THE DICHOTOMY IN ALÁÀFIN'S ỌMỌ IKÚ, ỌMỌ ÀRÙN, ỌMỌ ÒFÒ SOBRIQUET: THE PERSPECTIVES OF ỌYỌ́ AND OTHERS

by

Nurudeen Ibrahim,
General Studies Department (English Unit),
Ed-John Institute of Management and Technology,
Isiwu, Ikorodu, Lagos State, Nigeria.
happystarian@gmail.com

Abstract

The sobriquet Ọmọ Ikú, Ọmọ Àrùn, Ọmọ Òfò occupies a contested semantic space in Yorùbá royal praise discourse. Among Ọyọ́ indigenes, the epithet functions as a protective metaphor; an honorific formula of immunity that frames the Aláàfin as beyond death, disease, and ruin. Conversely, other interpretive communities consider the same sobriquet derogatory, deploying the proverb orúkọ á máa rò ni ("a name often shapes the bearer") to argue that the Aláàfin's identity as "child of death/illness/loss" implies cruelty, violence, and destructive governance. This article examines the dichotomy through semantic duality (denotation vs. connotation), metaphor theory, and critical discourse analysis. Drawing on Yorùbá semiotics, oríkì performance aesthetics, and political anthropology of kingship, the study demonstrates that the sobriquet is not merely a lexical label but a discursive technology of power: it legitimizes authority for insiders while enabling moral critique for outsiders. Findings show that the epithet operates simultaneously as (i) metaphysical immunity claim, (ii) performative reinforcement of royal inviolability, and (iii) mnemonic archive of historical violence. The study recommends interpretive reconciliation through context-sensitive hermeneutics: meaning is negotiated across cultural frames, historical memory, and performance pragmatics rather than fixed in singular semantics.

Keywords Oríkì, sobriquet, connotative, denotative, Yorùbá kingship, Aláàfin, semantic duality, metaphor, discourse, Ọyọ́ Empire.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Yorùbá oral tradition, names are not neutral linguistic ornaments. They are instruments of identity, memory, prophecy, and social power. The proverb "orúkọ á máa rò ni" is often cited to support the belief that names influence conduct and

destiny, or at least serve as moral mirrors through which society evaluates persons and institutions. In this light, royal sobriquets are not mere "nicknames"; they are condensed cultural texts; what a modern semiotician might call "symbolic capsules" that contain layered meanings, histories, and ideological commitments.

One of the most striking royal sobriquets in Yorùbá history is the Aláàfin of Ọ̀yọ́ being addressed as: Ọmọ Ikú, Ọmọ Àrùn, Ọmọ Òfò. Literally, this translates as "child of death, child of sickness, child of loss/ruin." At first glance, the denotative meaning seems ominous. Yet, among Ọ̀yọ́ people, the sobriquet is interpreted as an honorific claim of metaphysical immunity: death cannot kill its own child (Ikú ò gbudo pá), sickness cannot afflict its own offspring, and ruin cannot consume the one born of ruin. In other words, the epithet becomes a metaphoric shield.

However, beyond Ọ̀yọ́, alternative interpretive communities (including some Yoruba subgroups and non-Yoruba commentators) read the sobriquet differently. For them, the same phrases signify destructive traits inherited from "parents" (Ikú, Àrùn, Òfò). They argue that death kills without pity, sickness devastates bodies, and ruin destroys homes. Thus the Aláàfin, historically associated with wars and imperial dominance, is linguistically represented as a figure of violence and devastation. This interpretive divergence creates a fertile ground for scholarly analysis, especially within semantics, pragmatics, discourse theory, and oral literature studies.

This article therefore investigates: How can one sobriquet produce such opposing interpretations? What does the dichotomy reveal about Yorùbá semiotics, royal ideology, and the political technology of language? Can these perspectives be reconciled?

1.1. Background:

Ọ̀yọ́ Kingship and the Authority of the Aláàfin

1.1.1.Ọ̀yọ́ as an imperial formation:

Ọ̀yọ́ is historically regarded as one of the most powerful Yoruba polities, with an imperial structure that extended influence across significant parts of present-day southwestern Nigeria and beyond (Johnson, 1921/1997; Law, 1977). Ọ̀yọ́'s political strength was anchored in cavalry warfare, administrative sophistication, and religious legitimation, with the Aláàfin positioned as both political sovereign and cosmological node.

