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Ohùn – Yorùbá anti-'archy' youth attitude and expressions

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The dichotomy between *ègbọ́n* (senior) and *ábúrò* (junior) transcends mere denotation, it is implicational and consequential. It manifests every form of '*-archy*' involved in domination and power differentials: patriarchy, matriarchy, or even pawnship, indeed, the dynamics of dependency and domination play out within it. The evolving attempt to subvert this specific cultural pattern of oppression by Yorùbá youths/juniors involves resistant attitudes and insubordinate forms of expression that are here termed ohùn. In this article, I describe how ohùn is deployed to wrestle away, flip gerontocratic domination or at least lessen its specific impositions on an individual. I also conjecture at the force driving this cultural manifestation.

This paper is organized as follows. First, drawing from Oyèwùmí (1997) I present *in situ* the reality of 'seniority' in everyday life and show it as the basis, and Yorùbás' major principle, of societal organization. Then, I describe its workings across institutions, and how its various impositions, including obligations, become intensified diachronically by different social institutions and conclude by illustrating *ohùn*, a popular expressive device deployed to

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resist dominations due to seniority. The following Yorùbá adage sets the tone:

O$_{you}$ ní$_{have}$ àbúrò $_{junior}$, o$_{you}$ ni$_{said}$ o$_{you}$ kò$_{no}$ ní$_{have}$ ẹrú$_{slave}$. Iṣẹ́$_{duty}$ wo$_{which}$ l'o$_{did\ you}$ ran$_{assign}$ ẹrú$_{slave}$ ti$_{that}$ àbúrò $_{junior}$ o$_{not}$ jẹ$_{perform}$?

'How could you have a younger sibling and claim not to have a slave. What duties can a slave perform that you cannot require from a junior?'

The confederated group of peoples, denoted as Yorùbá, which is both the name of the people and their language, is hierarchically organized, secularly, religiously, and especially familiarly, the center of the patter and prattle of everyday life. Despite changes, 'segregated' hierarchy persists and intensifies in some areas.

In the Yorùbá spiritual realm, as passed down by the elders, the creator God (*Ọlọ́run*) is supremely at the apex, followed, in descending order, by the deities and, then humans who are above animals. The cosmos is equally separated into hierarchical levels viz heavens, in-between, and earth, respectively the abodes of Ọlọ́run, deities, and humans. In the socio-political sphere the rulers are preeminent, followed by their chiefs/elites, regular citizens, and slaves. Within the family, the head is automatically the husband (*ọkọ*), then the wife (*ìyàwó*), and the children successively. The hierarchical setup in each of these realms is based on order of existence (*age*). Olódùmarè, the creator god, preceded all others in existence, hence older, and is senior to the deities, fashioned by Olódùmarè to assist in the theocratic governance of the created. The ruler/s in Yorùbá land is/are often the founder/s of the kingdom over which they exercise rulership. Preceding others to the new space accords them seniority. Birth into such a patrilineal clan confers certain status and rights including eligibility to its hereditary positions to the exclusion of others. The husband, *ọkọ*, and his family host or receive wives marrying into their already existing patrilineal household. As such, every member of the household (*ọmọ-ílé*) at the time the wife joins the family, preceded her, and thus, are senior to her (Peel 2002: 139). In each of these 'naturalized' instances (social ascendancy to seniority is described later below), there is a cascading of seniority with attending deference, as a function of age (Schwab 1958), the workings of which evince the negatives of 'patriarchy'.

Yorùbá and 'patriarchy'

Every now and then, a scholar demonstrates the importance of re-examining canonized concepts, urging the reevaluation of their historical premises before universalizing a localized issue. Oyèwùmí (1997), in challenging the utility of western conceptualization of 'gender', argued convincingly that Yorùbá traditionally did not operate 'gender'. In disavowing gender stereotypes, Oyèwùmí showed that western dichotomized men and women and female and male is not about how the so-called women achieve the good life, but about how they obtain those benefits synonymous with the so-called men, overlooking the fact that there are certain inclinations to which nature, by virtue of sex, has predisposed each. And this is despite the obvious fact of human-to-human injustice, narcissism, and historically created social institutions that structure separations, divisions, and foster inequity. While "gender is seen as the process

by which individuals who are born into biological categories of male or female become the social categories of men and women through the acquisition of locally defined attributes of masculinity and femininity" (Kabeer 1991: 11), it is not organically the normality of all societies, and even where found, it manifests in lockstep with other values or tendencies that became intensified under western influences. Butler (1990: 48) uses the phrase "a colonizing epistemology" to explain that which inhibits from understanding "different configurations of domination". Kolawole (1997: 24) proposed "womanism" to capture the cooperative nature of the men and women thereby recognizing them as partners rather than foes (also Ogunyemi 1996: 116).

Essentially, the message of Oyèwùmí is that a society's perception, perhaps unlike an academic theory, is often of a limited scope and is deployed at the cost of numerous other reasonable possibilities, beclouding other vast areas of experiences for which other cultural perceptions provide much needed humility and balance. This observation is demonstrated by the dichotomy between 'gender' and 'seniority' which provide explanatory principle of inequity, domination, and access, for one, between males and females, and the other between 'seniors' and 'juniors' regardless of biology.

