

Grayness Is Aged, Bearded Is Adult: Yoruba Age and Seniority

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Abstract

I explore how Yoruba people ascertain who is junior, who is senior, and the mark of equality beyond obvious age, as well as the social function of these distinctions in everyday life. The social ranking of people as either senior, junior or mate is an invaluable principle of social organization among the Yoruba. It features prominently in determining privileges and access, and in orchestrating interpersonal relationships and modes of interaction. I examine linguistic and non-verbal signs drawn from popular cultural performances, habitual practices and proverbs, including socialised roles and habitual typification which representing the cogitations of a Yoruba senior, to provide an ethnographic description of this social practice in its historical and contemporary form. In addition to the linguistic evidence, the opinions of subjects interviewed on the subject are presented. Taken together, the various sources of information show that this classification system operates within integrated cultural institutions that rest on their origination precepts, goals of earthly existence, and sociation habitudes. The system and its utility persist as they are fundamentally woven into the psychology of the children during their formative years within the lineage, and into the worldview of others through enculturation since people's life chances are partly dependent on their position within their nuclear family and their lineage.

Keywords: agedness; senior; junior; agbalagba; aburo; odo; social stratification

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1 Introduction

The following discussion is primarily focused on Yoruba indices for determining social and status hierarchies – specifically, who is junior, who is senior, and who is equal – in their daily lives, and the purposes of these distinctions. It also explains some of the quotidian habitudes, mannerisms, expectations, and linguistic repertoires used by the Yoruba people to assert seniority or equality, or to mark another as junior.

Táiwò (*Tọ́ ayé wò*): The first one of twins to be born, presumed to have been the first to have a taste of the world.

Kéhindé: The second of the twins; this is the ‘one who came last’.

Yoruba nomenclature reflects the circumstances of birth. The names given to babies do more than identify; they serve as personal and communal historical documents, revealing a person’s personal attributes, social status, and position, among other aspects. For instance, a child born shortly after the death of a grandparent, or one born with the umbilical cord around its neck (*Àiná*), receives a name that memorializes these circumstances. Twins are given predestined names or appellations (*orúko àyànmọ́* or *orúko àmútòrunwá*) that identify them as twins and show the order of birth. The naming of twins, in particular, illustrates the cultural practice of seniority and the rights associated with it. The first twin to emerge is named *Táiwò* (*tọ́ ayé wo-* ‘taste the world’), and the second is named *Kéhindé* (‘last to come’). Despite being born second, *Kéhindé* is considered the elder because, in Yoruba belief, the elder sends the younger on errands. In the case of twins, the elder (*Kéhindé*) sends the younger (*Táiwò*) ahead to see if the world is suitable. Upon hearing *Táiwò*’s vagitus, a sign indicating that the world is safe and

palatable, *Kéhindé* emerges. Peremptoriness defines Yoruba seniority.

The social ranking of individuals is a fundamental principle of social organization for the Yoruba, significantly influencing privileges and access. In this contribution, I describe and explain how, aside from such obvious features as age (ascribed status), Yoruba people ascertain who is junior, who is senior, and who are equals in everyday life. The discussion will explore extant linguistic and non-verbal signals drawn from the popular cultural performances, habitual interpersonal practices, socialized roles, and characteristic typifications which appresents the perception of the Yoruba categorizing system. Specifically, there are three general features for identifying and classifying people as either older, junior, or equal: biological age, expected behaviours and mannerisms, and the kind of courtesy and deference extended to a person. Consider the claims of the following saying:

- (1) *Ewu ni ogbo*
Greyness is agedness
Irungbon ni agba
beard is eldership
Tubomu ni afojudi
Moustache is insolence

The above pithy saying references aspects of biological attributes indicative of physical maturity and concomitant conducts. According to it, greying signals agedness, beardedness signals adulthood, and a moustache signals insolence. In line with their societal organization, the Yoruba reverence age rather than deny or hide it. Age frames their identity and significantly configures their life chances in conspicuous ways.

Another Yoruba adage says, “in the absence of elders/the aged the town becomes disorganized; when a family head passes away, the home is desolate”. The orderliness of a town is owed to its elders, the older generation; without them, the home is bereft of leadership.

Thus, certain social responsibilities are associated with being an elder. Consequently, one of the gravest insults to an elder is to be referred to as *àgbà ti ko to ilé* (an elder that is disharmonious). Such a person is repudiated for failing to enforce peace, harmony, and tranquility within the household.

- (2) *Bí ọmọdé bá fẹ̀ sīṣe àgbà, ọjó orí-i rẹ̀ o níí jẹ̀*
 if youth want to do like senior, day head
 of theirs will not permit
 A child that would like to do the deeds
 of the elders would be stymied by their
 age

Like the elders, youths have their own ‘cultural scripts’ – techniques “for articulating cultural norms, values, and practices in terms which are clear, precise, and accessible to cultural insiders and to cultural outsiders alike” (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2004, 153). This cultural scripts model offers insights into both the cultural “differences in the ways of communicating and the underlying differences in the way of thinking” (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2004, 70). Importantly, it unveils the tacit assumptions, rules, and verbal and non-verbal actions that participate in individuals’ interactions as dictated by institutionalized norms and values. The cultural scripts for youth define them, situate them positionally, and circumscribe societal expectations of them. As the proverb says, “if a youth attempts to perform elderly deeds, their age will stymie or frustrate them”. Status and position peg people to certain equipollent behaviours, roles, and speech patterns.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the cultural background that informs the Yoruba principle of seniority, highlighting its pervasive power structure, obligations, and expectations. Sections 3 and 4 explore the basis for seniority, illustrating it as a function of ‘first on the scene,’ where the earthly constellation replicates or mirrors the spiritual one. Section 5 describes

and exemplifies the various markers of ‘aged,’ ‘senior,’ ‘mate,’ and ‘junior.’ Section 6 examines ‘achieved seniority’ and its markers across institutions, focusing on *àjùlọ* (superioriness). In Section 7 is a summary discussion of the rationale behind this practice with a conjecture for its dynamic persistence.

