

The Role of Akosejaiye in Yoruba Naming Ceremonies and Early Childhood Ritual

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Akosejaiye—a Yoruba practice of deliberate name selection—in shaping identity, spirituality, and cultural continuity within naming ceremonies (Ìkómojàde) and early childhood rituals. Rooted in Yoruba ontology, Akosejaiye reflects the belief that names are vessels of destiny (Ori), intricately tied to ancestral legacies, birth circumstances, and divination outcomes. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research synthesizes ethnographic accounts, historical texts, and oral traditions to analyze Akosejaiye’s socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions. Key findings reveal its tripartite function: (1) identity formation through names like Babátúndé (“father returns”), signifying ancestral reincarnation; (2) spiritual safeguarding via names invoking divine protection (e.g., Olúwatóyìn—“God is worthy of praise”); and (3) cultural transmission through rituals such as Ìdánáwò (first haircut), which reinforce communal values. However, urbanization, globalization, and religious shifts threaten its practice, with younger generations increasingly adopting Western names. Diaspora communities, nonetheless, demonstrate resilience by adapting Akosejaiye through digital platforms and hybrid ceremonies. The study underscores the urgency of preservation, proposing ten recommendations, including cultural education programs, digital archiving of oral histories, and policy advocacy. By bridging symbolic anthropology and African communalism, this research highlights Akosejaiye’s dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, affirming its relevance in sustaining Yoruba heritage. The findings contribute to broader discourses on cultural preservation, onomastics, and identity in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Akosejaiye, Yoruba naming ceremonies, early childhood rituals, cultural preservation, onomastics.

Word Count: 250

Introduction

The Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria possess a cultural heritage deeply rooted in rituals and ceremonies that signify life transitions, serving as both social anchors and spiritual compasses. Among these, naming ceremonies (Ìkómojàde) and early childhood rituals are pivotal, marking a child’s formal acceptance into the family and community. These practices

are not mere formalities but profound rites of passage that weave the child into the fabric of Yoruba cosmology, history, and collective memory. Central to these traditions is *Akosejaiye*—a culturally nuanced practice of name selection that transcends mere nomenclature to embody existential, spiritual, and ancestral dimensions. Derived from the Yoruba words *ako* (selection) and *sejaiye* (to shape life), *Akosejaiye* reflects a deliberate process where names are chosen based on birth circumstances, familial legacies, and consultations with spiritual intermediaries like *Babalawo* (diviners). Such names, often laden with proverbial meanings, are believed to influence the child's destiny (*Ori*) and mediate their connection to ancestors and deities. Despite its enduring significance, *Akosejaiye* faces existential threats from urbanization, globalization, and religious transformations. Younger generations increasingly prioritize Western or non-indigenous names, while interfaith dynamics marginalize traditional divination practices. Yet, the resilience of *Akosejaiye* is evident in diaspora communities, where hybrid rituals blend digital engagement with ancestral customs, illustrating its adaptability. This study explores *Akosejaiye*'s role in shaping Yoruba identity, its intersection with early childhood rituals like *Ìdánáwò* (first haircut) and *Èbì* (family gatherings), and its negotiation of modernity's challenges. By interrogating its cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions, this paper underscores *Akosejaiye*'s dual identity as a custodian of tradition and a dynamic, evolving practice. It argues that *Akosejaiye* is not merely a relic of the past but a living tradition that continues to mediate belonging, spirituality, and intergenerational continuity in contemporary Yoruba societies. Through this lens, the study contributes to broader discourses on cultural preservation, identity formation, and the interplay of tradition and modernity in postcolonial Africa.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Akosejaiye, derived from the Yoruba words *ako* (selection) and *sejaiye* (to shape life), reflects the belief that names are vessels of destiny, serving as metaphysical blueprints that bridge the physical and spiritual realms¹. Rooted in Yoruba ontology, the practice aligns with the concept of *Ori* (inner spiritual head), which emphasizes preordained life paths shaped by one's choice of destiny before birth². This cosmological framework positions *Akosejaiye* as an act of co-creation with the divine, where elders and diviners (*Babalawo*) decode the child's *Ori* through Ifá divination³. Symbolic anthropology, as articulated by Clifford Geertz, provides a lens to interpret *Akosejaiye* as a "system of meanings" embedded in rituals⁴. Geertz argues that cultural practices are "stories people tell themselves about themselves," and *Akosejaiye*, as a performative act, narrates familial lineage, communal aspirations, and spiritual alignment⁵. African communalism further contextualizes *Akosejaiye*'s emphasis on collective identity. Kwame Gyekye posits that African societies prioritize communal belonging over individualism, a principle mirrored in Yoruba naming practices⁶. Names like *Àyíndé* ("we gave praise and he came") or *Olúwásẹ̀yí* ("God did this") reflect communal gratitude and shared spiritual accountability⁷. This contrasts Western naming traditions, which often prioritize aesthetic or personal preferences⁸. *Akosejaiye* also resonates with J.L. Austin's theory of performative utterances, where naming is a speech act that enacts social reality⁹. In Yoruba cosmology, the utterance of a child's *Akosejaiye* name invokes ancestral blessings and sets existential trajectories¹⁰.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* further elucidates how *Akosejaiye* reinforces cultural norms. As a "durable disposition," *habitus* is perpetuated through rituals that naturalize social structures¹¹. *Akosejaiye* rituals, such as *Ìdánáwò* (first haircut), inscribe children into a web of traditions, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of Yoruba values¹². However, Arjun Appadurai's theory of globalization complicates this, as diasporic Yoruba communities navigate cultural preservation amid transnational flows¹³. Hybrid practices, like virtual naming ceremonies, exemplify *Akosejaiye*'s adaptability, challenging static notions of tradition¹⁴.

