

Mouth matters: Exploring the intersection of Yoruba cultural beliefs, metaphysical significance, and oral health practices

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Abstract

This study delves into the intricate tapestry of Yoruba cultural beliefs and their impact on oral health. Focusing on the unique worldview of the Yoruba people, the research investigates the metaphysical significance of the mouth, drawing on proverbs, maxims, and Ifa corpus verses. The study combines primary data gathered through fieldwork in Ile-Ife with secondary sources to uncover the sociocultural influences on oral health practices. The Yoruba's tripartite view of personhood, comprising Ara (body), Emi (life force), and Ori (head), forms the basis for understanding the connection between oral health and overall well-being. While recognising the biological functions of the mouth, the Yoruba's emphasis on its metaphysical importance reveals a complex interplay between aesthetics, fashion, and oral health considerations. The findings suggest the need for targeted educational programs that leverage existing cultural beliefs to promote positive oral health behaviours among the Yoruba population.

Keywords: Yoruba belief, significance of the mouth, metaphysical oral health, body in Yoruba culture, oral well-being

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Introduction

Oral health and illness behaviours, like general health and behaviour, cannot be understood in isolation from the worldview of those who practice them. Several studies have established that different cultural settings have different causal explanations, symptomologies, and notions of recovery for illnesses (Vaughn et al., 2009). In Africa, for instance, studies have shown that illnesses are often explained through the interplay among the metaphysical, natural world, and heredity (Beiersmann et al., 2007; Jegede, 2002; Nsabagasani et al., 2004; Ojua et al., 2013; Olaogun et al., 2005). While the role of culture in health, illness, and recovery across African settings has been explored in different aspects such as malaria (Dougherty et al., 2020; Feyisetan et al., 1997; Nsabagasani et al., 2004; Olaogun et al., 2005), and mental health (e.g., Lambo, 1956, 1960; Leighton et al., 1963; Patel, 1995; Prince, 1960; Ventevogel et al., 2013), there is little but growing literature on how sociocultural beliefs could affect oral health among the African setting (Agbor and Naidoo, 2011; 2016, 2019; 2015). Hence, this study aims at exploring Yoruba cultural beliefs and their worldview around oral health, as well as the implications they may have.

Improved oral health is crucial for reducing the global morbidity burden and enhancing the general well-being of populations. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2022), oral health is defined as the state of the mouth, teeth, and orofacial structures that enables individuals to perform essential functions, encompassing psychosocial dimensions such as self-confidence, well-being, and the ability to socialize and work without pain, discomfort, and embarrassment. Despite the strive for everyone to achieve standard oral health through hygienic practices, more than four in every ten persons worldwide live with at least one oral health condition (ibid).

Oral health diseases can lead to other life-threatening morbidities due to their direct connection to the blood, lungs, and bones. Poor oral health practices often

cause oral diseases, affecting eating habits and impairing speech due to tooth loss and other oral cavity diseases, resulting in pain, sensitivity, and other debilitating morbidities (Shay and Ship, 1995; World Health Organization, 2022). Although the impact may vary among individuals, oral health is believed to significantly influence the quality of life, irrespective of social divides such as age, ethnicity, and gender (McGrath and Bedi, 1999; McGrath C. and Bedi, 2004; Pakkhesal et al., 2021; Shay and Ship, 1995). For example, oral diseases have been linked to negative pregnancy outcomes in women, while effects on the elderly and psychiatric patients differ (Abiola et al., 2011; Cormac and Jenkins, 1999; McGrath and Bedi, 1999; Olusile et al., 2014; Shay and Ship, 1995). Oral diseases, particularly periodontal-related ones, are also associated with diabetes and can induce or exacerbate other ill health conditions such as pneumonia and endocarditis infections, among others (Sammalkorpi, 1989; Shay and Ship, 1995). Proper oral hygiene and effective oral healthcare practices remain essential for preventing oral diseases and maintaining general well-being. This has been an integral aspect of every culture including African cultures.