As this is a contemporary practice, the data presented are sourced from extant practices, scenes from popular Yoruba videos that capture the theme of the paper, and proverbs, the most invaluable and dominant form of all Yoruba discourse. Proverbs, the Yoruba say, are the horse of words, and words are the horse of proverbs; where words are missing, they are found through proverbs. The ability to code or ‘wrap’ meanings proverbially marks the utterances of the aged, indicating knowledge and serving as an accoutrement of *àgbàlagbà*, (the elderly) because they are “incisive in their propositions and terse in their formulations, and are deduced from close observations of life” (Owomoyela 2005, 12). For this work, some Yoruba people were consulted through unstructured interviews, using conveniently sampled informants. Additionally, written responses were obtained from questions posed to various high-school alumni WhatsApp groups.

2 Undercurrent of agedness and performance of seniority

What is seniority if not power? The power to actualize a wish, to punish or reward juniors without anyone questioning the senior’s authority to do so. A real feature of Yoruba seniority is *àjùlọ*, i.e., ‘superioriness’. It means that a senior in interacting with those of lower status is unswayed by anything or anyone other than his own conscience, aside from the need to yield to a greater *àjùlọ* of another senior. The Yoruba society is toploftical and peremptory in nature; as such, their mode of organizing their society and refereeing interpersonal communication and interaction is through the

‘seniority principle’ (Oyèwùmí 1997). As part of their communicative competence, children and members are socialized and acculturated to quickly understand gestured communications in their perception of people, one of which is captured in the pithy saying: *Mọ ojú mọ ara*. (know facial and body expressions) People are expected to have visual identification skills that enable them to read, understand, and correctly discern an interlocutor’s age and social status just by sight. Such quick assessments are crucial in regulating social relations, framing modes of discourse, and determining the terms of address that critically influence social behaviours, given that an individual’s rank is not only ubiquitous, but is the undercurrent of every Yoruba social interaction, the violation of which is sometimes met with grievous consequences. Some signifying appellations help individuals identify and categorize others by age, associate them with specific generations, and, consequently, determine those behavioural entailments commensurate to their positions.

a) *Àgba* ‘senior, adult’; antonym: *òdó* ‘youth’; *omodé* ‘child, including toddlers’; *omọ-omọ* ‘babies’

b) *Àgbàlagbà* ‘elderly, matured, seasoned’; antonym: *màjèsín* ‘youngster, novice’

These identifiers are relative, not absolute. A ten-year-old child taking candies from a three-year-old, who then begins to cry, may be reprimanded by the parent with, “Stop doing that, don’t you know you are *àgbàlagbà* and you should gift the *omodé* and not take things away from them?” Connoted in the difference between *àgbà* and *òdó* is agedness, maturity, experience, temperament, and responsibility. *Àgbà* and not *omodé* are presumed to embody all these. Aside from this distinction, there is a difference between:

c) *Òbí* ‘parents’; antonym: *omọ* ‘child/ren’

d) *Ègbón* ‘older, senior’; antonym: *àbúrò* ‘younger, junior’

Within these designations are a host of cultural connotations that far exceed their English equivalents. Each of these and related concepts for stratifying people based on age and generations undergird Yoruba sociation. The major differences in (2a-d) could be reduced to agedness (*àgbàlagbà*) and seniority (*àgbà*) on the one hand, relative to youthfulness (*òdó*) and juniority (*àbúrò*) on the other. The one is superior and the other less superior.

The received social order in Yoruba society, which starkly separates ‘senior’ from ‘junior’, reverberates across institutions as a function of inequity that is deeply linguistically encoded. This salient carrier and transmitter of indelible normative Yoruba relationship subsumes the spoken and gestural practices of the people. Through it, the dynamic psychology surrounding the institutionalized social and hierarchical distinctions unfolds consequentially. The pervasiveness of this hierarchy is so ingrained that it even extends to processes such as planning, as suggested by the proverb:

(3) *Ète lègbón; imòrán làbúro; bí a ó ti ẹ lẹketa won.*

‘Intention is the eldest; contemplation is the next; plan of action is the third.’

The subtext of the above proverb is not about the logical sequential steps involved in planning; rather it emphasizes that these steps are graded by ‘seniority’. The whole range of differential actions towards a person as a function of hierarchy, often perceptible to insiders, unveils the phenomenological sphere of individuals’ habitual responses to identified status – whether older, younger, or equal. Again, the goal of this discussion is to explicate Yoruba

features for ascertaining inequality or equality relationally and to account for their viability.

While the eponym Yoruba designates a large aggregate presumably descended from a common originator, it is important to note that their dispersal from their cradle, *ile-ife*, despite their uniformity, has produced certain variations. Just as their language has dialects, so too have some of their cultural practices evolved distinct variations. Nevertheless, the core pre-Western social formation of the Yoruba persists somewhat. While imported gods may pervade and dominate the environment, the powerful and influential position of core traditional paragons, rather than being an anamnesis that Gyekye (1996) would prefer to have ‘rest in peace,’ undergird the organization of life within the community like calm substrate waters, and occasionally their overlooked presence erupts violently, akin to a volcano.

