

The Ancient Story Engine: Ifá, I Ching, Torah and the Universal Architecture of Change

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Abstract

Every major knowledge tradition — Ifá, the I Ching, the Torah, the Tarot, alchemy, the Hero's Journey — operates as a story generator: a structured system that selects an archetypal pattern, correlates it with the current state of a person or community, and produces a narrative that makes the next action visible. This paper argues that these systems are not culturally independent inventions but instantiations of a single ancient architecture, rooted in binary combinatorics, acoustic transmission, and a correlation mechanism that connects the inner state of the questioner with the selected pattern at the moment of inquiry. The mathematical structure underlying all these systems — a hierarchical, self-similar diagram with universal aggregation and propagation properties — has been independently formalised in modern category theory and algebraic topology. Writing, as Plato warned in the Phaedrus, compressed and partially destroyed this architecture by stripping away the acoustic carrier that gave it operational force. SWARP (www.swarp.nl) is a contemporary reimplementations of the same architecture, substituting

expectation failure and emotional valence for the oracle throw, and distributing the interpreter function across a Community of Practice.

1. Introduction

When a Yoruba babalawo casts the divination chain and recites the story that emerges, when a Chinese scholar throws coins and reads the hexagram, when a rabbi traces gematria connections between two words sharing the same numerical value, when a coach guides a client through the seventeen stages of the Hero's Journey — they are all operating the same instrument.

This claim is not metaphorical. The structural identity runs deep: binary combinatorics, a selection mechanism that correlates the questioner's current state with the pattern at the moment of inquiry, a library of archetypal narratives indexed by that pattern, and an action prescription that follows from the narrative. The surface forms differ. The underlying architecture does not.

The argument of this paper proceeds in four steps. First, we establish the common mathematical structure. Second, we examine the correlation mechanism — the oracle throw — and show that it is not random but synchronistic: a reading of the questioner's state through a calibrated instrument. Third, we trace the transition from acoustic to written transmission and identify what was lost. Fourth, we present SWARP as a contemporary reimplementaion that recovers the operational core of the ancient architecture in a form applicable to organisational change.

2. The Common Mathematical Structure

2.1 Binary Combinatorics

The most visible shared feature is binary structure. The I Ching operates on six binary positions, generating $2^6 = 64$ hexagrams. Ifá operates on eight binary positions, generating $2^8 = 256$ odù. The deeper initiatory layers of Ifá extend to $2^{12} = 4,096$ and symbolically to $2^{16} = 65,536$. The Kabbalistic Tree of Life encodes a similar hierarchy through its ten sefirot and twenty-two paths.

This is not coincidence. A binary system with n positions generates exactly 2^n distinguishable states. The sum of the n th row of Pascal's triangle equals 2^n , distributing those states binomially. The most balanced states — those with equal numbers of open and closed positions — are the most frequent. In I Ching terms, hexagrams with three yin and three yang lines (there are twenty of them) are the most probable outcomes of an unbiased throw. The ancient architects of these systems were not working with Pascal's triangle by name, but they were working with its structure.

The progression $2^6 \rightarrow 2^8 \rightarrow 2^{12}$ encodes something specific: the number of binary distinctions required to fully characterise a situation. Six bits suffice for strategic questions. Eight bits are required for complex moral and systemic questions. Twelve bits are reserved for questions of dynastic succession or cosmic order. This is information theory applied to human experience, developed empirically over millennia.

2.2 The Three-Level Architecture

All these systems share a three-level hierarchical structure corresponding to cognition, emotion, and action. In Kabbalah, these are the triads ChaBaD (Wisdom-Understanding-Knowledge), ChaGaT (Lovingkindness-Judgment-Harmony), and NHY (Endurance-Majesty-Foundation). In the I Ching, the six lines of a hexagram divide into three pairs, each representing a level of human experience. In Ifá, the odù addresses the cognitive diagnosis, the ebo (offering) addresses the emotional and relational repair, and the changed behaviour addresses the action level.

Burstein and Negoita (2014) formalised this structure in category theory, modelling each level as an abstract simplicial complex and the transitions between levels as simplicial maps. In their framework, the central sefirah Tiferet (Harmony) is the pullback of Lovingkindness and Judgment: the universal solution in which two opposing forces are united without either losing its character. Asset prices, in their behavioral finance application, emerge as a nested limit — a limit of limits — aggregating tacit knowledge, explicit knowledge, emotional intelligence, and market data. The mathematics confirms what the tradition encoded symbolically: the system is a hierarchical feedback structure in which higher levels aggregate lower ones and lower levels receive guidance from higher ones.

2.3 Fractal Self-Similarity

Every sefirah contains within itself a complete sub-Tree of Life. Every odù contains within itself a set of narratives that recapitulate the structure of the whole system. Every hexagram line contains within itself the dynamic of the whole hexagram. This fractal, self-similar

structure means that the architecture is scale-invariant: the same diagnostic and generative logic applies to an individual decision, a team conflict, a national policy question, or a civilisational transition. Only the initiatory level — the number of binary positions — changes.