Studies have revealed diverse cultural beliefs and practices related to oral health across various African settings. Oral hygiene commonly involves chewing different plants that clean the mouth, combat bacteria, and prevent oral diseases (Aderinokun et al., 1999; Agbor and Naidoo, 2019; Fajemilehin and Ogunbodede, 2002). Scholars have documented hundreds of plants and numerous plant families utilized by Africans for oral disease prevention and treatment, as well as for therapeutic purposes such as pain relief and infection prevention. Chewing sticks, employed for various reasons, are notably used among the Yoruba (Ogunbodede, 1991; Titus and Oyetola, 2019), a topic that will be revisited later in this work. Beyond individual hygiene practices, people employ diverse approaches when faced with oral illness, including home remedies, consulting traditional healers, or a combination of both (Ashu Michael Agbor and Naidoo, 2016).

This study underscores traditional healers' role in addressing oral health concerns within cultural contexts. Notably, traditional oral dental surgeons, specialising in practices like tooth extraction, have been observed in Cameroon and Eastern Africa (Ashu M Agbor and Naidoo, 2011; Mutai et al., 2010; Simangwa et al., 2023).

Tooth extraction represents another oral health-related practice with diverse cultural beliefs across African settings. For instance, the widespread '*ebino*' practice, involving the removal of tooth buds or specific teeth in infants, is reported in Eastern Africa, including Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia. This practice is grounded in the belief that it contributes to curbing health conditions such as fever, diarrhoea, and stunted growth (Ashu M Agbor and Naidoo, 2011; Mutai et al., 2010). However, caution is stressed in the literature concerning the risks associated with '*ebino*' and related practices. Scholars also caution against using plants with unverified chemical constituents and certain tools and methods employed by traditional oral surgeons in tooth extraction (Ashu Michael Agbor and Naidoo, 2016, 2019; Mutai et al., 2010; Simangwa et al., 2023).

Concerning oral health in Nigeria, several studies have been conducted across different cultural contexts, many of which were surveys examining a range of topics from the prevalence of certain oral health diseases (Sheiham, 1967), to knowledge of oral health (Abiola et al., 2011), and oral health behaviour (Fajemilehin and Ogunbodede, 2002). For instance, studies have shown that oral health challenges, such as tooth decay and tooth loss, are prevalent among the elderly, especially within the Yoruba ethnic group (Sheiham, 1967), and among children from low economic statuses (Olusanya and Okolo, 2006). While oral hygiene promotion (e.g., see Bankole et al., 2011; Titus and Oyetola, 2019) and the use of different plants with locally made powders capable of preventing or treating oral diseases (Aderinokun et al., 1999; Fajemilehin and Ogunbodede, 2002) have been reported among the Yoruba,

little is known about the sociocultural beliefs and practices that underpin these practices. Except for Oginni and colleagues, who investigated cultural beliefs associated with the incidence of orofacial clefts among the three major ethnic groups (Hausa/Fulani, Igbo/Uroboro/Benin, and Yoruba) of Nigeria, finding that the Yoruba are more likely than other ethnic groups to attribute metaphysical or hereditary causes (Oginni et al., 2010). As demonstrated above, most of the few existing studies focused more on mouth-washing practices and materials used rather than the sociocultural beliefs associated with the mouth, shaping their notions of socially appropriate oral health behaviour and practices, which is the aim of this paper. Moreover, sociocultural beliefs about the body, in general, and the mouth, specifically, provide a lens for understanding how the mouth is taken care of. As such, this paper explores Yoruba beliefs about the body and mouth and the effects they may have on their oral health behaviour and practices.

Methods

The data for this paper was collected from both primary and secondary sources. For primary data, a 10-day fieldwork was conducted in Ile-Ife from October 18th to 28th, 2023 (part-time, 3:00-7:00 pm daily) to compile Yoruba proverbs and wise sayings related to mouth, tongue, gum/lips, and teeth. Ile-Ife was chosen due to its status as the cradle of Yoruba people and culture (Obateru, 2006; Osasona et al., 2009). Mr. T, a 32-year-old male postgraduate student of Yoruba Language at the Department of Linguistics and African Languages in the same university where the author teaches, conducted the compilation. Mr. T was recruited on Monday, October 16th, based on his qualifications (B.A. Yoruba Language and M.A. Yoruba Language in view) and competence in Yoruba language and culture. The author trained Mr. T on the same day, providing inclusion and exclusion criteria for the proverbs. Inclusion criteria required sayings to feature the mouth or at least one of the mentioned components,

while exclusion criteria covered non-mouth denoted features. Respondents (58 in total) were selected based on adulthood (perceived to be 30 years and above by Mr. T), fluency in Yoruba language, convenience, availability, and willingness to participate. The interview was semi-formal (without personal sociodemographic data and personal view or interpretation) were conducted in Yoruba language, with participants asked two questions: one about any proverbs or maxims related to the mouth and another featuring mouth/teeth/gum/lips.

