

# Yoruba personal naming system: Traditions, patterns and practices

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## Abstract

The Yoruba, like many other ethnic nationalities in Africa, have developed personal naming traditions, practices and patterns that represent the beliefs, expectations and circumstances surrounding new births. This article examines this aspect of the Yoruba culture, set as models and practiced by members of every Yoruba speech community. It discusses the typology of Yoruba personal names by focusing on their sociolinguistic features, and the impact of Western culture, Christianity and Islam on these names. The data collected for the study were drawn primarily from participant observations and oral interviews in addition to previous studies on Yoruba personal names. Textual data were sourced from the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO) lists of Yoruba candidates and admission lists of four universities. This article is based on indexicality theory which purports that the referent of a name is determined by the context. It is revealed that these names tell stories of families' socio-economic backgrounds, represent customs and religions, reflect dreams, as well as predict the child's future path. Yoruba personal names, therefore, mirror their cultural norms and social imaginaries.

KEYWORDS: ANTHROPOLOGY, PERSONAL NAMES, TRADITIONS, IDENTITY,  
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## 1 Introduction

Personal naming practices, patterns and traditions among the Yoruba of South-western Nigeria are the central focus of this article. Names and naming practices are a feature of every ethno-linguistic community. Naming is a specific sociolinguistic act, intimately linked with values, traditions, beliefs, hopes, fears and events in people's lives. Names indicate the many preferences of their owners (or givers) in terms of real-life objects, actions, features, beliefs and expectations (Rosenhouse, 2002). According to Alford (1987:51), personal naming practices offer important insights into the patterns of social and cultural organization of communities, and can be a key to broader cultural changes. Personal names tell us about the categorization of the name bearer (for example, gender) and often tell us what is significant about the background and the circumstances of birth. In naming a child, and in consciously choosing a name to refer to her/him, the name usually has enormous symbolic power as it will identify the child, send a message, express a hope or prayer and entrench a cultural or religious identity.

The study of personal names, according to Algeo (1992:727), is referred to as anthroponomy, while Al-Zumor (2009) calls it anthroponomastics. They both agree that the study of personal names comes under the discipline onomastics. They concur also that the study of names has drawn the attention of philosophers of language, anthropologists, linguists, historians, as well as interested members of the public. Frege (1949) considers names to have semantic attributes and referential contents. Rey (1995:26) corroborates this claim that names are purely referential. Some philosophers and linguists, according to Agyekum (2006:207), considered names as arbitrary labels that refer to certain signified entries, and that the signifier and the signified may not share certain intrinsic qualities with the person who has that name. Further, he argues that if the assertion that the characterization of names is constant with Saussure's characterization of linguistic signs as arbitrarily connected to their referents were true, then names would have no functional correlation with culture.

However, this is not wholly true, as Yoruba names are far from arbitrary; they are more than identification tags; they constitute an integral part of human experience. In fact, Yoruba names show the philosophical value of the people, and also emphasize the significance of past experiences, events or phenomena (Fasiku, 2006). According to Agyekum (2006), the literature on anthroponomy has posited that African names are quite different from those in Western societies where people generally take their fathers' last names. He argues further that while Western names are predictable, African names are generally not predictable, for until the child is born, and depending on the circumstances under which it is born, the name cannot be determined with accuracy. It can be unequivocally claimed that Yoruba names share many features with African names.

Naming can be considered as a universal cultural practice. Every society in the world gives names as tags to its members. However, the interpretations attached to the name vary from society to society and from one culture to another.

This article discusses personal naming traditions, patterns and practices that represent the beliefs, expectations and circumstances surrounding new births among the Yoruba of South-West Nigeria. It also examines the influence of European or established churches and the newly founded autochthonous Nigerian churches, as well as Islamic culture, on the Yoruba naming system and tradition-based Yoruba personal names.

Research works abound on Yoruba naming practices. For instance, Akinnaso (1980) explores Yoruba personal names from a sociolinguistic perspective and observes that sociocultural and grammatical knowledge are integrated in the construction of Yoruba personal names. Ikotun (2013) focuses on new trends in the Yoruba naming culture among Christians, and finds that modern Yoruba first names are inspired by and based on the Christian faith, e.g. *Similoluwa* 'Rest on the Lord' and *Ooreoluwa* 'Gift of God'. These names and their English versions can be used as baptismal names. Akintoye (2015) investigates the social implications of Yoruba indigenous names, and stresses that the Yoruba naming system performs the cultural function of distinguishing one clan from another. In this article, the anthroponomastic link between the traditions, patterns and practices inherent in the Yoruba naming culture is established, while not overlooking the perceived modifications in the traditions, patterns and practices due to external factors. In other words, it articulates the Yoruba naming system as a specific long-standing tradition, unveils the transmission of such a custom to the present generation and shows how that custom is sustained and maintained in the face of obvious threat.

