

SOME SALIENT ISSUES IN YORUBA

PERSONAL NAMES

CONFERENCE

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## ABSTRACT

As the title depicts, this paper intends to bring out some facts that are prominent and easily noticeable in the Yoruba Personal Names. These are discrepancies and changing issues from time to time.

## INTRODUCTION

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The New Encyclopaedia Britannica (Vol. 12, p. 814) says that:

A name is. . . . . used to refer to  
an individual entity, the name  
single out this entity by directly  
pointing to it. . . . .

We may say that a name is a way of identifying individuals. The issue of giving personal names to human beings has not just started. It is an historical event which dates back to the time immemorial. The Biblical statement confirms this in the book of Genesis chapter 2 verses 19 and 20 when it says:

Now the Lord God had formed out  
of the ground all the beasts of  
the field and all the birds of  
the air. He brought them to the  
man to see what he would name  
them; and whatever the man

called each living creature,  
 that was its name. So the  
 man gave names to all the  
 beasts of the fields.

Various Scholars have written one thing or the other on personal names in Yorùbá. Oduyoye (1972) and Adeoye (1972) devoted a book each to Yorùbá names. Many other authors of Yorùbá culture books earmarked one chapter or the other for the same purpose. Notably among these are Ogunbowale (1968:11-14), Daramola and Jeje (1997:28), and Ladele et al (1996:137-163). Different articles in academic journals have also touched various aspects of Yoruba Names: Ekundayo (1977) and Abiodun (1996) have argued as what Yoruba cherish in personal names. While the former says *Ayò* (Joy) is what Yoruba cherish, the latter says it is *Qm̩q* (child). Babalola (1981) analyses the patterns of *orúkò* *Abísò* in Yorùbá Personal names. Alaba(1997) and Adeniyi (1997) work on semantic and structure of Yoruba Personal names. All these show that Yoruba attach importance to Personal Names.

To show further that Yoruba attach importance to Personal Names, they normally think deeply before giving names to a child. Names are not given arbitrarily or unconnected. This is because

Yoruba believe that any name given to a child will have great impact in his life, so the adage "òrúkọ ní' ro Ọmọ". Yorùbá also put many things into consideration before Personal Names are given to their children. Among things they consider are religion, circumstances surrounding the birth of the child and the way the child is delivered. But as careful as Yorùbá are when it comes to Personal Names, some discrepancies and changes are noticeable.

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### FOCUSSED SALIENT ISSUES

The noticeable discrepancies and changes in Yorùbá Personal Names are the main focus of this paper and they are going to be discussed in this section one by one.

### NAMING DAY

The naming day continues to vary from time to time. From the onset, it was the sixth day after the child's delivery. This sixth day is called Ifàlọmọ. But it changed according to the sex of the child. If it were a boy, the naming day would be the ninth day because Yorùbá believe that the rib bones of a boy or man are nine in number. In case of a girl, the naming day used to be seventh day because of the belief that a girl has seven rib bones. This day also changed should a woman has multiple birth of twins;

it has to be the eighth day after the birth whether females, males or male and female. Eight is divisible into two equal parts.

Hence it will not create any rancour between the two children.

Presently, this eighth day has been adopted generally for multiple births, a single boy or girl.

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However, we observe that despite the fact that Yoruba women give birth to triplets and they attach spiritual importance to them, the naming day was not taken into consideration because of them as they did for the twins. It is our thinking that a day that would be equally distributed like ninth or twelveth day should have been fixed as the naming day. Further observation reveals that premature children and children born through cesarean operation don't have a specific day as naming day nowadays. The day they are born is not a determinant of the day they will be named but the day they are let out of the bottle and or the day that is convenient for the parents if these children survived. In case of a baby born through cesarean operation for the mother, eighth day after the child has been born may not be practicable as the naming day. There are situations whereby the mother will not be conscious or strong enough to withstand the rigour of naming ceremonies until two or three weeks after the delivery. As we know, apart from the fact that the presence of the two parents is important on that day, the father alone will



not be psychologically balance to organise anything. So, we have experienced some namings that took place two, three or more weeks after delivery.

