Toponymy in Igbomina Yoruba Language: An Anthropological Linguistic Perspective

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Toponymy, the study of place names, is an interesting geo-linguistic phenomenon in the ethnography of the Igbomina Yoruba people of Kwara State, Nigeria. The author is interested in the anthropological linguistic aspects of the topic. The research question is: what is the anthropo-linguistic significance of toponyms? Through the interview method of data elicitation, the author gathered information from Igbomina Community kings (Oba), Opinion leaders and custodian of public places, village squares and local museums. The study reveals that place names are very strong and reliable indices or records of people’s historical origin, their genetic relationships, their culture and philosophy. The author then classifies toponyms according to their anthropo-linguistic functions. The following typology of place names, we identified and analyzed: personal, place names, communal, ascriptive, descriptive, honorific, sacred/religious, taboo, etymological and general place names. It was found that toponyms are diachronic, geo-linguistic date marks which could be used in tracking down the history and age of a community, their migration and settlement, their language and dialect variation, the history of language change and language reconstruction, including language documentation.

INTRODUCTION

Toponymy is a geo-linguistic study which deals with the naming system of a community. It is particularly concerned with names given to places such as mountains, rivers, forests, valleys, groves, swamps, towns/villages, parks, rocks, buildings, monuments, worship shrines, etc. The author is therefore interested in the sociolinguistic and anthropological functions of place names in the Yoruba communities. The study covers different typology and classes of names such as personal, place, communal, ascriptive, descriptive, taboo, sacred, honorific, title and theosophic names.

Using interview and observation techniques for data elicitation, the researcher visited community museums, libraries, Oba’s palaces and places of worship. Some groves and shrines which could not be visited were studied by proxy (i.e. through the chief priest). Information gathered was analyzed using sociolinguistic and anthropological parameters.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Toponymy belongs to the field of onomastics, otherwise known as onomasiology, the study of personal names and place names (Olaoye, 2010). There seems to be a dearth of literature on place names in Nigeria, and this view had earlier
been expressed by McIntosh (1952) who observed that “place names require a collection of as much evidence as possible from contemporary oral sources since many names have never been recorded in writing”. Inimbom and Okon’s paper (2002) also lends credence to this view when they assert that place names are less mobile than other words, and hence they are not well documented in the literature.

Names are words by which individuals, places or things are identified and referred to (Chambers 21st Century Dictionary). Names, according to Onuegbu M.C. (2007) are incontrovertible means of identification in any community. Place names, the focus of this paper, are names which have been socially and culturally accepted, as means of identification of a particular place, by the people of that community (Chidozie 2010). Toponyms hold a great fragment of cultural, social and philosophical fossil of the society where they are found. McIntosh (1952) in his records of Scotland place names says that place names perform special functions, and are governed by special rules on the use of such places. Nnadi C. (2007) also says that names in Igbo culture also give a role or function to the place named.

Obahakwe .E. (1981) says that names give a kind of history of its bearers, and perhaps the reasons for giving places and persons such names. Toponyms according to Akpan I, and Okon. M.M (2002) are very significant, as they often present historical relics in a semi-fossilized forms, and they can give information about dialect dispersal, distribution, age and current state of affairs.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Anthropo-Linguistic Analysis**

Toponyms are categorized according to three broad areas: Geo-linguistic, anthropological and semantic classification as follows:

**Classification based on Geo-linguistic usage**

a. Personal place names: there are names given to places which are solely owned and used by a person or group of persons exclusively. Such places can however be inherited upon the death of the owner. Such places, most times, have the names of the owners as a pre-fix or suffix to the name of the place, e.g.

“Oro” is the name of a group of nine towns. It means something standing upright, steady and firm. The nine towns bear names prefixed to “Oro”, such as Okerimi-Oro, Afin-Oro, Ijomu-Oro, Iludun Oro, Agbeola-Oro, Otun-Oro, Idde-Oro, Okeola-Oro, and Ibode-Oro.

**Community place names:** These places are generally used by the community or family lineage or kindred, and are given communal names. These places cannot be owned by individuals; they are community properties. The following are examples of community-owned places or lands.

**Family lineage land.** These places or lands are owned and used by members of a particular family or lineage for farming, hunting, fire-wood felling, lineage meeting ground or places for family worship or cultural ceremonies. These places cannot be inherited, and personal houses cannot be built on them. Names given to such community-owned places cannot be used to name individuals. The following names are restricted to communal properties:

- Ile Ajobo = lineage worship land, such as forest, hill, valley, grove, etc where members of a lineage meet for traditional prayers, divination and cultural ceremonies.