A total of 163 proverbs and maxims were collected from the respondents. The first review stage involved removing 71 repeated proverbs and maxims, resulting in 92 (65 proverbs and 27 maxims). In the second stage, 34 proverbs and 13 maxims related to 'mouth' of animals or plants were expunged. At the final stage, 15 proverbs and 6 maxims were discarded because they personified the mouth in relation to other body parts or depicted the relationship between the mouth and the natural environment. For example, the proverb "*enu, enu ni eṣe fi npa ekuro oju ona*" loosely translates to "the feet can only attempt but cannot crack the palm kernel nuts that fell on the footpath." This proverb is often used to convey that one is embarking on a futile project or that their endeavours cannot be achieved. The remaining 16 proverbs and eight (8) maxims were deemed suitable for the final analysis, directly addressing Yoruba beliefs regarding the mouth.

The main secondary source was the Ifa corpus from the monograph "*Ijinle Ohun Enu Ifa*" by Wande Abimbola (2006). Other relevant journal publications and book chapters were used for complementary purposes. Four Ifa verses were purposively chosen from three different corpuses out of the sixteen in the book, illustrating the metaphysical nature of the body, the independence of body parts as deities, the power of the mouth as a deity, and the ideal nature of teeth.

The study employed a "suspicion interpretation" as the analytical frame (Willig, 2014) for both primary and secondary data. This approach, as defined by

Willig, (2014), aims to detect hidden aspects and account for latent meanings that may be obscured or trivialised. It allows the author to go beyond surface interpretations of Yoruba proverbs, Ifa corpus, and maxims, revealing meanings that might otherwise be overlooked or misunderstood.

Ethical considerations: No formal ethical approval was deemed necessary for the study, as it focused on the general worldview of the Yoruba without involving personal information from individual participants. Participation was voluntary, and oral informed consent was obtained from all participants, along with permission to use the data for academic purposes.

The ontology of the body in the Yoruba worldview and its influence on the notion of susceptibility to illness

The Yoruba people, an ethnic group primarily concentrated in the West African nations of Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, hold a significant presence in the southwestern region of Nigeria, making them the largest ethnic group in Nigeria and one of the largest in West Africa, with an estimated population exceeding 40 million (Falola and Heaton, 2008; Akintoye, 2014).

The Yoruba historical civilization and urbanism date back to the Iron Age, around 500 BC. By the eleventh century, the Yoruba had established notable cities characterized by dense populations and well-organised political structures, as highlighted by (Agai, 2017) and further elaborated by (Obateru, 2006). Cities such as Old Oyo, Ijebu-Ode, and Ondo gained global recognition as significant urban centres as early as the 15th century (Adeboye, 2003; Anifowose and Olatubosun, 2019; Obateru, 2006). This urbanism not only manifested in physical structures but also influenced Yoruba lifestyle, fashion, and their emphasis on cleanliness and neatness.

Yoruba beliefs also play a significant role in shaping their notions of body and personhood (Murphy and Leighton, 1963; Akintoye, 2014; Sprague, 1978).

In anthropology, the concept of "person" transcends biological and individual dimensions, encompassing cultural and social aspects (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001; Craemer, 1983; Degnen, 2018; Lepani, 2015). Anthropologists study how societies define and construct the idea of a person.

Yoruba beliefs about personhood reveal two interconnected yet distinct notions. Firstly, Yoruba thought perceives a person as tripartite, contrasting with the dualistic view prevalent in Western Cartesian theory (Ademuleya, 2007; Akomolafe, 2016; Balogun, 2007; Ekanola, 2006; Morakinyo et al., 2018; Morakinyo and Akiwowo, 1981). Secondly, their cultural belief suggests that the components of the body imply independence rather than constituting a singular entity (Ajibade, 2013). These perspectives have profound implications for overall well-being and, specifically, oral health.