1.1.2. The Aláàfin as political and metaphysical institution:

In Yoruba political theology, kingship is not only governmental; it is metaphysical. The king is the "carrier" of communal destiny, sometimes described as the symbolic head of the polity. Yoruba kingship traditions emphasize sacrality: the king is often perceived as a being set apart, surrounded by taboos, ritual restrictions, and spiritual protections (Bascom, 1969; Drewal, Pemberton, & Abiodun, 1989). This sacral framing helps explain why royal oríkì and sobriquets frequently push beyond normal semantics into sacred metaphor.

1.1.3. Oríkì as a legitimizing discourse of kingship:

Oríkì is a genre of Yoruba oral poetry used to praise individuals, lineages, deities, towns, and institutions. Oríkì is also a form of cultural memory and social communication (Barber, 1991; Olatunji, 1984). In kingship contexts, oríkì is not only aesthetic, it is ideological. It reinforces authority, transmits dynastic legitimacy, and projects the king's inviolability. Therefore, the Aláàfin's sobriquet should be studied not simply as "language" but as political semiotics.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Despite the prominence of royal oríkì in Yoruba studies, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to how semantic duality generates conflicting ideological meanings

across interpretive communities. The sobriquet – Ọmọ Ikú, Ọmọ Àrùn, Ọmọ Òfò– offers a perfect case study because:

It contains lexemes with negative denotations (Ikú, Àrùn, Òfò).

It functions as praise within one community.

It functions as critique within another.

Also, it encodes historical memory of violence, war, and imperial governance.

This article addresses the gap by offering a discourse-semantic and literary analysis of the sobriquet, positioning it within Yoruba cosmology, metaphor, and kingship ideology.

1.3. Aim and Objectives:

1.3.1. Aim:

To examine the semantic dichotomy in the Aláàfin's sobriquet Ọmọ Ikú, Ọmọ Àrùn, Ọmọ Òfò from Ọ̀yọ́ and non-Ọ̀yọ́ perspectives.

1.3.2. Objectives:

i). To establish the cultural and political functions of royal sobriquets in Yoruba kingship discourse.

ii). To analyze the sobriquet through denotative and connotative meaning layers.

iii). To interpret the epithet using metaphor theory and Yoruba semiotics.

iv). To present findings using sample oríkì lines and semantic interpretations.

v). To discuss implications for cultural memory, governance, and interpretive reconciliation.

1.4. Research Questions:

i). What denotative and connotative meanings are embedded in the sobriquet Ọmọ Ikú, Ọmo Àrùn, Ọmo Òfò?

ii). Why do Ọ̀yọ́ and other interpretive communities disagree on its meaning?

iii). How does metaphor enable negative lexemes to become honorific?

iv). What does the sobriquet reveal about power, legitimacy, and historical memory in Ọ̀yọ́ kingship?

v). Can the perspectives be reconciled through context-sensitive interpretation?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1. Oríkì as oral literature and cultural memory:

Barber (1991) argues that Yoruba oral genres function as cultural scripts embedded in social action. Oríkì is not merely "poetry" but a living technology of identity, performance, and memory. Olatunji (1984) describes oríkì as characterized by associative imagery, historical allusions, and condensed metaphor. In this sense, sobriquets are micro-oríkì: compressed praise narratives.

2.2. Semantics, polysemy, and interpretive communities:

Semantic theory recognizes that words often carry multiple meanings depending on context (Lyons, 1977). The same lexical item can function differently across discourse settings. Pragmatics also emphasizes that meaning emerges through speaker intention, audience interpretation, and social context (Yule, 1996). This supports the view that Ikú in a sacred praise context can function differently from Ikú in ordinary discourse.

2.3. Denotation vs. connotation in literary discourse:

Denotation refers to literal meaning, while connotation refers to associative or culturally loaded meanings (Leech, 1981). In Yoruba oríkì, connotation frequently overrides denotation through metaphorical elevation. Thus, negative words can become praise by invoking power over the negative force.

2.4. Metaphor as cognitive and political technology:

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) show that metaphor structures thought, not only speech. In royal oríkì, metaphors are ideological: they produce a worldview where the king is beyond ordinary vulnerability. Ricoeur (1977) similarly sees metaphor as meaning innovation. Therefore, calling Aláàfin "child of death" can mean "death cannot defeat him."

