

NAMES AND NAMING AMONG THE YORUBA

Modupe Oduyoye

Publisher, Sefer Books Ltd, Ibadan



A Yoruba naming ceremony.*

Ikomojade

On the eighth day after the birth of a baby (which takes place indoors), the baby is ceremonially 'brought out' in a ceremony known as *ikomojade* ("the taking of a child outside"). With the whole family in attendance, the baby is brought outside the house, water is poured onto the roof and the baby is taken inside while water from the roof drops onto the baby. This is the first *àlọ* ("go-ing out") and *abo* ("coming back") of the child in its life. The wish (the prayer) is:

Àlọ á dára the going out will be fine

Àbọ á sunwọ̀n the com-ing back will be well

The baby is not given any name yet, except for those "who bring their names from heaven."

*This picture was reprinted from Google images, naming ceremonies in Nigeria.

Ìṣọmọlórúkọ (the Naming of the Child)

The naming of the child follows the ceremony of *ikómọjádé*. The following symbolic materials are provided:

honey	–	to symbolize sweetness
salt	–	to symbolize sweetness
sugar cane	–	to symbolize sweetness
kola nuts	–	to symbolize the briskness of health and strength
bitter kola	–	to symbolize long life
alligator pepper	–	to symbolize plenteousness of seeds (many children)

The grandfather carries the baby and announces: "I name this child _____" Then he puts the tip of his finger into each of the materials and touches the lips of the child with it in turn, saying the appropriate prayer.

"Your life will be as sweet as honey"

"You will be as prolific as a pod of alligator pepper"

Then other male persons follow with their own names, in order of seniority, beginning with the father of the child. Older women take priority over younger men. The child is showered with names. Every name is a good wish for the child or a declaration of what is happening currently in the fortunes of the person giving the name.

Landmarks in the Family History

The Yoruba say: *Ilé l' à í wò kí a tó sọ 'mọ l'órúkọ* ("It is the home we look at before we give a child a name"). The name one gives one's grandchild or child is determined by the circumstances of one's home (family) at the time of the arrival of the child. The circumstances may be determined by factors like religion, occupation, status, etc.

Religion

Ògún:	Ògúnlèsì, Ògúnlàná, Abógunrin
Şàngó:	Şàngówánwá
Qya:	Abóyadé, Qyálàná
Èfun:	Èfúnkọyà; Ògúnmefun; Èfunşetán.
Ọṣun:	Ọṣun(ó)dínà, Ọṣun(ó)kọyà, Ọṣun(ó)tó-òkuro.
Ifá:	Fálàná, Fálùsì, Fásòrò, Fátóíkí, Fá-éè-şòràn-tí, Fámoriyò, Fádáiró, Onífádé

Osó:	Şóyinká, Şóláńkẹ́, Şónáíkẹ́, Şónóíkí
Awo:	Awólówọ̀, Awókọ̀yà, Awo-èè-şikà, Awo(ó)n-iyì
Odù:	Odù(ó)tọ́lá, Odù(ó)yoyẹ̀, Odù(ó)bẹ̀là
Egúngún:	A-beégundé
Olúyẹ̀lú:	Olúlàánú, Qlá-Olú, Elú-şadé, Olú-şolá, Olú-fẹ̀mi, Olúfúnmiláyọ̀, Olú-dá-lí-sí.

Family occupations

Àyàn (drumming):	Àyàndélé, Aláyandé, Àyànbádéjọ
Qnà (art):	Qnà(ó)bólú, Qnà(ó)bamiró, Qnà(ó)fọwọ̀kàn, Qnà(ó)díipẹ̀.
Oşé (<i>bi-pennis</i> of Şàngó):	Ba-m(i)gb(é)osé
Owú (hammer of blacksmith):	Jíbówú,
Ògún (prototype of blacksmiths):	Ogunlèsì, Ogunnúgà



Figure 1. Oba Ademola (The crown goes along with honour), Alake of Egbaland (1926 - 1962).

Status

Adé (crown):	Adémólá, Adéoyé, Adéboyè,
Oyè (title of chieftaincy):	Ọlá-oyè, Abíòyè,
Ọlá (high estate):	Ọlá(ó)di-púpò
Akin (valour):	Akin-(ó)-yẹmi, Akin-(ó)-yẹlé, Akin-éè-ku-gbé, Akin-éè-bòhùn
Ọşin/Ọşẹn (king):	Ọşin(ó)kan-lú, Ọşin(ó)tè-lú, Otubu-şẹn



Figure 2. Oba Aderemi (The crown consoles me), Ooni of Ife (1930 - 1980).