The Yoruba conceive a person as tripartite: *Ara*, *Emi*, and *Ori*. According to Yoruba belief, a person is a combination of *Ori* (head), *Ara* (biological body, including both external and internal organs), and *Emi* (life force). The concept of *Ori* in the Yoruba worldview includes two types: *Ori inu* (inner head) and *Ori ita* (outer head). The 'inner head' is believed to exist in the metaphysical realm before a person's birth, serving as the selector of one's destiny, while the 'outer head' is a representative of the former (Ademuleya, 2007; Akomolafe, 2016; Balogun, 2007; Ekanola, 2006; Morakinyo et al., 2018; Morakinyo and Akiwowo, 1981).

The *Ara* - body (including the physical outer head), is believed to be moulded by *Alagbede Orun/Orisa Nla* - the heavenly blacksmith, using clay to create a lifeless body (Oladipupo, 2018). This body is then presented to *Olodumare*, the Almighty, who adds *Emi*, the life force (Akiwowo, 1991; Balogun, 2007; Morakinyo and Akiwowo, 1981; Oladipupo, 2018). In the Yoruba worldview, the body is considered

earthen and susceptible to interference and damage by infections and natural processes. This belief is reflected in everyday greetings, *ara o le bi* (is your body strong) where inquiries about the strength of one's body are common, indicating a connection between well-being and strongness of the 'earthen' - body. The Yoruba preference for herbal and home remedies may be associated with their belief in the natural components of the body (Ezeaka et al., 2014; Jegede and Owumi, 2013; Owumi and Raji, 2013).

The third component of a person in Yoruba cultural view is *Emi* – Life force. *Emi* is believed to be a part or characteristic of *Olodumare* (God) and is the only giver or taker of it. The *Eji Ogbe*, an *Ifa* corpus, portrays *Emi* as follows:

Gbogbo Ori afin ewu
Abuke lo reru oosa ma so
Laalaagbaja lo ti ko ise e de
A dia fun Orunmila
Ni'jo tin nlo ra emi Omo Olodunmare s'obirin
Emi omo Olodunmare
Omo ateni legelege fori sapeji
Orunmila gbo rir e bo o ruu.... (Abimbola, 2006)

(Translation)

The head of albino is full of grey hairs
A person with hunchback is carrying Oosa's (god) baggage without relief
The he learned from Laalaagbaja
They performed Ifa divination for Orunmila
On the day he was going to take (buy) Emi, the Olodumare's daughter as wife
Emi, the daughter of Olodumare

*From the lineage those who spread mat to the edge of sapeji
Orunmila was asked to perform sacrifice and he did...*

In the aforementioned Ifa verse, “*Emi*” is portrayed as a daughter of God and the one responsible for giving her out in marriage. However, this still emphasizes the connection of *Emi* to God. In another context, *Emi* is described as immortal, divine, and invisible, much like God. As stated by Ademuleya, (2007), *Emi* is characterised by breath, serving as the fundamental indicator of life. Consequently, death is referred to in Yoruba as either “*Emi ti lo*,” translating to *Emi* has gone, or “*Emi owo a*,” translating to “*Emi* has been dropped.”

It is also believed that the preservation and protection of *Emi* is best protected by God himself. Therefore, appeasements, propitiations, and sacrifices become essential components of the Yoruba traditional healing system to seek God’s favour in maintaining and healing the spiritual aspect of an individual. More insights into the spirituality of the body, particularly focusing on body parts, will be discussed in the following section.

It is crucial to recognise that the three components of a person—*Ara* (body), *Emi* (life force), and *Ori* (Head)—are inseparable. Now, let’s explore the Yoruba understanding of the human body. In the upcoming discussion, I will delve into parts of the body as independent natural and metaphysical entities.

Mouth as a body part and deity in Yoruba cosmology

In anthropological terms, the body is considered a social category, not merely as a biological entity but also as a culturally and socially constructed phenomenon. Cultural, social, and historical factors influence how people perceive, experience,

and treat the body. Anthropologists use the body as a lens to explore and understand cultural beliefs, practices, and meanings, extending this exploration to different body parts laden with cultural symbolism within the human body.

