Yoruba Traditional Names and the Transmission of Cultural Knowledge[1]

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Introduction

Perhaps because of the paradoxical function of names in classifying a person simultaneously as an individual and as a product and reflection of society, anthropologists have been preoccupied with the classificatory function of naming[2] and the relationship between naming practices and social structure.[3] Consequently, less attention has been given to the communicative functions of personal names, especially their use in cultural transmission.

Following the themes already outlined in my previous work,[4] the present paper fills this lacuna by demonstrating how ritually significant information is coded in Yoruba personal names and how a sociolinguistic study of such names can enrich our understanding of Yoruba ritual knowledge and world view. The focus is on three ritually motivated subtypes of Yoruba traditional names: (a) *orúkọ àmútòrunwá* "names brought from heaven," (b) *orúkọ àbíkú* "names of born-to-die children," and (c) *orúkọ ẹ̀yà* "names of reincarnated children."

Each of the three subtypes of Yoruba names considered here is a

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[2]See, for example, Rodney Needham, "The System of Teknonyms and Death-Names of the Penan." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 10 (1954), 416–431; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966); and Russel H. Bernard, "Paratsoukli: Institutionalized Nicknaming in Rural Greece," *Ethnologia Europaea*, 2 (1968), 65–74.

[3]For example, see K.F. Spencer, "The Social Context of Modern Turkish Names," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 17 (1961), 205–218; Ward H. Goodenough, "Personal Names and Modes of Address in Two Oceanic Communities," in *Context and Meaning in Cultural Anthropology*, ed. M. Spiro (New York: Free Press, 1965); and Stanley Brandes, "The Structural and Demographic Implications of Nicknames in Navanogal, Spain," *American Ethnologist*, 2 (1975), 139–148.

[4]F. Niyi Akinnaso, "The Sociolinguistic Basis of Yoruba Personal Names," *Anthropological Linguistics*, 22 (1980), 275–304; and "Names and Naming Principles in Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Names*, 29 (1981), 37–63.

relatively closed set and does not admit freely of additional membership. Each is associated with a distinct type of ritual. The ritual considerations that motivate each subtype will be examined along with the sociolinguistic devices used to distinguish its members. The effects of literacy, Christianity, and Islam on Yoruba ritual names will be discussed as well as the traditional mechanisms used in perpetuating the names in spite of literacy and exogenous religions. The paper draws on historical, anthropological, folkloristic, and linguistic resources; and material from these different perspectives have been juxtaposed to stylistically reflect how the Yoruba integrate historical, cultural, and linguistic knowledge in both the construction and interpretation of personal names.[5]

Cultural and Linguistic Bases

Besides its more obvious function which is the differentiation of individuals, personal naming in Yoruba is another way of talking about what one experiences, values, thinks, and knows in the real world. Consequently, the construction of Yoruba personal names is based on systematic cultural principles and the coding of information into them is based on the lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic rules of the language.

Three basic sociocultural principles underly the construction of Yoruba personal names.[6] These are (a) the "home context" principle which defines the nature and context of the special circumstances (social, economic, political, religious, sentimental, etc.) on which a given personal name is based; (b) the "positive sanction" principle which calls for the elimination of socially unacceptable information from personal names; and (c) the "generality" principle which permits the abstraction from a multiplicity of events (statable in several sentences) of short generalizations which can then be used in personal name construction. Such generalizations can take the form of sentences or nominals.[7]

A typology of Yoruba personal names can be made according to the nature of the motivating home context or the semantic patterns exhibited by the names.[8] While such a typology will not be attempted here, two

[5]For further illustration of this approach, see Akinnaso, "Sociolinguistic Basis," and "Naming Principles."

[6]The cultural principles and lingusitic manifestations of Yoruba personal names are respectively discussed in Akinnaso, "Naming Principles," and "Sociolinguistic Basis."

[7]For an account of the derivation of Yoruba personal names from sentences, see Akinnaso, "Sociolinguistic Basis"; and S.A. Ekundayo, "Restrictions on Personal Name Sentences in the Yoruba Noun Phrase," *Anthropological Linguistics*, 19 (1977), 55–77. The derivation of Yoruba personal names from nominal compounds is discussed in F. Niyi Akinnaso, "On the Syntax and Semantics of Nominal Compounds in Yoruba Personal Names," *BLS*, 7 (1981), 1–12.

[8]For a typology based on semantic patterns, see Adeboye Babalọla, "Patterns in Yoruba Personal

broad morphologically contrastive types of Yoruba names should be distinguished, the distinction being based on folk classificatory terms. These are *orúkọ àbísọ* "names given after birth (i.e., during the naming ceremony)" and *orúkọ àmútọrunwá* "names brought from heaven." *Àmútọrunwá* names are motivated by unusual or abnormal birth circumstances (see 1–13 below), and are obligatorily given to children born under such circumstances as are considered abnormal.

On the other hand, *àbísọ* names are those motivated by various other types of home context — religious, social, occupational, sentimental, etc. While *àbísọ* names are given only during the naming ceremony, *àmútọrunwá* names can be given as soon as the baby is born by anyone who can match names with abnormal or ritually significant birth conditions. However, regardless of whether it has an *àmútọrunwá* name, a baby will still be initiated through the naming ceremony where several *àbísọ* names will be given to it, as usual. In some cases, an *àbísọ* name may supersede the *àmútọrunwá*. This, in fact, is usually the case where there is more than one child with the same *àmútọrunwá* name in the family. These two classes of names are structurally differentiated: *àbísọ* names are marked for various grammatical processes, using words drawn from the Yoruba lexicon, whereas *àmútọrunwá* names are generally unmarked, being mostly formed from non-lexicalized nouns and so constituting an esoteric lexical domain. Since they are not often suggestive of the special birth circumstances to which they refer, *àmútọrunwá* names have to be specially learned.