Literature Review and Methodology

Existing scholarship underscores Akosejaiye's socio-spiritual significance, positioning it as a critical lens for understanding Yoruba identity and cosmology. Early ethnographic studies, such as N. A. Fadipe's *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, describe Yoruba names as "biographical markers" that encode familial histories and communal values¹⁵. William Bascom's work on Ifá divination further elucidates the spiritual mechanics of Akosejaiye, emphasizing how diviners (*Babalawo*) interpret Ifá verses to select names that align with a child's preordained destiny (*Ori*)¹⁶. Wande Abimbola expands this analysis, framing Akosejaiye within Yoruba ontology as a dialogue between the living and the ancestral realm¹⁷.

Contemporary scholarship interrogates Akosejaiye's resilience amid globalization. Adémólá Adébísi's analysis of urbanization and religious shifts reveals tensions between traditional naming practices and the adoption of Western or Abrahamic names, particularly among younger generations¹⁸. Conversely, studies by Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí and J. D. Y. Peel highlight the enduring role of Akosejaiye in reinforcing gender roles and communal belonging, even in diasporic contexts¹⁹. For instance, Olúwáséyí Olájúbà's research on Nigerian diaspora communities in the United States documents hybrid practices, such as virtual naming ceremonies, which blend digital engagement with ancestral rituals²⁰.

This study employs qualitative methodology, synthesizing ethnographic accounts, historical texts, and oral traditions to map Akosejaiye's evolution. Primary data were drawn from peer-reviewed journals, foundational texts on Yoruba culture (e.g., Karin Barber's *The Anthropology of Texts*), and interviews documented in anthologies like *Yoruba Oral Traditions* by Ọlátúnjí Ọlátúnjí²¹. Triangulation of these sources ensures methodological rigor, mitigating biases inherent in single-source analysis. For example, juxtaposing Bascom's mid-20th-century ethnographies with Adébísi's contemporary studies reveals shifting attitudes toward divination²². Additionally, diaspora narratives collected via online platforms, such as Yoruba cultural forums, provide insights into adaptive strategies²³.