'Gender' like 'race' is obsessively wielded in American language use. While both are social inventions, they are nevertheless imbued with biological indubitability. Oyèwùmí's (1997) highly influential critique of western patriarchal order instigated growing challenges from non-western societies to the acceptance of e.g., 'race and gender' as given, and their projection as the main organizing principles of social life within which humans are hierarchized (Agwuele 2016). Oyèwùmí's underscored the "epistemological shift occasioned by the Western gender categories on Yorùbá discourse" (Oyèwùmí 1997: ix), she challenges the existence of an essential universal category 'woman' supposedly characterized by the social uniformity of its' members, shared social interest, or social position, and forcefully rejects western epistemology that ties social bodies to biology. This western naturalization of socially constructed obvious phenotypical differences ('race' and 'gender'), and the life chances and social status that are contingent on them, she argued, were not attested in Yorùbá traditional life prior to their encounter with the West. As non-gendered society, kinship categories, roles, duties, status, and positions remained fluid, uncorrelated with biological organs (sex), and the sexes were unranked one relative to the other.

It is within the framework of western dichotomized sex and gender differences that the ideology of patriarchy and matriarchy emerges and festers as a principle of interaction between them and as a mode of societal organization for some. Being not complementary, i.e., the sexes and genders are antagonistic; they are stratified in the socio-political and economic spheres. Both categories, the prism through which the westerners view and construct themselves as to what it means to be a man or woman (Bonvillian 2007), Oyèwùmí argued, appear essentialized. This culturally imposed dichotic perspective is continuously mirrored in scholarship, thus, male, and female gender roles are cross-culturally divided into public and private spheres, consigning women role to the private and men to the public (Rosaldo 1974). Even linguistically, there is women's language (Lakoff 1972); and presumably men engage in report talk, while

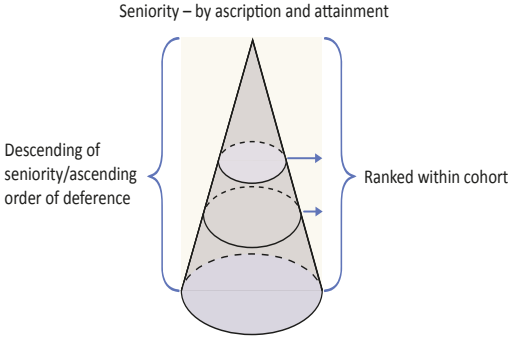
women do rapport talk (Tannen 1990). Socially constrained, boys are said to drop their /g/ more than girls (Fischer 1958), and apparently, women lead language change (Labov 1990). The 'priority of [visible] sexual difference' (Coetze & Halseman) is at the heart of the tension at the intersection of gender with socio-political and economic access on which the idea of patriarchy is rooted. Thus 'women' are oppressed by 'men' due to biology, just as 'blacks' are oppressed by 'whites' due to their skin color (Spelman 1989: 129). And Yorùbá 'seniors' oppress their 'juniors' by virtue of order of birth.

Yorùbá seniority

'Senior' and 'junior', unpalatable English equivalences of a Yorùbá percepts, tell us something about the mindset of the people, power structure, and social dynamics that configure their social experience, everyday life, and chances. In line with Mohanty (1991), we cannot but reflect on the historical, material, and ideological power structures that influence the life and status of Yorùbá 'juniors' so as not to falsely claim that this 'ideological culture' around which the social system of 'seniority' is built mainly serves and upholds 'patriarchy'. There is also a host of interactions between social characteristics, despite scholars treating them as independent of one another to explain their effects. Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to capture the idea of interaction between social categories. A look at quotidian Yorùbá life surrounding 'seniority' provides a deeper understanding of how their traditional institutions interacted with imposed western ideologies along with past colonial institutions to entrench and farther the domination, and systemic oppression of 'juniors'.

Basis of Yorùbá seniority

Seniority results from chronological age, order of birth, or by 'first on the scene' logic. Long before Oyèwùmí, Hopkins (1969) in his Report on the Yorùbá mentioned the honor due to males and females based on seniority. Bascom (1942, 1955) observed that individual relationship was dependent upon seniority, wealth, personal qualities among others, and between lineages, individual relationships are dependent on the relative rank of the lineage. Other scholars of Yorùbá life and society, such as Johnson (1929), Ajisafe (1924), Agwuele (2009) have also described and exemplified the centrality of seniority in everyday situations.



Seniority can be by ascription or achievement. First-on-the-scene logic confers seniority, except for twins. The first of the twins to emerge is Taiwo and the second of the twins is Kehinde. The etymology of these names captures Yorùbá world sense which accords seniority to Kehinde, who is presumed to have sent the younger ahead to 'test out the world'. If the world is pleasant, Taiwo's vagitus, which medically signals vitality and ability to breathe extrauterine, is considered a message to inform Kehinde, still in the womb, that all is well and as such may proceed to the world. Kehinde is

'the one that comes last but assumes seniority', and in accordance with that senior position, sends the junior, Taiwo (forerunner), on errand. The names of subsequent children born after the twins are predetermined, e.g., Idowu, Alaba etc., these names equate birth-order and affirm their positions in the hierarchy, the precariousness of which is retained in popular imagination by the saying, 'Idowu is not the slave of the twins, it is only order of birth that subserves one to the other' (*Ìdòwú kii ṣẹ ẹrú ibeji, nṣẹ ni wọn bi wọn lera wọn*).