Àbíkú and *ẹ̀yà* names are ritually motivated subsets of *àbísọ* names. They are normally given during the naming ceremony to children believed to be reincarnations of themselves (*àbíkú*) or of highly valued ancestors (*ẹ̀yà*). Like other *àbísọ* names, *àbíkú* and *ẹ̀yà* names make use of common words of the Yoruba lexicon and can convey a wide range of information, reflecting the namers' attitudes or expectations and other circumstantial details. Furthermore, while special (ritual) knowledge is required for decoding *àmútọrunwá* names, *àbíkú* and *ẹ̀yà* names are more semantically transparent and so can be more easily decoded.

Àmútọrunwá, *àbíkú*, and *ẹ̀yà* names evoke a world in which life and death are complementary phases of the same eternal existence, what happens in one being both a part and a transformation of the other. Within this context, "the limits between life and death do not really exist. Life is

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born from death and death, in turn, is the prolongation of life."[9] Thus, the Yoruba cosmos contains a hierarchy of beings, divinities, and spirits, all mutually participating in an endless communication network spanning both physical and spiritual worlds. At the top of the hierarchy is the Supreme Being variously called *Olódùmarè, Ọlọ́run, Ẹlẹ́dàá, Alàáyè*, etc. Next are the *òrìṣa* "divinities," *àwọn baba ńláa wa* "our ancestors," and other various categories of spiritual beings, all functioning as "ministers" of *Olódùmarè*. At the bottom of the hierarchy are human beings, seeking protection of the Supreme Being through the assistance of divinities and the ancestors.

In Yoruba traditional thought, humans are believed to be composed of various elements, the most important of which are *ara* "the corporeal element," *ẹ̀mí* "the spirit," *ori* "head" in its physical and spiritual senses, and *orí inú* "the soul." This complex composition reflects several complementary properties of being and relates directly to Yoruba beliefs about ancestor worship, devotion to divinities, sacrifice, and the related beliefs about *àmútọ̀runwá*, *àbíkú*, and *ẹ̀yà*, promoting a cosmos in which communication is possible between humans, dead ancestors, divinities, and other spirits. Indeed, as noted by Karin Barber in a recent article, the Yoruba cosmos is one in which "relations between humans and *òrìṣà* are in some sense a projection of relations between people in society."[10] It is this view of extended relationship between humans, *òrìṣà*, dead ancestors, and other spirits that underlies the present analysis.

Àmútòrunwá Names

When a child is born, say, inside an unbroken membrane or with the legs first rather than the head, the Yoruba do not believe that it is accidental. They regard such unusual birth circumstances as ritually significant, believing children born under such abnormal conditions to be specially created. Hence, such children are regarded more or less as *òrìṣà*, being worshipped almost like regular divinities. Any of the following *àmútọ̀runwá* names is given to such children, depending on the peculiar nature of their birth condition:

1. *Òjó* (male)/*Aina* (female) = Child born with the umbilical cord twined around its neck.

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[9]Dominique Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality and Thought of Traditional Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970/1979), p. 45.

[10]Karin Barber, "How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes Towards the *Òrìṣà*," *Africa*, 51 (1981), 724–745.

2. *Àjàyí* = Child born with the face downward.
3. *Ìgè* = Child born with the legs presented first rather than the head.
4. *Ìlọ́rí* = Child conceived without previous menstruation.
5. *Igísanrín* = Child born with an unusually curled umbilical cord.
6. *Òkè* = Child believed to be allergic to hot water and medication.
7. *Amúṣan* (male)/*Ato* (female) = Child born with the head and face completely covered with the membrane.

8a. *Dàda* = Child born with unusually curly hair.
b. *Èkìnnẹ̀* = Child born with unusually soft and slightly curly hair.

9a. *Odù* = Child born with six fingers on each hand.
b. *Olúgbódi* = Child born with six toes on each foot.

10a. *Ọ̀kẹ́* = Child born inside an unbroken membrane.
b. *Àjàsá* = Child born wearing the membrane around its body (i.e., with the head and feet uncovered).
c. *Sàlàkọ́* (male)/*Tàlàbí* (female) = Child born with the umbilical cord hanging over its shoulder.

11a. *Erinlẹ̀ Ojútù* = Child born with the umbilical cord twined around its right hand.
b. *Erinlẹ̀ Àbátàn* = Child born with the umbilical cord twined around its left hand.
c. *Erinlẹ̀ Ibú Ìgbèrí* = Child born with the umbilical cord twined around its right leg.
d. *Erinlẹ̀ Ońdu* = Child born with the umbilical cord twined around its left leg.
e. *Erinlẹ̀ Ibú Ọ̀ṣọ́* = Child born with the umbilical cord twined around its waist.

12a. *Táíwò* = The first of twins or triplets.
b. *Kẹ́hìndé* = The second of twins or triplets.
c. *Òkò* = The third of triplets.
d. *Ìdòwú* = Child born next to twins or triplets.
e. *Àlàbá* = Child born next to *Ìdòwú*.

13a. *Òní* = Child who either did not cry at all at birth or cried so much that no one could pacify it.
b. *Ọ̀la* = Child born next to *Òní*.
c. *Ọ̀túnla* = Third child after *Òní*.[11]

[11]This list can be expanded to include the seventh child after *Òní*, using regular day names: *Ìrèní* (fourth day), *Ọ̀rúnní* (fifth), *Ìfàní* (sixth), and *Ìjèní* (seventh).

In the above list, names that share certain definable characteristics have been grouped together. These characteristics are (a) similarity in birth condition: (8), (9), (11); (b) sequentiality: (12), (13); and (c) historical affinity: (10). For example, the names in (11) refer to children born with the umbilical cord in an unusual position while those in (12) refer to the sequential birth of twins or triplets and the children born after them.