## 2 Naming, culture and society

African cultural practices are steeped in spiritualism, where names are sacred to the people and to their very being. Indeed, names and naming among African peoples bear spiritual, psychological and physical significance (Fitzpatrick, 2012). For Africans, one's name is his or her soul. It has celestial powers and embodies spiritual presuppositions. The teaching of African spirituality suggests that when one bestows a name upon a child, that person is not simply naming the flesh of the child, but rather the name is for the person's soul (Bernhardt, 2001). Thus, in Africa, naming starts a few months before a child is born. Parents draw up a list of possible names for the newborn and share the list with grandparents, extended family members and family friends. The appropriate names from the list are selected depending on important family events surrounding the conception of the

child and the expectations the parents have for the child. When the child finally arrives, a naming ceremony is organized to formally give the selected names (Uzo, 2011).

Giving a name to a child in Africa hinges on the fact that the child has personal dignity right from the time of conception that needs to be respected and protected. This respect for the dignity of the newly born is symbolized through practices associated with the child's naming ceremony.

Among the Zulu and other Nguni-speaking people of South Africa, the word for name is *Igama*, meaning 'your symbol' – its original meaning being a symbol engraved upon a flat stone. Bernhardt (2001) reports that in early African societies when a child was given a name, the symbolic meaning of the child's name would be painted on a round pebble in red or black pigment, and this symbol would be kept for as long as the person lived. Upon death, the name pebble would be broken into two pieces and returned to the earth – transcending back into the spiritual realm.

Among the Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho and Botswana-speaking people in South Africa, a person's name holds immense spiritual power, and it is extremely important to conceal one's true name until tremendous trust is built between oneself and others. It is only then that one's true name should be revealed. It is believed that if an enemy wants to hurt someone, all the enemy needs to do is simply reverse the meaning of his victim's name. For example, according to Fitzpatrick (2012:27), 'If your name was *Lesedi*, which in Tswana or Sotho means "light", and an adversary wanted to cause harm to you, all s/he needed to do was reverse your name to *Lefifi*, which means "darkness". Thus, it was customary to have multiple names in addition to the true or sacred name in which one was given at birth.' This report is true of the Yoruba, who rarely reveal their sacred names or their mothers' names to friends, no matter how intimate the relationship is. According to Mbiti (2001), the Luo tribes in Western Kenya seek a name for a newborn while a baby is crying, during which time different names of the living and/or the dead are mentioned. If the child stops crying when a particular name is called out, the family members and attendants assume that the spirits calling for that name have been appeased, and the baby receives that name.

In contemporary Egypt, as reported by Baines (2018), a naming ceremony, *Seboo*, takes place on the seventh day of life. Celebrated by Moslems and Christians alike, the tradition is reported to involve family members and friends. During the ceremony, the baby is wrapped up in a white robe and the name is chosen by assigning different names to several candles, lighting them at the onset of the naming ceremony and then naming the child after the longest burning candle. Thereafter, the mother places the baby in a large sieve and gently shakes

it, an action believed will help the baby become accustomed to the vagaries of life. This is followed by laying the baby on the floor, with a knife placed on its chest to ward off evil spirits. The guests scatter grains, gold and gifts around him. These are symbols of the abundance they wish for the child. Further, the mother side-steps seven times over the baby, again to ward off evil spirits. Incantations are chanted by the attendants for the child to be obedient to his mother. This is followed by a procession of light and incense usually led by the mother carrying her baby, and finally, the feast.

Among the Yoruba people, according to Fitzpatrick (2012:29), newborns are named at a naming ceremony seven days after the birth, and within those days, the child's name is carefully considered and chosen based on the circumstances surrounding its birth. Usually, the child gets his/her name from its father; however, mothers and grandparents also play an important role in bestowing a name. Fitzpatrick (2012) claims further that, oftentimes, it is the names selected by the grandparents and great-grandparents that are given preference. Yoruba names are generally classified into two main groups: (i) *Oruko Amutorunwa* or the destiny name or name bestowed from the heavens and (ii) the acquired or assumed name – the name often given by a grandparent or close relative. Another feature of the naming ceremony is the *Oriki*, which is a praise song that is recited when a child is given a name, and it describes the child's future as well as the child's purpose in life. Fitzpatrick (2012) submits further that the *Oriki* also documents the achievements of individuals and ethnic groups. Depending on its use the *Oriki* varies in length. It is often invoked when praising a child for bringing honour to the family, or when attempting to evoke virtuous traits that are considered innate in a person as a result of his/her incantation.