Residential structure and seniority

Yorùbá traditional dwellings consisted of a series of patrilocal residences known as agbolé (compounds). Each constituting compound was made up of members of patrilineal sib and their spouses; in some cases, tenants are the third groups. Life within the compound, the primary unit for social and political interaction (Johnson 1929), and the center of religious activities, and each person's access are dependent on their position, and obligations, both of which confer influence and determine behavior. It is within this residential structure, that aims to ensure the production and reproduction of the material conditions of their existence (Afọnja 1999), that seniority is primarily experienced, and children are socialized to cognize it, accept it, and live it out. The social and cultural structures necessary for the achievement of the compound's goal are collectively guarded.

The population of the compound contributes to the influence and reach of its members. In an agrarian setup, this correlated with wealth. Members depended on the collective for access to land and titles, and to fulfill different rites such as marriage. Right from the onset of the marriage rite, the families are involved, be it in vetting the spouses, through to voicing of acceptance by the bride (*ìsíhùn*) to honoring the in-laws (*idá´na*) and to the payment of bride-wealth. The post marital patrilocal residence belongs to the husband's family. The family provides land for farming to the husband, who in turn provides the wife with the initial capital to start up her own business, assuring that both are economically viable and independent (Ajisafe, 1924: 57-58, Ellis 1894: 182ff). When the union produces offspring, naming ceremony, the official introduction of the child to the family and lineage, occurring a week after birth, is conducted by the most senior in the compound.

Such intricate interdependence between the individual and the collective pervades every aspect of the life of Yorùbá people. Seniority is invaluable to the workings of this highly stratified and formalized nation that depends on "a rigidly prescribed series of common and reciprocal rights, duties, privileges and forbearance between members or groups of members in virtually every aspect of social life" (Schwab 1955: 354). Kinship and kin group are the basis for livelihoods, identity construction and gaining social meanings and significance, and central to it is seniority.

Achieving seniority in the larger society

Looking beyond the household into the larger community, gerontocracy holds sway and scalar analogous to the compound is found either due to age, status, wealth, or personal achievements. When western styled education, government, paid employment, and lifestyle emerged, the existing interdependence and social structure adapted farther apotheosizing

seniority. As the rural and traditional migrated to the cities, their values and ethos migrated too. The transformation to commercial capitalism altered the mode of subsistence, and informed new values, but did little to stymie the hold of established cultural values that are foundational to kinship practices and social relations within which seniority thrives. Urban Yorùbá cities turns out to be "an economic unit, within which each individual is dependent on his neighbors for goods and services which he cannot provide for himself" (Bascom 1958: 191).

Traditionally, Yorùbá pre-pubescent children moved easily between family members to receive strict upbringing or engaged in apprenticeship (Owomoyelás 1994: 85). This practice continues. Before he became king, Prince Lamidi Adeyemi of Oyo Kingdom, was sent to Ìṣẹ́yìn to learn Quar'an, then to Egbaland, and finally to reside with a Christian school principal in Lagos to obtain formal education, despite being a Muslim. This was not an isolated case. With the rapid growth of urban cities such as Lagos under colonization, many people, who fluxed into it for economic reasons, especially, following the 1920s economic crash that wrecked the demand for cocoa and other cash crops were variously integrated. "…many newcomers had kin in Lagos with whom they lived and on whom they depended for assistance. Others counted on the support and protection of big men from their hometowns who were already established in the community. Strangers who had no contacts at all in Lagos became clients of an important person. Their patrons would perform many of the functions of kin for them…" (Mann 1977: 30) thereby exerting the 'filial' obedience underlying 'seniority' along with its hierarchies and inequities that dwell on coteries of deference, obligations, and less talked about, dominance, and control, despite the fronted solidarity and supportive aids. Once the relationship of 'senior' vs. 'junior' is established within the larger society, the 'junior' is practically beholden to the 'senior' in perpetuity except if the junior can successfully wrestle 'seniority' away from seniors.

Differently, high achieving individuals automatically acquire 'seniority' over those of lesser achievements. For instance, during a conference on Africa at the University of Texas at Austin, a female vice chancellor of a private university in Nigeria was given an award by the convener. As she stepped to the podium to receive the plaque, her entourage perhaps, and other Yorùbá participants from Nigeria, broke into a song of honor: "*Mama o, mama o, mama o, Ọlọ́run da mama si fun wa*." (Mother, mother, mother, God save our mother.) She was not the oldest of the Yorùbá attendees, however, by virtue of her being vice Chancellor of a university and now a recipient of a plaque in America, she automatically outranks all her Yorùbá cohort who consequently acknowledged her as mother. She would now receive the deference due to a 'senior' and a 'mother', and in return she is to nurture her subordinates as her children.