- Igbo Iluwo = forest that is communally weeded for environmental purposes. A lineage or even a whole village comes out enmasse, on the appointed date, on the people’s cultural calendar, to cut the weeds, prune the outgrowth, decorate the
roads and pathways in and around the forest. The event is often carried out with pumps and pageantry; there is eating, drinking, singing and dancing. The elders also come out to encourage and motivate the youth who carry out the jobs. The virtue of cleanliness, healthy living, good hygiene, love for nature, beautiful scenery and horticultural value, are inculcated and promoted.

The concept of “iluwo” communal environmental day activities is also extended to the clearing of roadsides leading to the village, the clearing and expansion of brooks or rivers in the neighbourhood, the sweeping of the market place and the burning of bushes, and burning of waste materials inside incinerators.

-Olofin-a = This is a mountain jointly owned by villages. The communities go there for cultural festivals preceded by burning of the bush and game hunting. People settled around this mountain for security purposes. The Oro indigenes of Irepodun local Government Area of Kwara State, Nigeria, go for spiritual and cultural convocation every year in commemoration of the day they migrated and settled at the heel of this mountain, which they perceive as a protective monument against enemies or invasion. “Olofin-a” really means God (“Olorun” shortened to “Olo”) gave (Fun) us (“Wa”) shortened to (a); God gave this mountain to us as a spiritual place of refuge. This is historical reconstruction, a recourse to linguistic paleontology in a way.

Ile Sango = Sango house. Sango is the goddess of Iron and Fire. The totem used for the identification of Sango is a metamorphic rock, dressed with palm oil.

General Place Names

Places given general place names are owned by the community, and people have the right of usage. These places cannot be given to individuals though people have access to them. The local government administration of the area controls the places by law, bye-law and fiat. Individuals are allowed to construct their own sheds which can easily be dismantled. Such places are the village market, village square, town halls, etc. Special names are given to these community properties

Taboo Place names

Taboo places are cursed land regarded as evil places that people are forbidden to enter. Infact, evil may befall anybody that enters the place without the expressed permission of the custodians of the places. Such places are used for burying people considered to have died mysteriously or those killed by the gods they have offended. These places are called a portal between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The inhabitants are the spirits of dead men and women.

Sacred/Religious Place Names

These sacred places are owned by the gods/goddesses, oracles or deities. These places are left as forests of demons which are accessible only to chief priests or servants of the deities. These chief priests are called “Abore”, that is the propitiators of the gods. They alone can enter into such places to worship the gods through divination and sacrifices.

Classification Based on Anthropological Functions

Some place names are classified according to certain anthropological parameters as follows:

Personal Place Names

- Ile Ogun

Parcel of land willed to a family member, as a form of inheritance from a dead parent. This type of land was initially called “Ile Ebi”, that is family land before the death of the benefactor.
Family Place Names

Family place/land is called Ille Ebi. This type of land is owned collectively by members of the family. Such as piece of land can also be willed to any of the siblings on the death of the father of the house. Ille Ebi is family house. Such a house belongs to all members of the family.

General Place Names

Oja (market) is a general place name, which is often named after the village/town king, and called Oja Oba, i.e. Oba’s (King’s) market. The market could also be named after the name of a village/town, as in Oro market, Ijomu market, Iludun market, etc.

Obada (King’s creation). A market that is created by the king of the village/town is called Obada market, as opposed to markets that are created by the Local Government Council.

Owo de (Money) wealth has come) is a place name given to a market which brings prosperity to the users.

Title Place Names

Names are given to some places in honour of some distinguished persons who have contributed immensely to the growth and development of the village/town. Chieftaincy title names are also used to name some important places that belong either to an individual or to a community, e.g:

Ile Oba = King’s/Chief’s land.

Oko oba = King’s farm

Taboo/sacred Place Name

There are taboo/sacred place names, such as:

-Igbo aiiwo: forest/bush that people are forbidden to enter, because they are inhabited by spirits, demons and deities. These places are regarded as evil forests.

-Ojubo: communal worship place, where deities are offered sacrifices for the atonement of sins and offences against the gods. We have, for instance, Ojubo Osun (Water/river goddess, called goddess of fatality or procreation); Ojubo Sango (worship place for the god of iron and fire); Oju esu (worship place for the god of evil/satan). Some persons in the community, especially individuals who belong to the lineage of the chief priests of the various gods and goddesses, are named after the deities, eg:

-Sangodiji: Sango has become well established, and hence has extended areas of is influence.