From the foregoing, it is clear that in Africa, naming is a very important tool used in various cultures to convey certain messages, either to an individual, family members or a community. Thus, naming practices among the Yoruba are approached, in this context, from sociolinguistic and anthropological perspectives.

### **3 The Yoruba people**

The Yoruba people are a large ethno-linguistic group in Nigeria, who speak the Yoruba language. There are many mutually intelligible dialects of Yoruba, such as Ekiti, Ijebu, Egba, Owe and Ikale. The Yoruba constitute more than 35 percent of Nigeria's total population, and around 40 million individuals throughout the region of West Africa (CIA Factbook, 2013). While the majority of the Yoruba live in Western Nigeria, there are also substantial indigenous Yoruba communities in Benin, Ghana, Togo and the Caribbean.

The Yoruba are the main ethnic group in Ekiti, Lagos, Ondo, Osun, Ogun and Oyo States of Nigeria, and they also constitute a sizeable proportion in Kwara, Kogi and Edo States. Traditionally, the Yoruba organized themselves into networks of related villages, towns and kingdoms, with most of them headed by an Oba (King). Major Yoruba cities and towns include Ile-Ife, Ibadan, Lagos, Ijebu-Ode, Abeokuta, Akure, Ilorin, Ijebu-Igbo, Ogbomoso, Ondo, Ikare, Oyin-Akoko, Omuo-Ekiti, Badagry, Ado-Ekiti, Osogbo, Ilesa, Oyo, Owo, Kabba, Offa and Ede. There are other Yoruba cities and towns in the republic of Benin, such as Ketu, Sabe and Dassa. Yoruba is studied from primary school up to university levels. Yoruba was used as one of the languages of legislation in conjunction with English in the then Oyo State House of Assembly during the First Republic in Nigeria. The Lagos State House of Assembly recently passed a bill making the teaching of Yoruba compulsory in schools in the state (Fadare, 2016).

The Yoruba people have a very rich culture and tradition which is distinct from other ethnic groups in Nigeria. They have particular traditional marriage ceremonies, naming ceremonies, burial ceremonies and rites. Yoruba people are easily known or identified by their native names, as every Yoruba name is a product of Yoruba culture, tradition, belief and circumstances surrounding the birth of a Yoruba child. However, as a result of Christianization and Islamicization, changes and modifications have been noted in the Yoruba naming system.

#### 4 Theoretical framework

Lyons (1977: 216) considers names to have two attributes – referential and vocative – and therefore considers names to be attached to referents. Personal names strongly reveal the power of names to emphasize social relationships. Personal names are iconic representations of composite social variables that indexicalize and relate to the name and the person. They include gender, hierarchy in birth, circumstances surrounding the birth, power and status (Agyekum, 2006). This is exactly what we find among the Yoruba, where personal names are drawn from a home-context principle, which is based on the Yoruba proverb: *Iléni à ñ wo kí á tó sọ omọ níorúkò*, meaning ‘The prevalent situation in the family determines a child’s name, or has a lot of influence on the name given to a child’. In fact, the events involved in the naming ceremony and the choice of names given to a child has traceable links to the referent. Lyons (1977) therefore claims that proper names are both synchronically and diachronically motivated.

The language of the people is manifested in their naming systems and practices, which may reflect marriage practices, family relations, politics, economics, occupation, religious beliefs and practices, law, and funeral traditions, patterns and practices. Different types of theories have been proposed for the study of proper

names or concerning the means by which proper names serve as referents. Of these theories, the indexicality theory has been found to be the most relevant to this study.

Indexes are signs that have some kind of existential relation with what they refer to, either spatial, temporal, social or personal (Silverstein, 1976:27). According to Agyekum (2006:212), in indexicality, language is used as a tool through which our socio-cultural world is constantly described, evaluated and reproduced. He argues further that when words are said to be indexically related to other objects and realities in the world, it implies that words carry with them a power that transcends mere identification and tagging of people, objects and properties. Similarly, Mensah (2015:116) contends that different cultures perceive and conceptualize the experience of life in different ways, and language functions as the primary carrier of these cultural connections. The Yoruba have names for every situation. Sometimes a new name is created to describe a new situation. However, the Yoruba do not give names carelessly, as they usually emanate from the thoughts and feelings of the parents and relations who give the children such names. Consequently, for the Yoruba, names are more than identification tags; they constitute an integral part of their lived experience. Yoruba names reflect the worldview and etymology of the people, and show the philosophical value of the people. They also emphasize the significance of an experience, an event or phenomenon (Fasiku, 2006). Thus, the Yoruba naming system is an aspect of cultural indexicality, since they have socio-cultural interpretations of names. For instance, some Yoruba names refer to personal, temporal, spatial and social situations as reflected in their lexis.