Of course, familiarity is never without its contempt. Yoruba’s stratification by age or the seniority principle is no longer a novelty, either for scholars or the people. It pervades everyday living, and it determines people’s life chances beyond the trivial. As the saying goes, “It is the child that knows probity that can share a meal with the adult” (*omode ti o ba mo owofe we yio ba agbaje un*). When closely examined, its vast consequences across all spheres of Yoruba life – social, religious, political, economic, and even judicial – become quite ominous. Consider the proverb *Arɔbafin ni oba pa* ‘It is the one who disrespects the king that the king kills.’ The king, in this case, is not just royalty, but is a metaphor for superiority. The potency of this categorization system has been extensively explored by scholars such as Bascom (1942, 1951, 1955), Alanamu (2016), who discussed aspects of socializing children into Yorubahood, Oyewumi (1997, 2016), who consistently advanced seniority as the basis for Yoruba endogenous hierarchies, and Agwuele (2009, 2023), who described the popular culture of Yoruba kinship practices and how the

language from the street is used to contest ‘status hegemony’ (*ajulo*). The focus now shifts to overt markers and attributes used for classification within this framework.

As already stated, proverbs, pithy sayings, and aphorisms are central to this discussion as they are deeply rooted in Yoruba real-life experiences and are also an important part of their intangible heritage and historiography. While not always without contradictions, they offer invaluable emic access to aspects of the Yoruba cognition of their world, the values they uphold, and their framework for articulating and preserving these values. The linguistic system plays a major role too; thus, their language use is congruent with those discriminating features of superiority or equality. Couched in their speech patterns and indexicalities are habitudes – norms and values – that disclose significant areas of cultural emphasis. For instance, the Yoruba say:

- (4) *Olówó ní mbá olórò-ó rìn; egbé ní mbá egbé seré.*
 ‘It is a rich person that keeps the company of the wealthy; only people of equal standing play together.’

This saying affirms the place of hierarchical distinctions within the Yoruba society.

3 Biological senior, junior, and peer: ‘First on the scene’

As already shown in Section 2, Yoruba categorizing of people is guided by two basic factors – natural ascription and social achievement; the one is unmarked, and the other is marked. In everyday life, for example, an elderly villager would be considered older than a young office clerk; the first child is the older sibling relative to the second child of the family. Similarly, a person with a high job title outranks those with subordinate titles. What makes these the unmarked categorization is essentially the

principle of being the ‘first on the scene.’ To wit, the Yoruba say:

- (5) *Eni tí a bá ní àbà ní ñje baba*
 ‘The person that one finds already
 settled at the granary is the lord of the
 place’

This means that due regard should be given to those who have reached a position or who have accomplished something before the one who did so afterwards. This principle of being the first on the scene captures the local norms guiding seniority-based interactions, it nullifies any guesswork, and it accords with Yoruba ontology.

3.1 Yoruba Cosmos

The first on the scene in the Yoruba world is the creator, followed by the deities that the creator fashioned to assist in the theocratic administration of the world. Next are humans, followed by land and water creatures, including natural resources. The threefold structure of the Yoruba cosmos includes the ‘preexisting’ (*ilé-òrun*), the primeval sky (*òkè-òrun*), and the ocean, on which the habitable earth was formed (*ilé-ayé*) (Morton-Williams 1964, 244). Within the earth, a reflection of the *Ilé-òrun*, there is ranked orderliness. The city, organized, kempt, and cultivated, is under the governance of a ruler and is hierarchically organized. The inhabitants of the city are ranked into distinct positions, and with this classification they order their earthly interactions. Just as the denizens of the sky are hierarchically positioned within the theocratic principles of Olódùmarè, the ranking of individuals facilitates the realization of core ideals and values that define their concept of a good life.

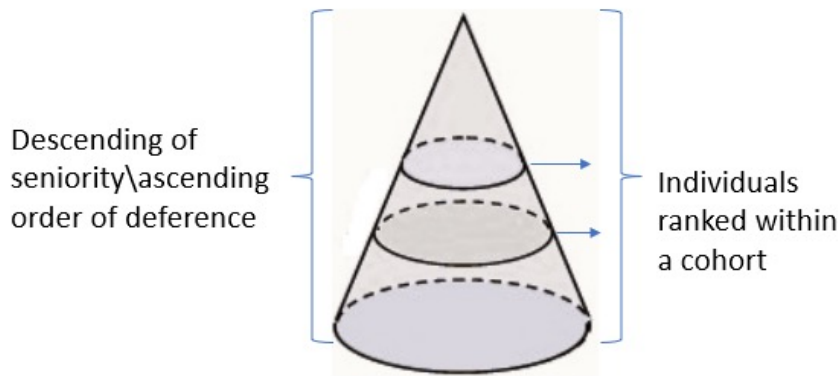
3.2 Earthly Governance

Who is the first on the scene in the founding of the nation or kingdom? Politically, each king/ruler occupies the *àpèrè* (‘throne’)

of their predecessor, who in turn replaced their own parents, who had obtained the instituting authority for the said *àpèrè* from the ancestors and deities ad infinitum. The founder of the Yoruba nation and its political structure, Oduduwa, was sent down from the heavens by Olódùmarè. The bag of sand that Oduduwa brought was used to form the land mass, with the city of Ife being the first dry land. Subsequently, Oduduwa became the first king, and his descendants inherited the throne successively. In Oyo town, the first king was Òrànmíyàn, one of the children of Oduduwa, who, in fulfilment of Olódùmarè’s injunction to spread out and populate the earth, established the kingdom. The rulers of Oyo, the Alaafin, are also known as the royal landowners (*oba onile*) in recognition of their relationship to the ‘first on the scene’, the founder of the kingdom of Oyo. Each successor to these thrones holds seniority over other contenders. In Ibadan, for example, there are two lines of successions to the throne, based on the two types of Ibadan chiefs eligible to become king: the military and civil lines. Civil chieftaincy titles are conferred on illustrious men who have distinguished themselves in different spheres of life and have made significant contributions to Ibadan’s civil life. There are only 20 civil chiefs at any time. The military line consists of 21 chiefs named from designated families. In both lines, newly installed chiefs start at the bottom of the hierarchy, gradually rising through promotion when any of the chiefs above them dies. The highest ranked chief on the civil line is *Ọtunba* (the ruler’s right-hand person), while the highest ranked military chief is the *Balogun*. Each takes turns becoming the king, *Olúbàdàn*. This set system, characterizing succession to the throne of Ibadan, exemplifies the natural line of succession based on seniority that defines, positions, and constrains every individual Yoruba’s life chances and every aspect of their quotidian lives.