Owning wealth, especially ostentations of material possessions, is a strong marker of high status and superiority (*àjùlọ*). Those who through personal exertion acquire wealth and accumulate visibly impressive resources obtain status, titles, and invariably political positions, making them seniors and peddlers of influence within the society. As noted by Mann (1977) "Prestige was not necessarily based on criteria that traditionally determined status in Yorùbá society-hereditary title, age, or excellence in trade, war, or cults – although these might have been important". Mann in her 1977

dissertation, also produced historical examples of people who have risen from very humble backgrounds to achieve seniority within the society. For instance, "Dosunmús predecessor, Oshodi Tapa, a former slave from Nupe, built up a power base as a wealthy trader and war leader and became the strongest man in the town, even though he was an Abagbon" (22). "Ali Balogun, a wealthy merchant began as a slave of the Akintoye family, and T.B. Aluko, a colonial servant, was descended from Buko akawa Oroge…." (171). This lesson has not been lost on all juniors. One does not necessarily have to have a great pedigree to achieve seniority, and one does not have to tow the traditional wait-your-turn path either, one can jump to the head of the line, usurp seniority, and be accorded deference and consequently wield privileges over previous seniors just like the cited figures and late contemporary example like Chief MKO Abiola. He overcame childhood poverty to become ITT Africa Chairman, and a very successful businessman. On the account of which he became the only man to have simultaneously held the title of military General of Ibadan nation (*Basọrun*) and the Generalissimo (*Ara-ọnakakanfo*) of Yorùbá land.

Seniority – stick and carrot: A system of appellation

Kini a nfi agba sẹ ju kaa fi rẹ ọmọde jẹ?

'What use is seniority if not to oppress the junior?'

As an area of cultural emphasis, the institution of seniority is linguistically coded. The two major terms of reference for siblings are 'older sibling' (*ègbọ́n*) and junior sibling (*àbúrò*). This is accompanied by a deferential term of address. Even in western styled high school, everyone above one's grade is addressed prefixing 'senior', or 'brother', or 'sister' to their first name; this is a replication of the traditional practice of not being on a first-name basis with a senior. As noted by Mesthrie et al (2009: 312). "Pronouns, names, titles, and address forms are particularly clear and well-defined subsystems of language that reveal asymmetries of power or solidarity between individuals (and the institutions they might represent). But they are not atypical of the way language is generally intertwined with social and social inequality." The senior is spoken to in the plural, while the senior, who calls the junior by their first name, speaks to them familiarly. Consequential is that the senior enjoys an elevated status, they are quasi boss, they give orders that stick. They are not talked back at and direct eye contact, considered insolence in some cases, is avoided. To violate such established social etiquette, either by enveloping the tone with a sneer, or by direct name usage often denotes a simmering anger or grievances that can no longer be contained. Within a household, parents check insolence with the rhetorical question 'is that your senior that you are addressing in that manner?' (*sẹ ẹ gbọ́n ẹ lo n'ba sọrọ bẹ'yẹn*). Friends police one another, for instance, a young person who dares speak in parables or proverbs to an older person without the customary post-deferential apology (*tooto sẹ bi owe o*), will earn the rebuke of hearers with the remark: 'you dare speak in proverbs before an elder?' Every infraction is immediately checked. Bystanders, parents, friends, all immediately first ask 'what did you just say?' to offer the person the chance to retract their utterance, just in case it was a slip of tongue.

This constellation obtains variously across every social institution, including those created by western missionary, commercial and colonial systems, the very harbinger of ranks and inequity. Private and public subjugation become conflated with institutional domination and abuse. Complicity produces its own advantages, the system is bolstered, entrenched, and continues unchallenged except by those locked out. "The body as a subject of culture rather than an object as articulated by Csordas (1990) enables us to consider that humans are always embedded within and thus impacted by both interpersonal and structural situational contexts" (see Nelson 2021). Both individual preponderances and institutional structures collectively impact the positionality and life chances of the junior. For instance, given the scalar and hierarchical social arrangement of persons, the Yorùbá society didactically employs orature to taut orderliness and the virtue of 'awaiting' one's seniority. It becomes ontologically tethered to the nation's philosophical outlook of *ìwà* (character) that guides a person on earth and whose fruit is patience. Await the unfurling of your destiny; 'don't retrieve by force that which is beyond your reach' (*ohun ti ọwọ mi o to, maa fi gọngọ fa*), and 'rush to a good life and you will shorten your life, slowly enjoy life and you will enjoy it for long' became (*tete jaye ko maa ba j'aiye pè, ma tete jaiye ki o ba le j'aiye pẹ*) arcane pithy sayings.

The trope, delayed gratification, or the famed themed indigenous cultural practices, that is used to sustain the narrative and working of seniority are embedded into the fabrics of the nation's every institution. The ascendancy principle is equally biologically encased, presuming inevitable growth into the position of 'senior' barring early death, considered abomination except of course, the silent, irrational workings of predestination. Seeing through such pedagogy and enculturation to subserviency, the junior began to redefine allegiance, asserting self-agency, and acting out of own volitions. Resistance comes in two fashions: belligerence (*agídí*) and grit, both manifest linguistically (*ohùn*), behaviorally, and through unbridled quest for money. The struggle to overcome seniority plays out in obtaining means to scale the ladder of seniority in non-biological ways.

Westernization, cultural institutions, and seniority

Ranging from the traditional, to the urban and cosmopolitan, the lineage continues, and the bond of filiality that devolved from household togetherness is rarely weakened even with the anonymity of city-lifestyle, neither does anomie result despite emancipation from the strong and domineering kinship customary to their traditional residential unit, the lineage.