In Yoruba cosmology, each body part is regarded as independent, unique, and serving various purposes. All body parts are culturally recognised and properly named in the Yoruba language, such as “ori” for head, “oju” for eye, “eti” for ear, and “irun” for hair, among others (Dingemanse, 2006). These body parts are not only distinguished but also considered distinct and somewhat independent entities within the Yoruba belief system. The belief that each body part is a distinct entity is illustrated in Ifa’s *Eji Ogbe’s* verse:

*Kukute kukuru Awo eba ona,
Adia f’ori. Ori n t’ode orun ow a si’le aye,
Ori n sukun alai leni.
Won wa ni ki ori lo se etutu, ori se’tutu , ori d’eleni.
Won ni ori bawo lo se d’eleni?
Kerekere oju wa b’ori do. Kerekere, imu wa b’ori do.
Kerekere eti wa b’ori do. Kerekere, enu wa b’orido..... Ori wa d’ele”i.”*

(Translation)

*Short Stump, the priest of eba ona
Which performs divination for Ori (head) on his journey to the earth
Ori was weeping for having no people around/acquaintances around him
Ori was asked to perform a sacrifice, Ori performed the sacrifice
Then, Ori had acquittances
People began to ask Ori how he came by acquittances,
In no distant time (after performing the sacrifice), Oju (eyes) came to join with ori
In no distant time, Imu (nose) came to join with Ori*

In no distant time, Eti (ears) came to join with Ori
In no distant time, Eui (mouth) came to join with Ori
That was how Ori had several acquittances

This verse, while having deeper sociological meanings, emphasises that a head without functioning or healthy eyes, nose, ears, neck, and mouth is considered 'shapeless' or useless. It also highlights that each part of *Ori* (head) was initially independent before a sacrifice was offered, allowing them to closely live together.

Moreover, all body parts, despite coming together with *Ori*, retain their spiritual entities. Each part has at least two names: a common name for everyday identification and an esoteric name denoting its metaphysical nature and functions. For instance, "*ori*" is commonly referred to as "*oba ara*," translating to the head as the 'king' or 'controller' of other body parts, emphasising its biological functions.

In the metaphysical realm, "*ori*" is also regarded as "*otita*," considered a complete being capable of moving, adjudicating, and compelling other metaphysical forces. Similarly, each body part, as a pseudo deity, has an esoteric name reflecting its metaphysical nature and functions.

Among these body parts, the mouth holds a special significance and is considered a deity. Its nonstop activities are believed to have profound impacts both in the physical and metaphysical realms. An *Odu Ifa*, *Oworin meji*, illustrates this:

"Agbongbon, Awo won lode Iloore
Agbayangidid, Awo won lode Ijesa
Okunrin yangidi yangidi ni won di ni atipa
Adia fun Olooyinmefun
Yoo bule Olowu roko
Wonli o boogun ile,

O bogun ile, Eboo re ofin
Won ni ko Borisa oja
O boorisa oja, eboo re ko da
Won ni ko bori, Obori,
O bori, ori pa,
Won ni ko bole,
O bole, Ile lu,
Won ni ko bo olobonorirbo baba ebo.
O ni oun mop baba eni ni eegun ile,
Oun mo pe Iya eni orisa oja
Oni oun mo ori lor, oun mo ile nile
Oni Oun o mo ouhn ti je olobonbotirirbo baba eboo
Nje kin won bo nIfe? Enuu won
Enu won ni won bon Ife
Enu won.
Mo fun gba, mofawo
Enu won naambo nIfe,
Enun Enu won ko ma le ri mi baja
Enu won
Mo wale, mo wana
Enu won, enu won ko ma leri mi baja, Enu won.” (Abimbola, 2006)

In this passage, *Olooyinmefun's* attempts to achieve success through various means, including appeasing different deities, highlight the spiritual importance of the mouth. The Yoruba recognise not only the biological functions of the mouth but also its sociocultural and metaphysical significance, as underscored in their daily

interactions, descriptions, and realities. The next section will provide a detailed explanation of this belief in the spirituality of the mouth within Yoruba culture.

Mouth as a biological body part in Yoruba beliefs and its oral health implications

The Yoruba people recognise the mouth not only as a biological part of the body but also as a crucial element that demands careful consideration in its usage. Proverbs such as "*ori ahon ni adun wa,*" signifying the tongue's role in recognising taste, and "*ai ki fi enu eni-eleni to oti wo,*" emphasising the uniqueness of personal taste experiences, underscore the significance the Yoruba place on the natural functions of the mouth.

This acknowledgment extends to their oral health behaviours, as the Yoruba perceive the mouth as a biological entity, much like hands and legs. The mouth is engaged in various daily activities, serving functions such as eating, cutting, and even fashion. Expressions like "*ara ija ni eyin wa,*" translating to biting being a part of the ability to fight, highlight the multifaceted roles assigned to the mouth.

