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**Journal**

American Anthropologist, 44(1)

**Author**

Bascom, William R.

**Publication Date**

1942-03-01

Peer reviewed

THE PRINCIPLE OF SENIORITY IN THE SOCIAL  
STRUCTURE OF THE YORUBA

By WILLIAM R. BASCOM

IN HIS paper, *Classificatory Systems of Relationship*,<sup>1</sup> Kroeber outlined eight factors which frequently serve as the basis for distinctions between kinship terms. These principles or categories were: the distinction between consanguinal and affinal relatives, between lineal and collateral relatives, between relatives of different generations, the factors of relative age within the same generation, the sex of the speaker, the sex of the individual referred to, the sex of the connecting relative, and the condition of the connecting relative (i.e., whether dead or alive). I propose to discuss a factor which does not appear in this list, but which is basic to the kinship system of the Yoruba of Nigeria, West Africa.<sup>2</sup> This factor I have called seniority.

The patrilocal dwelling unit known as the "compound" (*agbo ilé*) is inhabited by three classes of people: 1) the members of the patrilineal sib (*idúlé*) who live together in the same compound and who are known as the "children of the house" (*omq-(i)lé*), 2) the wives of the male sib members, who are known as the "wives of the house" (*aya ilé*), and 3) the unrelated outsiders (*àlejò*) who share the same compound through the hospitality of the sib members, regarded as the compound owners. As will be seen from the kinship terms used in reference all inhabitants of a compound except for the outsiders are ranked into a graded series according to their relative seniority, and the kinship terms which are used in addressing relatives either by descent or by marriage must show proper respect for the status of a senior person. Seniority is defined in terms of the length of an individual's affiliation—either by marriage or by birth—with the patrilocal kinship group whose members are known as the "children of the house."

There are two terms of reference applied to siblings which may be translated as "senior sibling" (*egbón*) and "junior sibling" (*àburò*). The distinction between these two terms is based upon the order in which the speaker and the person referred to were born. Neither the sex of either the individual or of the speaker, nor the distinction between lineal and collateral descent is significant. Accordingly the term "senior sibling" is applied to both male and female sib members of the generation of the speaker who are older than the speaker. While it is considered proper by the Yoruba them-

<sup>1</sup> (The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol. XXXIX, 1909), pp. 77-84.

<sup>2</sup> The fieldwork in the Yoruba town of Ife, Nigeria, during 1937-38 upon which this paper is based, was made possible by a fellowship of the Social Science Research Council of New York City, under the sponsorship of the Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University.

selves to consider members of ascending generations as "senior siblings," these individuals are usually referred to more specifically as "my father's senior sibling" (*egbón babá mi*) or "my father's junior sibling" (*àburò babá mi*) in the first ascending generation, and by similar descriptive phrases for members of other ascending generations. Thus in the case of ascending generations a second factor appears which can be added to Kroeber's original list: the relative seniority of connecting relatives.

It is obvious that the terms "senior sibling" and "junior sibling" could be accurately translated as "elder sibling" and "younger sibling," and that the distinction between them could be accurately described in terms of the factor of relative age, which Kroeber has already pointed out. Where sib members alone are concerned, an individual's age is identical with the length of his affiliation with the sib. But where affiliation with the sib is established through marriage it is also obvious that seniority is quite distinct from relative age, so that an entirely new factor must be considered. In the interests of parsimony, therefore, it is desirable to regard relative age, in the case of the Yoruba, as a special case of the more general principle of seniority.

Besides the general term for "wife" (*aya*), the Yoruba have two others, "senior wife" (*iyálé*), and "junior wife" (*iyawó*). A husband regards his first wife, or if she has died or been divorced, the wife to whom he has been married longest, as his "senior wife," whereas his other wives are referred to as either "wife" or "junior wife."<sup>3</sup> The Yoruba terms have a much wider application than their English translations would imply. Sib members regard all the women who have married into their sib as "wives"; that is to say, they may refer to the wife of any member of their sib as "my wife," or "my junior wife," or "my senior wife." The distinction between the two latter terms is based upon seniority, which in this case is quite distinct from relative age. An individual regards all the women who married into his own sib prior to his own birth as his "senior wives" and all those married afterward as "junior wives." The members of the sib, conversely, are all classed as "husbands" (*òkò*) regardless of their sex. In this case it is obvious that relative age is irrelevant since an adult woman is regarded as the "junior wife" of a baby girl born before her marriage into the sib.