Numerous references to the first bearers of *àmútọ̀runwá* names in Yorubaland abound in the people's folklore. For example, it is believed that the first bearer of *Dàda* (8a) was the elder brother of Ṣàngó "God of Thunder" who lived in the historical town of Ọyọ. *Ṣàngó* was a brave and daring man who would not tolerate any insult to his brother. He was always quick to come to *Dàda's* defence. Hence the proverb—still used in contemporary Yoruba—

14. *Bí Dàdá kò lè jà, ó ní àbúrò tí ó gbójú*
"Even if Dada cannot fight, he has a very brave brother (who can)."

Similarly, the attributes of the first bearer of *Òjó* (1) are often recalled in Yoruba oral history. He was a virile and troublesome man. His diet consisted mainly of black-eye peas (beans) and female chickens (mature hens). The contemporary significance of this diet is that it constitutes the basic ingredients sacrificed at ritual ceremonies performed for any bearer of the name *Òjó* (or *Àìná*). Folk tales of this kind exist for the other *àmútọ̀runwá* names.

A distinctive type of ritual is associated with each type of unusual birth condition. The basic scenario of the ritual is as follows: Relatives, friends, and well wishers of the bearer of an *àmútọ̀runwá* name are gathered in his/her parents' home. Libations are poured in honor of the first bearer of the name and symbolically in honor of the present bearer. This is followed by the rehearsal of the special *oríkì* "praise-incantation name" and singing of the special hymn associated with the relevant *àmútọ̀runwá* name. Then food is served which consists mainly of the diet associated with the first bearer of the name as well as food customarily associated with ritual.

For example, the *oríkì* (15) and special song (16) for *Òjó* (1) are as follows:[12]

[12]Although there are several dialectal variants of the *oríkì* and song, the substance is basically the same. The versions presented here (as well as some of the *àmútọ̀runwá* names in (1)–(13)) are those collected by Chief Fagbemi Ajanaku and reported in Fẹla Ṣowande and Fagbemi Ajanaku, *Orúkọ Àmútọ̀runwá* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1969). The English translation is, however, my own responsibility. A few metaphorical lines in the *oríkì* and song have been translated freely while two idiomatic expressions are left untranslated. "Classical" expressions of this type are distinctive

15.	**Oríkì Òjó**	**Òjó's praise-incantation name**
	Òjó yẹ̀-wú-gẹ̀, alágada ogun!	*Òjó yèwúgè*, owner of war sword!
	Òjó jẹ́ngẹ̀-ti-ẹ̀lẹ̀.	*Òjó* who is never scared of anything.
	Ajagun bí akúra!	He fights a war with all his might!
	Òjó kò sí ní ilé	When *Òjó* is not home
	Ọmọ adìẹ dàgbà;	Small chicks can grow;
	Òjó ì bá wà ní ilé	If *Òjó* is home
	Ì bá ti pa ìyá adìẹ jẹ.	Mother-hen will be killed for food.
	Ò kìnà kíná	*Ò kìnà kínà*
	Tí ń ti ojú aládìẹ kì í sí iná!	Who roasts mother-hen while the owner looks on!
	Òjó ń lọ ata, aládìẹ ńkígbe.	When *Òjó* grinds pepper, the owner of mother-hen weeps.
	Òjó, kenke bí èlè!	*Òjó*, strong like iron!
16.	**Orin Òjó**	**Òjó's song**
	Òjó, Òjó, Òjó o, kenke bí èlè!	*Òjó, Òjó, Òjó o*, strong like iron!
	Yẹ̀wúgẹ̀, alágada ogun.	*Yewuge*, owner of war sword.
	Òjó o, kenke bí èlè!	*Òjó o*, strong like iron!
	Aya Òjó kì ń pe Òjó	*Òjó's* wife never calls him by his name
	Bí ó bá pe Òjó, o ń pe orí Òjó!	If she does, she will ritually incite *Òjó* into action!
	Òjó o, kenke bí èlè!	*Òjó o*, strong like iron!

Like Yoruba divinatory speech, the *oríkì* and the song are a form of stylized ritual communication. Their functions include (1) integrating the bearer of the *oríkì* within the network of family and ancestral lineage; (2) praising him by relating his distinctive qualities and, therefore, his uniqueness; (3) providing a medium for invoking the spiritual essence of the *oríkì* bearer and, subsequently, (4) ritually elevating him to a state of perfection, preparatory to faultless performance. Traditionally, every Yoruba is supposed to have an *oríkì* which can be rehearsed when any of these effects is desired. The significance of the *oríkì* and songs associated with bearers of *àmútòrunwá* names lies in their continued use for the storage, retrieval, and transmission of historical and ritual knowledge.

Because they are infinitely recursive, *àmútòrunwá* names provide a rich medium for the perpetual replication of cultural messages in a non-literate community. In their daily use, these names evoke a rich schema that promotes the processing of several messages simultaneously: the historical origin of *àmútòrunwá* names, the associated birth conditions, the appropriate ritual, and the relevant *oríkì* and special song. Though

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features of Yoruba ritual communication (see F. Niyi Akinnaso, "The Literate Writes and the Nonliterate Chants: Written Language and Ritual Communication in Sociolinguistic Perspective," in *Linguistics and Literacy*, ed. William Frawley (New York: Plenum Press, 1982, pp. 7–36).

repeatable, *àmútòrunwá* names are unique in form and meaning. In many ways, they are distinguished from *àbíkú* and *èyà* names.