Missionary ideals, Victorian values and colonial paternalism instituted a culture of dependency the scale of which was previously unexperienced. Despite some significant changes to the institution of marriage, it was not negatively altered, neither was its values undermined. Marriage became monogamous, the relationship between male and female and their roles in the union was pushed to approximate Victorian values which expected husbands to be sole providers and wives the home-keeper; husbands are to be seen and heard in the public while wives acted as moral exemplar guardians of the family's and societies' moral values (see Mann 1977). Exploring Yorùbá elites, Mann (1980) reported a widow who explained the situation thus, "Our fathers

and husbands did not want us to work. They sent us to school to learn cake baking, needlework, French and drawing so we could be 'housewives.' All we were expected to do was marry and take care of our husband´s home" (213). "The idea that a woman was to be a burden on her husband had no existence in the mind of the African [Yorùbá]... until he came in contact with [Western] civilization... Let him who has money make his wife a queen" (220). Transiting a wife, a previously economically independent partner in the marriage, into a dependent housewife furthered the subjugation of middle-class wives. She does not earn her own keep but depends on the husband to supply all their monetary and material needs while she takes care of the home, the children, and attends to the needs of the husband when he returns. Impoverished, disenfranchised, marginalized, and subordinated created group of 'women' that now experience the daily indignities borne of years of exploitation at the hands of colonialism and the created group of 'men', starkly segregate them in terms of wealth inequity.

The created classes (women and men) and the reinforcing nomenclatures became the main proxy for institutionalized hierarchy with attending patriarchal imperatives. These nomenclatures, bereft of their cultural meanings, assume indigenous sensibility, reflecting cultural perceptions. Over seasons, the bequeathed European words have meshed with other ingredients into gourmet sauce for swallowing foreign ideals. Yorùbá and English users of the words gender, patriarchy, and identity, speak pass each other. There is an explicit link between the manufacturing and institutionalization of patriarchy and the ways that marginalization and treatment of the group women is perceived and explained. That the discourse 'patriarchy' now pervades the society is consistent with its ontology, yet the shape, specific manifestation and how locales address it is unique.

During colonialism and intensified proselytization of Yorùbá people, citizens' rights were not only differentiated as a function of assimilation policy, but they also largely widened the gulf between the preferred group relative to the excluded. Subservience and loyalty to western institutions were rewarded with salaried positions. Chiefly exploited in this cultural value is the inveterate belief that deference to 'seniority' is foundational to social order, and it invariably promoted educated elites. Due to Yorùbá culture of politeness, and their entrenched social distance that rests on 'seniority', and avoidance of name-calling, titles emerged, and were added as epithet that highlights achievements. Engineer, Barrister, Constable, Secretary, and the ubiquitous, *ọ̀gá* (boss) became badges of superiority that are now used as honorifics or polite terms of address to index status and garner deference. Anyone without either a traditional or western styled title is a junior, inferior.

The elites that emerged during colonization were on the average younger than the traditional elderly elites, who depended on 'natural seniority'. Common to the new elites was their embodiment of western and Yorùbá values – i.e., education, western outlook, and preeminence position within the community combined with religious and secular values. The outward manifestation of this wealth in terms of lifestyle and material possessions cemented their higher status within the community. These two have continued; to many, 'seniority' is having an international connection (including trav-

eling outside of the continent, consuming imported goods) and being locally prominent. Name recognition is important (*ọmọ tani? Or tani ẹ*? – "whose child? Who are you?" – are rhetorical put-downs wielded to claim seniority). The route to it was education for some, for others, it was commerce, talent, and bravery. Unfortunately, those occupying administrative positions as ministers, governors, legislators, and government functionaries consider these entities as their personal fiefdoms and a mark of success. They are courted mostly not so much for their personality as for the social and economic influence that they, through the personal use of their offices, can exert and, in this regard, they become seniors. The consolidation of resources in the hands of the family traditionally and now in the hands of newly minted elites farther disempowered the 'juniors', especially the youth, and intensified their dependency and fostered their oppression.

Also, during the missionary-colonial era, when only few Africans had western education, those who were not literate often approached the literate ones on a personal basis (kinship), to mediate their interactions with government institution. These then orally instruct and guide them to navigate state apparatuses. This reliance on people and trust in verbal messages continues. Yorùbá people still would trust what is told to them rather than seek direct information from official sources despite being literate. The term, 'connection' remains an indelible social, economic, and political capital that is implicated in the patron-client culture of the Yorùbá. Thus, social obligations are intertwined with economic interest to further 'seniority'. Quite importantly, to the extent that one can meet people's needs, ease, or ensure their access to institutional opportunities, and protect them, one assumes 'seniority', commands allegiance, and receives honorific terms of address.

To be patronized as a 'senior' is the quest of most 'juniors' who are not necessarily vested in creating equity as much as they covet the vaunted status of 'senior', the vicarious authority that devolves from dependency, and deference. Through 'seniority' there is an enormous influence with outsiders and unbridled power over kin. The possible abuse due to this dependence engenders resentment which motivates towards the search for wealth to not only obtain own freedom, but to extract 'revenge' by outcompeting them, i.e., 'out-senioring' the seniors. Hence the popular phrase of positivity, *wọn á gbà*: they will submit.