The terms "junior wife" and "senior wife" are further applied in reference to all women who marry into the same sib as the speaker. As used in this context, they refer to a woman's co-wives for which the general term is *orogun*. A woman regards the wives of the members of her husband's sib

<sup>3</sup> A man's most recently married wife may be distinguished as "my little junior wife" (*iyawó mi kékèrè*).

as "junior wives" if their marriage into the sib followed her own, and as "senior wives" if it preceded hers.<sup>4</sup> Again relative age is not significant since a man's first wife may be younger than his second or third.

A woman who is divorced and remarries into another sib loses her seniority; but when, as frequently happens through the operation of the levirate, a woman remarries into the same kinship group, her seniority is not forfeited. Occasionally the operation of the levirate may lead to a slight confusion as to the meaning of these terms. If a man "inherits" a woman who married into the sib before he himself married, his own "senior wife" is actually junior to the new wife he acquires. If someone should tell him "I saw your senior wife in the market today," he would assume—but he could not be sure—that his own wife was meant. Simply mentioning the wife's name, of course, would easily clear up the uncertainty.

In this way each male is ranked according to seniority both with respect to all sib members and to their wives. Each female is ranked in the same way until her marriage, at which time she takes her place in a new graded series including her husband's sib members and their wives. Superior status in terms of seniority carries with it certain prerogatives. Within the immediate family most of the work of housekeeping is done by the junior wives, and in those families where a man has many wives, the senior wife merely directs the activities of her junior co-wives. In the exceptionally large polygynous families with a hundred or more wives, the husband relinquishes to his senior wife the right of choosing which wife will sleep with him each night. In such cases the junior wives seek preferential treatment by doing favors for the senior wife and by giving her presents.

Within the compound relative age or seniority is important in the advancement of an individual to the status of "elder" (*àgbà*). At the meetings of the men of the compound (*egbe òkúnrin-(i)lè*), seating is dependent upon seniority; and when food and drink are served, not only are the "elders" given more but within the groups that share the same plate of food and pot of palmwine, the senior individuals have the right to the largest and choicest portions. Senior sib members likewise receive larger shares of the income from property belonging to the sib.

The status of an individual with respect to each of the classes of relatives with whom he is ranked according to seniority is reflected in the terms which he uses in addressing them. In some cases the personal name of the individual addressed appropriately expresses his status relative to the speaker; in others the speaker may use the kinship term which defines their

<sup>4</sup> In some cases the term "junior wife" is loosely equated with "co-wife" (*orogun*) and applied to a woman for whom the proper term of reference is "senior wife."

relationship in reference; in still others it is necessary to address the individual indirectly in terms of the name of his oldest child or the quarter of the town in which he was born, or to employ a kinship term which in reference exaggerates the difference in status between them.

According to the forms of address, the members of an individual's own sib are not classed simply into two groups, one junior and the other senior. They are roughly grouped into generations, but this classification is actually based upon relative age or seniority. A sib member who is old enough to have children of the speaker's age is classified as a member of the father's generation, but a father's brother who is actually about the same age as the speaker would be addressed as a member of one's own generation, and a father's brother who is actually junior to the speaker is addressed in the same way as a "junior sibling."

Sib members who are old enough to be classed in the generation of the speaker's father are generally addressed by their personal names. If they are distantly related, if they have such a character as to deserve no special respect, and if, in addition, there is no special affection between them and the speaker, they may be addressed as "my senior sibling." If on the other hand the speaker desires to show them particular respect, either because of their character and accomplishments, because of a close relationship, or because of a special affection for them, they may be addressed as "father" (*babá*) or "mother" (*iyá*), depending on their sex. For example, a father's brother need not be addressed as "father" even if he is thirty-five years older than the speaker, but this term may be used to show respect or affection if there is an age differential of only twenty years. At the present time one's own father is often addressed as "father" (*babá*); but it is said that formerly the proper form of address was in terms of the father's personal name, with the term *babá* being reserved in address for the grandfather.

Even one's own grandfather may not deserve to be shown respect. If a grandfather's character justifies it, he may be shown disrespect by addressing him by the kinship term usually used in reference, "my father's father" (*babá babá mi*), but because of the closeness of the relationship to address one's own grandfather as "my senior sibling" would be an insult beyond the bounds of propriety. Both maternal and paternal grandparents are usually addressed as "father" or "mother." Any very aged sib member of average reputation is likewise addressed as "father" or "mother" even if not closely related to the speaker.