The nominal phrase *àrífín* ‘insult, rudeness, disrespect, or slight’ derives from the verb

Seniority – by ascription and attainment



ri fin ‘to see someone and dismiss them contemptuously’. When directed towards an aged person or a senior, it is considered a grievous opprobrium. Older people, grown-ups, seniors, and those of notable standing are deeply in fear of *àrifin* and would strive to comport themselves normatively to ensure that under no circumstance are they faced with such humiliation. The perception of slight comes in various guises; a quite irksome one is when an *àbùrò*, a junior, calls a ‘senior’ (in age or status) by their first name. This egregious breach of etiquette would prompt the slighted person to seek ways of putting the offender in their position.

Mr. Ola, my friend and informer, who resides in Illinois, encountered such a situation, which he shared with me during a courtesy phone call. Both he and a female, also a long-time resident of Chicago, are Yoruba and they attend the same church. The lady, posh and very active in the Church, has a coordinating role, and is very good at her duties. Mr. Ola volunteers for youth activities under her supervision. Mr. Ola is youthful in appearance, and wears shirts and trousers. He has no grey hair, is slim, and still plays soccer. His younger siblings, the youngest of whom is older than this lady, already have grey hair. People are often surprised when they see grey-headed men (younger siblings) prostrating themselves to greet him and, addressing him using the honorific *ẹ*. Those who know Mr. Ola and how old he is are surprised whenever this lady calls

him by his name, Ola, and addresses him using the familiar singular pronoun, *o*, instead of *ẹ*, the plural pronoun reserved for older people and seniors. Finally, Mr. Ola had had enough. He narrated as follows:

How can this young girl be that rude to me? Where is this impudence coming from? I endured this ‘arifin’ for so long, and I decided to put her in her station and teach her an unforgettable lesson in humility and respect. I went to her after one of our church activities. I said to her, sister, I really enjoy being with the youth, it has been fun, however, I think at my age, I am closer to 60 than fifty, I should step aside for younger folks who could relate better to these young ones. Austine! You should have seen her. Visibly shocked, she immediately checked herself, stammered, went on her knees, with please sir, we appreciate your wonderful work with the youth sir. Is there anything we can do for you to continue supporting us for a while sir. Your leadership is invaluable sir. Right there and then, she began to address me properly using the plural pronoun, *ẹ*, became deferential, she is attentive when I speak, and she no longer interrupts me. Being in America and attending

the same church should not engender such 'àrífín' from someone that I 'senior' by at least 20 years.

4 First on the scene in the lineage and family

Socialization within the family constitutes the primary foundation for educating children about the ways of life of their community. By modelling societal norms and performing essential rituals, children observe their elders, from whom they learn, internalize, and reproduce their values, mores, and positionality. Beyond the family unit, the lineage is the next level and is the most influential structure in the socialization of a Yoruba child. This agnatic line of descent is an aggregate of males (and divorced females) who trace their descent to an ancestor. These males and their wives, as well as tenant migrants, reside in a compound. The members of the compound are ranked hierarchically as senior or junior according to the order in which they have joined the compound. This includes their relative age. The older person is the senior while the younger one is the junior. They are conceptualized as *àgbà* 'elder, older', *àgbàlagbà* 'aged', and *omòdé* 'little child, youth, young'. *Àgbà* has *àjùlò* (superiority). That is, agedness outranks youthfulness; senior outranks junior, and to *jùlò* (verb, 'surpass') is to outweigh the other.

a) *Mo ju ẹ lọ* 'I surpass you' (e.g., in age, rank, wealth, or position)

b) *Mi o kii sẹ egbẹ ẹ* 'I am not your equal/peer'

The interdependence afforded by *asuwada* (the Yoruba approach to sociation articulated by Akiwowo 1986) ensures that the interests of the community are, by extension, the interests of its members, who are expected to participate meaningfully in the life of the community at

their level of ranking. "From birth, patrilineal ties took precedence over all others, granting residence, inheritance, marriage, and funeral rights. Even death did not release a person from lineage affiliations, as they were buried in the compound and worshipped as ancestors who were expected to intervene in the lives of their descendants" (Alanamu 2016, 96). Consequently, individuals police their rank, and the age set/cohorts guard their positions; this preserves the pecking order and ensures that their comparative rights and privileges are not displaced. And especially, "in a period when records of births and deaths were not kept and when most important community resources were allocated on the basis of ascribed statuses of kinship and chronological age, it was the responsibility of each individual to be aware of his/her relative age vis-a-vis others" (Togonu-Bickersteth 1986, 111). Male descendants typically lived in one large compound or in contiguous compounds, headed by the lineage head, the oldest person, who exercised authority over the lineage members.