Seniority and obligations

"Yorùbá social identity was, and is, fundamentally relational, changing, and situational, with seniority the most crucial determinant of ranking" (Oyèwùmí 1997: xiii). There are cadres of seniority, there are school seniors, street seniors, family seniors, office seniors, and societal seniors etc. Each has prestige and exerts influence within their realms. Common to seniority is the redistribution of personal resources as a means of accumulating power, an indelible component of prominence among Yorùbá people. This 'buying' of influence has been explicated variously under patron-client relationship or clientelism (Omobowale 2008; Omobowale & Olutayo 2010). Consider the introduction of commercial public transport. Should a 'senior' happen to find a junior in the same commercial vehicle, the senior is obligated to pay the fare of the junior to retain respect and allegiance. To not do so without

offering any apology or excuse is to lose face. 'Face' (Brown & Levinson 1978) is an essential component of Yorùbá sociation.

To lose face is to earn the worst and most dreaded insult that can be handed to a 'senior' or an elder *àgbàyà*, 'useless old senior'. Farther, some first-born children have been known to sacrifice their own education to take up the burden of sponsoring their 'junior' siblings through school. The setup in its essence obliges the senior to nurture and guide the 'juniors' to success even at their own personal expense, and when successful, the juniors' success becomes collective success, and the junior, in turn, recompenses by providing for the extended family. Where this reciprocity breaks down with the junior in a servile relationship, dissent results. Despite my focus, it is important to say that Yorùbá seniority system is not all abuse, there are certain checks in it to ensure societal cohesion. It is the failure of the checks that invariably pushes the juniors to resistance.

As noted by Oyèwùmí (2005) and Agwuele (2009) among others, seniority is not all privileges in everyday life; it comes with enormous responsibilities. There are two aspects to it: moral and material responsibilities. Seniors are expected to be fair and just in all their dealings. When altercations occur between two juniors, inculcated in the junior is a belief that the senior will adjudicate fairly; thus, there is rarely a challenge to their ruling. Juniors attribute a great deal of wisdom and foresightedness to the seniors. The seniors, in their respective spheres are expected to be proper (*àgbà gidi* 'true and real') seniors. They are expected to embody the virtues and values valorized by society and to demonstrate them before receiving requisite deference and respect. However, once the debilitating feeling that injustice rather than justice is meted out, when a moral judge becomes amoral, a fair arbiter is now corrupt, and the protector turns oppressor, resentment wells and aggressive impulse takes hold of the junior, an outrage with 'seniority' ensues, and with it invariably drives the junior to seek means to avoid the unfairness. The world of difference, palpably measurable and without bridge, safe conquering it, hardens.

Ohùn – attitude and retort

Despite the misapprehensions of Ward (1937), he correctly noted that Yorùbá people strive for and attach great importance to status. According to him, "every Yorùbá boy want to become a big man. Sooner or later in life." "A 'small boy' is looked down upon". Quite importantly, he observed two Ikale-Yorùbá people quarreling and how quickly the argument descended to personalities: who are you by the way? (p. 29). This rhetorical question is about establishing '*àjùlọ*', seniority. It is about proclaiming one to outrank the other in quantifiable ways. This 1937 observation persists and intensifies in contemporary Yorùbá and Nigerian life, where 'I will show you who I am' is a weapon of violence. It could mean using connection to influential people (seniors), or personal access, wealth, and privilege (seniority) to buy justice and inflict pain on others including blocking a foe from getting their due, indeed, a violent exercise of power. Another catch phrase is, 'we are not in the same set' (we areneither in the same cohorts nor occupy same social rank) and then there is the rhetorical question, 'you and who are mates?'. 'Am I your mate'?

Having endured subordination in the historical past and having invested loyalty in the

intervening colonial and post-colonial period without earning the benefits that each epoch promised, the 'junior' not only designs ways of resisting 'seniority' but also to exploit avenues of empowerment. Rather than the future, the immediate takes greater position, rather than the collective, narcissist individualism results, and rather than thread the well-tested and established route of 'await-your-turn, faster alternate route are toed'. The body as a subject of culture rather than an object as articulated by Csordas (1990) enables us to consider that humans are always embedded within and thus impacted by both interpersonal and structural situational contexts (cf. Nelson 2021). Individual preponderances and institutional structures work hand in hand to impact the positionality and life chances of the junior. Thus, the hierarchical scalar society didactically employs orature to taut orderliness and instill the virtue of 'awaiting' one's seniority turn, thereby ontologically tethering it into the nation's philosophical outlook of *ìwà* (character), the way of being, whose quality is patience. Pithily, they say: 'await the unfurling of your destiny'; 'don't retrieve by force that which is beyond your reach' (*ohun ti ọwọ́ mi o to, maa fi gọngọ fa*), and 'hurry to a pleasurable life and you shorten your life, slowly enjoy life and you will enjoy it long' (*tete jaye ko maa ba j'aiye pè, ma tete jaiye ki o ba le j'aiye pẹ*). The trope, delayed gratification, is thusly embedded into the fabrics of the nation's every institution, premised on the presumption that the 'junior' will inevitably grow to become 'senior' barring early death, considered abomination except of course, the silent, irrational workings of predestination intervene. Seeing through such pedagogy and enculturation to subserviency, the juniors assert self-agency, and act out of their own volitions. Their resistance comes in two fashions: belligerence (*agídí*) and grit, both manifest linguistically (*ohùn*), behaviorally, and through inordinate quest for money, the very means to scale the ladder of seniority non-biologically.