### HEALTHY RIVALRIES

A sort of healthy rivalries manifest in the Personal Names giving to children in Yorùbá among the traditional religion worshippers. We call it healthy rivalry in the sense that they do it with joy and it has never caused rancour among them. We know that the 'Orìṣà' being worshipped in a family always fixtures in the name they give to their children. So, we normally hear 'Eégúnjòbí', 'Ọjẹgbèmi' 'Ọjẹdòkun and so on. To those that are followers of Sàngó, we can have Sàngódélé, Sàngógbèmi' and Sàngódòkun to mention but a few. The 'Ọgún worshippers can name their children as 'Ọgúngbèmi', 'Ọgúndòkun, or any other names that has 'Ọgún as first word. The healthy rivalry we are bringing out here is that whatever a worshipper of a god brings out from the names giving to his children, we can also get it from worshippers of other gods. Thus the following illustration:

Ọgún

Ọṣun

Ifá

Ọjẹ

Sàngó

Ọya

Odù

gbèmi'

délé

## NAMES PECULIAR TO SEXES

As we have names that are peculiar to male and female children separately, so also we have unisex names. Among names that can be given to male children are Akindélé, Oláwálé, Ibídàpò, Kòlápólé to mention but a few. Examples of names that can be given to female children alone are Omótáyò, Olúwatómilólá, Adérónkẹ and so on. The unisex names are Táíwò, Kẹhìndé, Olálítán, Omọlólá, Oláolú, Moróhunrúbò among others. But nowadays, these names are interwoven. We mean that there is no clear cut demarcation again because some names that were for males only can now be heard of females and vice-versa. Examples are 'Aṣàbí', Fúnmiláyò, Abósẹ̀dẹ and Babáyẹ̀ju (Adeoye 1969:21) that were meant for females alone but are now more pronounced in male children. An example of male names that are now pronounced in females is Olúṣẹ̀gun. With this, it will be difficult to draw a line of demarcation between female and male personal name.

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## NAMES THAT DEPICT WEALTH AND ROYAL FAMILIES

We also observe that names that depict wealth and royal families are no more peculiar to particular houses or families, they are now general. Examples of these names are Qládélé, Qlálékan, Qlásúnkànmí, Qlágabajú, Adéoyè, Adébímpé, Adédojà, and so on. The reason being that wealth is subjective. What somebody, or a family acknowledges as wealth is different from other. A family may think that riches are wealth while other family may accept the birth of a child, promotion, building of house, securing of job, and many others as wealth. So, we hear people bearing Qládèji if two out of the things named above happen at the birth of the child. Another salient point on this is that Yoruba normally like to name a child the exact name of a dead person if that person has lived an enviable life. If this happens, and the newly born child is named Qlájídé which a dead person has borne, it does not mean there is wealth in that house. Also, there are many people bearing names with "ADÉ" and there is no trace that anybody has ever become an Oba in their family talkless of wearing a crown. Another thing is that people used to bear only one name with ADÉ but now, we know many people with two or three names that have ADÉ.



## VOWEL INITIALS

Awóbùlúyí (1998:10 ) has pointed out that all nouns in Yorùbá are vowels initial especially when traced to various dialects of Yoruba Language. Yoruba names are nouns and they are no exception of this fact of vowel initial. Examples are Igè, Ojò, Olúṣolá, Akíntádé, Omólolá. However, if some names are shorten (Alaba 1997: 31-34 ), they may start with consonants but this is just the short form. Examples are Ṣolá, Lólá, Kèhìndé, Jéńyò and so on. One category of Yoruba Names is that of Oríkí 'Abísọ. -What we clearly observe in it is that all of them with the exception of a few start with vowel A. For instance, 'Abíkẹ, 'Ajàdí, 'Awẹró, 'Ajókẹ, 'Abẹgbé, 'Adìó and so on. Among the very few that start with other vowels are 'Iṣòlá and 'Ejìdé for men and women respectively.