## 5 Methodology

Three principal elicitation techniques were used to collect data for this study: document assessment, participant observations and oral interviews. Besides the names drawn from previous studies on Yoruba personal names, also consulted were the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO) lists of Yoruba candidates, and the admission lists of four universities in Yoruba-speaking areas, namely, the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti and the University of Ilorin, Ilorin. The researchers also embarked on a six-month fieldwork enterprise and utilized participant observations as elicitation techniques. Villages, mechanic workshops, outdoor bars and pepper-soup restaurants were visited in Ilorin, Ado Ekiti, Ikare Akoko, Oyin Akoko, OmuoEkiti, Ibadan, Ilesha, Ijebu and Abeokuta. Here, the researchers noted the different names people called themselves and others.

In total, 130 respondents were interviewed. Structured and unstructured interviews were conducted by the researchers. During the interviews, respondents were prompted to provide information about naming and naming practices in their communities. Questions were asked about the classification or typology of Yoruba names, and the emerging changes in the Yoruba naming system. The oral interview technique was adopted because of the opportunity it offered the researchers to get detailed information on how and why the pattern of the naming system is shifting from the original traditional practices. Face-to-face interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. Elderly people, leaders of different traditional religions and organizations, key persons, clerics, among others in the study areas were interviewed about different types of names and their meanings, particularly the traditional Yoruba personal names. The respondents were also encouraged to reflect upon why some Yoruba traditional names were being discriminated against and why new patterns of Yoruba names are manifesting. Questions were also asked whether the respondents disliked any of their names, and whether such names had been dropped or modified by them in any way. In analysing the data the following actions were deployed in order to meet the objectives of this study: (i) the descriptive content associated with the name, (ii) the reference of whatever is linked to the name in the appropriate ways and (iii) discussion of indexes as signs of the existential relation to which names refer, either spatial, temporal, social or personal. The demographic information about the respondents is presented in Tables 1 to 5.

**Table 1.** Distribution of respondents by age.

Age	Number	Percentage
15–24	20	15.4
25–34	24	18.5
35–49	26	20.0
50–59	28	21.5
60+	32	24.5
Total	130	100

**Table 2.** Distribution of respondents by sex.

Sex	Number	Percentage
Male	80	61.5
Female	50	38.5
Total	130	100



**Table 3.** Distribution of respondents by religion.

Religion	Number	Percentage
Christianity	54	41.5
Islam	46	35.4
Traditional religion	24	18.5
Others	6	4.6
Total	130	100

**Table 4.** Distribution of respondents by occupation.

Occupation	Number	Percentage
Civil servants	36	27.7
Business men/women	40	30.8
Farmers	18	13.8
Students	26	20
Artisans	10	7.7
Total	130	100

**Table 5.** Distribution of respondents by education.

School	Number	Percentage
University	50	38.5
Other tertiary institutions	30	23.0
Secondary school	20	15.4
Primary school	20	15.4
None	10	7.7
Total	130	100

Table 1 presents the age range of the respondents for this study, and shows that the respondents cut across different age groups: adolescents, adults and elderly.

With regard to Table 2, the researchers interviewed more males than females, because the process of naming a child among the Yoruba revolves primarily around men.

## 6. Analysis and discussion

### 6.1 Naming ceremonies among the Yoruba

Yoruba culture places extremely high value on children. They are so important in all Yoruba families that a marriage that is blessed with children is appreciated, honoured and valued, while a marriage without children is viewed with disdain and suspicion. As a result of the high premium placed on children in the Yoruba cultural universe, names are not given arbitrarily. Family tradition, belief and history are factors that must be considered when names are given to Yoruba

children. Therefore, the child naming process is a rigorous one with its attendant peculiarities and diverse interests. A Yoruba child usually has more than one name because extended family members and well-wishers also have the honour of giving their own names to the child. Yoruba names are so profound, meaningful, powerful and, at times, prophetic because it is believed that the names children bear can influence their entire life-cycle (Akinola, 2014:65–72). The concept of naming among the Yoruba can be better understood through some Yoruba proverbs that are related to naming:

- (a) Ilé ni à ñ wò kí a tó sọ ọmọ níorúko  
 house PREP 3PLUR look before 3PLUR name a child with name  
 ‘The prevalent situation in the family determines a child’s name’
- (b) Orúko ọmọ nín ro ọmọ  
 name child PREP control child  
 ‘A child’s name determines what he becomes or does’
- (c) Orúko ọmọ ni ijánuọmọ  
 name child BE control child  
 ‘A child’s name controls the child’

According to Ìkòtún (2013:2–3), one conclusion that can be drawn from previous studies on naming among the Yoruba people is that naming is such an important aspect of their culture that it is done with fanfare (cf. Daramola and Jeje, 1967; Okediji and Okediji, 1971; Adeoye, 1972, 1979; Akinnaso, 1980). Notwithstanding the similarities in the findings of researchers that have worked on Yoruba naming practices, there exist some discrepancies in their stories about naming among the Yoruba people. For example, Daramola and Jeje (1967) and Okediji and Okediji (1971) claim that a male child is named on the 9<sup>th</sup> day, a female child is named on the 7<sup>th</sup> day and twins are named on the 8<sup>th</sup> day. Yet Adeoye (1972, 1979), Ekundayo (1977) and Akinnaso (1980) report that many Yoruba people name their children on the 8<sup>th</sup> day as a result of the influence of Christianity and Islam. According to Ikotun (2011), information from two Ifá priests indicates that none of the days given by scholars could be said to be totally correct. Ifá is regarded as a repository of the people’s culture, history, tradition and values.

Ikotun further claims that whatever the Ifá priests say is usually regarded as sacrosanct, and states that the Ifá priest he interacted with said that naming is done on the 6<sup>th</sup> day, and that is why the Yoruba people say ‘Ifálọmọ’, meaning ‘every child is a 6<sup>th</sup> day, although the word ‘Ifálọmọ’ may also mean ‘unexpected favour’. Judging from the various accounts given above, it does seem that, at present, there are five different naming days among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Traditionalists name their children on the 6<sup>th</sup> day with fanfare. Members of the

European churches and some Pentecostal churches name their children on the 8<sup>th</sup> day with fanfare. Jehovah's Witnesses and members of the Deeper Life Bible Church, according to Ikotun (2013:69), adopt the day children are born for naming without fanfare or formal religious ceremony. Some Yoruba Muslims endorse the 7<sup>th</sup> day, while others adopt the 8<sup>th</sup> day.

## 6.2 Typology and patterns of Yoruba names

This section deals with the analysis of names and the interpretation of the results of the analysis. The analysis entails the typology of the names gathered for the study, exploring their meanings and the sociolinguistic trajectories relating the names to the social and cultural background of the Yoruba.

In the analysis that follows, we discuss the different categories into which Yoruba names are classified.

All the names in Table 6, according to respondents, are *àmútòrunwá* names 'names from heaven'. The respondents revealed that these names are given to children born in unusual circumstances. They are unary or one-word names whose meanings cannot be inferred through morphological concatenation. Their meanings are rooted in Yoruba culture and tradition. The respondents further revealed that children usually display certain peculiar features, signs, postures, attitudes or mannerisms at birth or immediately after birth for which the Yoruba tradition and culture have already prescribed specific names.

**Table 6.** Bestowed names / instant names / given names.  
Names brought from heaven (Orúkọ Àmútòrunwá).

(a) Òjọ	A male child that has his umbilical cord tied around his neck at birth.
(b) Àiná	The feminine for Òjọ: of the two names, the Ijebu uses Aina for both male and female.
(c) Àjàyí	A child born face down.
(d) Tàlàbí	A child born with head and body covered with caul or cowl.
(e) Òní	A name given to a baby who is very small in stature at birth, and who ceaselessly cries.
(f) Òla	A name given to a child that is born after Òní.
(g) Òtúnla	A name given to the younger sibling of Òla.
(h) Táíwò	The first to be delivered of a twin.
(i) Ètaokò	The third child of a triplet.
(j) Ìdòwú	A child born after a set of twins.
(k) Àlàbá	A child born after a set of twins.
(l) Ìgè	A child who presents the legs first, rather than the head at birth.
(m) Dàda	A child born with knotted hair or dreads.
(n) Òké	A child born with an unbroken membrane.
(o) Olúgbódi	A child born with a thumb and five fingers.
(p) Erinlè	A child born with an umbilical cord around his waist.

