

Toponymy: A Sociolinguistic Study of Selected Place- Names in Nigeria

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Introduction

Nigeria is the most populated country in Africa with about 200 million people, thirty-six states and 450 ethnic groups, of which the three major are: the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The nation houses the longest river in West Africa (the River Niger), the largest city in West Africa (Ibadan) and the *twin capital of the world* (Igbo-Ora). These three, among others, foreground the present study as they play principal roles in Nigeria's toponymic import.

Introduction (Contd.)

The study takes a critical look at the historical and oral accounts behind six place-names (Niger, Ibadan, Igbo-Ora, Jos, Lagos and Ile-Ife), and, argues that rather than resonating mere illocutionary act of describing, the names impact on the history, religion, economy, politics, customs and traditions of their immediate communities. A thorough dissection of the names will generate further onomasticity, historicity and narrativity attesting to their socio-cultural significance in the lives of the people.

Nigeria

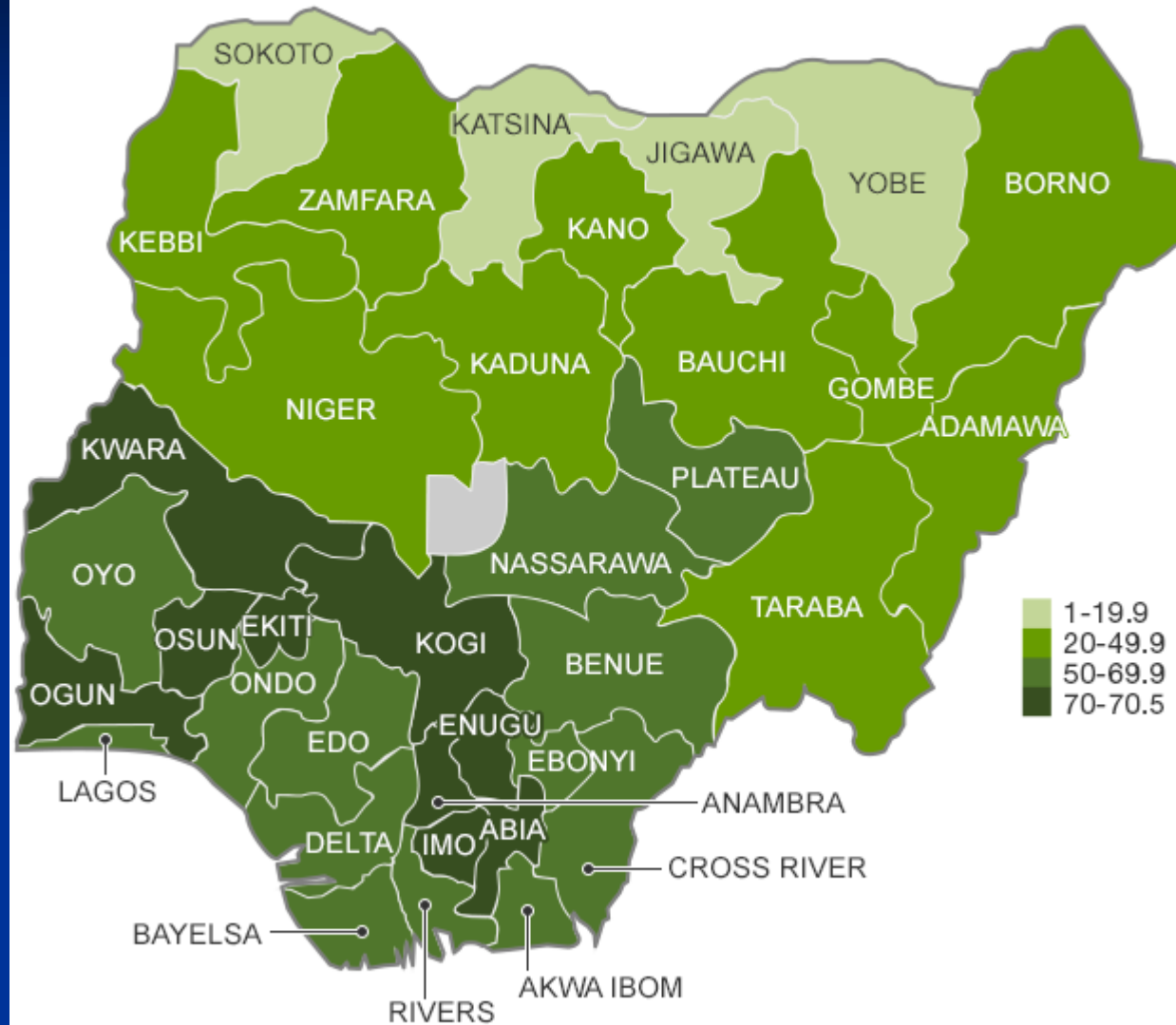
Nigeria is located in West Africa. It is a country of almost 450 diverse ethnic groups and about 200 million people. It has 36 states, three major linguistic groups: Hausa (North), Igbo (East) and Yoruba (West). Nigeria is roughly divided into two religious groups. The Christians in the South (West/East) and Muslims in the North. The capital of Nigeria is Abuja.

