



Titbits on Onomastics among the Yoruba Africans

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Introduction

The study of names among the Yoruba ethnic group that dominates South-western Nigeria has received insufficient attention from critics. This study, therefore, is a modest overview of the Yoruba names within the prism of Nigeria's socio-political, historical, philosophical and religious contexts. As espoused by Izevbaye (1981), there are two naming contexts, namely literary and sociocultural. The latter context is a crux to exploring Yoruba names in relation to the *Àbíké* concept, *Ifá* corpus, twining, deities, and predestination, orature and places in the present study.

The Yoruba Nation

The Yoruba nation is one of the three principal ethnic groups in Nigeria. The two remaining are the Hausa and Igbo groups. The Yoruba group spreads across six states in the West of Nigeria, namely Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti and Kwara. The Yoruba can also be found in Ketu and Sabe in the Republic of Benin as well as parts of Togo Republic. This is attributable to the influence of the Old Oyo Empire under the leadership of the paramount Emperor, the *Alaafin* of Oyo (See Ojebode, 2019a and Ojebode, 2019c). The ethnic group is renowned for its bravery and educational advancement. Ile-Ife is believed to be the cradle of the Yoruba while Oduduwa is often referred to as their progenitor.

Fig. 1: Map Showing Yoruba Nation



Source: <https://www.google.com/search?q=map+of+africa+showing+yorubaland&tbm=isch&source=iu>

Significance of Names among the Yoruba

Specifically, among the Yoruba, there is an aphorism that, *Orúkọ ọmọ níí ro ni*, which denotes that, 'A child's name bolsters him/her.' As a complement, another Yoruba statement says, *Òrọ ilé, ibú ilé, làá wò ká tóó sọmọ lórúkọ* which implies that the place and mode of birth of a child are crucial to a child's name.

From reviewing several works of Wole Soyinka, Odebode (2010) postulates that from a few strands of letters called a name, one can extract social information on the sex, status, religion, age, ancestry, occupation, education, birth and aura of a Nigerian child. Thus, a name is perceived as a social *deoxyribonucleic acid* (DNA) (168).

Significance of Names among the Yoruba contd.

In Nigeria, each ethnic division has its peculiar cultural perspective on names. Meanwhile, a fundamental belief among many indigenous Africans is that a name can influence a child's prospect. This assumption about Yoruba names reflects in the works of many African literary artists, i.e. Femi Osofisan, Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka (See Odebode, 2013; Odebode, 2015; Ojebode, A. & Odebode, I (2019); Ojebode, 2019b). The Yoruba philosophy as epitomised in phenomena such as *Orí* (the predestined head), *Orúkọ Àmútòrunwá* (names brought from heaven or circumstantial names) and *Oríkì* (invocation of *Orí*, the "head," the seat of mental and spiritual traits, which include reason, will, and luck is employed by many African authors/auteurs (Izevbaye 169).

Yoruba Anthroponyms

An average Yoruba person bears at least three names: *oruko amutorunwa* (circumstantial name), *oruko abiso* (given name or first name), *oruko baba* or *oruko ebi* (father's name or family name). For instance, the co-researcher's first name, *Idowu*, is a circumstantial name which denotes s/he was born after a set of twins; then a middle name or a given name, *Olusola* which denotes the Lord Jesus Christ enriches me, and the father's name which is Odebode (the warrior/hunter arrives home). The Yoruba also have one *oriki* (a secret name which traces the ancestry/history of the bearer and which is sung like a poem or panegyric) for both commoners and kings (See Ojebode, 2019c).

It is possible that a child is born normally and not circumstantially. In such a situation, the child will have one given name, one middle name and the family name. However, every child will have *oriki* (secret praise name) which is usually given by the grandparents.

From a sociocultural standpoint, Yorùbá anthroponymic names, are derived from culture, history, and religion.

Yoruba Nicknames

Nicknames originate from fields like sociology, psychology, philosophy, and linguistics (Kripke 253; Evans 187). A nickname is a name given to a human being or an inanimate object in addition to the regular or official name (See Ojebode, A., Odebode, I & Odesanya, A., 2019). Izevbaye (1981) describes a nickname as “a name that is given when an individual does not conform to his natal name” (169). People read meaning into a person’s behaviour and give a new (nick)name befitting his/her trait. However, it is a taboo for a new bride to call any member of her husband’s family by his/her personal name. She thus observes their various physiological traits and give them (nick) names befitting such. For instance, if the man is tall, he is called *agoro (the tall one)*, if short, *akuruyejo (short and good at dancing)*. You also have *eyin afe (the delightful teeth)*, *idi ileke (beaded buttocks)* etc. Thus, nicknames emanate from identifying a person’s physiology and behaviour.