The linguistic device, ohùn, is an attack on prevailing social code, it subverts normative values and indexes defiance and irreverence, a fierce resistance to 'seniority'. *Ohùn* is tone (the psychological perception of pitch; and tenor-valuation with respect to sonority and pleasantness), it is voice (manner vocalization specific to a person), and attitude (Don't speak to me like that; 's/he sounds angry, happy, sad, or moody). Talking back to any senior is already socially impugned by Yorùbá, talking back intently, rudely and with a raised voice is enregistered as '*omo-igboro*', a tout or person of the street, without a home, and hence mannerless, unruly, and undisciplined, just as one would expect of 'feral' children.

Devices and strategies

Ohùn functionally manipulates Yorùbá language and is parasitic on its norms and communication devices. It does not have its own syntax, rather it exhibits as Storch (2011: 19) noted for secret languages, specialized vocabulary, specific pronouns, verbal forms, and metaphors, among others deployed for self-assertion and express an emancipated non-subservient personality. As a communicative device, *ohùn* is a stylect (Hurst 2008), including 'lect' i.e., slang words connected to a specific style, that is, a form of gesture, dressing, and other cultural manifestations. Invoked as an overt symbolic weapon of resistance, *ohùn*, a meaning making device, indexes among others hostility towards the hearer. This ideological restive posture, that marks defiance

and resolve, functions in the form of 'iconization' (Irvine & Gal 2000) where communities construct a shared take on themselves, others, and on the difference between them.

Honorific register is commonly used to mark boundaries between the 'seniors' and 'juniors' writ large. For Yorùbá, this comes in the form of name avoidance and the use of plural pronouns to address or reference the 'seniors'. Plural pronouns index not only seniority by age, status, or position, it is also the polite and respectful form that encode formality. In its usage, hierarchy, distance, and power relations are embodied and reflected. Formality lexicon as already suggested is inbuilt into the Yorùbá syntax. For there to be a shift in style suggests a shift also in formality. Variously attested, the use of' **his/her** mother/father' (*mama/baba* **ẹ** (3rd person sing.))" in place of '**my** mother/father' (*mama/baba* ***mi*** (1st person sing) exemplifies the distancing of self from parental authority. This usage may have originally expressed endearment, when a partner hails the other as e.g., '*iyawo/ọkọ ẹ'*; (spouse of the main guy) within the practice of praise-singing. Furthermore, the style shifts occurs in maintaining reverential appellation with familiar pronouns, e.g., *Olori ma worry* instead of *Olori* ***e*** *ma worry* (boss, don't worry).

Ohùn draws simultaneously from traditional Yorùbá and western phrases, imageries, and popular cultural manifestations with an admixture of codes for efficacy. Sometimes, the metaphorical reference is to football players' skill to outmaneuver opponents (Maradona, Ronaldo,) or strength, like Roger 'Miller' to overrun oppositions like 'caterpillar' trucks. Users employ alliterations and plays on words, i.e., a junior could reject the threat of a senior by likening themselves to fire, and the senior to candle, thus assuming the ability of fire to melt wax (*igara candle ni iwaju lighter*). This banter is akin to playing the dozen (Abrahams 1962). Other times social items are used as a simile. A young woman, for instance, was forced to put down a persistent suitor by describing herself as a *container* too heavy for his *bajaj.* Bajaj is not a common term in Yorùbá land for tricycles, her choice shows her to be informed (*já si*). As such, portraying the suitor as lightweight who cannot bear the cost of dating her. A young boy tired of his older sibling bossing him around retorted and dissed the senior saying: *Ẹgbọn ẹ ko isạn silẹ, ẹ wa sọra yin di Van Damme*. 'Senior, relax, stop flexing your muscles, as if you were Van Damme (the popular body builder-actor)'.

To obtain its efficacious bite, *ohùn* thrives on quick and sharp retorts when contesting supremacy. As already mentioned, there is often an instant resort to personality disputations in any quarrel, with the ubiquitous rhetorical phrase, 'who are you': *ta ni ẹ*. The quick retort of the junior under duress is often '*se wọn n'fi oju yin gba owo ni bank ni?'* 'Is your likeness/face legal tender' or 'is your likeness on 1000 Naira bill? (*Sẹ iwọ ni wọn ya si ori 1000 Naira?*). Essentially, saying, if you are not as recognizable as the currency, then you are unimpressive.

Humor is yet another linguistic strategy of *ohùn* that is used to veil resentment, just as speaking in antonym is *ohùn's* subterfuge for aggression. The humor employed in *ohùn* does not just belittle the experience of its oppression, it resists it actively. Shopping the traditional culture of praise singing, juniors pour encomiums on the seniors, hailing their achievements and generosity and then declare allegiance; all the while indirectly using some linguistic variables that

index certain social categories to convey new social relations and construct nuanced social meanings (Eckert 2003). This approach is premised on the culture of jests, foolery, and comic performances traditionally employed to veil strong criticism of powerful people without incurring social sanctions. On the one hand, traditional performers appear as jesters, and on the other they are astute social critics. Every Yorùbá individual has a praise name in addition to their given names. Other praise names are added in the course of life to reflect achievements and personality traits. A violent person may be hailed as *aja bi iji* ('destructive like the tornado'), *aseyi o wu bi Eledumare* ('selfwilled like God'); juniors creatively exploit this existing tradition of eulogy and epithet to pass commentary. Surreptitiously, the line between praise and insolence is blurred and a transition to aggressive stance occurs. Conversely, belligerent juniors also self-praise to stand their ground and assert the self, such as saying: *'emi akekaka ki ọlọrọ ọlọrọ. Ti ọlọrọ ba ọlọrọ, kini ọlọrọ yio se'*; I who rails loudly to the hearing of the concerned. For if the concerned hears what would they do? Within humor, *ohùn* users reappropriates established orature practices to construct new expressions to mark defiance and express critical persona.