Map of Africa



Literacy

Percentage of secondary school attendance



Source: Nigeria Demographic and health survey 2013

The name - Nigeria

- The country derived its name from (the River) “Niger Area”, a term coined by Miss Flora Shaw (1852-1929), a journalist native of Woolwich, England who, in 1902, married Lord Lugard, the Governor General to the Colony of Nigeria (1914-1919). Her argument was that the *Royal Niger Company Territories* was too long to be used as a name. So, she put up her argument of renaming Nigeria in the *Times of London* on 8th January, 1897. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flora_Shaw)

Niger State, Niger Republic

- However, there is a state in **Nigeria** called **Niger State** and a Francophone neighbouring country named **Niger Republic** bordering Nigeria in the North.
- All derived their names from the River Niger which flows from Futa Jallon Highland in Guinea across Niger Republic to Nigeria.
- *When the Arab explorer, Leo Africanus wrote, he noted it in 1526 as 'Niger' which meant 'black' in Latin, like to mean 'River of the Blacks'.*

<http://www.nairaland.com/1295105/slogans-meanings-histories-36-states>

Map Showing River Niger Cutting Across Niger Republic, Nigeria and Niger State



Niger: The Power State

- Each of the 36 states in Nigeria has a slogan that indicates its uniqueness.
- The catchphrase of the Niger State is the power state. Power here is indicative of rulership in electricity because the major power plant in Nigeria is in Niger State.

Jos Plateau

- Jos is the capital city of Plateau state. The state's slogan is the "home of peace and tourism" Of all the cities in the old Northern Nigeria, Jos is the only one that was governed by direct rule from Britain. All other northern cities were governed through indirect rule. This is because Jos is a mining and plateau state with the Shere Hills forming the highest point of the plateau at a height of about 6,000 ft.

The Name - Jos

- The other uniqueness of Jos was that there were many white settlers and missionaries there. So, it can be said to be the major Christian state in the old Sokoto caliphate north of Nigeria. There are different twists to the origin of the word "Jos". An account holds that the original name emanated from Gwosh (a village at the current centre of the city) which the Hausa wrongly pronounced as "Jos". This account, which subsists in the white paper of the Commission of Inquiry to Jos crisis in 1994, is attributed to Annes, a British colonial administrator.

The Name – Jos (contd.)

- Another account maintains that "Jos" came from the word "Jasad" meaning body. To distinguish it from the hill tops, it was called "Jas," which was mis-pronounced by the British as "Jos." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jos>). The final account holds that the name came from a set of acronym which stands for Jesus Our Saviour (<http://www.abbreviations.com/JOS>).

Jos (contd.)

- This account is traceable to the Christian missions who flocked to Jos with the colonial masters when tin was discovered there.

The Yoruba Nation

The Yoruba nation is one of the three major groups in Nigeria. The two remaining being Hausa and Igbo groups. The populace is spread over the six South-Western States of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti as well as Delta, Edo (South); Kwara and Kogi (Middle-belt). It should be noted that Port Novo, the administrative capital of the neighbouring Republic of Benin is also a predominantly Yoruba speech community known as Ajase-Ipo.

Yoruba Nation contd.

- The ethnic group is renowned for its bravery and entrepreneurship and in contemporary Nigeria for its educational achievements and advancement (Adeniran 2009). Oduduwa is often referred to as the Yoruba's progenitor. He was a descendant of Lamurudu, a Mecca Prince and was believed to have migrated to Ile-Ife hundreds of years ago.