## FREQUENT USE

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Still on Oríkí 'Abísọ, it was not hitherto used to call people frequently like that of Orúkọ 'Abísọ. It was been used occasionally on children when they greet their parents or elderly people. This might be in the morning, afternoon, night, when they return from work, when they are being petted etc. Now, it is being used frequently to call people to the extent that school children

or married women bear it as their surnames and marital names respectively. So, we hear Olú 'Alàbí, Dayò Akàngbé, Mr A. K. 'Aṣàbí, Madam 'Awèró, Mrs Àdió etc.

## AMBIGUITY

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Another Salient fact we want to point at in this paper is the ambiguity nature of some Yorùbá Personal Names. This can be because of two main reasons. One is the ambiguity created from the names themselves. This means it is nobody's fault to have given these names two or more meanings. These names are bound to be ambiguous. Among these names are Adékàńbí and Adéògún. Adékàńbí' can be interpreted as "it is my turn to give birth to crown" or "Is it my turn to wear the crown?" This second interpretation is common among the people when they normally say "Adékàńbí is a mere question". Adéògún can also be interpreted as "Crown is not equal" or "The crown of 'Ogún" the god of iron. Bóláńlé can be that "The child met honour at home" or "the father met a child who is the symbol of honour at home on his arrival from somewhere".

The second type of ambiguity can be traced to the ignorance of correct pronunciation by the people. This usually happens to names that are tribal and dialectal in nature. It means anybody

who is not from that tribe or dialect may not know how to pronounce these names correctly. For example, we have Orídotà Agbáláyà, Gbòsẹ̀. Fàgbèmígbé, Ikúbájé etc. Some people will call Orídotà which means "The head has become gun-powder or bullet," as Orídóta which means "a dull head". Agbáláyà means a brave person but it can be wrongly called 'Agbàlàyà which means "Chest is the elder." Gbòsẹ̀ means somebody that has taken the whole week but people call it Gbósẹ̀ which can be interpreted as "carrying of the week." The correct pronunciation that Ondo' based name is Fààgbàmígbé which means Ifá has seized me for life. Ikùbàájé is another Ondo based name which means "death has not spoilt it" but people we say Ikúbàájé to means directly opposite to the real meaning.

### ATTACHMENT TO AREAS

Some Personal Names have been attached to or noted for some areas in Yorubaland. We are trying to say that some names are peculiar to some towns and cities in Yorubaland. For examples, if we hear Bellow, Ajikòbí and Gàmbarí, we shall know that they are from Ilorin. Fàgbàmígbé and Ikúbájé are Ondo names. Médùbí, Médùpín and Mèdáyése are from Kaba in Kogi State. Sónèkàn, Sóbòwálé, Sódímu etc are Abéokúta names.

## CHIEFTAINCY TITLES AS PERSONAL NAMES

In the past, chieftaincy titles were titles and nothing but titles.

These chieftaincy titles are of different types. From traditional worshippers, we have Apènà, Àwòrò, Àwíṣẹ, Mògbà. The rulership titles are: Balógun, Mógàjí, Ọtún, Aṣípa, Badà etc. But nowadays these chieftaincy titles have been converted to personal names (Adeoye 1969: 3).

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### MULTI-SYLLABIC

No Yorùbá Personal Name is a mono-syllabic no matter how shorten it is. They are all multi-syllabic in nature. This example will buttress what we are saying. Ọmókẹhìndégbẹ̀gbon - Seven syllables but if shortened as Kẹhìndé, It will have three syllables.

Other examples are:

Ajàyí	-	3 syllables
Igè	-	2 "
Adéyẹmí	-	4 syllables
Ẹ̀sàngótádé	-	4 syllables

### EXTINCT NAMES

There are some extinct Yoruba Personal Names. These names are mostly found in Orúkọ Àmútòrunwa and Orúkọ Àbíkú. Among Orúkọ Àmútòrunwá that are no more existing are Idògbé, Àasà,



Johojo, Tâlàbi, Salakọ etc. From Orúko Abiku, the following examples have seized to exist. Àyùú, Dojo, Anwoo, Maamoora Kòsókó, Ajítóní, Ajá etc. Nobody gives children any of these names any longer. Those that are still bearing these names have them as surname or marital names. The reason is that the era of belief in Àbíké has gone and nobody cares to take note of what happens when the child is born, where the baby is born, and how the baby is born talkless of giving him or her the Orúko Àmútòrunwá. Few Orúko Àmútòrunwá that are still existing are Táíwò, Kéhìndé, Idòwú and Àlàbá. Even we have people of this category that bear their middle names instead.