Structure and Meanings of Yoruba Names

Without giving the meanings of Yoruba names, they have no significance. Each person who gives a child a name in Yoruba land is trying to express an idea, as he/she does when communicating in the language.

Yoruba names are so many that to attempt to give their meanings one by one will be like trying to compress a dictionary of Yoruba names into an article in a journal.¹

Noun phrases

Ògún-adé:	The Ògún (of) royalty
Adé-ògún:	The crown (of) Ògún
Adé-ọlá:	The crown (of) high estate
Ọlá-Ifá:	The high estate (of) Ifá"
Agbo-ọlá:	The social circle (of) high estate
Baba-l-ọlá:	Father is (the source of) honour
Oyin-l-ọlá	Honey is fame/Fame is sweet
Ade-b-oye:	A crown is (the essence of) a title (cf. Adé-oyè: A crown (of) a title)
Ọmọ-n-iyì:	Children are (sources of) prestige
Ọmọ-l-ará:	Children are (next of) kin
Oye-l-ọlá:	A title is (an emblem of) high estate
Ọmọ-l-ẹwà:	A child is beauty

Subject-verb object

Oyè-(ó)ṣ-ọlá:	A chieftaincy title (it) effects fame
Adé-(ó)-ṣ-ọlá:	A crown (it) effects fame (cf. Adé- ọlá: A crown (of) high estate)
Ogún-ṣ-ọlá:	Ogún effects fame
Ògún-ṣ-ẹyẹ:	Ògún effects glory

Subject-adverb-verb

Baba-(ó)tún-dé:	Father again arrives
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¹ A. Babalola and O. Alaba, 2003. *A Dictionary of Yoruba Personal Names*. West African Book Publishers, Lagos; M Oduyoye, 1972. *Yoruba Names; Their Structure and their Meanings*. Daystar Press, Ibadan.

- (I)ye-(ó)-tún-dé: Mother (she) again arrives
 Akin-(ó)tún-dé: The valiant one (he) again arrives
 Qmṛ-(ó)-tún-dé: A child (it) again arrives

These names chronicle deaths and births in the family. The male child born after the death of his grandfather is *Babatunde*. The female child born after the death of her grandmother is *Yétúndé* or *Iyabò* (Mother returns). A child born after the death of a previous child is *Qmṛtúndé* (child again arrives) or *Olúrẹ̀mi* (God consoles me).



Figure 3. An elderly woman with memorial figures of her deceased twins (Taiwo & Kehinde).

Recurrent child mortality

If a woman loses her infant child over and over again, the child is considered to be an *àbíkú* (one who is born to die). When it is born again, it is given names like:

- Kalẹ̀jayé: Sit down and enjoy life
 Málomó: Do not go any more
 Bámijókòó: Sit down with me
 Kú-jò(w)ó-rẹ̀: Death spared it
 Kú-dá-(è)yí-sí: Death spared this one
 Kú-kọ-(è)-yí: Death rejected this one
 Olẹ̀-túbò: The thief-returns

Recurrent child mortality involves the family in fruitless medical expenses which is like losing money to a thief.

Bringing one's names from heaven

The circumstances of birth of some children mark them out. Take twins for example, they do not wait till the eighth day to be named.

Táiwò (*a tó ayé wò*: taste the world to see)

Kẹ̀hìndé (*a kó ẹ̀hìn dé*: bring up the rear)

No creativity is required on the part of the parents to name the twins. The next child is automatically *Ìdòwú* (*Twi Tewla* in Ghana). And the one after *Ìdòwú* is automatically *Àlàbá*.

Àjàyí:	A child born facing down
Òjó/Àiná:	A child born with the umbilical cord twined around its neck ²
Dada:	A child born with its hair knotted together
Ìgè:	A child who presents feet first when the mother is in labour
Sàlàkó(boy):	A child born with the head and body covered with the caul (amniotic membrane)
Tàlàbí(girl)	

The words in some of these names brought from heaven are archaic. Their meanings are hidden in onomatology (the science of the formation of names or terms) and onomastics. A child born during a festival (òdún) is called *Abíòdún* or *Abòdúnrìn/Abòdúndé*. A child born on a day of rest (òsẹ̀) is *Abíòsẹ̀* or *Abòsẹ̀dé*. A child born on the road (ònà) is *Abíònà*. The short forms of these names are the forms without the 'A' (one who): *Bíòdún*, *Bòdúnrìn*, *Bòsẹ̀dé*.