Map of West Africa Showing Yoruba Nation in Arrow



Map showing the Yoruba Nation



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Lagos: Centre of Excellence

Lagos used to be the capital of Nigeria before it was moved to Abuja in the early 90's. The Portuguese explorers in 1472, gave it a name synonymous with its uniqueness i.e. Lagos (lagoons) meaning "lakes" or water settlement. But the Yoruba people called it Eko, an Edo (Benin) word for military settlement. This is because Lagos used to be the military barracks for the Benin Empire. That is why Lagos and Benin are the only two towns where the title of their monarchs is "Oba". The palace regalia and language are also similar in some regards.

Lagos (Contd.)

Apart from the uniqueness of Lagos in terms of water and commercial activities, we may establish also that out of the seven military coups staged in Nigeria, five were carried out in Lagos. Hence, it is indeed a military barracks.

Ile-Ife

Ile-Ife is believed to be the cradle of the Yoruba. That is why it is called “the cradle or the source”. According to oral tradition, when Oduduwa got to Ile-Ife, the whole town was covered with water. He had a cockerel and sand with him. He poured the sand on the water and put the bird on it. As the bird was spreading the dust, **“the land keeps expanding”**. Thus the meaning of the name. One credible fact is that every Yoruba town and citizen (even outside Nigeria) lays claim to Ile-Ife as his ancestral home.

Ibadan

One of the grandchildren of Oduduwa called Lagelu founded Ibadan. He was a warrior who travelled from Ile-Ife to a place “close to the savannah,” hence the name *Eba odan* or Ibadan for short. Ibadan is the capital of Oyo State. The state’s slogan is “the pace-setter”. This stems from the fact that Ibadan houses: the first University in Nigeria, the first stadium in the country, the first television station in Africa and the tallest building in Africa by 1960. Ibadan was also the capital of the old Western state.

Ibadan (Contd.)

These attributes earned Oyo State the praise-song: “Aji se bi Oyo l’a n ri, Oyo kii se bi eni kankan” (We always see the imitators of Oyo, Oyo will never imitate anybody). The peaceful democratic structure of electing its king, Olubadan, is a true reflection of African democracy while the city by 1829 had dominated the whole Yoruba race militarily, politically and economically. Unlike other Yoruba towns, Ibadan has peculiar means of naming its streets/areas. One of such is **Kobomoje**.

Kobomoje Area/Street

It was *Baale* Orowusi who refused to allow Ibadan people (men and women) in his domain to be taxed as ordered by the then colonial master. Therefore, the District Officer threatened and ordered his arrest. The *Baale* did not run away unlike others. Rather, he decided to commit suicide than submitting to the colonial master's wish. His people therefore described him as "a brave leader who did not goof before his intimidator", hence the meaning of the name *adari ti ko ba omo je* or *kobomoje* for short.

Odinjo

Similarly, it is an aberration for a deaf-mute to be dancing to music in as much as he could not hear. But to the amazement of the Ibadan people, a man who could neither hear nor speak was always dancing anytime he saw people drumming around the palace of the late Oba Adebimpe. It was this oddity that attracted the Ibadans living around the area. They therefore named the street after the man as Odinjo, meaning the deaf-mute is dancing.

Igbo-Ora

The Twin Capital of the World

The town Igbo-Ora is also in Oyo State. Its name denotes “the fertile farmland”. But the town is called the twin capital of the world or the land of twins.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/highlights/010607_twins.shtml

It is believed that an average home has two cases of twinning in Igbo-Ora. Researchers (Machin 1996; Holladay 2008) have claimed that the Yoruba have the highest rate of twinning in the world, at 45 twins per 1,000 live births. This is attributable to a high consumption of the white yam (*dioscorea rotundata*) by the Yoruba woman.

Igbo-Ora (Contd.)

The yam causes hyper-ovulation because it contains a natural hormone phytoestrogen which acts as stimulant to the ovaries thereby producing eggs simultaneously from each side (Fierro 2008).

Another Yoruba account for the preponderance of twins among them is attributed to a large intake of okro leaf (*ilasa*) particularly among the Oyo north residents. The leaf is believed locally, to contain chemicals responsible for conception of twins .

Igbo-Ora (Contd.)

The white yam and okro (leaf) are grown in Igbo-ora.

Hence, the catchphrase(s): from fertile land to the twin capital of the world

Importance of Twins in Yorubaland

Among the Yoruba, the coming of (the) twins into a family is significant because it marks an “onomastic revolution” (Odebode, 2010) in that family. The naming system of such a family changes automatically as new names evolve. Such names are patterned after the “ibeji” (twins) i.e. ‘ibi’ denoting to deliver and ‘eji’ meaning two.

Importance Contd.

