

The Yoruba Personality Assessment Criteria

O. S. Elegbeleye

Department of Psychology, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile – Ife, Nigeria

E-mail: tobae2@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT This analysis presented the personality assessment criteria often used by the Yoruba as a psychological tool to position an individual on the social responsibility scale and also to determine the norm compliant level of the Yoruba person. The study focused on the four core criteria upon which such assessment is anchored. These are; the family arrangement and child rearing technique, which is the foundation of personality building block, socialization processes from childhood to adulthood, classification of personality types, attribution values and personality types. This is a response to the yearning that seeks to integrate socio – cultural beliefs and practices into the building block of personality development. A haunch that is expected to give both Clinical and Counselling practices a boost.

The Yoruba, an African race that commands a population of over 40 million people, are predominantly found in Southwestern Nigeria, but spread across the coastal lands to the republic of Benin. The Yoruba in the Diaspora are located in some part of Brazil and North America. Their homegrown type of civilization that for a long time defied the colonial incursion into the African political space distinguishes this race. Apart from the fact that they are well known to other African tribes through their mercantile, they are well versed in craftsmanship. Most of their crafts, stolen as spoils of war are today openly displayed in famous museums in Britain and other parts of the world.

The Yorubas have a history of governance that compared well in organizational technique with any other in the world. This system of governance subsisted for well over a century. During the pre 1960 colonial era in modern Nigeria, their level of enlightenment pushed them into the forefront of the political agitation for independence. This high level of enlightenment firmly entrenched them in a central position among the Nigerian elite of today. They have been able to dictate the socio-political and economic pace in Nigeria due to the unique personality type that they are naturally endowed with. They are well educated, articulate and dynamic. They have peculiar attitude to life that is more a function of an internalized norm than a set of learned mores. These internalized norms are cued into their psyche at the level of a family unit that is built on undiluted set of values. Personality assessment, social interaction pattern, and modes of evaluation, all derive from the quality and tone of this value system.

In order to highlight the Yoruba's personality assessment criteria, the following psychological flashpoints shall engage the attention of this paper :

Family arrangement and child rearing techniques
Socialization processes from childhood to adulthood

Classification of personality types

Attribution values and Personality types

1. FAMILY ARRANGEMENT AND CHILD REARING TECHNIQUES

In the traditional Yoruba family setting, the paternalistic social arrangement was the paradigm that dictated what role was allotted to who, and what role expectation was demanded from all members of the household. The father is the statutory head of the family. His words are law. Along with this privilege is his responsibility as the breadwinner for the family. He is generally assumed to have started the family; therefore it is beholden on him to give it direction, both psychologically and physically. Psychologically, he makes the rules that are norm-compliant and supervises its execution. Both the mother and the siblings are bound by these rules, even though they too have their role assignments. When there is a need for discipline, the father metes it out in a measure commensurate with the offence. Most infractions that attract punishment are analyzed and explained to the child so that he would avoid similar pitfalls in the future. When there is disaffection between the man and his wife, there are coteries of significant others within the extended family household who would mediate. Mediators include the head of the family,

the most senior wife, and other adult member of the family who has the weight of age and by extension wisdom on his or her side. It should be pointed out that such disaffection as this hardly ever degenerates to a level where consideration for divorce becomes an option. Even though polygamy as a system of marriage characterized most family settings, few cases of outright divorce was ever recorded

The family system predominantly practiced in the traditional Yoruba setting is the extended family type that accommodates tiers of family units networking as one big blood related family. The oldest man in the family plays the role of the family head with whom authority resides. He settles disputes when there is conflict, be it between siblings, husband and wife, or among the men or the wives. The family sociology is such that employs democratic tenets in the day-to-day running of the affairs of members. It is important to mention that such a family setting, as this was the precursor of social interactional pattern and the affable interpersonal relationship that sets the African man apart as an affable, and affiliative personality.

The child is the responsibility of all mothers within the household to nurture. But authority about how such nurturing duties are dispensed resides with the first wife of the family head, who is seen as the big mother, and therefore a mother to everybody. Custom permits the man to marry more than one wife, which explains the reason for the relatively large size of the family. Everybody watches out for one another and reports unwholesome behaviors by any erring member to the appropriate quarters for punishment. By the time a child hits the age of five years, he must have mastered the important values associated with social behaviors, moral proclivity and role expectations. This is the level at which the seed of sex role stereotypes are sowed. The standard Yoruba family setting does not allow for the use of such negative and derogatory tags as “bastard” or “orphan”. All children are catered for and accommodated within the confines of the large family setting. This includes the children of a bereaved widow. In the actual sense of the word, there are no widows as all women are answerable to a husband at all times even after the demise of the first husband. It is arranged such that the younger brother of a diseased husband automatically inherits the bereaved widow of his late brother, and with the

inheritance comes the responsibility for the welfare of the subsisting children of the widow for her late husband.

