

# Ifá in Comparison: African Tradition, Esotericism and Christianity in the 19th Century



The oracle Ifá is in a very interesting position today. On the one hand, it is considered the entry point into a Yoruba ontology. On the other hand, it is categorised as a divination practice, comparable to other oracles worldwide. As the first observation goes, any and every Yoruba concept should be explained through Ifá, its practices but especially its idioms. These sentences typically uttered in a divination are today comprised in the Ifá corpus, written down since the early 20th century. Yet, before an interest in the totality of its possible utterances emerged, Ifá was already embedded in a number of comparisons that are the roots for both observations – its cultural key position as well as its global comparability.

Using a genealogical approach, the lecture contextualises Ifá's position today in a global religious history. The case study for the lecture are speeches delivered by a Christian West African intellectual, John Augustus Abayomi Cole (c. 1850-1943) who made comparisons between Ifá and occultism and through occultism, with kabbalah. Thereby, he declared Ifá, often seen as black magic, as the local religion and science. The thesis is that the ways in which Ifá is considered today can be tracked back to these practices of comparison, even though its traces have been made invisible by the effects of this comparative moment, which are among others, ethnonationalism, esotericism studies, and the study of religion.

Judith Bachmann is currently a substitute professor at the University of Münster, and a postdoctoral researcher with the University of Heidelberg, Germany. She has studied at the University of Heidelberg, the University of Leipzig, and the University of Gloucestershire, UK. For her PhD, she has worked on witchcraft in Nigeria. Her doctoral thesis was awarded the dissertation prize of the German Association of the Study of Religion in 2023. Her academic works have been published with international top-rated journals. From 2022-2023, she was an international fellow of the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced Studies, financed by the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellency of the University of Bayreuth, Germany. In Bayreuth, she worked on a globally entangled genealogy of Ifá, focusing on sources of the late 19th and early 20th century, written by Yoruba intellectuals. Currently she is working on her second book about Ile-Ife and the Odùdùwa shrine in the 19th and 20th century and the intersection of history, mythology, religion and politics in Yoruba tradition.



**June 18, 2024 6:00 pm**



**Room 000.235, Seminar room,  
Hartmannstr. 14, Building D1,  
Erlangen 91052**

**LINK FOR VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE:  
[HTTPS://FAU.ZOOM.US/J/63672581746](https://fau.zoom.us/j/63672581746)**



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