**Table 7.** Children named after circumstances at birth.

- (a) Adé sí onà (Ádésinà)  
Crown open road  
'Born after the parents have been barren for a long time'
- (b) Abí            òdún  
Give birth festive period  
'Born during Christmas or New Year'
- (c) Adé si órò (Adesoro)  
Crown come festival  
'Born during important festival'
- (d) A-ba            egún            dé (Abegunde)  
3SG-PREP masquerade come  
'Born during Egúngún festival'
- (e) A-bí            si            ònà (Abiṣṣnà)  
3SG-born PREP road  
'He/she was born on the road while going to or coming back from the farm'
- (f) A-ba            orisá            de (Aborisádé)  
3SG-PREP festival come  
'He/she was born during Orisa (festival)'
- (g) A-bí si (igba) ógun (Abisógun)  
3SG-born PREP war  
'A child born during a war'
- (h) Ómọ pé  
Child delay  
'A child who stayed beyond the regular nine months of gestation'
- (i) Bàba rí mi sá (Bàbarinsá)  
Father see PRO run  
'A child whose father died on the day he/she was born'
- (j) Yeye rí mi sá (Yeyerinsa)  
Mother see PRO run  
'A child whose mother died immediately he/she was born'
- (k) Bá mi dé ilé (Bámidelé)  
Follow PRO reach home  
'A child born while the parents were residing in another town different from their hometown'
- (l) Tí chin okún            bò (Tókúmbò)  
From PREP sea arrive  
'A child born overseas'

Table 7 contains names based on the circumstances surrounding the birth of a child. They may relate to the place of birth, events taking place at the time of birth, death of parents, festivals, sacred days and the manner of birth. The names under this category are grouped into three classes: (a) Anthroponyms, (b) Temporonyms and (c) Manner of birth.

- a) Anthroponyms are personal names that refer to the place of birth of the child, e.g. ‘Abiónà’, which means ‘a child born on the road while going to the farm’. More examples are given in Table 7.
- b) Temporonyms refer to names that relate to the period of time when birth happens. The period may relate to important Yoruba festivals, such as ‘òrisà’ festival or egúngún (masquerade) festival, e.g. ‘Abórisàdé’ and ‘Abéégúndé’, which mean ‘a child born during òrisà festival and egúngún (masquerade) festival, respectively.
- c) Manner of birth: This may relate to the sequence by which the mother has given birth. Table 6 shows, among others, the situation when twins are born, and how children born after them are automatically given specific names.

**Table 8.** Death prevention and survival names.

- (a) Má a ló mo (Malomo)  
Do NEG go again  
‘Do not go back again’
- (b) Kó sí oko (Kosoko)  
NEG BE hoe  
‘There is no hoe’
- (c) Igbe kó eyi (Igbekoyi)  
Bush reject DEM  
‘Forest has rejected this’
- (d) Dúró ki o jé ayè (Durojaye)  
Wait CONJ 2SG eat life  
‘Wait and live to enjoy life’
- (e) Aja  
‘Dog’

As reported by our respondents, there are special names that Yoruba parents give to certain children whose mothers suffer constant child mortality (see Table 8). The general belief among the Yoruba is that these children are predestined to torment their mothers through unstoppable mortality. Names that suggest pleas or abuse are given to such children. The Yoruba people believe that when these

children are pleaded with, or abused through their given names, they may decide not to return to the underworld. Names such as ‘Málòmó’ (‘Do not go again’), ‘Kòsókó’ (‘No hoe to dig the grave any more’), Bánjókò (‘Stay with me’), Dúrójayé (‘Wait and live to enjoy life’), Ajá (‘Dog’) and Eranko (‘Animal’) are given to these children, who are known as ‘Abíkú’ (‘Born to die’) in the Yorùbá community.

**Table 9.** Theophoric names.

- (a) Èsù dí onà iku (Èsùdinà)  
 Esu block way death  
 ‘Esu deity stops death (child mortality)’
- (b) Òrisà ki iya (Òrisàkiya)  
 Deity wipe suffering  
 ‘Deity wiped off my suffering’
- (c) Ògún sí onà (Ògúninà)  
 Ogun open road  
 ‘God of iron opened my womb’
- (d) Ifá b̀n mi (Fáb̀nmí)  
 Ifa give me  
 ‘Ifá (oracle) gave me (this child)’

The names in Table 9 depict Yoruba belief in supernatural beings and their power to give children. Thus, children who have been sought from other deities apart from God are named after the deities who have helped the parents in cases where there has been child mortality or barrenness.