To start with, the two parents assume new nicknames viz *baba ibeji* (the twins father) and *mama ibeji* (the twins mother). The immediate elder brother or sister to *ibeji*, from that moment, will be referred to as *Kedunwale*, a nickname denoting (s/he who brought the twins home). Note that the twins are also referred to as *edun* (chimpanzee).

Change in Family Name

Furthermore, all other siblings that preceded the *ibeji*, apart from the immediate one, are referred to as *egbon ibeji* i.e. the twins' elderly ones. The first sibling between the twins is called *Tayewo* or its contracted form *Taiwo* denoting s/he who first tastes the world. The second is *Omokehinde* or *Kehinde* for short. The name denotes s/he who comes last.

Idowu

However, the child born immediately after the *ibeji* is called Idowu (the present researcher's first name), whether male or female. (Note that gender does not count in twinning and their names). Idowu is always very hard and stern. Therefore s/he is praised as *esu lehin ibeji* (trickster or the devil after the twins). Idowu is also called the *eketa omo* i.e. the third child.

Alaba, Idogbe, Idoha

The next child after *Idowu* is *Alaba* a name denoting s/he was born after *Idowu*. After *Alaba*, we have *Idogbe* which denotes a child born after *Alaba*. Provided the mother conceives again, her next child would be automatically and circumstantially christened *Idoha* meaning a child born after *Alaba*.

It should be noted that most families do not go beyond Idoha before stopping child bearing, having had some children before the *ibeji*. Alternatively, some families would have had another set of twins immediately after the first (or in between Idowu to Idoha).

Multiplied Twins

Where the twins are born twice, their names will be modified/qualified thus:

Tayewo agba – the elder Taiwo

Tayewo kekere – the younger Taiwo

Kehinde agba – the elder Kehinde

Kehinde kekere – the younger Kehinde

Multiple Births

Meanwhile, the Yoruba also recognise multiple births like *ibeta* (triplets). But the latter do not command respect as the *ibeji*. For instance, each of the triplets is referred to as *eta-oko* which denotes equal triplets. This is traceable to the biblical idea of equality in trinity (see I John 5:7 in *The Holy Bible*) as no one is greater than the other among the set of triplets. As a corollary, the Yoruba always give another name(s) to each of the triplets for the purpose of identification.

Gender (In)equality

One unique factor about the *ibeji* is that they are given names on the eighth day regardless of their sex. This is peculiar because according to Yoruba tradition, every male child is named on the ninth day while female children are christened on the seventh day. This situation is hinged on the Yoruba belief that a male child possesses nine bones while the female counterpart is credited with seven.

Civilisation and Christianity

This gender inequality system in naming is in vogue among rural dwellers though civilisation and Christianity have eroded away the system in most urban areas.

Naming in Yoruba land

It is interesting to note at this juncture that every child is given at least three major names and one *oriki* (praise name). The major names are: the first name, the middle name and the surname (or family name which occasionally may be the immediate father's first or middle name). There are occasions when the extended family members like grandparents do bestow different names on a child depending on their perception of the child and the circumstances surrounding his/her birth.

Against the popular English saying "what's in a name?", a name, therefore, is a social DNA among Africans, particularly, the Yoruba. As a DNA, one name may give the history, politics, religion, age, geography (location), vocation and (birth) circumstances behind its bearer.

Functions of names

Functionally, naming transcend ordinary labelling or identification. According to Wole Soyinka (1988), naming is a critical business in traditional African society because names comprise meaning and history. They are also " intimations of hope and affirmations of origins." (Soyinka 1988, p.50)

Names mirror societies and every name reflects the habit and custom of those who employ it and establish its usage. Based on the above, names in many African cultures are carefully constructed "in a semantico- syntactic sense to manifest specific meanings" (Oyeleye 1991:16).

Names Expressing Desire for Twins

Because of the respect and prestige accorded the *ibeji*'s parents, many families want to have twins. Such wish is expressed in naming styles like *Ejiwumi* (I love twins) and *Edunremi*- which is the Ijesha (Yoruba) dialect for saying I love chimpanzee (i.e.twins) Note that “eji” is a contraction of *ibeji* (twins) in this context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that none of the other place-names studied interacts with African anthroponyms and customs as Igbo-ora. Similarly, none of the set of multiple births or any other child is accorded social respect as the *ibeji*. This is so because twinning transcends ordinary birth(s) or naming among the Yoruba. It cuts across their religious beliefs, socio-economic activities and serves as a marker of deference to the twins' family.

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