Within the (nuclear) family, the husband, by virtue of receiving the wife into his established home and preexisting compound, holds seniority over his wife, and so do all other members within the compound, including any children, even a day-old baby, who preceded her. The wives married into the compound are also ranked according to the time of their 'birth' into the compound. The co-wives recognize those who came before them as senior wives and those who came after them as junior wives. Biological age is not the determining factor; rather, the time each member joined the household dictates their place in the household hierarchy.

Children within the family and lineage are positioned successively. Twins are special. As already described, the first to emerge, Taiwo, is considered younger than Kéhíndé, who is the last to arrive. This instance of coming from behind to assume seniority is a cultural trope that allows for other paths to

'seniority' aside from age. While the traditional compound lifestyle is rapidly declining due to urbanization and growth in the number of members, the structural constellation remains operational. The assumption of certain offices and the advancement to the status of an elder within the compound, lineage, and ultimately the Yoruba society at large depends on it. The starkly patrilineal Yoruba of Oyo, Ife, and Ekiti, for instance, organize their political and social structures around kinship and age, with many chieftancy titles being hereditary within the lineage. Ijebu and Ondo Yoruba obtain rights to lands through maternal and paternal lineages and this access is a function of age, necessitating close policing of one's position. This semi-automatic schema of interaction, inculcated during the time of initial socialization, persists and reverberates across their social life.

4.1 Mate: *egbè* or *irò*

Those who arrived on the scene at the same time are considered (age) mates. To be of the same age, in the same class/grade in school, or of the same status is to be equals, called *egbè* or *irò*. Neither has superioriness over the other. In essence, *àjùlò* is not involved. While this interpretation applies in principle, there are certain nuanced modifications in certain contexts. For instance, among the Yoruba of Ekiti, every male belongs to an age set, constituted every three years. The leader is typically someone who has distinguished himself through certain recognizable personality features rather than being formally appointed (Lloyd 1959, 372). Similarly, for the Ijebu Yoruba, the traditional age set comprises all those born with a three-year period. The set is formalized by receiving an official designation from the king. This age set has a social function: maintaining social morality among the youth. Members of the same set bind together to police their age group, administering collective justice to offenders within their set. This communal

action fosters solidarity and camaraderie.¹ The set transitions as a group through to the social and political positions of elders. Barring this instance, there is no generational unit akin to the system among the Gikuyu of Kenya (Kenyatta, 1987).

European-style education came with what appeared to be a natural classifying system. The members of a cohort are equals, those in grades above an individual are seniors, and those in grades below are juniors. This system of classification extends to all European-style institutions. Thus, to have the same job rank is to be mates and equals. However, even within this, there is a subtle understanding and working of ranking. The first person on the scene, despite equal ranks, is considered senior. For example, if there are two drivers in a company, the first one, even without any official designation to the effect, is considered the senior. Conversely, in the context of school, individuals in the same grade or class are considered equals and mates, regardless of age. They are on familiar terms, can take liberties with one another, and tend to keep company together. To wit, the people say:

- (6) *Egbé eni là ngúnnyán ewùrà dè.*
 'It is for one's peers that one makes
 pounded yam with *ewùrà* yams.'
 (Owomoyela 2005, 65)

In essence, birds of a feather flock together. Implied in the various proverbs are not just the different standings, but also behavioural expectations, such that it is expected for peers to police one another by engaging in frank critiques where necessary.

5 Indices or markers of different stations

As elsewhere, there are visual cues that people rely on to associate a person with a particular

¹I am thankful to Mr. Niyi Ekisola for sharing his own experience among the Ijebu people.

rank, either as senior/ older/elder, junior/ younger/youth, or age mate/equal/peer. Some of these cues are described below.

5.1 Physical appearance

Primarily, Yoruba judge whether someone is older or younger based on physical features. Grey hair is called the crown of the aged, in honour of the value of becoming aged. Wrinkles are another indicator. One of the subjects polled for this study wrote as follows:

My late father told me that, when he graduated as a Grade-1 Teacher in those days, he went to ODEOMU (sic) [his city of birth]. He said, all his age mates, who were there farming had grown so old that his colleagues that went with him, were asking him why was he (sic) greeting those old men (so they appeared, physically to them). But, he told them that some of them were even his juniors. The rigorous farming made them look old. But, because few of those people felt slighted by his actions, he decided to respect them as elders – just to maintain peace and harmony.

In addition, a person's mode of dressing and carriage aid in the estimation of seniority by age. In the Yoruba comedy, *Ile Ariwo*² (episode 3), the landlord was arguing with a tenant about the electricity bill. The young female tenant took offence at what the landlord had said and became rude, saying:

How dare you say such a thing to me. You even say it with the boldness of an elderly person (*àgbà*). *Şe ntori wipe Ankara s'omi dagba ti e ko si? E wo costume awon talika, e*

nje ko ma dabi wipe e ti d'agba ['Is it because you are wearing tie-die-made-me- an-aged person? You put on a poor person's costume to assume the personality of an aged person'].

The wearing of certain native clothes, sewn in traditional styles, is often implicated in sizing up a person. For males, these are mostly t-shirt-like tops with round necks worn over drawstring slacks. Females wear similar tops, with wrap-around skirts and a headscarf made from the same fabric. This mode of dressing is synonymous with older people, and it suggests simplicity, coverage, conformity to tradition, a rustic existence, and low status. In contrast, youths who use locally styled fabrics often tailor them to reflect current fashion trends. For females, this might mean cropped tops, spaghetti straps, and above-the-knee skirts, signaling a departure from conservative styles and an embracing of modernity.