Circumstantial Names

The indigenous Yorùbá observes the conditions, situations, and circumstances of an expectant mother and the nature of the child's birth before giving such names (Ilesanmi 108-119). Thus, they issue circumstantial names which echo “the hopes, fear, aspirations, and wishes of the biological parents of the child and those of the extended family members such as grandparents” (Olatunji 68). For instance, *Abíòsẹ̀* (a child who is born on Sunday), *Dàda* (a child born with dreadlocks), *Fúnsọ́* (I was given the child to look after), *Bọ́dúnrìn* (a child born during an annual festival) and *Ìyábòdé* (a female child born immediately after the death of a mother/grandmother).

Fig. 2: Dàda (A child that is born with dreadlocks)



Àbíkú Phenomenon

Àbíkú in the Yorùbá culture is a child (male/female) “predestined to a continual cycle of birth, death and rebirth” (Akinnaso 55). Àbíkú spirits “are believed to belong to a group of demons that reside in the woods around “Iroko” trees (Odebode and Atunde 126; Moruwawon 209). See Wole Soyinka’s and JP Clark’s *Abiku*. The following names are issued by parents of Àbíkú children to prevent their death. For instance, *Máìlọ* (do not leave now), *Málorọ* (do not depart anymore), *Dúrójayé* (wait to enjoy life), *Dúrosinmí* (wait to bury me), *Ìgbékọyí* (the forest rejects this child), *Kalẹjayé* (settle to enjoy life), *Kòsọkọ* (no more hoes/for burial), *Kúmúyì* (death has a hold on this one) and *Ikúmápàyí* (do not die). (See Odebode, I. & Onadipe, A. (2012) & Ojebode, 2019b).

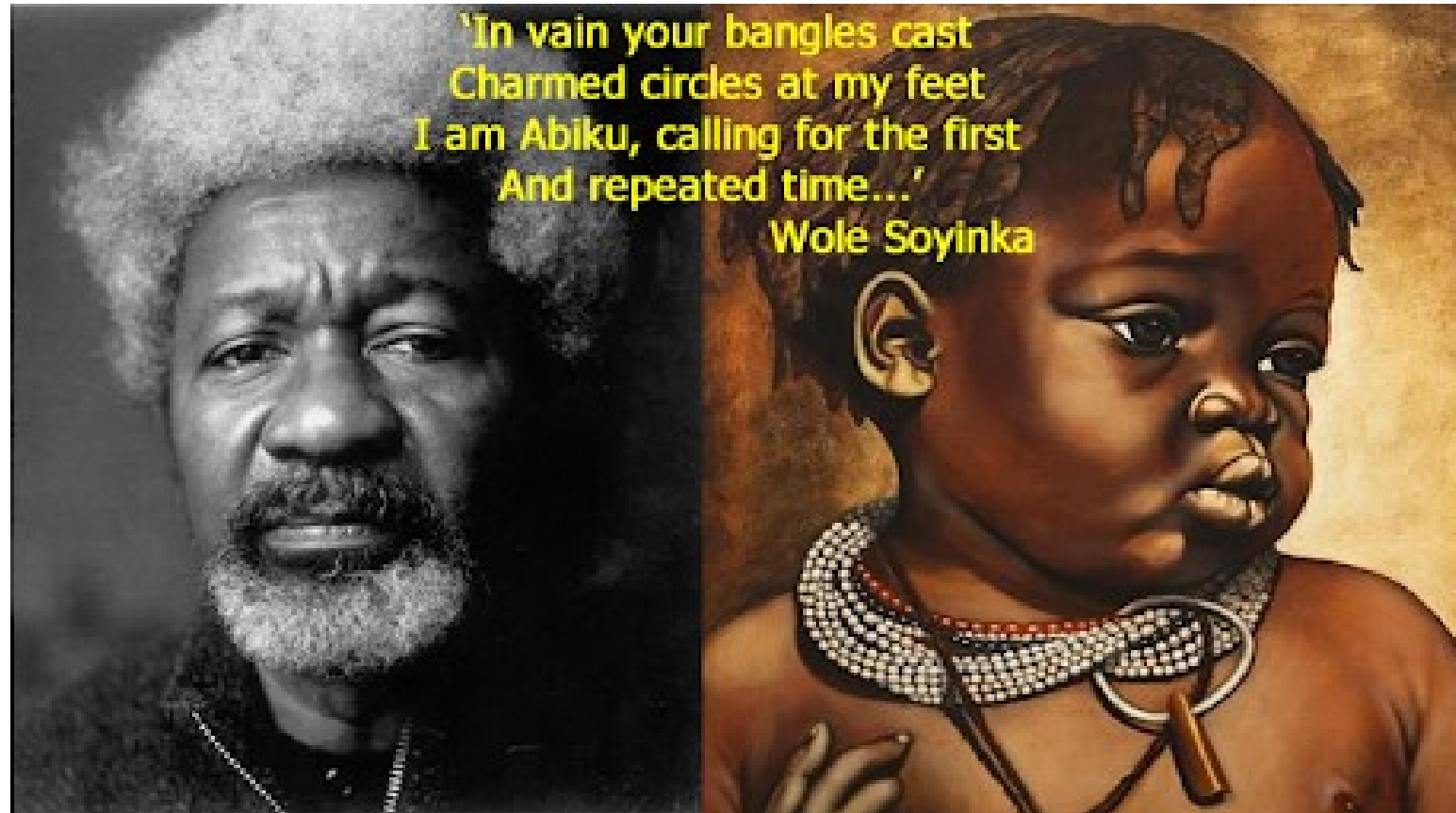
Abiku Contd.