PART II

Mabel Şégún dedicated her collection of short stories, *The Surrender and Other Stories*, to *Qmọwunmí*, my favourite daughter, who happens to be my only daughter. 'Mọwunmi is not the only child of Mabel Şégún: two boys preceded her. But she did not call any of the boys *Qmọ(o) wunmi* — "A child (she) is-attractive-to-me" (I like children). She could not, for *Qmọwunmi* is a name of endearment, and the Yoruba reserve names of endearment for girls. For example:

<i>A-dù-k'ẹ̀</i>	That which is rushed-to-pet (Cf. 'A-dù-b'i)
<i>A-bẹ̀-k'ẹ̀</i>	The one whom (one) begs to pet (Cf. 'A-b'ẹ̀-b'i)
<i>A-j-í-k-ẹ̀</i>	That which (one) wakes up to pet
<i>A-ş-à-k'ẹ̀</i>	That which (one) selects to pet (Cf. <i>A-ş-à-bí</i>)
<i>A-m-ò-k-ẹ̀</i>	That which to know is to pet (Cf. <i>A-m-ọ-o</i>)
<i>A-b-í-k-ẹ̀</i>	One which is born to-be-petted
<i>A-j-ọ-k-'ẹ̀</i>	That which is jointly petted (Cf. <i>A-j-ọ-b'i</i>)
<i>Qlá-j-um'ọk'ẹ̀</i>	Fame joined to pet (Cf. 'A-j-ù-m'ò-bí)
<i>A-f-ọ-l-a-k-ẹ̀</i>	That which-with-high-repute is petted (Cf. <i>A-f-ọ-l-á-b-í</i>)
<i>A-t-i-n-ú-k-ẹ̀</i>	That which -from-the-womb-is petted

² The Ijebu do not use the name Òjó.

- Mo-r(i)ohun-k'ẹ́* I found something to pet (Cf. *Mo-r(i)ohun-f(ún)-ol'ú*)
Mo-f-ol-ú-k'ẹ́ I employ God to pet (Cf. *Mo-f-ql'orun-şo*)
(K'i-)k'ẹ́-l-omọ A child is for petting
Ad-é-b'á-n-k'ẹ́ The crown-joined-me-to pet (Cf. *Ad-é-b'á-n-jọ*)
A-j-i-b-(á)-'ik-ẹ́ One who wakes up to meet petting (Cf. *A-jí-b-óyé, A-j-i-b-á-d-é*)

These are names which grand mothers give to their grand daughters. Contrast *A-t-ínú-kẹ́ Ige* (female) with *A-j-i-b'ó-l'á Ige* (male).

'Mówùnmi has another name, *Ará-mí-dé* (My kin arrives). *Ará*³ occurs in two other names for girls — *Omọ-l-ará* (children are one's next of kin) and *Omọ-t-ará* (a child is worth as much as a next of kin). There is a debate about which is considered to be a more intimate word of relationship — omọ or ará? The Yoruba say:

Omọ-n-idẹ (children are bronze)

Akpa-l-ar'á (your arms are your next of kin)

They also say: *B'ina bajo ni jo omọ ẹni, t'ara ẹni l'a ikọ gbọn* (If fire touches you and your child, it is the fire that touches you that you should first shake off).

My father's eldest brother gave his first three children omọ-names:

Omọ (ó)t-ayọ A child is sufficient for joy (a boy)

Omọ (ó) wùn-mi (a girl)

Omọ-l-ar'á (a girl)

It does not seem that the name *Omọlara* is ever given to a first child — *Omọlara Ogundipẹ-Leslie*, is the second of two sisters, neither of them a first child. The name *Ara-mí-dé* has the same structure as its male counterpart: *Ólù-mí-dé* (my *Olu* arrives). *Ólù-mí-dé* is hardly ever the name of a first child. *Ólùmídé Kùkọyí* is the second child of my uncle; *Olúsànyà*, and *Ólùmídé Şowùnmi* is the second child of *Oluşẹgun Şowùnmi*. He came after a girl who, by title, is a *Bẹ́ẹ̀rẹ̀*, like Mrs. Olufunmilayọ Ransome-Kuti. A child named *Ólùmídé* is like David (Hebrew: *Dawid*, Yoruba: *Dáwódù* > *Dáódù*, Qur'anic: *Dau da*).⁴

The nickname, *Akérele* (one who though small is tough), would have fitted *Haile Selassie II*, Lion of Judah, *Negusa nagast*, the last *negus* of the Amhara. He was deified

³ *Ará* (kin) has a by-form in Yoruba — *ara* (body, skin).