Unlike aged seniors, achieved seniors – those of higher status, the rich, and the political elite – might also wear locally styled fabrics, but these are often bespoke, personalized with elaborate designs that immediately distinguish them as belonging to a higher class. Aesthetics is an important index of *àjùlò*; it is an area where one shows superiority over others. Clothes do not only provide coverage; ostentatious ones, especially, convey fashion and taste as a function of wealth and status; sometimes they reflect membership in a prestigious club, society, or religious group. Expensive material goods are the ineluctable accoutrement of seniors to convey *àjùlò*, (superiority). Within the political sphere, high ranking politicians, those with ministerial appointments, and directors of parastatals are often easily distinguished by their aesthetics. Their secretaries, personal assistants, and subordinates, in deference to the flamboyance of their bosses in elaborate traditional wear, often wear shirts

²https://youtu.be/sZOp8-xvGko?si=HwTe4Q4qxkUmz_WH (accessed August 2, 2023)

and ties, with or without jackets, in accordance with their job status.

5.2 Speech

Aged people, that is, the elderly and those with authority, are distinguished by their manner of speaking. They are presumed to be seasoned wordsmiths, who reflect the wisdom of society in their expressions. They offer solace to the community, they refrain from speaking ill of others, regardless of their deeds, they adjudicate impartially, and they interact with fairness. Long-suffering, patient and reserved, altruistic and without guile, to talk with them is to drink from the fountain of knowledge accumulated over a lifetime, and to interact with them is to see those core societal values modelled. For, the closer one is to joining the ancestors, the more transparent one presumably becomes in one's earthly dealings, except, of course, for those elders known as *àgbàyà* 'foolish old person' or *àgbà ikà* 'wicked old person'. The following proverbs illustrate aspects of the indigenous conceptualization of agedness, reflecting unspoken but realistic societal expectations of seniors and the aged regarding their verbal performance, demeanour, and personal conduct.

- (7) *Ojú ni àgbà nya, àgbà kíí yanu*
 'The elder is quick with their eyes, but not with their mouth.'

Àgbàlagbà, the aged, are quick to observe but are measured in their words and are never rash in their pronouncements. Neither are they, as suggested in the next proverb, given to goading others to violence.

- (8) *A kì í gbó "lù ú, lù ú" lènu àgbà.*
 'One never hears "beat them up; beat them up" in the mouth of an elder.'
 (Owomoyela 2005, 42)

Not only do *àgbàlagbà* resolve disputes and never goad disputants on, but they also have

the last say in any matter brought to them, as expressed in the proverb below.

- (9) *Àgbà kì í wà lojà kòrí omọ titun wó.*
 'When an elder is not at a marketplace, a baby's head will rest askew.'

Essentially, where present, *àgbàlagbà* prevent untoward happenings. They ensure for instance, that the head of a baby on the mother's back remains not skewed by instructing such mothers on how to properly care for their babies. They act as arbiters of peace and are invaluable in resolving conflicts (Bamikole 2008). All these roles are associated with their age, honour, fearlessness, wisdom, temperance, and selflessness. An *àgbàlagbà* under whose watch discord, strife, and malice occur walks uncleanly and consequently lacks the garb of honesty and transparency, but is bedecked in shame, *àgbàyà* ('a foolish old person'). The aged person who has all the physical attributes but lacks the commensurate moral qualities that cement their superioriness (*àjùlò*) loses face (*alàìnitijù* 'shameless') and falls into disrepute.

5.3 Interactions with *àgbàlagbà*

An *àgbàlagbà* within the Yoruba society is recognized through specific address forms. Interactions among the aged and seniors are guided by politeness strategies. One key aspect of this politeness is the avoidance of personal names. Such avoidance is not peculiar to Yoruba but has been extensively discussed for various peoples of Africa, including Ibibio (Essien 1986), Dagbon of Ghana (Dakubu 2000), and Ewe people of Ghana (Agblemagnon 1969; see also Agwuele 2009, Ubahakwe 1981, and Ameka and Breedveld 2004), among others. Teknonyms – names that reference one's status as a parent – serve to convey and mark politeness. Individuals are named with reference to one of their children, for instance *Baba/Mama X*, ('father/mother of X'). Peers, particularly the youth, educated in western values, do not subscribe to this practice among themselves;

they engage with one another on a first-name basis. However, they use teknonyms deferentially when speaking with *àgbàlagbà*, people older than them or of their parents' generation. The point that is underscored is that those to whom teknonyms are addressed are regarded not as peers but as seniors.

Socially, politeness strategies are employed to maintain and enforce distance, and to index deference with regard to acquired seniority. Substituting for names are professional titles; for example, Prof., Dr., Barrister, Chief, Senator, Pastor, and Aafa are used as address names. When referencing seniors in their absence, the format of the title plus the last name is typically employed. To be thus addressed or referenced is to be recognized as senior, elder, and not a peer. Additionally, the plural pronouns *e*, *won*, and *eyin* are used in addressing such people and in referencing them, while familiar pronouns like *o*, *iwọ* are reserved for peers and juniors.

Just as egalitarianism is the mode of social organization among the Jo/'hoansi of Namibia (see Widlok and Tadesse, 2005), the hierarchical ranking of people among Yoruba is not an outcome of external factors but is endogenous. Within the grading system that they operationalize, as already explained, are cultural attitudes and understandings that orchestrate the perception of a person as *àgbàlagbà*, along with the associated deep-seated reverence and expectations that transcend mere denotation by appellation. For instance, in the absence of parents, the *ègbón* (older sib) or *àgbà* (older person) assumes parental roles and responsibilities; as such, they are accorded the respect that would be due to one's parent. To the senior is accorded respect in acknowledgement of the intergenerational roles, social duties, and leadership responsibilities potentially expected of them. These are communicated through various proverbs and pithy sayings.