**Table 10.** Names by parents’ profession, family belief or objects of worship.

- (a) Qd̀e ẁ mí  
 hunter like PRO  
 ‘I love being a hunter’
- (b) Àyàn ní yì (Àyàniyi)  
 drummer ASP fame  
 ‘Being a drummer is prestigious’
- (c) Ògún to i mole (Ògúntomole)  
 deity ADV PREP deity  
 ‘Ògún (The god of iron) is worthy to be worshipped’

- (d) Ifá ko iwà dé (Fákuadé)  
Ifa bring manner come  
'Ifá divination had brought someone with good character'
- (e) Awó yẹ mí  
divination fit PRO  
'Ifá divination fits me'

Names in Table 10, according to some respondents, are examples of names associated with a child's family's job, trade or profession and religion or belief. Any name that has *ode* 'hunter' or *ogún* 'god of iron' as a prefix is generally associated with families known for hunting. Some other names in this category are: *Ògúndèjì* 'god of iron becomes two', *Odékúnlé* 'Hunters fill the house', *Odétúndé* 'A hunter has come back again' and *Ògúnjémilúsi* 'god of iron has made me popular'. Any name that has 'ògún' as a prefix also indicates that the bearer is from a family who believes in the 'god of iron', known as 'Ògun'.

**Table 11.** Name by royalty.

- (a) Adé wá lé  
Crown come home  
'The crown has come home'
- (b) Adé dára  
Crown good  
'The crown is good'
- (c) Á-ja ogun gba adé (Ajagungbadé)  
3SG-fight war collect crown  
'The one who fought war to get a crown'

Names in Table 11 are given to princes. Every name in this Table contains the word 'ade', meaning crown, and by extension refers to the Yoruba institution of kingship or 'oba'. It is the exclusive and inalienable right of Yoruba princes to bear and answer to such names. There are a few princesses who bear names with 'ade' in them also. For example, Adesewa 'the crown beautifies me'. The Yoruba culture allows princes to be kings, while princesses can only be regents during interregnum.

### 6.3 New patterns of Yorùbá personal names

In the preceding sections, we have analysed tradition-based Yoruba personal names, which include *Orúko àmùtòrunwá* 'names that are brought from heaven', such as *Òkè* 'child born inside an unbroken membrane', and *orúko àbíkú* 'names

for those that die and are perceived to have been reincarnated'. In recent years, however, the giving of tradition-based Yoruba personal names as first names has sharply declined. Ìkotun (2013) argues that the current non-use of the tradition-based Yoruba personal names as first names is due to the following reasons: First, in the past, women used to give birth to children, in most cases, at home, and in some cases on the way to the farm. The people that assisted in the birth, such as *asaghèbí* 'mid-wives' or in some cases parents or grandparents, knew about the culture of the Yoruba people. It was they, after delivery, who would announce the child's name based on the circumstances that surrounded the birth of the child. From 1980 to the present, improved Western medical facilities and the church maternity system has meant that pregnant women prefer to have their babies delivered in hospitals. The doctors and the nurses/midwives who work in the hospitals are not deeply conversant with Yoruba culture. Further, because some babies are born through caesarian operations, it is difficult to know if babies are, for example, *ìgè* (a child who presents the legs first rather than the head at birth i.e. breach position) or *Òkẹ́* (a child born inside an unbroken membrane/placenta), to mention a few.

Similarly, profession-based names like *Àyánwálé* 'The drummer has come home' have almost ceased to exist as first names among the Yorùbá people because such professions have lost the prestige and respect they hitherto enjoyed. Further, when Nigerians or Yoruba people became church founders in the 1980s, new dimensions and patterns were introduced into the Yoruba naming system as shown in the following examples of Table 12.

**Table 12.** New dimensions and patterns in Yoruba names.

- (a) Olúwa ní o ni mí (Olúwalónimí)  
 God BE one own PRO  
 'God owns me'
- (b) Mo-ni olúwá (Molólúwa)  
 1SG-ASP God  
 'I have a God'
- (c) Kikida opé (Kikidáopé)  
 All thank  
 'All thanks'
- (d) Ìyanu olúwa  
 Miracle Lord  
 'The Lord's miracle'



- (e) Ti olúwa ni mí (Tolúwanímí)  
 PRO Lord BE PRO  
 ‘I am the Lord’s own’

Based on our discussion, it is clear that names and naming in Yoruba have undergone many changes, such as borrowing, loss of names, change in use of names and innovations in name shortening patterns (Orie, 2006). The changes are the result of contact with Islam and Christianity. The naming tradition described earlier was intact until the penetration of Islam into Yorubaland, followed by Christianity and colonization.

### 6.3.1 *Borrowing*

The first generation of Yoruba Muslims adopted Arabic names and discarded indigenous names, considering them paganistic. When it dawned on them that Yoruba names could be used to express tenets of their new faith (Oduyoye, 1972), indigenous names were used in addition to Arabic names. Examples of adopted Arabic names are given in Table 13.