-Sango wanwa: Sango has visited me, i.e. Sango has done me well, either by making a woman become pregnant or by giving her a child. Sometimes this name is in honour of Sango who has brought good luck or prosperity to a man or a woman

-Ifaseyi, Ifatokun, Ifatomi, Ifaronbi: all these names are given in honour of “Ifa” the god of divination.

-Ifaseyi = Ifa has done this

-Ifatomi = Ifa is enough for me, i.e. Ifa is my saviour/refuge or my only god.

-Ifagbemi= worshiping Ifa god has benefitted me, or has answered my supplication

-Ifatunbi = Ifa has re-created me, or has re-born me, or has made me prosperous

-Ifagbamila= Ifa has saved me from danger or has brought me salvation, or has made me wealthy.

It is however interesting to note that the advent of Christianity in the Yoruba communities has brought about changes in these names. The word/name Jesu (Jesus)
or Oluwa (God) is now replacing the names of the gods or deities, as in:

Ifaseyi = Jesuseyi or Oluwaseyi = God has done this. Ifagbamila = Jesugbamila or Oluwa gbamila = God has saved me, etc. Sometimes, the name Oluwa/Olorun (God) is shortened to “Olu”, as in “Olu mi de” “Oluwine” (my God has come) or God has come to visit me.

Classification Based on Semantic Categories

Descriptive names, e.g.

- Abeokuta = under the rock. This is a Yoruba town in the South-West of Nigeria, so named because the town is under some rocks or at the hill of some rocky mountains.

- Osogbo = “Oso” (wizard) in “Igbo” (forest, den) i.e. forest wizard. The town called Osogbo in Osun state, Nigeria, is situated in a land or forest that is believed to be inhabited by wizards or evil spirits.

- Oke Onigbin = hill/mountain that has a lot of snails i.e. snail mountain.

- Igbonla = Big forest or thick forest

- Iludun = sweet town. History has it that this town was formerly called “Iluju” that is a town situated in a swampy land. Modernization, particularly industrial conurbation, is responsible for the change of old, pristine names to more modern names.

Ascriptive Place Names

Ascriptive names ascribe certain values either virtues or vices to things, place and persons, e.g:

- Igbo – aaiwo = forbidden forest. This is a forest that is ascribed evil, and hence very dangerous to people.

- Aiyetoro = peaceful world or a land of peace. The name ascribes the virtue of peaceful living to any town with this name.

- lle Oyedun = house where chieftaincy title or chieft dom is sweet or pleasurable. This name is given to a lineage enclave or ward

Honorific Place Names

These are names given to places, and things such as hills, mountains, rivers, forests, café, valleys, buildings, monuments, markets, town halls, village square, etc, named after important or eminent personalities with historical track record of chivalry, unorthodox courage, bravery, sagacity, righteousness, uprightness and philanthropism. The following honorific place names are common in Yoruba land:

Oja Oba = king’s market named after the king “Oba” of the town, in appreciation of the king’s contribution to the welfare of the people.

Ogun State. A name given to a state in honour of the historical contributions of this benevolent river goddess of procreation and fecundity. It is believed by the people of Ogun state that women go to this goddess to seek for pregnancy or child birth.

Oke Maria. Holy Mary hill. This is a hill named after Holy Mary (the mother of Christ). It is a form of local holy pilgrimage centre where Roman Catholics go for prayer and worship. It is a place believed by the Igbomina-Yoruba to have been visited by the Apparition of the Holy Mary. People go there once a year for spiritual deliverance, renewal and physical (health) cleansing.

Oke Padi = Father’s vicarage on the hill. This is a place where the catholic priests live. It has a chaplaincy where Catholics worship and attend Holy Mass. “Padi” is a Yoruba name for Padre (Latin Pater), (English –Father).

St Peter’s Church. A catholic church named after a patron saint.
Community primary and secondary schools are also named after opinion leaders, philanthropists, clergymen, chiefs, kings, popular lineage personage, towns, villages, etc., e.g. Ayaki Secondary Grammar School; Idofin-a Grammar School; St. Andrew’s Grammar School; St. Peter’s Primary School.