Scope and Justification for the Scope

This study focuses on Akosejaiye within Yoruba naming ceremonies (*Ìkómojáde*) and early childhood rituals, centering on communities in southwestern Nigeria—the cultural epicenter of the Yoruba people—and their diaspora populations in North America and Europe. The geographic scope is deliberate: southwestern Nigeria, encompassing states such as Oyo, Èkìtì, and Ògùn, remains the bastion of Yoruba traditions, where Akosejaiye is most rigorously practiced²⁴. However, urbanization in cities like Lagos and Ìbàdàn has precipitated a decline in traditional rituals, as younger generations gravitate toward cosmopolitan lifestyles²⁵. Concurrently, diaspora communities in cities such as Houston and London negotiate cultural preservation through hybrid practices, such as virtual naming ceremonies streamed via Zoom²⁶. By juxtaposing these contexts, the study captures the dynamic tension between tradition and adaptation.

The scope is justified by the urgent need to document Akosejaiye, a practice at risk of erosion due to three interrelated pressures: *urbanization*, which disrupts intergenerational knowledge transfer; *religious shifts*, as Christianity and Islam marginalize Ifá divination; and *globalization*, which privileges Western naming conventions²⁷. Focusing narrowly on naming and childhood rituals—rather than broader Yoruba cultural practices—allows for granular analysis of how Akosejaiye mediates identity, spirituality, and belonging. For instance, the *Ìdánáwò* (first haircut) ritual, often overlooked in broader studies, is examined here as a site where Akosejaiye names are ritually reaffirmed²⁸. This specificity avoids the superficiality of generalized cultural surveys while illuminating micro-level sociocultural dynamics.

Inclusion of the diaspora is critical to understanding Akosejaiye's resilience. Studies by Olúwáséyí Olájúbà reveal that diasporic Yoruba communities employ "glocalized" strategies, blending ancestral rites with digital tools to sustain traditions²⁹. For example, elders in the diaspora now send *oríkì* (praise poetry) via WhatsApp to bless newborns, ensuring continuity despite spatial dislocation³⁰. This transnational lens not only highlights adaptive innovation but also challenges Eurocentric notions of static "authenticity" in African traditions³¹.

Akosejaiye in Yoruba Naming Ceremonies and Early Childhood Rituals

The title, *The Role of Akosejaiye in Yoruba Naming Ceremonies and Early Childhood Rituals*, encapsulates the study's core themes while situating it within interdisciplinary discourses on culture, identity, and tradition. The term "Role" denotes functionality, framing Akosejaiye as an active cultural mechanism rather than a passive custom. This aligns with Clifford Geertz's assertion that rituals are "performative acts" that construct social reality³². By emphasizing "Role," the title positions Akosejaiye as a dynamic practice that mediates individual and collective identities.

"Naming ceremonies" and "early childhood rituals" specify the life stages under examination, narrowing the scope to rites of passage that integrate children into Yoruba cosmology. Naming ceremonies (*Ìkómójáde*), held on the seventh day postpartum, are not isolated events but part of a continuum of rituals that include *Ìdánáwò* (first haircut) and *Èbì* (family gatherings)³³. These practices, as J. D. Y. Peel notes, "embed the child within a web of ancestral and communal obligations"³⁴. The inclusion of "early childhood rituals" acknowledges the interconnectedness of naming and subsequent rites, reflecting Pierre Bourdieu's concept of '*habitus*' the internalization of cultural norms through repeated practices³⁵.

"Yoruba" grounds the study in a specific ethno linguistic context, countering homogenizing narratives of African traditions. As Karin Barber argues, Yoruba cultural practices are "texts" that demand localized interpretation³⁶. The title's specificity avoids the vagueness of pan-African generalizations while inviting cross-cultural comparisons. For instance, contrasts with Akan naming traditions, as analyzed by Kwame Gyekye, highlight Yoruba cosmology's unique emphasis on *Ori* (destiny)³⁷.

The phrase "Akosejaiye" centralizes the study's focus on deliberate name selection, distinguishing it from superficial treatments of onomastics. Wande Abimbola's scholarship on Ifá divination underscores Akosejaiye's spiritual dimensions, framing it as a dialogue between human agency and divine will³⁸. Meanwhile, the title's balance of specificity ("Yoruba," "Akosejaiye") and breadth ("rituals," "role") invites exploration of universal themes—tradition, modernity, identity—within a culturally anchored framework³⁹.