Senior sib members who are not old enough to be classed with the father's generation may be addressed as "my senior sibling" or by personal name. Junior sib members who are not young enough to be classed with the

first descending generation are addressed as "my junior sibling" or by personal name. A recent development is the use of the English term "brother" to show respect or affection for a junior sibling.

In addressing sib members who are young enough to be children of the speaker, the term "child" (*om̩o*) or the personal name may be used. The term "child" in Yoruba has no implications as to the individual's age, so that it can be applied to an adult if the difference in relative age is sufficient; in its primary sense it means descendant or offspring, and includes both sons and daughters. An individual never addresses his own child as "my child." Should he do this instead of using the personal name as is customary, he would be regarded as boasting about the number of children he has. Whoever heard him would say, "What right has he to brag? Is he the only one who has children?"

A husband addresses his own wives by their personal names or, if they have borne him a child, he may show them respect or affection by addressing them in terms of the child's name as "mother of so-and-so." A wife may not address her husband by either his personal name or his nickname. If her husband has a child by any wife, she addresses him in terms of its name as "father of so-and-so." If a man is childless, his wives can use no regular form of address, but can only call his attention by asking, "Do you hear?"

In addressing any woman who has married into his sib, a speaker may use the term "my wife" or, with regard for their relative seniority, "my junior wife" or "my senior wife" regardless of the sex of the sib member. Again it is obvious that seniority is quite distinct from relative age, for a female child who has only recently learned to speak may address an adult woman who has just married into her sib as "my junior wife." The speaker will be addressed in return as "my husband." Alternatively a female member of the husband's sib may be addressed as "mother of my husband" (*iyá-(o) k̩m̩i*) or "child of my husband" (*om̩o-(o)k̩m̩i*). The distinction between these two terms is entirely independent of the age of the husband, since a girl of eleven is not too young to be addressed as "mother of my husband," but whether this is dependent on the age of the child addressed or her seniority relative to the speaker was not made clear by my informants.

A brother's wife, alternatively, may be addressed by her personal name, regardless of her seniority relative to the speaker; or, to show respect or affection, she may be addressed in terms of the name of her eldest child. Conversely, however, a woman may address only junior members of her husband's sib by their personal names. If they are senior to her, but of about her own age, she must invent a nickname by which she may address

them or use the Christian names which at the present time are equivalent in this respect to a nickname. If a member of the husband's sib is old enough to be her parent, she must address them as "my father" or "my mother," or in terms of the name of their eldest child. In the latter case again she may use the personal name of their child only if she herself is senior to the child; otherwise she must use a nickname.

In addressing a co-wife, a woman has the choice of several terms, each of which expresses an attitude of respect which is regarded as proper for a particular difference in status. No junior wife may ever address a senior wife by her personal name. The only exception to this fundamental rule is upon an occasion when everyone is drinking and in high spirits; and then it can be done only as the introduction to a long eulogy in which she mentions as much of the senior wife's genealogy as she knows: "Comforti, daughter of so-and-so and so-and-so,<sup>5</sup> grand-daughter of . . . etc., mother from *Iremo* quarter, you are a very good woman, a kind, considerate co-wife, etc. . . ."

If a man has five wives, the second addresses the first as "my mother" if there is considerable difference in seniority in terms of the length of time they have been married into the same compound, or in relative age between them. If there is little difference, the term "my mother" is never used, but instead the second wife addresses the first as "my senior wife," or as "mother from such-and-such a quarter" of the town, or if the first wife has a child, as "mother of so-and-so" using either the personal name or the nickname of her oldest child. Whenever a junior wife is addressing a senior wife, the choice between the nickname and the personal name of the child does not depend on the relative status of the speaker to the person addressed, but on the status of the speaker relative to the child of the senior wife. And, as we have seen above, the situation is the same when a woman is addressing a senior member of her husband's sib in terms of the name of his or her child.

The proper form of address of a third wife to a first wife is "my mother." Only if she is proud and haughty would she presume to address her as "my senior wife" or in terms of her quarter or her child's name. In addressing a second wife, however, where the difference in status is less, the third wife uses the term "my senior wife" or the terms involving the name of the second wife's child or quarter.

The fourth wife must always address the first wife as "my mother." Usually she addresses the second wife as "my senior wife" or in terms of her quarter or her child, but to show respect to the second wife because of a

<sup>5</sup> The names of her father and mother.

considerable difference in age, or to show a special affection for her, she may use the term "my mother." There is so little difference in seniority between the fourth and third wives that the former would never address the latter as "my mother," but always by the other terms.