Abiku Names

The full form of the term *àbíkú* is *ẹni tí a bí tí ó sì kú* "one who is born to die (young)." Essentially, the term refers to someone who is predestined to a continual cycle of birth, death and rebirth by the same woman.[13] In Yoruba folk belief, *àbíkú* children have their primary home in the forest (i.e., the spirit world), and are believed to have signed a pact with the spirit forces, promising early return after a taste of *ilé ayé* "the human world." Their migration between spiritual and human worlds is believed to be mediated by *ikú* "Death." This group of children is traditionally distinguishable by their personal names referred to in folk terminology as *orúkọ àbíkú* "*àbíkú* personal names."

Another distinguishing feature of *àbíkú* children is the *sàárà* "propitiatory sacrifice" performed by their parents on their behalf. Participating in the ritual are neighborhood children, usually of the *àbíkú's* age grade, symbolizing the *àbíkú's ẹgbẹ́* "spiritual companions." The ritual is characterized by generous food service, elaborate libations, singing and dancing. The ritual serves a dual purpose: (a) to propitiate the spirit forces and (b) to lure the *àbíkú* into staying permanently in *ilé ayé* "the human world" which is portrayed in the ritual as friendly, enjoyable, and protective.

Because of the apprehension of premature death, a predominant feature of *àbíkú* names is the overt or covert use of the concept of *ikú* "death" in their construction. Sometimes, the word occurs directly as *ikú* or in its contracted form as *'kú* or in its verbal form, *kú* "die." At other times, *ikú* or *kú* may not be overtly expressed in a given *àbíkú* name. In such cases, the overall semantico-pragmatic representations of the name and its underlying symbolic structures will jointly evoke the image of death and therefore of *àbíkú*. Let us, for a start, consider the following data:

17a.	*Kúsàánú*	Ikú ṣe àánú "Death was merciful"
b.	*Kúforíjì*	Ikú fi orí jì "Death granted a pardon"

[13]For an account of the *àbíkú* phenomenon among the Igbo, Basotho, and Marathi Indians, see, respectively, Christie Achebe, "Literary Insights into the Ogbanje Phenomenon," *Journal of African Studies*, 7 (1980), 31–38; Paulus M. Mohome, "Naming in Sesotho: Its Sociocultural and Linguistic Basis," *Names*, 20 (1972), 171–185; and Indira Y. Junghare, "Socio-Psychological Aspects and Linguistic Analysis of Marathi Names," *Names*, 22 (1975), 31–43.

c. *Kúyìnínnù* — Ikú yìn ín nù
"Death left him alone"

d. *Kújọ́ọ́rẹ̀* — Ikú jọ̀wọ́ọ̀ rẹ̀
"Death spared him"

Each of the above names is a simple declarative sentence constructed according to the lexico-grammatical and semantic rules of the Yoruba language. All the declarative sentence names affirm that the child's survival is due to Death's mercy or to the dissolution of the alliance between the child and Death, the underlying objective being to induce Death to leave the *àbíkú* children alone so that they can complete the legitimate life cycle. Though affirmative, these sentence names have an undertone of appeal; notice the use of subtle and appealing words/phrases such as *àánú* "mercy," *fòríjì* "pardon" and *yìnínnù* "leave him."

However, when Death fails to heed their pleas, parents often direct their anger at it by constructing *àbíkú* names that directly accuse Death of wrongdoing:

18a. *Kúṣìkà* — Ikú ṣe ìkà
"Death is very harmful"

b. *Kúṣoró* — Ikú ṣe oró
"Death causes severe pain"

c. *Kúrunmí* — Ikú run mí
"Death ruined me"

Like the preceding examples, these are also affirmative, declarative, sentence names, but the pragmatic focus shifts from appeal to indignation, harsh words being used in the hope that Death might stop its malevolent work by being told how harmful it is. Occasionally, however, parents resort to an angry, though often futile, command at Death to stop its malevolent work, as in the following example:

19. *Kúmápàyí* — Ikú má pa èyí
"Death, do not kill this one"

This last example is cast in the imperative mood even though parents are fully aware they have no control whatsoever over Death. However, the use of the imperative mood here serves a major psycholinguistic function, enabling the parents to release the emotional and psychological tension arising from their experience of the *àbíkú* phenomenon. When we consider the subjugating role of imperatives in natural discourse, we soon realize that *Kúmápàyí* is a command carefully coined to ritually downgrade and insult Death, while symbolically reflecting the intensity of the parents' agony.

When all appeals to Death fail to generate a change in the *àbíkú*

situation, parents often shift attention from Death to the *àbíkú* child itself in the belief that it must be party to the arrangement. When the focus is on the *àbíkú* child itself, four major linguistic devices are used in constructing *àbíkú* names. These are (a) conditional clauses, (b) imperatives, (c) negativizers, and (d) dehumanizing lexicon. Let us consider each of these in turn with typical examples drawn from attested Yoruba *àbíkú* names.

We start with conditional clauses as indicated by the following examples:

20a.	*Bíòbákú*	Bí (k)ò bá kú "If he does not die . . . "
b.	*Beyíòkú*	Bí èyí ò kú "If this one does not die . . . "

These uncompleted conditional statements are intended to keep the *àbíkú* child in suspense concerning the "goodies" that await it if it can stay and live long enough, thereby inducing it to renege its contract with the spirit forces. Conditional names also symbolize the uncertainties about the *àbíkú's* survival and the fears and doubts in the parents' minds.