**Table 13.** Yoruba Islamic names. Source: Orie (2006:8).

Islamic name	Male	Female	Meaning
(a) Habib	Habib-u	Habibatu	The friend or beloved
(b) Latif	Latifu	Latifatu	Servant of the subtle one
(c) Mumin	Mumini	Muminatu	The believer in God

The root names in Table 13 are gender-free and may be adapted as male or female names, depending on whether the suffix *-u* and infix *-at-* is attached to or infixes in the name, respectively (Orie, 2006:8).

**Table 14.** Yoruba Christian names.

Christian name	Adaptation	Alias	Meaning
(a) Solomon	Solomonu	Onímò	Wisdom
(b) Joseph	Jósèḗfù	Aláláá	Dreamer
(c) Mary	Meri/Màrià	Ìyá a Jèsù	Mother of Jesus

Christian names (Table 14) are adapted to fit the open syllable pattern of the Yorùbá language’s phonological structure. Thus, high vowels, [i] or [u] are inserted after final consonants. Up till the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, converts preferred the use of biblical names; however, Yoruba names are more common today. Most of the indigenous names that Christians give to their children involve Olúwa ‘the

Lord' or 'God' (Sodiku and Sodiq, 2004), as in the examples in Table 12. The marked change in Yoruba Christian names also extends to surnames, which have undergone modification. For example, Òrisáseyi ('Òrisà god has given me this child') has now become Olúwaseyi ('God has given me this child') and Fábùnmi ('Ifá oracle has given me this child') has now become Jésùbunmi ('Jesus has given me this child').

In the above examples, deity surnames have been dropped. The deity names have been replaced with 'Olúwa' (Lord) or Jesu (Jesus). According to Orié (2006:11), until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, indigenous surnames were considered sacred. Regardless of the religious persuasion of the Yorùbá people, they retained their surnames no matter how pagan they sounded. However, surname modification is a current trend among Yoruba Christian adherents who want to dissociate themselves from deity or idol worship.

### 6.3.2 Name loss

According to Orié (2006:6), two types of name loss are attested in Yoruba names, total loss and partial loss. Names are totally lost when both its form and the meaning have disappeared. For example, 'Èsùdínà' has become 'Dínà' through a morphological process of clipping. As claimed by Orié (2006:16), many indigenous names have disappeared through lack of use, among which are the following:

Sàlàkó (m.), Tàlàbí (f.)	A child born with umbilical cord around shoulder
Amúsàán (m.), Ato (f.)	A child born with the head covered with membrane
Olúgbódi (m. or f.)	A child born with a sixth finger

Orié (2006:16) reports that some names have lost their feminine forms; only the masculine forms are used today. Ìdòwú is both a male and female name but Sàlàkó and Amúsàn are used by males only. Olúgbódi is no longer used, possibly because modern medicine provides means of eliminating the extra finger. Some *Àbíké* names such as Ajá ('Dog'), Igbékòyí ('The bush refused this one'), Okú ('The dead one'), Òbòtúndé ('Monkey has arrived'), Ìjímèrè ('Brown monkey') and Àkísàáátán ('Rags are exhausted') have also been lost. With civilization and modernization, people no longer like to give such derogatory names to their children. Moreover, modern healthcare delivery systems have drastically reduced the rate of child mortality in Nigeria, and people are now also better informed about the causes of child death.

## 7 Conclusion

We have, in this article, examined names and naming system among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. We discussed, with examples, different categories of Yoruba names and argued that Yoruba names are drawn from the home context. The home context includes special circumstances surrounding the birth of children, the social, economic, political and other conditions of parents or families, the occupations or professions of the parents and the religious affiliation of the parents. The study finds that Yoruba names can be divided into two categories: unary names or one-word names and sentential names. Unary names are ‘àmútòrunwá’ (names brought from heaven), while sentential names are names derived from sentences; these cover many other types of names.

The article supports Ikotun’s (2013) argument that tradition-based Yoruba personal names no longer exist as first names due to improved Western medical facilities and church maternity systems, which have taken over the delivery of babies from ‘agbèbí’ (local midwives) and grandparents who knew about the culture of the Yoruba people and were associated with naming. The changes in the Yoruba naming system, such as name borrowing, loss of names and changes in use of Abíkú names have also been discussed. Finally, we contend that in spite of these changes or modifications to the traditions, patterns and practices in the Yoruba personal naming system, the underlying beliefs involved in naming a child remain potent and well-rooted in the Yoruba community.

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