3. The Correlation Mechanism

3.1 The Oracle Throw is Not Random

The central puzzle of all oracle systems is the throw. How can the fall of coins, the cast of a divination chain, or the drawing of a card reveal anything true about the questioner's situation?

The answer is not supernatural. It is synchronistic in Jung's technical sense: the throw and the questioner's state are not causally connected but are expressions of the same underlying configuration at the same moment. The questioner's hand, on this throw, at this moment, expresses the same pattern that characterises their situation. The throw is a reading of the questioner's state through a calibrated physical medium.

This mechanism works because it requires the questioner to be fully present at the moment of the throw. Unlike a questionnaire or an interview, the throw cannot be prepared for or manipulated. It captures the actual state, not the reported state.

Roger Schank's concept of Expectation Failure provides a cognitive complement to Jung's synchronicity. Learning — genuine, retained learning — occurs only when an expectation

fails and the failure carries sufficient emotional charge. The moment of expectation failure is the moment of maximum presence: the person is fully in their situation, not managing their presentation of it. This is the moment at which the story generator makes contact with the real.

3.2 Human Design as Structural Layer

Human Design integrates the I Ching's 64 hexagrams (renamed gates) with the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, astrology, and the Hindu chakra system into a single diagnostic framework. The planetary positions at birth determine which gates are active — the fixed architecture of the person. The current planetary transits determine which additional gates are temporarily activated — the current chapter. Together, they specify the structural context within which the oracle throw occurs.

This adds a third layer to the correlation mechanism:

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Fixed architecture of the person (birth chart)
    x
Current position in time (transits)
    x
Correlation moment (throw / expectation failure)
    ↓
Story specific to this person at this moment
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The story generated is not generic. It is the most precise narrative possible given the intersection of these three layers. This is why experienced practitioners of any of these systems can produce readings that feel uncannily accurate: they are not guessing. They are reading a well-specified state through a calibrated instrument.

4. The Acoustic Original and the Cost of Writing

4.1 Sound as the Primary Medium

All these systems were oral before they were written. The odù of Ifá are recited, not read. The Vedic mantras carry their meaning as much in tonal accent (svara) as in lexical content — the Vedic tradition explicitly states that a mantra recited with incorrect tones is not merely ineffective but dangerous. The Torah's cantillation marks (trop) are older than its vowel notation and carry a layer of meaning that the consonantal text alone cannot convey. The I Ching was transmitted orally for centuries before it became a book.

Sound carries information that writing cannot encode: pitch, rhythm, resonance, breath, the physical presence of the speaker, and the dynamic calibration between speaker and listener that allows the story to be adjusted in real time. A sung odù works on the body of the listener before it reaches the mind. The meaning is secondary to the resonance. This is why all great story generators require repetition — dhikr, mantra, cantillation — and why that repetition is not decorative but functional: it deepens the resonance until the pattern is stored in the body, not only in the mind.

4.2 Plato's Warning

In the Phaedrus, Socrates recounts the Egyptian myth of Theuth presenting writing to King Thamus. Thamus rejects the gift: writing will weaken memory by substituting the ability to retrieve for the ability to know, and a written text cannot answer back — it says the same thing to everyone, regardless of who asks and when.

Plato's critique identifies two specific losses. The first is the loss of adaptive response: a living teacher calibrates the transmission to the student; a written text cannot. The second, deeper loss is what Plato calls the orphaned word — the written text has been separated from its father, the speaking presence that gave it life.

There is a third loss that Plato does not name but that the history of these systems makes visible: the loss of gated access. In the oral tradition, the initiatory structure — 2^8 for ordinary consultations, 2^{12} for dynastic questions — is enforced by the knowledge structure of the practitioner. You cannot access the deeper layers until you have mastered the shallower ones, because the deeper stories only make sense in the context of the shallower ones. Writing removes this gate. Everything becomes simultaneously available to everyone, which sounds like democratisation but is in practice the destruction of the developmental architecture.

4.3 Writing as Code

Writing is not the death of the system. It is a compression — lossy, but recoverable. The written odù, hexagram, or Torah verse is a pointer to an acoustic, embodied, relational

practice. Those who have been initiated can read the pointer and recover the practice. Those who have not mistake the pointer for the content.

This distinction — between the written code and the living practice it encodes — is the key to understanding why these systems appear mystical to outsiders and precise to insiders. They are not mystical. They are compressed.

5. SWARP: A Contemporary Reimplementation

5.1 Architecture

SWARP (www.swarp.nl) reimplements the ancient story engine in a form applicable to Communities of Practice in organisational and governmental contexts. The structural mapping is direct:

Ancient system	SWARP
Fixed architecture of person	Human Design profile + role (Hub / Leader / Visionary / Doer)
Correlation moment	Expectation Failure: the moment a case is entered
Pattern library	Emotion table: $2^4 = 16$ states indexed by four dimensions
Story	Case in Story Format
Interpreter	Hub / Visionary role
Community	Community of Practice
Offering (ebo)	Plan of Action
New cycle	New event generated by Plan of Action

5.2 The Emotion Table as Binary Pattern Library

The emotion table in SWARP encodes sixteen primary emotional states using four binary dimensions: Identity (I), Attraction (A), Power (M), and Actor (C). These correspond structurally to the four worldviews of McWhinney's Paths of Change: Mythic, Social, Unitary, and Sensory respectively.