Though they can be interpreted as a special kind of ritual insult, *àbíkú* imperative names, with a focus on the *àbíkú* child itself, have a rather pathetic emotional appeal. Consider the following examples:

21a.	*Mátànmí*	Má(ṣe) tàn mí "Do not deceive me"
b.	*Málọmó*	Má(ṣe) lọ mọ́ "Do not go (i.e., die) again"
c.	*Majékódùnmí*	Má(ṣe) jé kí ó dùn mí "Do not cause me any pain"
d.	*Máboògùnjé*	Má(ṣe) ba òògùn jé "Do not render medication ineffective"
e.	*Bánjòkó*	Bá mi jòkó "Sit down with me"
f.	*Bánkólé*	Bá mi kọ́ ilé "Help me to build a home"
g.	*Dúrósimí*	Dúró sin mí "Stay to bury me"
h.	*Dúrójayé*	Dúró jẹ ayé "Stay and enjoy life"
i.	*Dúróṣọmọ*	Dúró ṣe ọmọ "Stay and play the child"
j.	*Kalèjayé*	Kalẹ jẹ ayé "Sit down (i.e., take your time) and enjoy life"
k.	*Rótìmí*	(Dú)ró tì mí "Stay by me"

As can be deduced from the above examples, *àbíkú* imperative names demonstrate an unusual ambivalence. If we go by the usual pragmatic function of imperatives, especially their use in downgrading the addressee and thus creating social distance, these names indicate some special kind of ritual insult. Yet these same names also represent a subtle, though somewhat oblique, invitation to the addressee to come closer to the addressor. For it is by carrying out the instruction signalled by the predication that the addressee (*àbíkú* child) and the addressor (parent) can live together happily and fulfill normal life expectancies. Though apparently contradictory, these two functions of imperatives are intended in these names. In other words, *àbíkú* imperative names are both command and appeal, both insult and invitation. This ambivalent attitude toward the *àbíkú* is aptly demonstrated in Clark's famous poem on the subject.[14]

Though none of the imperative names in (21) contains an explicit reference to Death, they all evoke its image for the direct consequence of the *àbíkú's* negative response to the ritual command is death. The avoidance of direct reference to Death in these names indicates the Yoruba preference for indirectness, especially in making a request. When *ikú* is explicitly encoded in the imperative sentence name addressed to the *àbíkú* child, the pragmatic target is Death rather than the child. This is clearly illustrated by (22):

22. *Gbékúdè* — Gbé ikú dè
"Arrest Death and tie him (figuratively, prevent Death from taking action)"

Since this is, of course, an impossible task, it seems that the function of this name is not so much in instructing the *àbíkú* to punish Death as in ritually downgrading and insulting Death, thereby forcing him to leave the *àbíkú* child alone.

It should be pointed out at this juncture that parents sometimes allow a role reversal between them and the *àbíkú* child as in the following example:

23. *Másọmínù* — Má(ṣe) sọ mí nù
"Do not throw me away"

Here it is the *àbíkú* child talking to the parents, instructing them not to discard it. This is another use of indirectness which, in this case, metaphorically absolves the parents of any responsibility for the instruction contained in the name. The ultimate goal is to achieve the subtle inducement of the *àbíkú* to stay and live long.

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[14]J.P. Clark, "Abiku," in *Modern Poetry from Africa*, ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (London: Penguin, 1963).

When imperative names are not used, the Yoruba sometimes ritually instruct the *àbíkú* not to die by using the negative particle *kò* "not" or a negativizing verb *kò* "reject" in name construction. Consider, for example, the following common *àbíkú* names:

24a.	*Kòkúmọ́*	Kò kú mọ́ "It (the child) no longer dies"
b.	*Kòsọ́kọ́*	Kò sí ọkọ́ "There is no hoe"
c.	*Kúkòyí*	Ikú kọ èyí "Death rejected this one"
d.	*Ìgbẹ́kòyí*	Igbó kọ èyí "The forest rejected this one"

Culturally, these names ritually insult the *àbíkú* while emphasizing the Yoruba positive expectation that the child will no longer die prematurely as before. This idea is expressed sometimes indirectly as in *Kòsọ́kọ́* (24b) which is an oblique statement from the parents to the *àbíkú* that they no longer have any hoe to use in digging a grave in case the child chooses to die again! But, as can be deduced from the indirectness of the statement, there is an implicit undertone of appeal to the *àbíkú* not to die. In Yoruba folklore, the *àbíkú* love to be petted even when dead. Since lack of a suitable grave will be detested by the *àbíkú*, a name like *Kòsókó* is believed to be able to prevent it from dying. If the *àbíkú* eventually dies, its body is sometimes mutilated as a further mark of humiliation, to prevent it from coming back to earth.[15] If the *àbíkú* is born again, a name like *Ìgbẹ́kòyí* (24d) is then used to make it realize that there is no room for it even in the forest where, in Yoruba folk classification, the *àbíkú* originally belonged. *Kúkòyí* (24c) performs a similar function: it is to make the *àbíkú* realize, through lying, that Death has reneged his own part of their mythical pact.

But perhaps the most ritually insulting subset of *àbíkú* names is achieved by the use of dehumanizing lexicon.[16] Examples are:

25a.	*Ajá*	Dog
b.	*Ekòló*	Earthworm
c.	*Àpáta*	Rock

Since these names are also regular proper names for the non-human subjects to which they ordinarily refer, it follows that their function as

[15]cf. Wole Soyinka, "Abiku," in *Modern Poetry from Africa*, ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (London: Penguin, 1963).

[16]Mohome also reports the use of dehumanizing lexicon in Basotho names for similar purposes.

personal names lies not in their ordinary referential/denotative meaning, but in their ritual, symbolic representations. Essentially, these names represent some special kind of ritual insult. Such insults are symbolically encoded in *àbíkú* names to serve a dual purpose: (a) to indicate the child's "worthlessness" and, by so doing, deter evil spirits from bothering to claim it, and (b) to express the parents' attitude to the *àbíkú* situation. There is, of course, considerable variation in the intensity of such insults, the most intense being the use of dehumanizing lexicon as in (25).

