

Welcoming a New Life: Yoruba Naming Traditions

by Lisa Falk

This article is based on the Web site A Nigerian Yoruba Naming Ceremony in Washington, DC, by Diana Baird N'Diaye, PhD, of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and Dr. Gilbert Ogunfeditimi, African Immigrant Folklife Project community scholar. See the Web site for photos, audio clips, poetry, and ritual food recipes, www.folklife.si.edu/vfest/africa.

In Western Nigeria, the Yoruba celebrate a new life by giving the baby a name. Bestowing a name is in accordance with the belief that a baby who is not named within seven to nine days after birth will not outlive the parent of the same sex. Children may receive names from their parents and grandmothers. Names are not thought of in advance, but are based on circumstances at the time of birth.

The Meaning of a Name

A little baby with a big name: Monisola Morounmbo Olatubokun Vivian Ogunfeditimi. She has four first names, each reflective of someone's thought of that child. The mother gave her Monisola, meaning "I have my own share" because after three sons, this was her first daughter, or her share in the family. The father gave her Morounmbo, meaning "I have something precious to take home." The family lives in the U.S.; home refers to Nigeria. The Nigerian grandmother named her Olatubokun, meaning "It is time for my honor to come back home." And Vivian is after the baby's other grandmother, in Detroit. They will call her *Moni* for short.

On the Web site is a list of Yoruba names that includes pronunciation and categories of meanings, for example, names for families of warrior clans or traditional doctors.

Receiving a Name

Yoruba children receive names during a special ceremony. The name is not simply written on a birth certificate; it is ritually given. Soon after their son was born, Mr. and Mrs. Adeboyeke, who live in Washington, DC, invited friends and relatives to their house for a naming ceremony. The family wore festive new clothes. Guests arrived bringing gifts, much like guests bring to a baby shower in the U.S. or to a *bris* among Jews.

After a bit of socializing, the ceremony began. Everyone assembled in the living room around a table laden with several kinds of ritual food and objects. Since the family belongs to the International House of Prayer for All People, their pastor Rev. Frederick Ogunfeditimi officiated. He started with a hymn and then introduced each of the foods and objects on the table to the baby to taste or touch. As he did so, he declared the symbolism of each and said prayers for the child's well-being and good character. Among other things, he presented water so the child, like water, will be important to his people; a pen for the hope that it will be used for good, not for ill; and salt and honey to bring pleasantness and sweetness in life. After the child touched or tasted the items, they were passed to family and friends.

Lesson Ideas

By exploring what names mean and how different cultural groups have special naming traditions, students get to know one another better, learn more about their families and communities, draw parallels among people's naming traditions, and take deeper notice of names everywhere—from street names to names in literature and history. Start by sharing your naming story with students. Next, ask them to interview one other about how their names were chosen and bestowed. For homework they can investigate an adult's naming story. Find resources for teaching with naming traditions in **Louisiana Voices** www.louisianavoices.org, Unit III Lesson 3. More ideas follow.

1. Ask students to find out how their parents chose a name for them. What do their names mean? What would your students name a child? Why? Have your students search the Internet and the library for more information about names and their meanings.
2. Print out the *Ewi* poem from the Web site. Have students read it and then write a poem of their own honoring a new life receiving its name. Students may listen to the *Ewi* on the site to inspire their poetry.
3. Discuss with students what associations they connect with certain names. Are these linked to the character of people they know with those names? Do they think that changing their names might affect how they behave? Older students might discuss nicknames and their influence on sense of self as well as behavior.

It is also traditional to have a poet sing an *Ewi*, a poem created to honor individuals going through a rite of passage and often accompanied by drums. *Ewi* poets are admired for the richness of their words, the artistry of their idioms and proverbs, and their deep knowledge of the Yoruba language.

Festive foods follow the ceremony. They have no *Please turn to page 16*

In Washington, DC, Ewi poet Abiodun Adepoju and his wife celebrate the naming of their newborn twins, Taiwo and Kehinde, the names traditionally given to twins in Yoruba communities.



Photo by Harold Dorwin, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution

Yoruba Naming

continued from page 4

particular symbolism but are traditional Yoruba dishes such as inyan (pounded yam) and okra soup. The Adeboyeku family prepared goat stew and friends brought fried plantains and rice dishes.

The Impact of a Name

Many Yoruba believe that a name is so powerful it can influence your behavior. Rev. Ogunfeditimi tells how one child was affected by his name:

There was this child aged four years in Nigeria who had been given the name “Sumala” at birth. Although he was so very young, this child would steal anything stealable. His parents had tried everything [to stop him] to no avail. At last he was brought to me for prayer. At that time, there was a notorious thief in Nigeria who also bore the name “Sumala.” When I prayed, God instructed me to change the child’s name and that he would stop stealing. I therefore baptized him and gave him the name “David.” From that day he stopped stealing. This was a great miracle to the community.

All of us have names. Choose from among our Lesson Ideas (see p. 4) to explore naming traditions with students of all ages. Post this stanza of the *Ewi* poem from the Web site to remind students that everyone wishes the best for babies!

*The baby is newly arrived.
Parents, friends, and acquaintances,
You are all commended for the baby.
May the baby have a long life,
A long life in comfort.*

Lisa Falk is director of education at the Arizona State Museum in Tucson and also wrote “Step on the Pedal and Go” on p. 6.