odù* that appears to the client is similar to the above divinatory session with the *òpèlè*. Below is an example of verses from an *odù* called Èji Ogbè, which explains how important divination practice is on earth.

*Kò síbí tí aféfé kí í fẹ́ é dé*  
*Kò síbí tí ìjì kí í jà á dé*  
*A d’ífá fún Òjísé Olódúmarè*  
*Èní tí Olódúmarè rán wá sílé ayé*  
*Èní rán’ni ní sẹ́ là á bẹ̀rù*  
*A kí í bẹ̀rù èní tá á jẹ́ fún*  
*Olówó orí mí kò jẹ́ t’l̀kòlè òrun bọ́ wá s’l̀kòlè ayé*  
*Olówó orí mí ò rẹ̀’bì Kankan*  
*Tó fí ñ sẹ́ gbogbo ohùn tí ó fẹ́ é sẹ́*  
*Èní tó bá kọ́’ tí ikún s’l̀fá*  
*Èniyànkéniyàn tó ní èní wo’fá ò lógbón lórí*  
*Ènikéni tó ní èní ñ wo’fá n sẹ́sẹ́ ibi*  
*Ó sẹ́tán tó fẹ́ é lọ s’l̀lákéji*  
*Ọjọ́ tó jáde nílẹ́ kò jẹ́ padà wálé mọ́*  
*Èbí irú wọn ní í jẹ́sẹ́ ọwọ́ ọ́ wọn*  
*Ènikéni ò gbọ́dò sọ pé Ifá ò ní sẹ́ é*  
*Ohùn t’l̀fá bá sọ ní fún babaláwo lóúnjẹ*  
*Èní tó n’l̀fá ñ purọ́ ò lèrè kankan.*



FIGURE 19. Àràbà and Ifá priests on Òkè Ìtasè, the sacred hill of Ifá.

I was informed that this was a caution to all evil-minded people not to ascend the hill with an impure mind, as they would suffer bad consequences. The Àràbà performed a recitation ritual of *isokò* (invocation) three times, and they all climbed the hill. He sang the *isokò* twice without any of the priests answering him except in murmurs. On the third oration, all the Babaláwo responded to him. This ritual invocation was performed until the entire group reached the top of the mountain.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Ifá ceremony relates to its global and modern significance. Over the years, it has become an Ifá fair, an orchestrated performance rather than a merely local ritual. A sizable number of Ifá devotees from Cuba, Brazil, and the United States travel to Ilé-Ifẹ̀ for this ceremony. Because of its international dimension, a local committee of Ifá and *òrìṣà* devotees is put into place to plan the event of the evening. A program is normally printed indicating when various aspects of the night's activities will take place. These include speeches from Ifá guests from abroad and in Nigeria as well as a singing and recitation competition among Ifá representatives from various towns and cities. Prizes and gifts are given to talented Yorùbá groups who impress the assembly the most. In various national and international dignitaries in Ifá cycle are called upon to introduce themselves and speak or perform. It is an occasion to invoke Ifá in prayer for the gathering. In this particular festival, a female diviner from Lagos (whom I later

*The Diviners' New Yam Festival:  
Ọdún Àgbọ̀nirègún or Ègbodò Eriwo*

While the Ègbodò Ọ̀ṣ̀ni addresses the king's physical and spiritual well-being, Ọ̀dún Àgbọ̀nirègún or Ègbodò Eriwo relates to the well-being of all Ifá priests and their lineages and especially the Àràbà, chief priest of Ifá. It is the occasion when the Àràbà and his lineage are reaffirmed as the legitimate leader and king of the Ifá devotees and the custodians of the Ọ̀ṣ̀ni's Ifá. From a phenomenological perspective, the festival provides the occasion for the diviners to renew their authority to perform divination in the sacred city, an authority derived from the Ọ̀ṣ̀ni's sacred kingship. Ifá's *àṣẹ*, the spiritual and sacred authority, is conferred on them. The transfer of the *àṣẹ*, the divine authority, to the diviners by the Ọ̀ṣ̀ni is portrayed in the following narrative, which was told to me by the Àràbà:

Ọ̀rúnmilà has one *àṣẹ*, the divine power and spiritual authority, which he uses to perform divination. One day, the Ọ̀lọ́fín (the Ọ̀ṣ̀ni) called him to perform divination for him. However, the vulture had stolen Ọ̀rúnmilà's *àṣẹ* and hidden it. A day before Ọ̀rúnmilà's visit to the house of Ọ̀lọ́fín, he sent to all the diviners to inform them about his predicament. This was a call to duty and Ọ̀rúnmilà might be disgraced or die if he could not respond to the Ọ̀lọ́fín's call. Upon consulting Ifá, the diviners asked Ọ̀rúnmilà to prepare *ẹ̀kọ* (cornmeal) and pour red palm oil on it—the favorite meal of the vulture (*igún*)—and place it outside. When the vulture saw the food and wanted to eat it, he vomited up Ọ̀rúnmilà's *àṣẹ*, and the diviners picked it up to return it to Ọ̀rúnmilà, who burst into song:

*Àṣẹ, àṣẹ, Ọ̀ṣ̀rẹ̀*  
*Ifá gbàṣẹ lónít o, Ọ̀ṣ̀rẹ̀*  
*Àṣẹ, Àṣẹ, Ọ̀ṣ̀rẹ̀*

Ifá has received the *àṣẹ*, the sacred authority, today.

The above song is what the Àràbà and the diviners sing on their way to the king's palace during the festival of Àgbọ̀nirègún to confirm the renewal of their authority to serve the Ọ̀ṣ̀ni and the people of Ilé-Ifẹ̀. It is akin to a renewal of one's certificate or license to practice a trade, in this case, Ifá divination.

*The Process of the Diviners' Festival* The Ifá ceremony on Ọ̀kè Itàṣẹ signals the beginning of Ègbodò Eriwo (the Diviners' New Yam Ceremony). From this day, the diviners' festival is reckoned to be on the eleventh day. The celebration is performed by the Àràbà, the diviners, and their lineages, and it takes place both in the individual homes of the diviners and the Ọ̀ṣ̀ni's palace. Just as in the ceremony of the Ọ̀ṣ̀ni's New Yam Festival, the Ègbodò Eriwo begins with the diviners' visit to Ọ̀ṣàrà to pluck the sacred Ifá leaves with which to wash their Ifá sacred objects. Following the ritual bathing of Ifá's instruments, a goat is sacrificed and its blood is poured on the Ifá objects. As the leaves are squeezed in water, the diviner recites the ap-