Such arrangement as this prevents the serious social problems associated with widowhood and the individualistic isolationism practiced in the west. On the death of a spouse, the bereaved enjoys a support system that stands as a buffer to ward off loneliness, joblessness, frustration and displacement. A strong sense of belonging and social identity is fostered in the child. The family tie is so strong that at times a child may grow to adolescence before knowing who his biological mother is, because he calls every female in the household who is older or falls in the same age bracket with his mother by the affectionate title “mother”. All the females within the household who falls within this category also see the child as their responsibility.

The occupational choice of most adult male members of the family is influenced largely by the chosen occupation of the head of the family. The younger siblings either join him in his occupation as apprentices or helping hands, but it is pertinent to note that they all jointly contribute to the resources and breadwinning requirements of the family. This is however not to undermine the independence and freedom guaranteed any such adult male member of the extended family to leave the big compound and establish his own in any part of the community whenever he feels matured enough to do so.

2. SOCIALIZATION PROCESSES FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD

Socialization processes start from early childhood at the family level. This is when the child vicariously learns about the norms and the mores of the society as are transmitted by the parents and other older siblings through admonitions, scolding and spanking for untoward behaviors that do not conform with acceptable social and moral standards. For example, the child is taught very early to respect age and defer to it. For this reason he is educated in the symbolic art of prostrating in the case of a male child, or kneeling in the case of a female child while greeting the elderly. A slight bow of the head and deliberate avoidance of eye contact when being spoken to by the elderly are behavioral scripts associated with respect for age and the elderly that the child is expected to imbibe

into his norm repertoires when interacting with elders. Older siblings are also expected to be deferred to by younger ones. At about age two, the child has started to prefer sharing his play period with any available person of his age group, particularly within the environment of the big family compound. By age five, he has identified himself with a semi-formalized out-of-the compound peer group.

Peer grouping during childhood bears all the features of the normal social group. The traditional pastime of the average Yoruba children's group is hunting small games such as harmless reptiles found around the home, birds and rats etc. Also, they engage themselves quite often by practicing sex role mastery where female children would simulate child rearing practices and cooking activities, and male children get themselves occupied with masculine tasks like building of mud houses, talking tough to an imagined wife or child and wrestling with one another. Peers at this level are hardly gender mixed in their play period; hence same sex peers are often seen together. So essentially, at this period, peer groups serve as an information bureau for the child, it teaches him or her sex role and it also acts as a practicing venue for adult values.

During adolescence, the young person is now set for the rigors of occupational identity. There is a gamut of occupations to choose from. For the female, there are such occupations like weaving, dyeing, hair plaiting, palm oil processing, sewing, selling and buying etc. While available for the male are such jobs as farming, bricklaying, sculpting, making of drums, drumming, singing, soldiering, hunting, blacksmithing etc. It is customary for Yoruba families to identify with an occupation, which is adopted as the family occupation. Every male member of the family is expected to have knowledge of this occupation and adopt it as his own. Names adopted by most families derive from their family occupation. By the time an individual gets to adolescence, he has gained a fair mastery of the family occupation because he would have had a cause to assist and therefore understudy the family occupation through interaction with his father at work. The female at this age level is trained by the mother and other adult female members of the family in preparation for marriage. Hence not much emphasis is placed on a serious occupational requirement for her.

Socialization at this point is played out at the

level of occupation-induced interaction that often exists between members of the same age grade who must by now be identified with a particular occupation. More often than not, age grading is arranged to cover all individuals whose ages fall within a close range of one another. A range of five years often marks an age grade boundary. Age grading therefore becomes a community-wide landmark by which achievement, proper role mastery and value orientation, success, and belongingness are measured as attributes of social compliance. Where you belong to an age grade generally believed to be matured to enter into marriage and you do not have a suitor or a fiancé, your social rating would drop drastically. You automatically run the risk of being considered irresponsible and unfit to hold a position of leadership among your peers. Within the age grade is a social structure that makes participation and role taking mandatory. A kind of watertight regime of rules and regulations exist to guide behavior, hence any slight deviation from the norm is not only frowned upon but could earn the erring member direct ostracisation from the group. For this reason such social vices like stealing, laziness, refusing to pay debts, murder, sociopathy, psychopathy etc. are rarely experienced in the Yoruba traditional settings. The age grading social structure is instituted in such a manner that only children are left out of its network. Therefore all the attributes of group functioning, such as conformity, compliance, competitiveness, cohesion, group ethics, etc. are manifested.