### COMPOUND NAMES

People nowadays bear compound Personal Names as surnames and marital names. In the past, a man could only bear his father's or forefather's name as his surname. This is a traditional way of immortalising people. But what we at times experience now is compounding of one's father's name with that of fore-father's to become surname. We have even experienced a situation where somebody dropped either his father or fore-father's name as surname. He decided to make his third name the surname. Another fact is women or ladies that refuse to drop their surnames when married. Instead, they compound the surname with the husband's name. This act is more popular among daughters of rich men, politicians and female broadcasters in various media houses.



## BASIC VERSUS DERIVED

According to the structure and semantic of Yoruba Personal Names analysed by Alaba (1997:29-34) and Adeniyi (1997:115-124), it is glaring that if viewed from morphological point, some Yoruba names are basic words while very many are derived. Among the basic ones are Ige, Ajayi, Ọjó, Aina, etc. Examples of derived Yoruba names are Olusólá, Taiwò, Olórunníísomo, Ọgúntádé, Oláyínká etc. Though no statistical survey was carried out, we are sure that the basic and derived names can not be in the same proportion. The ratio of derived names must be far higher than that of the basic one because names can be derived at will

## VILLAGE OR CITIES ' NAME

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One thing that is rampant in the Northern part of Nigeria is taking the name of a town or village as one's surname. We have some towns and villages like Kontagora, Nasco, Kano, Zaria, Kaduna, etc and we have people bearing Mamman Kontagora, Gado Nasco, Aminu Kano etc. What we are not sure of these names is whether they are initially personal names that turned to be the names of the villages and cities. What is operating in Yorubaland is Personal Names becoming the names of areas in towns and cities. Thus, we have Agodi, Genla, Mqatan, Alli-Iwo and Olugbode areas in Ibadan. In Ilorin, we have Sobi, Taiwo and Gambari areas.

## NUMEROUS PERSONAL NAMES

In Yorubaland, personal names giving to a child on the naming day is usually more than one. At times, it ranges from ten to fifteen especially for a first child of a couple. Abiodun (1999:1) proffers reason for this when he says:

It is noted that Yoruba people believe that names are very important. In effect, every member of an extended family normally feels obliged to give a name to a newborn child. To this end, a child may end up receiving up to six or more names.

The fact we want us to notice here is that only one or two of these names normally survive. In most cases, the parents and the child might forget other names as the child grows older and older. If viewed from what is happening today, one would think that the names giving to the child by the parents take priority, but it was not so in the past. We have witnessed situations whereby the names giving to the child by the elder sister, grand father, grand mother, uncles etc take priority or finally emerge as the Personal Name of the child.

## SUMMARY

This paper is divided into three sections: the abstract, the introduction and the main focus. The first section tells us what the paper intends to achieve and the second section is just the review of related literature. The third and final section focuses the observed discrepancies and changes in Yorùbá Personal Names. These discrepancies and changes are on the choice of naming day, healthy rivalries among the names traditional worshippers are giving to their children, Names peculiar to males and females and unisex names, Names that show whether somebody is from a wealthy or royal family, observation on Yorùbá Personal Names to be all vowel - initials and frequent use of Oriki 'Abíso as opposed to former occasional use. Other aspects of Personal Names that this paper has touched are the ambiguity nature of some names, Names that are peculiar to some areas or sub-tribes of Yoruba, the chieftaincy titles that have become personal names, the multisyllabic nature of all names in Yorùbá, the extinct names, the compound names, personal names that have become the names of areas in each town or city and Numerous personal names giving to a child on the naming day.

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