Indeed, in a way, the differences in the overt linguistic devices used in constructing *àbíkú* names is symbolic of the variation in the intensity of the parents' suffering and subsequently of the semantic load of the ritual insult encoded in *àbíkú* names. Thus, the shift from conditional clauses through imperatives and negativizers to dehumanizing lexicon roughly corresponds to variation in intensity of the parents' reaction to the *àbíkú* situation. However, individual variation in coping with difficult situations makes it difficult to predict which linguistic device will be used at what point or by which parent.

In general, *àbíkú* names evoke a world that is accessible only through some ritual transportation. Like *àmútọ̀runwá* names, they replicate cultural messages. However, as we shall see, the messages they encode are of a different order from those of *ẹ̀yà* names, despite apparent similarities.

Ẹ̀yà Names

The Yoruba concept of *ẹ̀yà* has its base in the belief in ancestor reincarnation. In Yoruba traditional belief, the family is made up of both the living members and departed ancestors. Those who are regarded as ancestors are (grand)parents who died legitimately of old age, that is, after completing the normal life cycle. They are believed to be keenly interested in the welfare of their living descendants:

> They are the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities. Offences in these matters is ultimately an offence against the forefathers who, in that capacity, act as the invisible police of the families and communities.[17]

Because the Yoruba believe that the departed ancestors preside spiritually over their activities, it is not uncommon for a man in difficulty to seek help from his ancestors, saying

26.	*Bàbáà mi, má sùn o*	"Please, my father, do not sleep (i.e., do not neglect me)"

[17]J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 83.

It is no wonder then that, like recognized divinities, ancestors are not only revered and venerated, but also worshipped.[18]

Consequently, the Yoruba believe that departed ancestors have various ways of communicating with the living. One of the most cherished ways is for the soul of the departed ancestor to be reincarnated and born to one of his/her offsprings. This motivates a highly positive desire among the living offsprings to have their parents and grandparents reincarnated soon after their death. Indeed, a common statement of condolence from well-wishers to the bereaved offsprings is

27. *Bàbá/Ìyá a tètè yà o* "May father/mother reincarnate soon"

and, to a particular offspring, a familiar well-wisher would say

28. *Bàbá/Ìyá a yà lọ́wọ́ọ̀ rẹ o* "May father/mother reincarnate through you"

When such reincarnation is confirmed, usually as a result of childbirth soon after the death of a parent (usually a grandparent) and, sometimes, after oracular consultation, the personal naming system is again employed to store and transmit such knowledge.

While *àbíkú* names are not often differentiated for sex, *èyà* names are usually differentiated because of Yoruba belief that the deceased male reincarnates only in male offsprings and the deceased female only in female offsprings. Thus if a baby boy is believed to be a reincarnation of a deceased parent, any one of the following names is automatically chosen, depending on which pragmatic effect the namers wish to achieve:

29a. *Babátúndé* Babá tún dé
"Father has returned"

b. *Babá jídé* Babá jí dé
"Father is reincarnated"

c. *Babátúnjí* Babá tún jí
"Father wakes again (i.e., is reincarnated)"

d. *Babáwáyé* Babá wá (sí) ayé
"Father returned to earth"

e. *Babáwálé* Babá wá (sí) ilé
"Father returned home"

f. *Babárìndé* Babá rìn dé
"Father returned (voluntarily)"

[18]See Wande Abimbola, "The Yoruba Concept of Human Personality," in *La Notion de Personne en Afrique Noire* (Paris: CNRS, 1973); J. Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (London: Longman, 1979); and J.S. Eades, *The Yoruba Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

g. *Babáyẹ́misí* — Babá yẹ́ mi sí
"Father honored me (by returning to my family)"

On the other hand, reincarnated females are given any of the following names:[19]

30a. *Yétúndé* — Yeyé tún dé
"Mother has returned"

b. *Yéjídé* — Yeyé jí dé
"Mother is reincarnated"

c. *Yéwándé* — Yeyé wá mi dé
"Mother came back to find me"

d. *Yésìdé* — Yeyé sì dé
"Mother indeed returned"

e. *Yékẹ́mi* — Yeyé kẹ́ mi
"Mother petted me (by returning to my family)"

f. *Ìyábọ̀dé* — Ìyá bò dé
"Mother really returned"

g. *Ìyáyẹ́misí* — Ìyá yẹ́ mi sí
"Mother honored me"

Though they have slightly different pragmatic effects, all these names convey essentially the same message: that father/mother is reincarnated in the particular child so named. Structurally, all the names are simple declarative sentences with father/mother as subject and the evocation of the notion of reincarnation in the predication.

But we have previously noted that declarative sentences are also used in constructing *àbíkú* names. We may, therefore, ask: what are the differences between *àbíkú* and *ẹ̀yà* names and how do the differences help distinguish between the two types of rebirth after death that we have discussed? Basically, *àbíkú* and *ẹ̀yà* names differ in their cultural motivation, in their structural possibilities, and in their pragmatic effects. These differences in turn reflect the wider differences between the notions of *àbíkú* and *ẹ̀yà*.