ESSENCE OF TOPONYMS

Toponym and Culture

Toponym points to the cultural heritage of a people. Place names show people’s origins, gender distinction, pattern of inheritance, land use act, family history, chieftaincy rules and practices, birth rights, death and burial practices, religious beliefs and observances, cultural marks and taboos and social relationships. Place names are given to people at birth to show their origin or family background lineage, religious cleavage, gender, etc. There are place names given to children based on the circumstances surrounding their birth. For instance we have names deduced from the following topography:

Road: Onasanya – road suits me, or gives me opportunity in life, or road favours me.

Abiona = A child born on the road

Forest: Igbosere = forest used as a playing ground or for entertainment or for games

River: Osuntomi = River Osun is enough for me.

:Osunseyi = River Osun has done this. These names are given to children whose birth was made possible through supplication to the river goddess.

Hill/Mountain: Oke-rimi (Okerimi) = Hill has seen me, and is ready to protect me. This is the name of a village/town on top of a hill or on the foot of the hill. The child is actually called “Omo Olorimi”, that is a child from Okerimi town. Such a name is really panegyric; it is a cognomen or even a praise name.

Grove/thicket: (Igbo Oro) Forest/Shrine for spirits, masquerades, or worship places for different deities. People sojourn in these places for spiritual rejuvenation. Children are named after such groves in appreciation of the deities.

There are names that portray people’s philosophical beliefs. Such names come from the cosmology of Yoruba people who believe in the spirit realm, gods and goddesses, death and re-incarnation, etc.

We have names that are described as theosophic, such as:

Omo oje = Oje’s child, i.e. child of masquerade

Oje biyi = Oje gave birth to this child

Omo epa = child of Epa masquerade

Omo Ayaki = child of Ayaki. Ayaki is the name of the king who is revered because he is worthy of being visited and honoured.

Traditionally the king’s palace is a place that must be visited in order for the community to pay homage to the king, as a sign of respect. Ayaki is therefore a royal place name given to princes and princesses.

Toponyms and Historical (Genetic) Relationship

Toponyms point to historical (genetic) relationships among people. Etymological names portray the history of descent, migration and causes of dislocation and relocation, change in names and cultural practices. People identify their relations through the place names they bear.

Toponyms and Linguistic (Language) Change

Place names point to both diachronic and synchronic language change. These changes are seen in new spellings and tone marks in the new names that came into existence through relexification. These
new names are date marks in the history of the Yoruba race. The following place names are examples of linguistic diachrony:

Oshogbo is the old name

Osogbo is the new name. The letter (h) has been removed from the old name, and replaced by the diacritic mark (.) under the letter (s) in order to retain the pronunciation.

Igbo ora is the old name (swampy forest)

Igbo ola is the new name (Opulent/rich) forest settlement that is rich in economic trees, mineral resources, fishing rivers/brooks, etc.

Oke Ora (Hilly/mountain swamp) is the old name

Oke Ola (Hill of wealth) is the new name

Iluju i.e llu jiu (a town/village inside a dense forest) is the old name.

Iludun (a village full of sweet, good, pleasurable things of life) is the new name.

RESULTS

From the sociolinguistic and anthropological analysis of the data collected through interviews, the following are the major findings:

Toponyms are reliable geo-linguistic records of people’s historical origin, genetic relationships, culture and philosophy.

Toponyms are diachronic and synchronic date marks that could be used in tracking down the age of a community, their migration and settlement history, their language and dialect, including language change, endangerment and documentation.

Toponyms have many functions, such as:

Pedagogic: for teaching aspects of Yoruba Morphology, Semantics and Sociolinguistics.

• Cultural: for showing the culture and ethnography of the people.

• Morality: for teaching the youths the rules of communal living, together with breach of rules and their sanctions.

• Philosophy: for teaching people some basic philosophical tenets and the cosmology of the Yoruba race.

• Religion: some place names reveal the religious beliefs of the people.

• Language: the relationship between people and their languages can be traced through place names

• Land use: toponyms can be used to show the demarcation of lineage land, boundary or the history of boundary adjustment. Toponyms direct people on land ownership rules and sanctions for any breach of the land use act. Place names are governed by special rules on people’s movement in and out of the land, right of ownership, things to be put on the land, and on mode of use. Places are named descriptively to signify ownership.

• History: place names reveal facts about the level and age of civilization of the people.

CONCLUSION

This study has opened another signification area of investigation which if pursued may reveal more information about linguistic and cultural anthropology of the Yoruba race. The author has succeeded in documenting a number of Yoruba place names, though a more comprehensive list is desirable. It is expected that future researcher will go into other areas not covered in this study such as lexicography,
psycholinguistics and phonology of toponymy.

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