Empowerment (+10) represents all four dimensions positive — the state of full coherence across all worldviews. Complete isolation (-10) represents all four dimensions negative — total systemic collapse. The sixteen states between these poles map the full space of human experience in organisational contexts with the same economy that the sixteen *odù meji* map the full space of human experience in Yoruba cosmology.

The threshold $|\text{emotion}| \geq 3$ for sharing a case is the operational equivalent of the Yoruba concept of *àṣẹ* — life force, causal power. A story without sufficient emotional charge has no *àṣẹ* and will not move anyone. It is stored but not circulated. Only stories with sufficient charge enter the generative cycle.

5.3 Distributing the Interpreter

The central innovation of SWARP relative to its ancient predecessors is the distribution of the interpreter function. In Ifá, the *babalawo* is irreplaceable: years of initiatory training are required to know which story to tell for which *odù* in which context. This creates a bottleneck that limits scale.

SWARP distributes this function across the Community of Practice through role differentiation. The Hub facilitates and publishes. The Visionary identifies cross-case patterns. The Leader translates patterns into action. The Doer executes and generates new cases. No single person needs to hold the complete knowledge. The community holds it collectively.

This is not a degradation of the system. It is an adaptation to the scale requirements of contemporary organisations, consistent with the principle — expressed in the Ubuntu

philosophy — that knowledge lives in the community, not in the individual.

5.4 The Meta-CoP and Self-Reference

SWARP includes a Meta-CoP: a Community of Practice whose subject matter is the platform itself. Cases about the platform enter the same Story Format. Patterns in platform use generate Plans of Action that become software modifications. The development process and the platform are the same Wheel.

This self-referential structure is not an engineering curiosity. It is the ancient principle of the system that generates stories about its own operation, refining itself through the same mechanism it uses to refine everything else. The babalawo who brings his own failures to the odù is operating the same loop.

6. Implications

6.1 For Knowledge Management

The standard model of knowledge management distinguishes tacit from explicit knowledge (Polanyi) and attempts to convert the former into the latter through documentation. The ancient story generators suggest a different model: keep the knowledge acoustic and embodied, use writing only as a compression and pointer, and maintain the initiatory structure that ensures the pointer is only accessed by those who can recover what it points to.

SWARP implements a partial version of this model. The Story Format preserves the narrative structure of oral transmission. The emotional threshold filters for experiential charge. The role structure preserves a version of initiatory access. Full acoustic transmission — the sung odù, the chanted mantra — remains outside SWARP's current scope, but the architecture is compatible with it.

6.2 For Organisational Change

The ancient systems were used for exactly the purposes SWARP addresses: decisions under uncertainty, conflict resolution, succession planning, strategic reorientation. The methods used by government agencies and large organisations today — surveys, workshops, change management frameworks — are, by comparison, informationally impoverished. They capture reported states, not actual states. They generate consensus documents, not stories with àṣẹ.

SWARP's expectation failure mechanism captures actual states. Its emotional threshold filters for stories that will move people. Its pattern recognition across cases generates the kind of generative knowledge that drives real change.

6.3 For the Study of Ancient Systems

The argument of this paper implies that Ifá, the I Ching, the Torah, the Tarot, and related systems should not be studied as separate cultural phenomena but as a single distributed research programme, conducted over millennia, into the architecture of human experience and the conditions for change. The differences between them are adaptations to cultural context. The shared structure is the finding.

This reframing has methodological consequences. Comparative study of these systems should focus on structural correspondences — binary depth, correlation mechanism, three-level architecture, emotional threshold — rather than on surface symbolism. And contemporary implementations like SWARP should be understood not as applications of ancient wisdom but as contributions to the same ongoing research programme.

7. Conclusion

The story generators of the ancient world — Ifá, the I Ching, the Torah, the Tarot, alchemy, the Hero's Journey — are instantiations of a single architecture. That architecture is characterised by binary combinatorics, a three-level hierarchical structure, a correlation mechanism that connects the questioner's state to the selected pattern at the moment of inquiry, and an acoustic transmission medium that carries information the written code cannot encode.

Writing compressed this architecture, as Plato warned. The compression was lossy: the acoustic carrier, the adaptive response of the living interpreter, and the gated initiatory structure were all degraded. But the written forms preserved the combinatorial skeleton, and that skeleton is sufficient to reconstruct the living system for those with the knowledge to do so.

SWARP is such a reconstruction, adapted to the scale and context of contemporary organisational life. It substitutes expectation failure for the oracle throw, emotional valence

for àşę, Community of Practice for initiatory community, and distributed role structure for the individual babalawo. The architecture is the same. The instrument is new.

The ancient story engine is not an artefact of pre-scientific thinking. It is a technology — one that modern knowledge management, change theory, and organisational design have not yet matched for precision, economy, or operational force.

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