⁴ *Dawid* was *Akéredolú*: One who-though small-become s-primus (I Samuel 16: 1-13)

by the Rastafarians of Jamaica, in recognition of his defeat of the army of Mussolini in the Battle of Adowa. Haile Selassie (the power of the Trinity) was a short man (like Paul of Tarsus), and Amharic *haile* is Yoruba 'O *le* (it is tough) in the Yoruba nick-name.

Wurà-ql-á (Gold of honour)

This is matched with *Qlá-iyá*⁵ ("The fame/money of mother is without hassle), or *Qmu-iyá-dùn* (The breast-milk of mother is sweet).

Ìy-a-ni-wúrà (Mother is gold)

This is matched with *Babalolá* (Father is for status)

The first Nigerian female senator was Mrs. Wuraqla Eṣan (nee Ojo), the founder of People's Girls' School, Molete, Ibadan. The *Iyalode* of Ibadan at the time the Hinderers worked as missionaries in Ibadan (1857) was *Efunṣetan Aniwura*. The first was her name, the second was a nickname she was given because of her wealth.

According to the Yoruba:

<i>Qmṛ-l'èrè-ayé</i>	Children are the profits of life
<i>Qmṛ-l-olú</i>	A child is paramount
<i>Qmṛ (ó) wón</i>	A child is not easy to come by (A child is expensive)
<i>Qmṛ (ó) borí-owó</i>	A child transcends money
<i>Qmṛ (ó) ya jowó</i>	A child is faster than money
<i>Owó-é è-t(ó)-qmṛ</i>	Money does not reach (the value of) children

The last five names have become surnames. Surnames are not traditional in Yoruba culture. My own full identity would be specified thus: *Modupé qmṛ Qṣinfowora qmṛ Oduyoye ni ile Ajé-ni-í--ojú-òré-jé ní Italajoda ni Ijèbu Ode!* Yoruba *qmṛ* is cognate with *von* in German (*von* Bismark), *van* in Dutch (*van* Dyke) *ben* in Hebrew (*ben* Gurion), and 'ibn in Arabic.

Àárín (middle)⁶ occurs in *Àárín-qlá*, the name of the third child of Reverend Daniel Olubi, is a girl who came after two boys. When a son comes after two or more daughters, he is named *Qkan-là-wón* (One who separates them). The name *Ṣó-l(a)-àárín*

⁵ Cf. *Gbèdè lowó iyá*.

⁶ *Al'-rinà*: middle man in marriage negotiations; *Ad'iyè irànà*: the chicken that clears the way before a corpse.

(The seer splits a path through the middle) has the verb *là* which occurs in the following names:

<i>Ogún-làṅà</i>	Ogun clears a path
<i>Dé-làṅà</i>	The crown clears a path
<i>Fá-làṅà</i>	Ifa clears a path
<i>Adé-la-bù</i>	The crown (the king) clears (a path through) deep waters
<i>Adé-la-jà</i>	The crown separates the fight

Akin⁷ does not occur in Yoruba names for girls. The Yoruba do not expect their daughters to become warriors. The Yoruba say: *Ikú ogun nii kpa akinkanjú* (It is death in the battle field that kills a brave warrior). If a warrior dies in the battle field, his child born soon after may be named *Akin-é è-kú-gbé* (the brave one did not die in vain), *Akin-é è-ni-ìgb-àgbé* (there is no forgetting for a brave man) or *Kú-m-olú* (death took the leader). It is considered odd for a girl to have the name *Kúmólú*.

Akin-là-wón (The brave one separates them) is the full form of the name of Professor Akin Mabogunḡ. He says in his autobiography, *A Measure of His Grace*:

I was the first boy of the family after a succession of girls. My arrival was extremely welcome, at least by my father. My first name, Akinlawón, means 'A brave one comes between them', the them, of course, being the girls.