2.5. Yoruba cosmology: balance, duality, and paradox:

Yoruba cosmology emphasizes complementarity rather than strict binaries. Abimbola (1976) and Idowu (1962) describe a worldview where visible and invisible realms interact. This supports the interpretation that death/illness/loss can be invoked not as doom but as forces under control. The proverb bí a bá pe ẹni ní ọdẹ, a fi ọwọ́ tọ́ ọ́ sí igbó (if you call someone a hunter, you direct him to the forest) illustrates performative naming: names authorize roles.

2.6. Kingship, power, and moral contestation:

Political anthropology recognizes that sacral kingship often attracts both reverence and critique (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1940). Yoruba kingship contains mechanisms of constraint (e.g., Oyomesi), suggesting that royal power is negotiated. Therefore, divergent interpretations of sobriquets may reflect ideological tensions about authority, violence, and legitimacy.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEW ORK:

This study integrates five theoretical lenses by adopting a multi-theoretical framework integrating semantics, pragmatics, metaphor theory, semiotics and discourse studies.

3.1: Denotation and Connotation in Lexical Semantics:

Lexical meaning operates at two broad levels: denotative (literal, surface, scientific, ordinary) and connotative (literary, associative, evaluative and culturally loaded). Denotation refers to the core referential meaning of a word, while connotation reflects emotional, cultural, and ideological associations (Cruse, 2011; Saeed, 2016). The sobriquet's denotation appears negative: death, illness, ruin. However, its connotation within Ọ̀yọ́ royal discourse becomes protective and elevating.

3.2: Pragmatics and Meaning in Context:

Pragmatics argues that meaning is not fixed in words but emerges through context, intention, shared knowledge and inferential processes (Mey, 2001; Yule, 1996). Oríkì, as performative oral art, intensifies pragmatic meaning because it is produced within ceremonial and ideological settings where words function as actions.

3.3: Speech Act Theory: Oríkì as Performative Utterance:

Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) speech act theory provides a powerful model for interpreting oríkì as performative language. The sobriquet does not only describe; it blesses, legitimizes, immunizes and politically consecrates. Hence, "Ọmọ Ikú" may operate as an illocutionary act of protection rather than a literal claim.

3.4: Conceptual Metaphor and Yoruba Royal Semiotics:

Conceptual metaphor theory explains how metaphor structures thought, not merely poetic language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The sobriquet constructs kingship through metaphors of kinship with cosmic forces: DEATH AS KIN, ILLNESS AS KIN, RUIN AS KIN. It explains how "child of death" becomes "immune to death" through conceptual mapping: KINSHIP WITH A FORCE = CONTROL/INVIOLABILITY (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Such metaphors frame the king as beyond ordinary vulnerability.

3.5: Discourse, Ideology, and Power:

Critical discourse approaches emphasize that language encodes power relations and ideology (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). The opposing interpretations reflect ideological positions: royal legitimation versus moral critique. The "others" reading is a counter-discourse that remembers war and imperial violence. CDA explores how language reproduces power and ideology (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). Here, the sobriquet is analyzed as discourse: it legitimizes Aláàfin's authority for insiders and becomes critique for outsiders.

3.6. Semiotics (Saussurean and social semiotics):

Semiotics explains how signs generate meanings beyond literal reference. The sobriquet functions as a sign with layered signifieds: immunity, power, violence, memory.

3.7. Reception Theory / Interpretive Communities:

Meaning depends on communities of interpretation (Fish, 1980). Ọ̀yọ́ and "others" are interpretive communities with different histories, political memories, and ideological positions.

This framework is intentionally interdisciplinary to align with humanities, language, literature, technology, and management.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research design

This study employs a qualitative textual and discourse-analytic design, suitable for oral literature and semantic studies.

4.2. Data sources

Royal oríkì performances and commonly cited Aláàfin praise lines (archival and secondary sources).

Yoruba proverbs and aphorisms related to naming and destiny.

Scholarly texts on Yoruba kingship, oríkì, and semantics.

4.3. Method of analysis

Semantic analysis: denotation/connotation, lexical fields of Ikú, Àrùn, Òfò.

Metaphor analysis: mapping negative forces to immunity claims.

Discourse analysis: ideological functions of praise and critique.

4.4. Ethical considerations

The study treats oral texts as cultural heritage, acknowledging interpretive diversity without imposing a single "correct" meaning.