In recognising the importance of maintaining the health of the mouth as a biological organ, the Yoruba incorporate hygiene practices to protect it from infections like "*jeyin-jeyin*" (Titus and Oyetola, 2019). Oral hygiene practices involve the use of stems, roots, and leaves, aligning with the broader Yoruba cultural emphasis on cleanliness and neatness (Murphy and Leighton, 1963; Obateru, 2006; Sprague, 1978). Even Ifa verses, such as *Odi Meji*, stress the necessity of keeping teeth clean and sparkling white.

Funfun niyi eyin

Egun gagaaga niyi orun

Omu siki siki siki iki niyi obirin

A dia fun f'Eji Odi ti nsukun alailobirin

Tin fi joojumo kawo botan

Ero Ipo, Ero Ofa

Igba ti idi di meji naa la d'olomo (Abimbola, 2006)

(Translation)

The beauty of teeth is whiteness

Interconnected bone is the beauty of the neck

Robust breast is the beauty of a woman

Thus, performed divination for Odi that was complaining of not having wife

That would not always be cheerful

The people of Ipo and Ofa,

It is when there are two (opposite) genitals that one can procreate...

Despite their positive disposition towards oral hygiene, some Yoruba expressions reveal a potential gap between their oral health standards and general expectations. 'Suspicion interpretation' of beliefs around mouth hygiene practices suggest that aesthetic and fashion considerations may outweigh concerns for one's health. Proverbs such as "*akara dori aka yin o di eegun*" (lit. bean cake often considered hard to break for a person that lost his/her teeth) highlighting the difficulty of eating solid foods with missing teeth. Moreover, the Yoruba's emphasis on the structure and set of teeth, as seen in expressions like "*eyin m'enugun*" (a complete set of teeth makes the good structure of the mouth) and "*eyin fun j'owo*" (a good set of teeth should not have gaps) pretend to focus on the importance of the teeth as well as alignment or arrangement. However, the context in which these proverbs are used, particularly to describe the beauty of an individual, suggests not only the concerns for facial

aesthetics than to health implications but also a prioritisation of appearance over the oral health.

Similarly, the sayings such as *“ibanuje ko si fun eni ti eying ta sita”* (loosely translated as the facial look of a fellow with protruding teeth [when lips fail to cover one’s teeth] always suggesting happiness) and referring to the incisors *eyin ọọkan* or *eyin faari* (lit. fashion teeth) do not only equate having teeth to a mere fashionable facial look but also trivialise those dental abnormalities without any indication that such may require dentist’s assistance.

Interestingly, there seems to be less concern about the structure or number of teeth. Proverbs like *“Wontiwonti ko leyin b’eyin ba se meji ko ti funfun”* (meaning having only two white teeth is better than having a numerous coloured teeth) and *“melo la fe ka ninu eyin adipele, tinu orun, tode ojo, ookanlelegbaje lo fidi mule ninu erigi lai ti yo”* (lit. you cannot finish counting the teeth of a person with hyperdontia), indicating that neither loss of teeth nor excess of it is a significant worry reinforce this notion. The Yoruba view tooth loss, even complete loss, positively in certain conditions such as old age or for the sake of authority. Prayers for long life *ko pẹ bi m’ọpẹ see pẹ, ko f’owọ pau, ko f’erigi j’obi* categorically states the wishes of the majority for only grey hair and the ability to eat cola-nut with gums alone, thus, portraying tooth loss as a natural and desirable sign of aging.

As such, while the Yoruba view the mouth both as a biological and metaphysical entity, their cultural expressions and practices suggest a complex interplay between aesthetics, fashion, and oral health considerations. The next section will delve into the metaphysical aspects of the mouth in Yoruba beliefs.

Metaphysical significance of the mouth and its oral health implications in Yoruba culture

The belief in the metaphysical potency of the mouth and its capacity to determine one's success among the Yoruba remains one of the most important factors reflecting in their everyday lives. For instance, despite their recognition of food in human daily life, health, and achievement, as well as the importance of the mouth in performing them, as reflected in their proverbs "*okun inu laa fi gbe t'ode*," meaning you can only have strength to do whatever you want to do after you have eaten, and "*ki ni a o je, s'agba ki ni ao se*," meaning that one can work effectively only after being fed; yet, the mouth or any of its components is neither equated to nor synonymous with food or eating.