As already suggested, *ohùn* is a stylect – i.e., attitude and language that shops from the notoriety associated with motor park touts and their thuggery. Juniors in resistant mode exploit the imagery associated with this milieu to signal 'negative face'. Selective use of traditional Yorùbá linguistic devices and orature allows the junior to bring the 'street' to restive situations, for instance:

O 'ngba lori mi gaan
'There is madness in my head'

Ma wo ti suit ti wọ, igboro ni mi.
'Forget the suit, I am street'

Maa change ẹ fun yin
'I will soon transform [to street] for you'

Ohùn merges street persona, attitude, and speech patterns to a forceful weapon of resistance. If one cannot call the shots then faking a specific status or identity – i.e., packaging, becomes an option. This is like the way a product is packaged to seduce and entice buyers. It is a make belief. For instance, hyping one's financial background by dressing to impress, even if on borrowed wardrobe, is part of 'packaging'. Using expensive gadgets, name dropping, being generous to obtain hangers-on that then sing one's praise and being savvy in using social media to present a glamorous life, now termed, slaying, sometimes grant the junior access and benefits that effectively define them as smart (achieved status), and those conned as *òtè*, 'fools'.

Little would the forces of globalization, if it could, have predicted that its many artefacts would provide such powerful means to escape, and acquire Yorùbá seniority, providing resources for signaling assorted negative faces across different spheres of seniority. While not thugs, the ruggedness of the street supplies the variables that afford individuals the resources for rejecting impositions and for forcefully signaling resistance to subserviency or oppression. *Ohùn* is at the core of the ever-lucrative Yorùbá popular hip-pop and rap music. It provides the artistes the much-needed spondulicks that have catapulted many juniors to senior.

Social attitude and ideology

The ideological process, á la Althusser (1971), that works in various institutions, views the individual as a subject; one who is active and at the same time subjected. The Yorùbá seniority system operates Althusser's (1971) ideology which 'interpellates' juniors into subjected or 'subject' positions. Individuals he suggests, accepts, and operates this preexisting and unquestioned ideology as reality and subsequently, it is rarely violated. This ideology is especially influential in the private domain; pervading the family, community, and through collective education, enjoins itself as civility and core ideal of Yorùbá sociation (*asuwada* and *omoluabi* á la Akiwowo 1986). This Yorùbá 'cultural system' (Geertz 1975), which places great premium on ascendancy of power, is at the crux of their social organization, and it pervades all intercourses. Its mechanism of control can include violence, but more effectively, it is in the form of discipline that is not overtly corporal. This structure, in the fashion of a social fact, appear natural, and common-sensical, thus making its fundamental assumptions unquestionable until the unquantifiable power, respect, and admiration that fortune bequeaths emboldens the junior to resist the inherent await-your-turn moral.

While Epicurus may have included fame and wealth in those desires that are neither natural nor necessary, the Yorùbá seniors consider them an accoutrement of seniority. Seniority comes in many ways e.g., economic, political, social, religious, but ultimately boils down to 'money'. *Owó gba àgbà* ('money usurps seniority'). For without it, the different ways to elitism or seniority lack strong coercive force, and this fact is not lost on all juniors. The juniors aspire to get a lot of it, for only then will others 'submit' (*wọ́n á gba*, i.e., 'they will submit') and with it comes the ability to maximally co-opt others to own bidding. While they, the juniors, may seem well prepared for the frustrations of their position due to their socialization, the accompanying panoply of pernicious emotions ceaselessly aggravated by unending subservience inevitably generate rebelliousness that seeks not just escape but a reversal of estates. *Ohùn* is therefore an extreme expression of belligerence that surpasses every other when under the yoke of seniority. Better, however, is escaping oppression via personal achievement which then elevates one above the existing seniors.

Power, per Max Weber (1947), is the fundamental concept underlying relations of inequality. For a society that is hierarchically rigid, with strict social distance between speaker and addressee, and relative power of one over the other, and degree of imposition associated with the interaction (see Brown and Levinson 1987: 15, 74–80), talking back, and talking back with sass, insolence, and attitude is a major social infraction. *Ohùn* thus constitutes an egregious and irreparable break in social order.

Conclusion

Effectively formed in the past and still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present (Williams 1977: 122), seniority is a 'residual' culture. This socio-economic differentiation embodied in seniority, like patriarchy, provides a concept of theorizing oppression (Beechy 1979: 66) and dominance within the Yorùbá nation. Inequity comes in

various guises, naming them as understood by their experiencers is the onset of finding a solution to them within the sphere of their multifarious influences. Of course, any discourse of subordination, inequity, discrimination, and marginalization of any kind must reflect the interrelated axes of other social categories, since they are mutually reinforcing phenomena that in turn shape complex social, economic, and political inequalities. Nevertheless, the discussion was narrowly focused on seniority and how juniors exploit a form of expression and attitude to subvert seniority while actively seeking the means to become senior.

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