4.5. Conceptual Framework (with Diagram)

Explanation

The framework models how one sobriquet generates divergent meanings based on context and ideology

Conceptual Framework Diagram (Textual Model)

SOBRIQUET AS A SIGN

"Ọmọ Ikú, Ọmọ Àrùn, Ọmọ Òfò"

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| |

INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY A INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY B

(Ọ̀yọ́) (Others)

| |

Praise/Legitimation Critique/Indictment

| |

CONNOTATION: Immunity CONNOTATION: Inheritance

- death cannot kill him - death = cruelty
- illness cannot afflict him - illness = suffering aftermath
- loss cannot ruin him - loss = destruction of victims

| |

PERFORMANCE FUNCTION: HISTORICAL FUNCTION:

- reinforce sacred kingship - archive violence memory
- social cohesion - moral judgment

| |

OUTCOME: OUTCOME:

Royal inviolability & authority Tyranny narrative & ethical critique

5. RESULTS/FINDINGS

5.1. Finding 1: The sobriquet performs "immunity semantics" in Ọ̀yọ́ discourse

In Ọ̀yọ́ performance context, the sobriquet functions as a metaphysical shield. It is less a literal statement and more a ritual speech act.

Sample oríkì lines (constructed in traditional style for illustration):

Aláàfin Ọ̀yọ́, Ọmọ Ikú!

Ikú ò gbé pá; ẹni tí Ikú bí, Ikú ò lè pa!

Ọmọ Àrùn; àrùn ò lè wò ó!

Ọmọ Òfò; òfò ò lè jẹ́ kó fọ́!

Interpretation:

The lexemes Ikú, Àrùn, Òfò are invoked as "parents" to establish a kinship logic: kinship implies immunity.

5.2. Finding 2: The same sobriquet encodes moral critique outside Ọ̀yọ́

Outside Ọ̀yọ́, the proverb orúkọ á máa rò ni drives interpretation. The sobriquet becomes evidence of inherited cruelty and destruction.

Interpretive reading:

Ikú = killing without pity → war brutality

Àrùn = pain and disability → suffering of survivors

Òfò = ruin → destroyed homes and seized property

5.3. Finding 3: Semantic duality is enabled by metaphor and pragmatics

The phrase "child of death" can mean either:

(A) death is his domain; he cannot be killed, or

(B) death is his nature; he kills like death.

Meaning is therefore pragmatic, not fixed.

5.4. Finding 4: The sobriquet is a technology of political legitimacy

Within Ọ̀yọ́, praising the king with such paradoxical power metaphors strengthens the sacral ideology of kingship and stabilizes loyalty. It becomes an indigenous "authority software"—a cultural technology that sustains governance through language.

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

6.1 Reconciling the paradox: Yoruba ontology of duality

Yoruba thought is comfortable with paradox. The same object can be both feared and revered. Deities like Ògún embody this: god of iron and war, yet also of civilization and technology (Drewal et al., 1989). Ògún kills, but Ògún also clears paths. This duality parallels Aláàfin's sobriquet: death/illness/loss are not merely negative—they are forces that can be commanded.

Similarly, Ṣàngó is thunder: destructive yet justice-oriented. Thunder kills, yet thunder "judges." Thus, Yoruba cosmology does not interpret destructive power as inherently immoral; it can be morally regulated by justice.

6.2. Denotation vs. connotation: why the conflict persists

Denotatively, Ikú is death. Connotatively, within royal oríkì, it becomes a marker of invincibility. For outsiders who do not share the performance ideology, denotation dominates, and connotation shifts into moral suspicion.

6.3. The politics of memory: empire, violence, and narrative

Empires generate counter-memories. For those historically positioned as "conquered," royal praise can sound like glorification of oppression. Thus, the sobriquet becomes a site of memory conflict.

6.4. Implications for management, technology, and governance studies

This study contributes beyond literature:

Management: Royal praise discourse functions like organizational culture—shared language legitimizes leadership and binds members.

Technology: Oríkì operates as indigenous information technology—storing data, history, identity, and authority codes.

Governance: Divergent meanings show why legitimacy is unstable; authority is interpreted differently by stakeholders.

7. CONCLUSION

The dichotomy in the Aláàfin's sobriquet Ọmọ Ikú, Ọmọ Àrùn, Ọmọ Òfò is fundamentally a struggle over meaning: denotation versus connotation, praise versus critique, legitimacy versus indictment. The study demonstrates that the sobriquet is not semantically fixed; it is socially produced through interpretive communities, performance context, and historical memory. Reconciliation is possible only through context-sensitive hermeneutics: acknowledging that both readings are culturally rational within their ideological frames.

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