3. CLASSIFICATION OF PERSONALITY TYPES

From the Western perspective, personality as a concept is construed in one respect to refer to the external and visible characteristics identifiable with an individual, and in other respects, as a host of subjective social and emotional qualities that may not be directly visible to the eye, or as an enduring and unique cluster of characteristics that is given to constant changes in response to different situations. The connecting link between these varied perspectives is that whatever attribute constantly displayed by the individual over time can be used as a personality label to describe him. However, the concept of personality as it is understood by the Yoruba is a function of several orientations,

which intersperse between the socio-economic and the mythological. According to Morakinyo and Akiwowo (1981), the term *eda eni*, appears to be the nearest Yoruba equivalent to the Western concept of personality. The meaning they gave to this is that which has been created, creature, or being. *Eniyan* in Yoruba language is a composite of several meanings. In one sense it can be operationally interpreted in its biological symbolism as a person, a human being, a human creature. But it hardly has any bearing to human personality except when qualified with one of the several adjectives commonly used to distinguish between what type of a personality is being referred to. Hence whatever adjective attached often reflects the kind of contextual meaning intended. For example, *eniyan pataki*, (an important person) *eniyan rere* (a good person), *eniyan daradara* (A generous person), *eniyan buruku* (a bad person), *eniyan jatijati* (a rascally person), *sasa eniyan* (a distinguish person), *saraki eniyan* (a famous person) etc. are all contextually appropriate scripts of personality.

It is instructive to note that the Yoruba classification of personality type follows the generally well-known dichotomies between the good and the bad. As there are personalities considered good so are a gamut of others considered bad. These classifications are based essentially on the social interaction patterns available within any given Yoruba community

Social Dimension: Social values that govern conduct in the social space are supposed to have been imbibed at the family level and cultivated during peer engagements. An appropriate mastery of these values goes a long way in predisposing the individual to choose socially compliant cues when carrying out-group assignments. The way these duties are discharged automatically dictates the personality rating of the individual and by extension what side of the divide (i.e. between the good and the bad) he will be classified. This is a kind of external character assessment that feeds on the assumed proper internalization of the norms and values of the Yoruba society by the assessed; in which case, any positive self-assessment that does not tally with the societal evaluations would not hold water. A desirable personality type appropriate for social approval is described by such labels as; *Omoluabi* (personable), *akikanju* (valiant), *borokini* (bachelor), *afinju* (impeccable), *elegbeleye* (sociable), *arewa* (pretty), *adekambi*

(talented), *afenifere* (welfarist), *oge* (damsel), *gbajumo* (famous), *ilumooka* (popular), *loyaya* (affable) etc. The personality attributes considered socially undesirable are given such negative labels as; *modaru* (rabble rouser), *obun* (dirty), *agboyisoyi* (gossip), *opuro* (liar), *alagabagebe* (unreliable), *osonu* (wicked), *alarinka* (waif), *onisokuso* (talkative) *alagbere* (prostitute), *gbewiri* (thief), *kenimani* (jealous), *onijekuje* (glutton) e.t.c. All of these labels portray personality types in both their positive and negative dimensions

4. ATTRIBUTION VALUES AND PERSONALITY TYPES

Three attribution dimensions often provide the clue to the Yoruba's belief about human personality development. These are; pre-destination; personal efficiency; and duty inspired behaviour scripts.

Predestination is a system of belief that insist on a predetermined life path for man, who, try as much as he would, cannot but follow the path unswervingly in accordance with the determiner's wish. In the Yoruba ontology of human personality according to Morakinyo and Akiwowo (1981), there is a strong belief that supports the fact that human personality is predetermined, in which case, a new born babe is assumed to have come to the world fully packaged. This packaging covers, among other things, personality type, career choice, span of life, and the type of spouse to marry e. t. c. It is therefore a common practice for parents to seek the expertise of diviners for guidance concerning what type of child the heavens have thrust in their care, and by extension, what type of parenting style to adopt in raising the child

The ifa oracle is the most favoured channel for divining the *itele waye omo* (life path or destiny of the child). In the language of the ifa oracle, which incidentally tallies with the commonly used and well understood construct among the Yoruba are words like the *ori*, *ese*, *owo* and *oruko*. *Ori* literally meaning the "head" but conceptually representing the sum total of the individual's allotted measure of fortune and misfortune which has been packaged for him to encounter in his sojourn on earth. Remarkably not too different from the Greek mythology about predestination. Where an individual predominantly exhibit an anti-social behaviour, it is

often said that he is troubled by his ori; hence ori n da a laamu is a label to describe a never-do-well, whether measured on achievement scale, social scale or overall personality scale.