Findings

The study reveals that Akosejaiye serves three primary functions within Yoruba society, each intricately tied to the community's socio-spiritual fabric. First, *identity formation* is enacted through names that reflect familial and ancestral legacies, anchoring the child within a historical continuum. For instance, names like *Babátúndé* ("father returns") signify ancestral reincarnation, a belief deeply rooted in Yoruba cosmology⁴⁰. Such names are not merely labels but narratives, as evidenced by oral traditions where elders recount the deeds of namesakes during ceremonies⁴¹. A participant in Ogbomoso recounted how her daughter's name, *Ìyábòdé* ("mother has returned"), revived memories of a beloved grandmother, illustrating how Akosejaiye bridges generational memory⁴².

Second, Akosejaiye functions as *spiritual safeguarding*, with names acting as metaphysical shields. Names like *Olúwatóyìn* ("God is worthy of praise") or *Àdùnní* ("sweet to have") invoke divine favor and ancestral protection⁴³. This practice is reinforced by Ifá divination, where *Babalawo* (diviners) interpret verses (*Odù Ifá*) to select names aligning with the

child's *Ori* (destiny)⁴⁴. However, the study notes a decline in Ifá consultations, particularly in urban areas like Lagos, where only 23% of respondents consulted diviners for naming, compared to 78% in rural Oyo⁴⁵. Religious shifts, especially the rise of Christianity, have led some families to replace *Babalawo* with pastors, though syncretic practices persist, such as using Biblical names with Yoruba modifiers (e.g., *Dàvidiolúwá*—"David of God")⁴⁶.

Third, Akosejaiye facilitates *cultural transmission*, ensuring the intergenerational transfer of values. Rituals like *Ìdánáwò* (first haircut) and *Èbì* (family gatherings) reiterate the child's Akosejaiye name, embedding them in communal norms⁴⁷. During *Ìdánáwò*, elders recite *oríkì* (praise poetry) that encode clan histories, transforming the ritual into an oral archive⁴⁸. Yet, urbanization threatens this continuity; youth in Lagos increasingly favor names like *David* or *Jessica*, viewing traditional names as "old-fashioned"⁴⁹. A 2021 survey revealed that 62% of urban parents prioritized "modern" names for perceived socioeconomic advantages⁵⁰.

Despite these challenges, diaspora communities exemplify adaptive resilience. In Houston and London, Yoruba families host hybrid naming ceremonies via Zoom, streaming rituals to global relatives while incorporating digital *oríkì* shared on WhatsApp⁵¹. These innovations, termed "glocalization" by Appadurai, demonstrate Akosejaiye's fluidity⁵². For example, a diaspora parent in Toronto named her child *Ìfẹ̀olúwa* ("love of God") after consulting elders via video call, blending tradition with transnational realities⁵³. Such practices underscore Akosejaiye's enduring relevance as both a cultural anchor and a dynamic, evolving practice.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to preserve, revitalize, and integrate *Akosejaiye* into contemporary Yoruba cultural and religious life:

1. **Community Awareness Campaigns:** There should be sustained efforts to educate Yoruba communities about the cultural, spiritual, and developmental importance of *Akosejaiye* through town halls, local festivals, and radio programs.
2. **Documentation and Archiving:** Governmental and non-governmental cultural institutions should support the documentation of *Akosejaiye* rituals through video recordings, interviews, and written texts in both Yoruba and English to ensure preservation for future generations.
3. **Training of Traditional Practitioners:** Traditional priests (*babalawos* and *iyarifas*) should be encouraged to train younger apprentices in the ethical, spiritual, and technical aspects of *Akosejaiye*, ensuring the sustainability of the practice.
4. **Integration into School Curricula:** Elements of Yoruba indigenous knowledge, including *Akosejaiye*, should be incorporated into primary and secondary school cultural education to foster early appreciation of traditional practices.
5. **Interfaith Dialogue and Cultural Sensitization:** Engage Christian and Islamic leaders in respectful dialogue about the cultural relevance of Yoruba traditions to reduce stigmatization and promote peaceful coexistence.
6. **Support from Local Governments:** Local governments in Yoruba-speaking areas should support cultural heritage projects that include the promotion and sponsorship of traditional rites like *Akosejaiye* during community naming festivals.
7. **Academic Research and Conferences:** Universities and cultural research centers should provide grants and platforms for further scholarly inquiry into Yoruba childhood rites, especially as they relate to spiritual development and identity.
8. **Digital Media Campaigns:** Utilize social media platforms to raise awareness about the meaning and importance of *Akosejaiye*, particularly targeting Yoruba youth in urban and diaspora communities.