- (10) *Egbón iwájú: alughon baba.*
'One's older brother [is a suitable]

substitute father.' (Owomoyela 2005, 322)

- (11) *Aṣiwèrè èyàn ní ñwípé egbon ò tó; ẹni a bá níwájú ní ñṣe baba fínni.*
'Only an imbecile says that those older than he or she are of no account; those who came before one can fill the role of father.' (Owomoyela 2005, 28)

Given that those older than a person might stand in the stead of parents, they are never to be disdained. Beside the reverence for and social valuation of those who are biologically *àgbàlagbà*, acquired seniority is also not to be disparaged, but is highly regarded due to the influence of such people, who can facilitate access, favour, or denial. Consequently, the Yoruba say that no one compares to a rich person, for nothing is beyond a rich person, hence the peremptoriness of their acts:

- (12) *Olówó làgbà; olówó soro ẹnu e ñyọná.*
The rich person is the eldest of all; the rich person speaks, and fire shoots out of his mouth. (Owomoyela 2005, 416)

Underlyingly the social differentiations within the Yoruba society are the power differences between *àgbà* and *àbúrò*, which are manifested through *àjùlọ*. Power is entrenched positionally, and it is accepted as given; its coercive force requires compliance; as such, the subordinates and the superior view each other differently. The one who garners respect and reverence due to their perceived power is the *àgbà*, the senior.

5.4 Identifiers of a junior or *àbúrò*

The categories of junior in Yorubaland are primarily a function of being less in age, status, privileges, prestige, and power. Lexical items referencing juniors also connote diminutive, minor, less, dependent, and in some extreme cases, servility. It must be stressed that these subordinated references, especially

the denotation *àbùrò*, have an emotive filial entailment that designates those referred to as the wards of their seniors and elders, and consequently, as people needing nurturing. Complementarily, being marked positionally as vulnerable, they play host to the needs, wishes, and caprices of the senior. For instance, the ones that are sent on errands are juniors. This hierarchical structure was notable in high schools from the 1960s to the 1980s, where students in higher grades held authority over those below them and were capable of punishing or assigning tasks. The teacher can discipline any student and send them on errands, while the principal exercises authority over the teachers. Taking orders makes one subservient to the order giver, and running errands for someone clearly identifies that individual as junior.

A junior, or subordinate is not expected to lecture or educate *àgbàlagbà* (older people), as that would be exceeding their station. The Yoruba culture attributes wisdom to agedness.

(13) *Àbùrò kì í pa ègbón nítàn.*

‘The younger person does not give the older person history lectures.’

(14) *Àgbà tí kò tó ọmọdé-é ràn níṣe ní ńsọ pé kó bu omi wá ká jọ mu.*

‘It is an elder who lacks the authority to send a child on an errand who tells the child to go fetch water so they can drink it together.’ (Owomoyela 2005, 200)

The junior cannot give an order and make it stick without coercion; so too, an aged person without the wherewithal to enforce the authority of their position sweetens their orders with incentives, and as such is also less than *àgbàlagbà*. To be *àgbà* is to have what *àgbàlagbà* entails. Finally, it is a marker of youthfulness to constantly remind others of good deeds done for them. When an aged person, senior, or *àgbà* does a favour, they never mention it again, neither do they seek

acknowledgement for it. It is up to the recipient to speak of it, if they want to.

(15) *Àgbà ṣoore má wo be.*

‘Elder, do a favour and remove your eyes from it.’ (Owomoyela 2005, 255)

While many people are staying longer in the work force, the retirement age in Nigeria for civil servants is 60 years. The retirement age for teachers (elementary and high school) was recently increased to 65, while university lecturers and professors have a mandatory retirement age of 70. Thus, retirement signifies the transition to senior citizenship, identifying an individual as an *àgbà*. Furthermore, being unemployed or outside the active labour force often suggests agedness. Young people are typically more engaged in work, and those still employed (in modern contexts) or continuing to farm are generally perceived as younger. A significant decrease in activity is commonly recognized as a key indicator of old age, as noted in an empirical study by Togonubi-Bickersteth (1988), and the menopause is also associated with aging in females.

6 Achieved seniority or superiority

While, as a social fact, seniority is a fixed, indubitable, and essential position within the Yoruba nation, the bearer is not fixed. Those designated the senior by chronological age may find themselves regarded as junior to a high-achieving younger individual. The plasticity of the hierarchical setup allows the industrious individual to attain social and political superiority through the accumulation of spondulicks. With money the previously junior person can leapfrog the aged to gain supremacy or superioriness (remember the twins; the last to come assumes seniority), hence the saying:

(16) *Owó ò mọ ègbón, ó sọ àbùrò dàgbà.*

‘Wealth does not know who is the elder;

it makes a senior of the younger person.’

Barber (1981, 724) suggests that while the Yoruba nation is a hierarchical society, the dynamic impulse in political life is the rise of self-made men. Individuals compete to make a position for themselves and can bypass the traditional system to become important personalities. Additionally, Owomoyela (2005, 285) included, in his documentation of Yoruba proverbs, sayings that back up Barber’s observation. These sayings continue to motivate the junior to strive for supremacy within the system.

(17) *Àtètèdáyé ò kan tàgbà; orí ẹni ní nǵbénì ga.*

‘Primogeniture has nothing to do with elderliness; it is the head that elevates one.’ (Age is no guarantee of status.)

(18) *Àtètèdáyé ò kan tọ̀rọ̀; Ọlórún ní nǵse orí owó.*

‘Primogeniture has nothing to do with wealth; God assigns wealth to heads.’