Iconoclasm in Yoruba Names

I received a text message from Pastor Mola but did not reply because I could not work out who was Pastor Mola. About a month later, I found on my shelf a book by Pastor Sina Mola. He had actually autographed it when he gave it to me. I looked at the back and saw the photograph of the author. "But this is Margaret's brother," I said to myself. Isn't their surname *Ogunmola*?" Now I got the clue. Having become born again, and a pastor of a Pentecostal church for that matter, Sina dropped *Ogun*, the theophoric part of his surname, leaving only Mola!

What is *Ogún*? Or who was *Ogún*? *Ogún* is the patron of Yoruba blacksmiths. The Hahm (Ham) people of Kwoi in the area of the Nok culture attribute the iron slags

⁷ *k-n* in Yoruba *akin* (*Òdúmakin*) is *k-n* in Yoruba *okun* (vigour), *èkùn* (tiger)

outside their villages to *Kuno*, whom they call 'devil'.⁸ This is an extreme case of the demonization of the pioneers of the Iron Age in Africa.

So what do we do? Give up all the *scientia* of ancient Africa, because those who do not have *scientia* or gnosis see pharmacognosis as witchcraft? Bishop *Osanyin* of the CMS Yoruba Mission did not drop the connection of his ancestors with the patron saint of healing. Neither did Bishop *Odotola* drop the *odu* in his surname. Bishop *Awosan* retained his surname even though he was not a *babalawo*.

PART III

Naming among the Yoruba: A Postscript by Pat Oyelola

The practices carried out in Yoruba naming ceremonies differ slightly from town to town, and even from family to family within the same town. However, the purpose of the naming ceremony is always the same — to integrate the baby into the family and the community, through elements which have a symbolic significance. What follows is the description of the naming ceremony conducted in the 1960's for the new-born babies of an Egba family from Ilugun Asalu, in Abeokuta.

Girls are named on the 7th day, while the boys are named on the 9th day. The ceremony takes place early in the morning. A boy and a girl from the family of the baby's father are chosen to represent the original ancestors, *Oşplufẹ* and *Yemowi*. They each hold a shallow carved calabash bowl bought in the market. Meanwhile, various items of food are cooked and placed in small clay bowls: these must include a fish, a bird, a bush animal and yam mashed with palm oil. Water, palm-oil, honey and kolanuts are also required. Two small holes are dug outside to the right and left of the entrance to the house; these will receive morsels of the food for the ancestors.

The mother with her baby sits in front of the entrance to the house with a small dish and a bowl of water beside her. The baby's paternal grandmother then takes a morsel of each of the food items, touches the lips of the baby with it and puts it in the mother's dish. The mother will later eat the accumulated food, which the baby will imbibe through her milk. *Oşplufẹ* and *Yerowi* also take morsels of food, after the grandmother, and put them in their calabash bowls. As the grandmother touches the lips of the baby with the various types of food, she says in Yoruba:

This is fish from the river. May nothing that you eat that lives in the river do you any harm!

⁸See Byang Kato. 1975. *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. Evangel Pub. House, Nairobi, Kenya.

This is a bird that flies in the air. May nothing you eat that flies in the air do you any harm!

This is a rodent that lives on the earth. May nothing you eat that lives on the earth do you any harm!

This is food, May nothing you eat that grows in the soil do you any harm. (This accompanies the yam mashed with palm oil)

This is palm-oil for peace and tranquillity. May your life be peaceful and tranquil.



ŌKE ALEJI, ABEOKUTA

PHOTO: R. ELKINGTON

The grandmother then pronounces the name given by the grandfather, dropping a few coins into the bowl of water by the mother's side. Then all those present, whether members of the family or not, drop coins into the bowl, either repeating the name given by the grandfather or giving names of their own choice. The money in the bowl belongs to the

mother of the baby. *Qşolufẹ* and *Yemowi* then put the contents of their calabashes into the holes in front of the house for the ancestors. They cover the holes with earth, using their left feet. Water is now thrown on the roof of the house and the mother runs in and out carrying the baby, while the young people 'beat' her with flexible twigs (*atori*).

The baby is tapped gently with twigs by an elder of the family — 7 times for a girl and 9 times for a boy — who repeats the names the baby has been given by the grandfather. The elder will then receive a 'beating' from the young people to show that s/he is a member of the same family as the baby. This beating recalls *Qdun Ikereku*, the arrival festival formerly celebrated by this family, during which young people beat each other vigorously with flexible twigs (*atori*).

The traditional ceremony is followed at a later date by a Christian baptism. Now, however, the ceremony described above is no longer practised. The younger generation regard it as pagan and therefore undesirable.