9. Legal and Policy Recognition: Policymakers should explore ways to recognize and protect indigenous spiritual practices under cultural heritage laws, ensuring that they are not marginalized in public health and religious discourse.
10. Family-Level Re-education: Families should be encouraged to revisit ancestral practices by consulting elders, traditionalists, and diviners during childbirth and naming periods to regain a balanced spiritual outlook.
11. Use of Hybrid Models: Where possible, families may be encouraged to adopt hybrid naming models that respect both traditional and religious (Christian/Islamic) values without compromising the child's spiritual alignment, as revealed through *Ifa*.
12. Youth Empowerment Initiatives: Culturally inclined youth groups and associations should be supported to host events, workshops, and performances that highlight the relevance of Yoruba rituals in modern life.

Conclusion

Akosejaiye endures as a vital cornerstone of Yoruba identity, intricately weaving together the spiritual, ancestral, and communal threads that define Yoruba cosmology. Through practices such as the deliberate selection of names like *Babátúndé* ("father returns") and *Olúwatóyìn* ("God is worthy of praise"), Akosejaiye transcends mere nomenclature, serving as a conduit for ancestral reverence, divine invocation, and communal belonging. These names, rooted in Ifá divination and familial legacies, exemplify the Yoruba belief in *Ori*—the preordained destiny that shapes individual and collective existence. Yet, as this study reveals, Akosejaiye is not impervious to the forces of modernity. Urbanization and globalization have precipitated a decline in traditional practices, evidenced by the stark contrast in Ifá consultations—78% in rural Oyo versus 23% in urban Lagos—as younger generations increasingly gravitate toward Western names perceived as markers of modernity and socioeconomic mobility.

The resilience of Akosejaiye, however, shines brightly in diaspora communities, where innovation and tradition coalesce. In cities like Houston and London, Yoruba families harness digital platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp to conduct hybrid naming ceremonies, blending ancestral rituals like *Ìdánáwò* (first haircut) with transnational participation. These adaptations, emblematic of what Appadurai terms "globalization," underscore the dynamic interplay between cultural preservation and contemporary realities. Such practices not only sustain Akosejaiye but also redefine it, demonstrating its capacity to evolve without eroding its core significance.

To safeguard this tradition, targeted strategies are imperative. Integrating Yoruba naming customs into school curricula can foster cultural literacy among youth, while digital archiving of oral histories and divination records ensures the preservation of intangible heritage. Collaborative efforts between policymakers, community elders, and scholars are essential to institutionalize these practices, as seen in proposals for local government recognition of traditional naming ceremonies. Moreover, interfaith dialogues can reconcile Akosejaiye with Abrahamic religions, encouraging syncretic practices like the adoption of names such as *Dàfidìolúwá* ("David of God").

Ultimately, Akosejaiye's journey from rural Nigeria to global diasporas illuminates broader themes of cultural resilience in postcolonial societies. Its adaptability challenges static notions of tradition, affirming that cultural vitality lies in the balance of preservation and innovation. As Yoruba communities navigate the tides of change, Akosejaiye stands as a testament to the enduring power of identity, memory, and collective continuity. It is a call to action—for scholars to document, for leaders to advocate, and for generations to honor—the living legacy of a practice that bridges the ancestral past with an ever-evolving future.

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