The owo, which literally means the “hand”, is a construct depicting the interplay between the individual’s free-will and his predestined nature. He, through the dint of hard work, can translate ori buruku (misfortune) to ori rere (success or valuable personality). Hence it is not unusual to hear it commonly said that owo eni ni a fi n tun iwa eni se, (hard work is what is required to translate misfortune to fortune) which originated from the ifa corpus. Ese is another construct whose literal translation approximates the “leg”, but conceptually, it emphasizes the judicious use to which the individual puts his locomotive freedom. This freedom is not blind to the predestined allotment designed for the individual who only has to fulfill destiny by using his two feet to loco mote himself into fortune or misfortune. A wife or a child that is described as possessing ese buruku (bad leg), is a harbinger of misfortune for whomever harbours him or her. This construct is also used to describe the personality of an individual. For example; elesi osi (impoverished leg) or elesi osi meji (possessor of two left legs) or elesi buruku (owner of a bad leg) are all figurative expressions depicting the construct of an unacceptable personality among the Yoruba.

Oruko (name) is another construct that is used commonly to depict a person’s personality. Hence the type of a name a child bears is a derivative of the ifa divination and pronouncement on his life-path. Right from birth, the name of the child has put upon him the labeling that points attention to what kind of profession he must choose. Names like Abeegundes, Ojeyemi, Eegundoyin, and e.t.c. belong to the masquerade profession. Faseyi, Fayoose, Faponle are names that tie the child to the ifa oracle. Osungbohun, Osundele, Osungbayeri etc., are labeling attaching the child to the river goddess. Balogun Akindele, Akinrefon, Akogun etc. are names associated with warfare and by extension used to describe aggressive and bold personality. Occupation possesses significant identity-stamping rudiments. And through one’s occupation, character is formed that stays with the individual throughout his adult life. For this reason, it comes easily to the Yoruba to define personality and

performance through a person’s name. The saying that Oruko lo n ro omo (the child’s name is a prompt for his behaviour) is an expression that conveys the belief that a person’s name has an implicit value-tag that predisposes him to exhibit good or bad, aggressive or amiable, warm or hostile behaviour.

Personal Efficiency: As well entrenched as the belief in predestination is in the Yoruba ontology, so is the belief in personal efficiency, which is understood to be an endowment given to the individual as a possible leeway out of the stifling effects of untoward destiny. The personal mainstay of the individual is his ability to evoke the admixture of internalized values with courage and determination, to overturn a predetermined ill luck and rugged life path. This is which is similar in interpretation to Carl Rogers’ positive self-statement. Hence hard work and diligence becomes watchwords that feature frequently in folklores and poetry of different genres. For example; in the counselling sessions often given to adolescents and youths when considered old enough to take on adult responsibilities, such idioms as of the following are invoked as message tools;

ikawo o laso, teni n teni (*it is what one works for that he can freely use*)

lo d’ifa fun Ajitoni, won ni b’o (*causes Ajitoni to be forewarned by the ifa*)

ji t’oni, ta lo m’eni ‘a ji t’ola (*that how man survives from one day to another*)

oni l’ari, eleda l’omola (*is a mystery reserved only for the gods to unravel.*)

ojumo t’oni to mo ba wa laye (*the unfolding of this day that meets us alive,*)

k’a loo lati sise a se ni laari, (*admonishes us to apply our mind and body to hardwork*)

nitori t’o ba d’ojo ale, k’a ba a (*so that in our old age*)

r’eni sin ‘ru fun ni (*we can be privileged to be served and treated like a lord*)

t’a a ba bi ‘ni tan a tun tun’ ra eni bi (*even after physical birth, it behoves one to rediscover self*)

