Yoruba Fact-Finder

Compilations of Yoruba History, culture and tradition

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Yoruba culture

Yoruba culture refers to the idiosyncratic cultural norms of Yorubaland and the Yoruba people.\[1\]

Contents

- 1 Art
  - 1.1 Sculpture
  - 1.2 Textile
- 2 Cuisine
- 3 Naming customs
  - 3.1 Naming
  - 3.2 Oruko Amutorunwa (Preordained name)
  - 3.3 Oruko Abiso (Name given at birth)
  - 3.4 Abiku Names
  - 3.5 Pet names
- 4 Law
- 5 Linguistics
Art

Sculpture

Yoruba bronze head sculpture from the city of Ife, Nigeria c. 12th century A.D

The Yoruba are said to be prolific sculptors, famous for their magnificent terra cotta works throughout the 12th and 14th century; artists also harness their capacity in making artwork out of bronze.[2]

[edit] Textile

Weaving is done on different types of looms in order to create hundreds of different patterns.
Cuisine

Yams are said to be one of the important food for the Yoruba; plantain, corn, beans, meat, and fish are also choices.[3]

Naming customs

Yorubas believe that people live out the meanings of their names. As such, Yoruba people put considerable effort into naming a baby. Their philosophy of naming is conveyed in a common adage, *ile ni a n wo, ki a to so omo l'oruko* ("one pays attention to the family before naming a child"): one must consider the tradition and history of a child's relatives when choosing a name.

Some families have long-standing traditions for naming their children. Such customs are often derived from their profession or religion. For example, a family of hunters could name their baby *Ogunbunmi* (*Ogun* gives me this) to show their respect to the divinity who gives them metal tools for hunting. Meanwhile a family that venerates *Ifá* may name their child *Falola* (*Ifa* has honor).[1]

Naming

Since it is generally believed that names are like spirits which would like to live out their meanings, parents do a thorough search before giving names to their babies. Naming ceremonies are performed with this in mind. The oldest family member is given the responsibility of performing the ceremony. Materials used are symbols of the hopes, expectations and prayers of the parents for the new baby. These include honey, kola, bitter kola, atare (alligator pepper), water, palm oil, sugar, sugar cane, salt, and liquor. Each of these has a special meaning in the
world-view of the Yoruba. For instance, honey represents sweetness, and the prayer of the parents is that their baby's life will be as sweet as honey.[4]

After the ritual, the child is named and other extended family members are given the honour to give their own names to the child. They do this with gifts of money and clothing. In many cases, they would want to call the child by the name they give him or her. Thus a new baby may end up with more than a dozen names.[5]

**Oruko Amutorunwa (Preordained name)**

- Amutorunwa (brought from heaven)
- Oruko - name

Yoruba believe that a baby may come with pre-destined names. For instance, twins are believed to have natural-birth names. Thus the first to be born of the two is called Taiwo or "Taiye", shortened forms of Taiyewo, meaning the taster of the world. This is to identify the first twin as the one sent by the other one to first go and taste the world. If he/she stays there, it follows that it is not bad, and that would send a signal to the other one to start coming. Hence the second to arrive is named Kehinde (late arrival; it is now common for many Kehinde's to be called "Kenny". The child born to the same woman after the twins is called Idowu, and the one after this is called Alaba (female) or Idogbe (male). Ige is a child born with the legs coming out first instead of the head; and Ojo (male) or Aina (female) is the one born with the umbilical cord around his or her neck. When a child is conceived with no prior menstruation, he or she is named Ilori. Dada is the child born with locked hair; and Ajayi (nicknamed Ogidi Olu) is the one born face-downwards.[6]
Other natural names include *Abiodun* (one born on a festival day or period), *Bosede* (one born on a holy day; *Babatunde/Babatunji* (meaning father has come back) is the son born to a family where a father has recently passed. This testifies to the belief in reincarnation. *Iyabode, Yeside, Yewande, Yetunde*, (mother has come back) is the female counterpart.

**Oruko Abiso (Name given at birth)**

- Oruko - name
- Abi - birthed
- So - named

These are names that are not natural with the child at birth but are given on either the eight day of birth (for females) and ninth day of birth (for males). They are given in accordance with significant events at time of birth or with reference to the family tradition as has been mentioned above.

Examples of names given with reference to the family tradition include *Ogundiran* (Ogun has become a living tradition in the family); *Ayanlowo* (Ayan drumming tradition is honorable); *Oyetoso* (Chieftaincy is ornament); *Olanrewaju* (Honor is advancing forward); *Olusegun* (God has conquered the enemy).