The fifth wife must always address the first wife as "my mother." She may use this term for the second and third wives to show respect or love, but the usual form of address is as "my senior wife" or "mother of so-and-so" or "mother from such-and-such a quarter." The fifth wife in addressing the fourth wife never uses the term "my mother." She will address her in terms of the name of her child or her quarter if the difference in age or in seniority between them is great, otherwise by the more usual term, "my senior wife."

Failure to use the proper term in addressing a co-wife may lead to serious consequences. The insult may take the form of using a term which does not show sufficient respect, but the offense may be just as serious if a term is used which obviously shows too great respect for the difference in status involved. Thus for a fifth wife to address the fourth wife as "my mother," especially when a sneer can be detected in the tone of voice, might easily be as disrupting an incident as for the fifth wife to address the first wife as "my senior wife" instead of as "my mother."

According to informants, if the latter incident should occur, the first wife would inquire indignantly, "Are you speaking to me?" If the fifth wife replies "Yes," the first wife would say sharply, "What do you mean? Go to your house and learn wisdom," or imply that she had not been taught good manners by asking scornfully, "Is there no elder in your house?" The woman who offers the insult is given sufficient chance to retract, so that serious incidents do not develop from slips of the tongue, but are always deliberate insults in which the offender is determined to persist. They result from grievances of long standing which can no longer be kept beneath the surface. Inquiries as to what would happen if the fifth wife addressed the first by her personal name met with amazement. "Á! à! She would be flogged!" The first wife herself, however, does no more than to rebuke the fifth wife as in the previous instance. Then the members of the extended family or household intervene, asking the fifth wife if they had correctly heard what she said. If the fifth wife is determined not to yield, the members of the household condemn her and the women of the household end by slapping and even beating her with switches. As a result of this the fifth wife packs her belongings and goes home to her parents.

When her parents find out why she has come, they call in the husband and the first wife to settle the matter. The fifth wife is again asked if she



did what she is accused of, and if in defiance she admits it, her parents ask, "What do you mean? Don't behave like a person who hasn't been taught (*abikq*)" or "like a person who has been taught but did not listen (*akqigba*)."  
If she still refuses to retract her insult, her parents begin to beat her. Some cases of this sort can be settled only by divorce; but if an apology is forthcoming, the two wives eat kola nuts and then food together, officially making peace and reuniting the husband's family.

Even if a fifth wife should call the fourth wife by her personal name under ordinary circumstances, she would be checked at once; but the matter would not be so serious because the difference in status between them is not so great. The fifth wife may address the second wife in terms of the name of her quarter without causing an argument, but the second wife would suspect a latent antagonism. In such a case, as in so many others, it is the tone of voice used in address that indicates whether the reference is hostile or not.

Open quarrels between co-wives usually involve those of about the same level of seniority. Thus the fourth wife fights with the third and fifth wives, but seldom dares an open break with the first or second wives, knowing that even her own family will not side with her. If she harbors grievances against either of these, she must go to a senior co-wife who is friendly to her, to her husband's mother, or to her own mother for someone to plead her case for her.

In addressing junior wives a senior wife usually employs their personal names. A woman may address her husband's most recently married wife as "my junior wife," but even here the personal name is customarily used. If the junior wife has a child, the senior wife may show friendship or respect for her by addressing her as its mother, but this is optional and would not be done simply because the junior wife is elder than the speaker. In cases of exceptional friendship between co-wives, and where the junior wife has no child, the senior wife may address her junior as "my partner" (*awé mi*). A junior wife cannot use this term reciprocally unless there is little difference in seniority and age.

Under certain circumstances kinship designations are used in addressing individuals who are in no way related to the speaker. Here also the terms which are used must show the proper respect for their status relative to the speaker, but since in this case the individuals addressed are in no way affiliated with the sib, their status does not depend on seniority as defined in this paper. Instead it depends upon age, wealth, and membership in certain hereditary classes, which can only be named here. In the town of Ife all sibs are ranked in the following order: 1) the compound of which the incumbent king (*Qni*) is a member; this is but one section of the large sib