As can be readily deduced from the preceding discussion, *àbíkú* and *ẹ̀yà* are two different, if not contradictory, subtypes of the same belief system, one (the *àbíkú*) being an epiphenomenon of the other. Though both have to do with death and rebirth, one, *ẹ̀yà*, conforms to legitimate expectations about the life cycle whereas the other does not. Consequently, while *ẹ̀yà* is highly favored and respected, *àbíkú* is negatively sanc-

[19] *Ìyá* and *Yeye* in the following examples are dialectal variants of "mother."

tioned and disrespected. It should be noted however that, even when normal life expectancies are fulfilled, not every dead person comes in for consideration as an ancestor. Awolalu lists the qualifications as follows:

> To qualify, such men and women must have lived well, attained an enviable old age before dying, must have left behind good children and good memory. Children and youths who die a premature death, barren women, and all who die a 'bad' death . . . are excluded from this respectable group.[20]

Thus, to die young and expect a rebirth is an anathema to *ẹ̀yà* belief system for it introduces discontinuity or lack of fulfillment to the established social order. Therefore, the *àbíkú* phenomenon is a serious puncture to Yoruba cosmology. Yet it exists and draws attention to itself. But like the archetypal contrasts between "true" and "false" prophets in Christian religion, or more generally between good and evil, *ẹ̀yà* and *àbíkú* belief systems coexist, the existence of one throwing the other into sharp relief.

Since they differ in cosmological orientations, it is not surprising that *àbíkú* and *ẹ̀yà* employ different linguistic devices in name construction. Even where they both make use of the same syntactic device (viz., declarative sentences) they differ considerably in pragmatic implications. Thus, while *àbíkú* names are marked by indirectness and ritual insults, only affirmative, declarative sentences, with positive pragmatic effects, are used in constructing *ẹ̀yà* names. Thus, while *ẹ̀yà* names announce a happily awaited event (viz., reincarnation of a dead ancestor), *àbíkú* names are partly appeals and partly ritual insults, expressive of a variety of moods from sympathy and pity to anger and indignation, and serving ultimately as ritual medication for curing, as it were, the *àbíkú* syndrome. These differences notwithstanding, *àbíkú* and *ẹ̀yà* names both perform the dual function of (a) providing a channel of communication between the dead (or Death) and the living and (b) serving as a medium of information storage and cultural transmission.

Certain paradoxes about the Yoruba belief in *ẹ̀yà* should be mentioned. The paradoxes arise from the Yoruba belief that an ancestor may reincarnate while he/she remains in the other "world" where he/she continues to be invoked from time to time. It is also believed that, although an ancestor may reincarnate only once within the same nuclear family, simultaneous reincarnations of the same ancestor is possible within the extended family.[21] Furthermore, it is believed that even though a male ancestor may

[20]Awolalu, p. 54.

[21]See William Bascom, "Yoruba Concepts of the Soul," in *Men and Cultures*, ed. A.F.C. Wallace (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), p. 404; Idowu, p. 194; and Eades, p. 122.

have reincarnated, he can still come to earth in the materialized form of *egúngún*, a sacred phenomenon in Yoruba belief system often confusingly glossed as 'masquerade' or 'masquerader' in the anthropological literature.[22]

These paradoxes are supported by a belief system which sees life and death as a continuum in which death is not ultimately a tragedy but a temporary occurrence and necessary prelude to the reincarnation of the departed ancestor. Moreover, Yoruba belief in the multiple composition of a person supports the separate survival of each of the composite elements except the corporeal which, being ordinary matter, decays. Thus, the *ẹ̀mí* "spirit or vital force" of the deceased can remain in the ancestral world while his/her guardian soul is reborn with a new body, breath, and destiny.[23] Since his spirit "lives on" in the ancestral world, a male ancestor can still visit in the form of *egúngún* when appropriately invoked, despite (several) reincarnation(s).

Names, Rituals, and Sociolinguistic Change

Two underlying causes of social change among the Yoruba today are the spread of literacy and the adoption of two exogenous religions, Christianity and Islam. Basic changes in kinship, economic, and political organization, in the modes of communication, in the diagnosis and treatment of diseases, and indeed in the entire social structure and "worldview" of the Yoruba are due largely to the spread of literacy, the concomitant diffusion of Western cultures and technologies, and the conversion of most Yoruba to Christianity or Islam.[24] Though these processes began more than a century ago, their effects have never been so seriously felt as in the last three decades.

Seriously affected are attitudes toward indigenous cultural traditions, especially toward traditional ritual performances. Since the ritual motivation of *àmútọ̀runwá*, *àbíkú*, and *ẹ̀yà* names is no longer salient for all Yoruba, we should expect some changes in naming practices and a decline in the performance of the appropriate rituals. These changes are of two kinds: (a) the adoption of Western, Christian, or Muslim names, and

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[22]For an account of the *egúngún* cult, see P. Morton-Williams, "The Egungun Cult in Southwestern Yoruba Kingdoms," in *WAISER Conference Proceedings* (Ibadan: West African Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1954); and O. Olajubu and J.R. Ojo, "Some Aspects of Oyo Yoruba Masqueraders," *Africa*, 47 (1977), 253–275.

[23]Bascom, p. 404; cf. Awolalu, chapter 3.

[24]For a general review of the consequences of literacy on language, thought, culture, and society, see F. Niyi Akinnaso, "The Consequences of Literacy in Pragmatic and Theoretical Perspectives," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 12 (1981), 163–200.

(b) the tendency toward positive naming. The former minimizes the relevance of home context, an important principle of Yoruba naming, while the latter avoids the esoteric and sometimes derogatory connotations of ritually motivated names.

For example, instead of an *àbíkú* name like *Ìgbékòyí* (24d), many literate Yoruba today prefer pragmatically positive names like (31):

31a.	*Olúṣèyí*	Olú(wá) ṣe èyí "God did this(i.e., gave us this child)"
b.	*Ọlọ́runrotèmiwò*	Ọlọ́run ro t'èmi wò "God took my problems into consideration"

These are names given by two of my literate informants to their children who should traditionally have been given *àbíkú* names because of the series of infantile mortality they had experienced. The use of *Olú(wa)* and *Ọlọ́run* (names now usually associated with the Christian God) as the subject NP of these sentence names illustrates a major shift in religious affiliation and subsequently of "world view." Another device favored by literate Yoruba is the repetition of the deceased child's name if the newborn is of the same sex. In this way, *àbíkú* names and their ritual connotations are completely avoided.