**Abiku Names**

- Abi - birthed, or Bi - born
- Iku - death, or Ku - die / dead
The Yoruba believe that some children are born to die. This derives from the phenomenon of the tragic incidents of high rate of infant mortality sometimes afflicting the same family for a long time. When this occurs, the family devises all kinds of method to forestall a recurrence, including giving special names at a new birth.\(^7\) Such names reflect the frustration of the poor parents:

- **Malomo (do not go again) Kosoko (there is no hoe anymore).** This refers to the hoe that is used to dig the grave.
- **Banjoko (sit with me)**
- **Orukotan (all names have been exhausted)**
- **Yemiitan (stop deceiving me)**
- **Kokumo (this will not die)**

**Pet names**

The Yoruba also have pet names or oriki. These are praise names, and they are used to suggest what the child's family background is or to express one's hope for the child: *Akanbi-* (one who is deliberately born); *Ayinde* (one who is praised on arrival); *Akande* (one who comes or arrives in full determination); *Atanda* (one who is deliberately created after thorough search). For females, *Aduke* (one who everyone likes to bless), *Ayoke* (one who people are happy to bless), *Arike* (one who is blessed on sight), *Atinuke or Abike* (one that is born to be pampered).

**Law**

Yoruba law is the legal system of Yorubaland. It is quite intricate, each group and subgroup having a system that varies, but in general, government begins within the immediate family. The
next level is the clan, or extended family, with its own head known as a Baálé. This chief will be subject to town chiefs, and these chiefs are usually themselves subject to their Oba, who may or may not be subject to another Oba himself.\textsuperscript{[8]}

Most of what survived of this legal code has been assimilated into the customary laws of the sovereign nations that the Yoruba inhabit.

**Linguistics**

Main article: Yoruba language

Yoruba written literature begins with the formation of its grammar published in 1843. The standard language incorporates several features from other dialects.\textsuperscript{[9]}

**Wedding**

The child that is named will grow to adulthood. The Yoruba culture provides for the upbringing of the child by the extended family. In traditional society, the child is placed with a master of whatever craft the gods specify for him or her. Or he may take to the profession of the father, in the case of a boy, or the mother, in the case of a girl. The parents have the responsibility for his/her socialization into the norms of the larger society, in addition to giving him a means of livelihood. His or her wedding is also the responsibility of the parents.

The wedding ceremony is the climax of a process that starts with courtship. The young man identifies a young woman that he loves. He and his friends seek her out through various means, including playing pranks. The young man sends messages of interest to the young woman, until such a time that they are close enough to avoid a go-between (alarina). Then once they both
express mutual love, they let their parents know about their feelings for each other. The man's parents arrange to pay a visit to the prospective bride's parents. Once their consent is secured, the wedding day may be set. Prior to the wedding day, the payment of bride price is arranged. This secures the final consent of the bride's parents, and the wedding day is fixed. Once the day has been fixed through consultation with the Orisa, the bride and bridegroom are warned to avoid travelling out of town, including to the farm. This is to prevent any mishap. The wedding day is a day of celebration, eating, drinking and dancing for parents, relations, the new husband and wife and their friends and, often, even foes. Marriage is not considered to be only a union of the husband and wife, it is also seen among the Yoruba as the union of the families on both sides. But before the bride goes to her husband's house, she is escorted by different people i.e. family and friends to the door step of her new home. There she is prayed for and her legs are washed. It is believed that she is washing every bad-luck that she might have brought into her husband's house away. Before she is finally ushered into her house, she is given a calabash (igba) and then she is asked to break it. When it breaks, the amount of pieces it is broken into is believed to be the number of children she will give birth to. On the wedding night she and her husband have their first meeting and he is ordinarily expected to find her to be a virgin. If he doesn't, she and her parents are disgraced and may be banished from the village where they live.

**Music**

Main article: Yoruba music

Music and dance have always been an important part of their culture; used in the many different forms of entertainment.\(^{[10]}\)
Funeral

In Yoruba thought, death is not the end of life; it is rather a transition from one form of existence to another. The ogberis (ignorant folks) fear death because it marks the end of an existence that is known and the beginning of one that is unknown. Immortality is the dream of many, as "Eji-ogbe" puts it: *Mo dogbogbo orose; Ng ko ku mo; Mo digba oke; Mo le gboin.* (I have become an aged ose tree; I will no longer die; I have become two hundred hills rolled into one; I am immovable.)