whose members are known as "children of the king (*qm(ə)-qba*) and from which the king is chosen; 2) the *Mqədewa* sibs which formerly lived within the walls of the palace and from which the palace chiefs (*Wóye*) are chosen; 3) the *Ifẹ* sibs which comprise the bulk of the population of Ife and from which the town chiefs (*Ifẹ*) are chosen; 4) the remaining compounds of the sib from which the *Oni* can be chosen, whose members are in the position of campaigning for one of their own number as successor to the present incumbent, and who therefore assume a status inferior to that of the other townspeople; 5) the *elù* sibs, comprising Yoruba who have moved to Ife from other towns; and 6) the *ko-gb(ə)-ede* or non-Yoruba living in Ife, those who do not "hear" (understand) the Yoruba language. The status of an individual in terms of the ranking of the sib into which he was born is reflected in the manner in which he addresses individuals affiliated with other sibs.

Thus the terms "father" and "mother" may be used in addressing any unrelated individual whose status is superior to that of the speaker, even if only because of an age difference of three or four years. These terms are generally used only when the speaker does not know the personal name of the individual whom he is addressing. But "father" may also be used—as an alternative to his title—in-addressing a chief, who along with the speaker's senior co-wife and the speaker's husband,<sup>6</sup> must never be addressed by personal name. Again to address as "father" a person who knows his status is inferior to that of the speaker is to insult him and, if this is done deliberately, it will lead to a quarrel and even to physical violence.

Any person not related to an individual, but young enough to be his child may be addressed as "this child" (*qmoyi*) in the sense of a descendant, or "this child" (*qməde yi*) in the sense of any young person. The speaker may also use compound words to indicate the sex of the person he addresses: "son" (*qmə-(ə)kunnrin*), "daughter" (*qmə-(ə)birin*), "boy" (*qməde-(ə)kunnrin*), or "girl" (*qməde-(ə)birin*).

The term "junior wife" can likewise be used in addressing a woman not related to the speaker, who is of inferior status. If a woman hears someone call "my junior wife," she looks at him to see if he is addressing her. If so, and if she sees that he is older than she is, or if she recognizes him as someone superior to herself in class or wealth she replies civilly. However, if she thinks he is younger or inferior in status, she looks at him scornfully and asks, "Do you mean me? Am I a Hausa woman?", this latter in reference to the custom of accosting Hausa prostitutes as "junior wives."

With non-relatives, as with relatives, the use of the proper form of ad-

<sup>6</sup> Informants were not sure whether or not grandparents are to be included in this category

dress is not in itself sufficient to show respect for a person of superior status; the tone of the speaker's voice is equally important. The Yoruba delight in insulting Europeans without fear of reprisal by employing a complimentary form of address spoken in a tone which shows disrespect and contempt, but which the Europeans fail to recognize as insolence.

An analysis of the Yoruba terms of reference thus reveals the importance of the factor of seniority which, while it is in some instances closely related, is actually quite distinct from the principle of relative age. Hence this, and the factor of the relative seniority of connecting relatives, can be added to the list begun by Kroeber in 1909. An analysis of the terms employed in addressing relatives who are ranked according to seniority not only documents the importance of the observance of proper forms of etiquette in West African societies, but reveals as well the importance of a number of other factors which influence a speaker's choice of terms. There are the character or the reputation of the individual addressed, his wealth, and his class affiliation; the affection or intimacy, and the proximity of the relationship that exists between him and the speaker, the speaker's arrogance or humility, and the situation in which he approaches the individual whom he is addressing. A person who is asking a favor may use a more respectful form of address than usual in order to increase the chances of a favorable reply. Whether or not the individual addressed has children is another important factor, and it should again be noted that in the case of the choice between addressing a parent in terms of the personal name of the child or the child's nickname, the significant element is the speaker's seniority relative to the child whose name is used, and not seniority to the person addressed.

Finally, the chronological order of two individuals' affiliation with a sib does not alone determine their relative seniority, for a fifth wife who marries ten years after the fourth wife is in a different position from one whose marriage follows that of the fourth wife by only a year. Further, a member of the speaker's sib or of the sib of the speaker's husband who is about the same age as the speaker is addressed differently from one who is old enough to be the speaker's parent or young enough to be his child. Although the distinction between these categories can be conveniently described in terms of generation, it is not based strictly upon genealogical considerations and differs from the situation in our own society where a father's brother is classed as uncle regardless of the fact that he may be younger than the speaker. In both these instances it is to be seen that while the terms of reference classify relatives simply as junior or senior to the speaker, distinctions are made within these two fundamental groups in the use of terms of address.

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY  
EVANSTON, ILLINOIS