However, Odebode (2013) discovers that the *abiku* names are face threatening (acts) to the bearers. To mitigate this, the bearers decided to anglicise the names using various morphological processes like clipping, blending etc. This system is common on customised shirts and social media like Facebook. For instance **Babatunde** (father reincarnates) is clipped to become either **Babs** or **Teddy**. Similarly, **Ikusaanu** (death has mercy) is anglicised as **Kusan**. **Soji** (wake up or reincarnate) is alphabetised as **S.O.J. (Ess Oo Jay)**. In the same vein, **Ajitori** (s/he wakes up today) becomes **Jiton**. **Others include:**

Kilanko (What are we celebrating?)= **Kilar**

Yetunde (mother reincarnates) = **Yetty**

Fig. 3: *Àbíkú* Myth



Twining among the Yoruba

Traditionally, a Yoruba boy is named on the ninth day while a girl counterpart is christened on the seventh day. This is probably based on the Yoruba myth that a girl child has seven bones while a male child possesses nine. But a set of twins is named on the eighth day regardless of their sex. This is because the twins are deified by the Yoruba (See Odebode, 2010a). The coming of twins into a family is significant because almost every member of the family will assume new names patterned after the twins e.g. Papa and mama Ibeji (***twins parents***, note that ibi means to deliver and eji means two contextually), Kedunwale (s/he who brought the twins home; the immediate senior child to the twins), Idowu (s/he born after the twins) etc.

Yoruba Theonyms

Theonym is the “name of a god, a goddess, or a divinity.”

Odebode (2019) in “Theonymy in Anthroponymy: A Sociopragmatic Study of Selected Yoruba African Religious Names” reveals that the Yoruba has a pattern of initiating their names with the names of their deities. It should be noted that the Yoruba believe in polytheism. Thus we have *Ifawole* (the divination oracle comes home), *Ogunwale* (the iron god comes home), *Sangowale* (the thunder god comes home), *Osunwale* (the river goddess comes home). Nowadays, Christianity has seen to the decline of this culture significantly because it is synonymous with western education greatly. Hence, the deities are being replaced with Olu (i.e. the lord Jesus Christ). Thus we have *Oluwale* (the Lord Jesus comes home), *Olusola* (the lord Jesus enriches me) etc. However, it is insightful to note that some Yoruba also embrace the Islamic religion. The naming pattern of such people is the Yorubanised Arabic names. E.g. *Lamidi* (El Hammed), *Buremo* (Ibraheem), *Lasisi* (Abdul Azeez), etc.

Yoruba Toponyms

According to Radding (2008), toponyms are given intentionally to “impart a certain meaning; they are not arbitrary and are better considered as ‘signs’ because they contain meanings that are beyond ordinary” (394). The Yoruba have diverse place names: rivers (Osun, Oya, Oba, Asejire, Kudeti), mountains (Olumo, Oke Dada, Oke Bola, Oke Bioku, Oke Paadi, Oke Aremo), towns (Abeokuta, Ibadan, Eko Lagos, Oyo, Modakeke, Ile-Ife) and Streets (Marina, Lekki, Ojuelegba, Mapo, Kobomoje). Rivers are given female names while mountains are given male appellations. It is insightful to know that these names are historical. In fact, behind every name is a story. For instance, the stories of Abeokuta, Olumo Rock, Modakeke and Ile –Ife are echoed in Odebode (2010b).

Yoruba Toponyms contd.

For example, the Portuguese gave Lagos her name in 16th century because of its proximity to lakes. But the natives called it Eko (military barracks) because it served as barracks to the Edo local invaders. Oyo got her name from a prediction by the Ifa Oracle to Prince Oranmiyan who left Ile-Ife and Benin. The oracle told him not to stop the journey until he got to a place that would be slippery for his horse. This is where Oyo Empire derived its name from i.e. Oyo (the slippery ground).

Conclusion

In view of the above, we may submit that naming is a critical business among the Yoruba.



THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!

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