Another measure put in place to advocate personal efficiency is the marital obligation that imposes upon the man the need for him to relocate from his father’s compound to his own as soon as he is betrothed. To enjoy the freedom that comes with age, a separation from one’s parents’ direct sphere of influence is highly desirable because it serves to prevent friction that may

arise as a result of clash of interest between an adult child and his parents. However such a relocation as this does not come without its concomitant commitment to prepare materially and financially ahead of time to start a family worthy of respect among peers. This becomes a major occupational motivation that when achieved, one becomes better integrated into the mainstream of his age grade. Idioms that stamps this graphically as a counselling tool readily used by Yoruba elders to teach youngsters the right values is expressed thus;

Aponle o si f'oba ti o l'olori (*A high chief without a wife courts disrespect*)

Borokini o se e f'ogun odun se (*one does not remain a bachelor for twenty years*)

Adagba ma l'adie irana at'adogbo (*old age without a hope of proper burial*)

Ma ni'le lori, won o r'aiye wa (*nor a befitting shelter is vainglorious*)

Akuku ibi san ju radarada omo (*better not be given birth to than to live and die unsung*)

There is generally a high expectation for the adult person to be identified with an occupation that can pay his way. That is, position him properly to discharge his social responsibilities. This responsibilities include; starting a family through marriage, providing shelter and sustenance for the immediate, and in some cases, the extended families, giving a befitting burial to the aged parents when they pass on, giving the hand of the daughter away in marriage to a suitor and participating fully in community based development projects. These expectations are, however gender sensitive in the sense that, being essentially a paternalistic society, the Yoruba value profile excludes women from these high role expectations, and where she has the means to achieve the feats, she does it under the aura of her husband. The woman is particularly expected to stand by her husband and tend the home.

Duty Inspired Behaviour Scripts: There are some personality attributes that are believed to be naturally endowed. This belief is not deterred by a parallel belief in predestination or the human ability to transform his life for the better through the dint of hard labour. But rather because it is an entrenched cultural belief and practice certain individuals are not expected to deviate from a personality label formally designed for their special position and special assigned duties. These are members of the royal household and the priesthood order. Royalty conditions the

behavior of individuals that have the royal blood in their veins to adopt personality traits that are tainted with authority and haughtiness. A personality that is afflicted with faint traces of superiority complex. Cultural belief imposes authority on this set of individuals; hence over the passage of time they have become accustomed to the use of power and the privileges that come with it. This has given vent to such saying as;

A ki nri omo oba k'a ma ba dansaki l'ara re
(A prince will always exude the the aura of royalty)

Other snippets that convey the authority laden personality profile of the royal household include the following;

Alayeluwa (*Royal Majesty*)

Oluaye (*The owner of the Universe*)

Igba keji Orisa (*Second in command to the gods*)

Oba l'o n' ile (*the owner of the land*)

Kabiyesi (*Someone who nobody dares to question*)

Ejigbara Ileke (*Icon Wealth*)

Individuals from the royal household are therefore imbued with characteristics that agree with the dispensation of authority, leadership privileges that are not earned but imposed and a general outlook on life that subordinates other individuals. Authority is not wielded by the royal household alone but also by delegated chiefs who operate at a lower cadreship than the king. Royalty also comes with special apparels that are emblematic of the exalted position of members. These apparels are heavy and exotic and are adorned with expensive beads

Priests and diviners have scripts of behaviours that come with the special duties they perform in the Yoruba social set up. Apart from operating as a messenger between man and the gods, they are healers of a sort and attimes could be foretellers of future events, they are also believed to have a direct access to Olodumare the head of the pantheons. These duties impose upon them a personality profile that sets them apart from the generally prescribed social order that governs conduct in the Yoruba socio cultural enclave. They are seen but hardly heard, and when they are heard it will be to deliver messages from those on high. This therefore confines them to a restricted social latitude that is not more expansive than the milieu of their shrines. They are generally respected along with other

members of their household and they are believed to be the primal custodian of wisdom and the heirlooms of the original culture of the race. Ascribed to them are such labels as eni orisa, (the instruments of the gods) aboruboye aboye bo sise, (may authority attend all your sacrifices) Baba awo (Highly revered wise one) etc.

CONCLUSION

In attempting to highlight the personality assessment criteria commonly adopted by the Yoruba to describe individuals, identify their social profile, and locate their standing on a culture compliant scale, this paper has endeavoured to point attention to important criterion – referenced cues commonly used as a yardstick for personality assessment. These include; the way the behaviour is enacted, the

context within which the behaviour is enacted and the enactor of the behaviour. This attempt will enrich the expertise of social psychologists, counselors and psychotherapists in becoming more adept at handling behaviour deficiencies that may afflict a Yoruba individual who may have been suffering from improper role interpretation and unfulfilled role expectation.

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