Similar processes of change apply to *èyà* names though the basic ones, (29) and (30), continue to be used by both the literate and non-literate. This is partly due to the pervasiveness of the belief in reincarnation and partly to the non-derogatory implications of conventional *èyà* names. One major change introduced to *èyà* names by literate Yoruba is repetition of all or part (usually the subject NP) of the deceased person's sentence name in the newborn's name. For example, one of my informants, whose father died shortly before he had a new baby boy, gave the following name (32) to his baby:

32.	*Akínwálé*	Akín wá (sí) ilé "Akin (the valiant) returned home (i.e., is reincarnated)"

The deceased father's name was (33) below:

33.	*Akínsúnmádé*	Akínb sún má adé "Akin (valor) is next to rank to the crown (royalty)"

While *èyà* names continue to be used, *àmútọ́runwá* names are fast on the decline, and, in fact, some of them, e.g., (5) and (11), have dropped out of the name repertoire of many Yoruba, partly because they have lost their historical significance and partly because the modern techniques of

prenatal care and childbirth make some of the abnormal birth conditions infrequent. Even when such abnormal conditions occur, explanations are often based on the logic of Western science.

Since person definition and naming are usually based on the namer's value criteria,[25] the adoption of exogenous religions often results in a change in naming pattern.[26] This is particularly true of the Muslim Yoruba, expecially those who are born Muslim (second generation Muslims). Many of them now give Muslim names (often Yoruba adaptations of the Arabic forms) directly to their children, without giving them any indigenous Yoruba names and regardless of the circumstances of birth. Among the Christian Yoruba, Christian (or English) names are given on baptism,[27] and they coexist with the indigenous ones. Tonkin reports a similar process for the Jlao Kru of Liberia:

> Conversion to Christianity was marked by a baptismal name, and most civilized people today will have a 'European' name drawn from a limited repertoire of Bible, saints' and English Christian names, even if they are not active church members. This name is part of a civilized name.[28]

Tonkin's distinction between Kru 'country' and 'civilized' names is in part based on the non-literate/literate distinction. This distinction is evident in Yoruba naming, though the adoption of exogenous religions is not peculiar to the literate Yoruba. Consequently, there are many non-literate Yoruba who assumed Christian names on conversion and yet remained resolute traditionalists.

Both among the literate and non-literate, indigenous and 'foreign' names coexist. Even when the literate do not give ritually motivated names to their children, non-literate elders, whose advice on naming is often sought, usually suggest them. Most literate Yoruba still uphold the traditional consultation of (grand)parents, for suggestions of appropriate names for their new babies, and this guarantees the perpetuation of

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[25]See Lévi-Strauss, ch. 7.

[26]See F. Niyi Akinnaso, "Continuity and Change in Yoruba Personal Names," paper presented at a symposium on Changing Continuities Among the Yoruba, Twenty-fifth Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Washington, D.C., Nov. 3–7, 1982; and Elizabeth Tonkin, "Jealosy Names, Civilized Names: Anthroponomy of the Jlao Kru of Liberia," *Man* (N.S.), 15 (1980), 653–664.

[27]The current tendency toward indigenization in economic and political organization is also reflected in the adoption of indigenous Yoruba personal names for Christian baptismal purposes. This points to the syncretization of traditional and exogenous religions. In *The Yoruba Today*, Eades reports striking correspondences between Muslim and traditional methods of divination on the one hand, and between Christian-Aladura and traditional ritual practices on the other. This syncretism is now particularly evident during *ìsọmọlórúkọ* "naming ritual" where Christian, Muslim, and Yoruba traditional practices are blended as needed.

[28]Tonkin, p. 658.

indigenous names. And despite conversion to Christianity or Islam, ritually motivated names still retain their vitality among non-literate Yoruba who are, incidentally, still in the majority.

Conclusion

In his analysis of the forms and contents of Baktaman ritual, Fredrik Barth concludes that "every culture is an ongoing system of communication and contains a corpus of replicated messages."[29] In this paper, I have sought to explicate certain aspects of Yoruba ritual knowledge through their system of person definition. It has become clear in the process that names do not simply classify as Lévi-Strauss claims; they are conventionalized communicative acts as my previous studies of Yoruba names and Tonkin's study of Kru names also suggest. *Àmútọ̀runwá*, *àbíkú*, and *ẹ̀yà* names are thus basic to a theory of ritual communication in which the living and the dead are participants; they are part of a cosmos in which the dead can come back and in which the living can take a message to the dead, even to Death himself! In order to understand the nature of this communicative act, it is necessary to go beyond surface linguistic representations to the level of cultural presuppositions and symbolism, that is, beyond etic to emic representations, as this paper demonstrates.[30]

It is true that personal names are commonplace phenomena, being highly secularized: a single personal name can be used several times a day either to refer to the same individual or to several unrelated namesakes. But it is precisely their potential for commonplace occurrence and frequent usage that makes personal names an appropriate medium for the storage, retrieval and transmission of cultural knowledge in a predominantly oral culture. When social and cultural values change, names and naming patterns often change accordingly. For some, e.g., Yoruba Christians, new names reflect new realities, suppressing or coexisting with traditional names. For others, e.g., second generation Yoruba Muslims, new names do not only reflect new realities, they replace traditional names and what they symbolize or communicate. Thus, names define sociocultural and psychological realities, and are in turn defined by these realities.

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[29]*Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea* (New Haven: Yale Univesity Press, 1975), p. 15.

[30]cf. Roger M. Keesing, "Linguistic Knowledge and Cultural Knowledge: Some Doubts and Speculations," *American Anthropologist*, 81 (1979), 14–36.