The Yoruba also pray for many blessings, but the most important three are wealth, children and immortality: *ire owo; ire omo; ire aiku pari iwa.* There is a belief in an afterlife that is a continuation of this life, only in a different setting, and the abode of the dead is usually placed at a place just outside of this abode, and is sometimes thought of as separated by a stream. Participation in this afterlife is conditional on the nature of one's life and the nature of one's death. This is the meaning of life: to deliver the message of Olodumare, the Supreme Creator by promoting the good of existence. For it is the wish of the Deity that human beings should promote the good as much as is possible. Hence it is insisted that one has a good capacity for moral uprightness and personhood. Personhood is an achieved state judged by the standard of goodness to self, to the community and to the ancestors. As people say: *Keni huwa gbedegbede; keni lee ku pelepele; K'omo eni lee n'owo gbogboro L'eni sin.* (Let one conduct one' life gently; that one may die a good death; that one's children may stretch their hands over one's body in burial.)

The achievement of a good death is an occasion for celebration of the life of the deceased. This falls into several categories. First, children and grand children would celebrate the life of their
parent who passed and left a good name for them. Second, the Yoruba are realistic and pragmatic about their attitude to death. They know that one may die at a young age. The important thing is a good life and a good name. As the saying goes: Ki a ku l'omode, ki a fi esin se irele eni; o san ju ki a dagba ki a ma ni adie irana. (if we die young, and a horse is killed in celebration of one's life; it is better than dying old without people killing even a chicken in celebration.)

It is also believed that ancestors have enormous power to watch over their descendants. Therefore, people make an effort to remember their ancestors on a regular basis. This is ancestor veneration, which some have wrongly labelled ancestor worship. It is believed that the love that exists between a parent and a child here on earth should continue even after death. And since the parent has only ascended to another plane of existence, it should be possible for the link to remain strong.

**Philosophy**

Yoruba culture consists of folk/cultural philosophy, religion and literature. They are embodied in Ifa-Ife Divination, known as the tripartite Book of Enlightenment in Yorubaland and in Diaspora.

Yoruba philosophy is a witness of two epochs. The first epoch is an epoch-making history in cosmology and mythology. This is also an epoch-making history in oral philosophy in oral culture during which time Oduduwa was the sole philosopher, the head, and a pre-eminent diviner. He theorized about the visible and invisible worlds, reminiscing about the cosmology, cosmogony, and the mythological creatures in the visible and invisible worlds.
The second epoch is the epoch of metaphysical philosophy. This commenced in the 19th century when the land has become a literate land through the diligence and pragmatism of Dr. Bishop Ajayi Crowther, the first Anglican African Bishop.

Yoruba philosophy is mainly a narrative philosophy, explicating and pointing to the knowledge of the causes and the nature of things, affecting the corporeal and the spiritual universe and its wellness. Yoruba people have hundreds of philosophical aphorisms and lores, and they believe that any lore that widens people's horizons and presents food for thought is the beginning of philosophy.

Although religion is often considered first in Yoruba culture, nonetheless it is philosophy, the thought of man and the reasoning of the mind that actually leads the faculty (ori) to the creation and the practice of religion. Thus philosophy is antecedent to religion.

Today, the academic and nonacademic people are becoming more and more interested in Yoruba philosophy. Thus more and more researches are being carried out on Yoruba philosophy, as more and more books are being written on it—to emboss its contemporary mark and to advance its research amongst non-African thinkers and political scientists who are beginning to open their doors to other cultures, thus widening their views.

**Religion**

Main article: Yoruba religion

The Yoruba are said to be religious people, but they are also pragmatic and tolerant about their religious differences. Whilst many profess the Yoruba school of thought; many profess other faiths e.g. Christianity, Islam, Budhism, Hinduism e.t.c.\[11\]
Language

Main article: Yoruba language

Yoruba people traditionally speak the Yorùbá language, a member of the Niger–Congo language family. Apart from referring to the aggregate of dialects and their speakers, the term Yoruba is used for the standard, written form of the language.\(^{[12]}\)

References

1. \(^{a,b}\) Kola Abimbola, Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account, Iroko Academic Publishers, 2005. ISBN 1-905388-00-4


3. \(^b\) Nicole Mullen, Yoruba Art & Culture: Food..., Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology and the Regents of the University of California, Berkeley 2004.


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