Wealth, status, honour, and riches are not inherently tied to age; rather, they result from a combination of predestination and personal effort. Abimbola (2006), in his exploration of Yoruba personhood, describes *esẹ* (leg) as representing ‘strife’, ‘struggle’, and ‘hard work’. Humans are equipped with legs to facilitate the actualization of their predestined potential via their mobility. Abimbola sees the legs as a metaphor for those earthly exertions that accompany humans through their peregrinations. Furthermore, according to the verse of Ifa, ‘Osa’: “It is in destitution that a child learns Ifa; it is afterwards that prosperity follows” (*Iponju lomode fi kọ’fa. Igbəhinwa ẹ na la’ra de’ni*). Altogether, these proverbs and sayings reveal the two paths to *àgbà* – ascribed and achieved. Regardless of how *àgbà* is attained, there is a collective submission to them from those now

made junior. People ‘give it up’ to them (*gbà fún wọn*), accept their supremacy, and requite it with the societally instituted forms of regard, both verbal and non-verbal, that have been variously exemplified in this discussion.

7 Discussion: Persistence of seniority

It is not enough to describe the practice of age distinctions between seniors, equals, and juniors and how they are immediately discerned empirically, it is important to explain the reasons for this practice and to account for its persistence. Obviously, there must be a significant role that age gradation plays within the nation for it to continue being relevant.

As previously said, the *idilé* ‘lineage’ is the most consequential in the life of the Yoruba child traditionally and it still prefigures consequentially in contemporary times. The lineage is the landholding cooperative within which the household and its productive unit finds resources. Land is vested in the lineage; descendants’ right to access land and other social, political, and religious privileges owes to effective possession and usufruct rights that ensure the inalienability of land. This kin-based group, *idilé*, fulfils several functions for its members.

The individual is intrinsically tied to the *idilé*. Traditionally, individuals derive their titles, professions, and religious observances from the *idilé* of their birth. In other words, a person’s identity and life chances (barring exertion and predestination) are rooted in their *idilé*. Within the *idilé*, individuals within the constituent families are ranked based on seniority. A person’s position in the hierarchy determines when and how that person can access the resources of the *idilé*. The patrimony of the *idilé*, argues Schiltz (1982), represents a capital of economic and symbolic assets, which includes “their land and instruments of production but also their kin and clientele... representing a heritage of commitments and debts of honour, a capital of rights and duties

built up in the course of successive generations” (Bourdieu 1977, 178). These endogenous categories reflect autochthonous values that are premised on their sense of the world, and it is within the lineage, administered by ranking, that children first experience life and society in real terms. The *idilé* furnishes them with the requisite model for interaction based on the possibilities attached to their position. Individuals therefore obsess about their positions. Even among the chiefs, there is a constant jostling for seniority (Schiltz 1982). Additionally, the *idilé* instils in the child the variously codified sense of inter-relationships in the world that occur in their everyday language, such as in proverbs and requisite gestures. Ultimately, the “culture of an epoch, class or any group as it is internalized by the individual in the form of durable dispositions that are at the basis of his/her behavior” (Bidet and Bailey 1979, 203).

Within the perspective of ‘sociation’ theory propounded by Akiwowo (1986) is foregrounded a transactional relationship that is essential to the survival of an individual as a member of a group within the existence and continuity of the group. Akiwowo suggests that there is a symbiotic relationship between the individual and their community of interaction that implicates the life of both. The individual, as a social being, finds their essence within the community, which, without the individual, would not exist. The group or society requires civility and cooperation from the individual, while it affords the individual a platform for self-actualization and the fulfilment of their ‘destiny’. This self-actualization occurs within the social parameters set by the community, which define norms and values. The key interacting features for the Yoruba include the requisite character (*iwà*) of the individual, their behavioural patterns (*ihùwàsi*) for manifesting their character, including their habits (*iṣẹ̀ṣi*) and ultimately their cooperation (*àjọṣe*) with other members. While cooperation is the goal, the undertone, however, is adherence to

rigidly established rights and obligations due to gerontocracy.

Young people were considered irrelevant, naïve, fickle, and vulnerable, and they were expected to be always obedient and unquestioning until they become matured, *àgbàlàgbà*. To this, they say, a baby elephant does not trumpet when its parent trumpets. Juniors are to be silent in the presence of their seniors. Their main duties were to do the bidding of adults, assist in any possible way and learn. In return, they obtain food, shelter, and care (Alanamu 2016, 105).

Customarily, the social, political, and historical heritages are entrusted to the aged, who, as their custodians, ensure their faithful transmission to the following generation. Hence the saying that, in the absence of elders, a community descends into chaos; when the family head dies, the household becomes desolate. Aside from this, faithfulness to the wellbeing of the community, at that stage, goes a long way towards ensuring that, upon death, the elder transitions into the cult of the ancestors, where they continue to watch over the community, with the possibility of reincarnation. Stratification is a Yoruba principle for organizing the world, and this is also reflected in their metaphysical world.

8 Conclusion

Summarily presented were some of those physical features and affective dispositions that relate to the Yoruba categorization of people as aged/senior, peer, or junior. It has been shown that the workings of these are integrated into cultural institutions that rest on Yoruba origins, goals of earthly existence, and sociation habitudes. As Cordwell (1983, 56) noted, “the Yoruba see their society as hierarchies within

hierarchies and as intertwined and crossing networks of lineages and nonfamily association. Each of these serves to support the individual in his place in society. The hope is that they keep him or her afloat so that hard-won status or wealth is not lost.”

While the toothless, grey-haired, bald-headed, and frail are revered and honoured

for accumulating inestimable wisdom and resiliently weathering the ravages of time to become sages and cultural polymaths, who are the custodians of lore and defenders of core cultural heritages, the youthful, boisterous, strong, daring, and adventurous are valorized, prized, and elevated for feats that defy their age and for knowledge that confounds longevity.

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