On the contrary, in contemporary Yoruba daily conversational language, *enu* (mouth), *ahon* (tongue), *ete* (lips), *orọ* (verbal words/utterance), and *ẹbọ* (sacrifice) are often used interchangeably. For example, someone who speaks rapidly is described as "*enu e ya*," literally translating to 'his/her mouth is fast,' while an eloquent person is referred to as "*enu e mu*," translated as 'his/her mouth is sharp,' and someone who abuses often is called "*elete fi fẹlẹ*," meaning someone with slim lips. Someone speaking harshly is referred to as "*ahon e le*," meaning his/her tongue is harsh, and a talkative is called "*elete boroboro*," someone with a loose lip. In fact, the mouth is also equated to metaphysical objects such as sacrifice, as reflected in '*enu araye l'ebo*' – people's mouth is as the same as a sacrifice. Attaching mouth to its social interacting more than other functions suggests prioritising the conversational capacity over the other natural usage of the mouth. No wonder the Yoruba often sound the warning such as "*ma je ki enu re ko ba o*" – do not allow your mouth to attract evil towards you to caution against speaking recklessly to avoid trouble.

Another common belief expressed in proverbs and wise sayings is "*enu eni l'ase wa*," meaning that the mouth is the dwelling place of '*Ase*' - authority. This is

also supported by the *Owonrin meji* quoted above. The statement, 'may (their/my) mouth not fight me,' is referring to the Yoruba belief in the inherent power of the mouth to impact them positively or negatively.

The Yoruba also hold that nothing can hinder the authority and efficacy of verbal words. Scholars have noted the Yoruba's strong belief in the power of spoken words, in the form of *epe* (curse) in inflicting illness (Monisola, 2009; PRINCE, 1960), and prayer in healings (Adewuya and Makanjuola, 2008; Aina and Famuyiwa, 2007; Callister and Khalaf, 2010; Makanjuola and Morakinyo, 1987; Owoeye, 2012), especially regarding mental illness. A proverb like "*ile ki su ohun*" meaning darkness can neither interfere with nor hinder the efficacy of the verbal words, also buttresses the point. The tongue is strongly linked to speech, often used interchangeably with both "mouth" and "words," while teeth are associated with the innate power of speech or 'word power. For instance, the proverb "*Enu on'ko lo nfi pe'ku*," meaning that someone may die of a mere cough if the fellow keeps confessing that s/he may die of the condition, is pointing to the Yoruba belief power of confession or tongue.

Moreover, Yoruba mythology about teeth suggests that the lower set must develop before the upper set. Growing the upper teeth first, known as "*eyin yare*," implies that whatever the child says will always come true. Consequently, Yoruba parents do everything to ensure that a child's upper teeth do not grow before the lower ones. Doing this may resort to using any measures which may include herbal substances or even applying force. In case it eventually grows, Yoruba parents will ensure that such a tooth is removed by all means. While the parent prevents their child from possessing *ase* by removing upper teeth should it grow first, a respondent expressed a belief that some Yoruba adults in the process of seeking or enhancing *ase*, lose their teeth perhaps due to some chemical content of the herbal materials used to prepare the enhancer. However, these practices require further investigation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Yoruba demonstrate a profound understanding of the mouth, recognising it as both a physical and spiritual entity. This belief significantly influences their oral health practices, exemplified by their emphasis on oral hygiene through the traditional use of chewing sticks. Arguably, the Yoruba belief about mouths is one that prioritizes the metaphysical component over the biological functions. The Yoruba stress the importance of the cleanliness of the mouth and whiteness of the teeth irrespective of the number left loss. This belief may not fully acknowledge the direct and indirect connections between oral health and various other health issues, including cardiovascular and reproductive health. Therefore, there is a pressing need for more educational programs addressing these links.

It might be more effective and beneficial to base such programs on the existing Yoruba notion regarding the significance of the mouth to the spiritual body, emphasising the constant need for caution in its use. Expanding on this prevalent belief holds promise in encouraging the Yoruba people to adopt appropriate oral health practices and recognise the associated responsibilities, such as regular check-ups and adherence to dental medical advice. This approach aims to instigate positive behavioural changes in oral health, fostering a broader understanding of its impact on overall well-being.

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Conflict of interest declaration

I confirm that I have no conflicts of interest of any kind.

AI Declaration of Usage

I declare the use of ChatGPT 3.5 for proofreading this paper.

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