

## TOWARDS A RECONSTRUCTION OF YORUBA CULTURE HISTORY: A TOPONYMIC PERSPECTIVE

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**ABSTRACT** This paper discusses the significance of toponymy in historical and archaeological reconstructions especially as it relates to the culture history of Yorubaland. Drawing case studies from two extreme areas of the region; Igbominaland and Badagry coastal area, it is observed that toponymy provides useful information which is relevant as sources for many aspects of the culture history and archaeology of the region. It is concluded that, even though the hints provided by toponymy are of very high reliability, they however need to be corroborated by oral, historical, and archaeological sources.

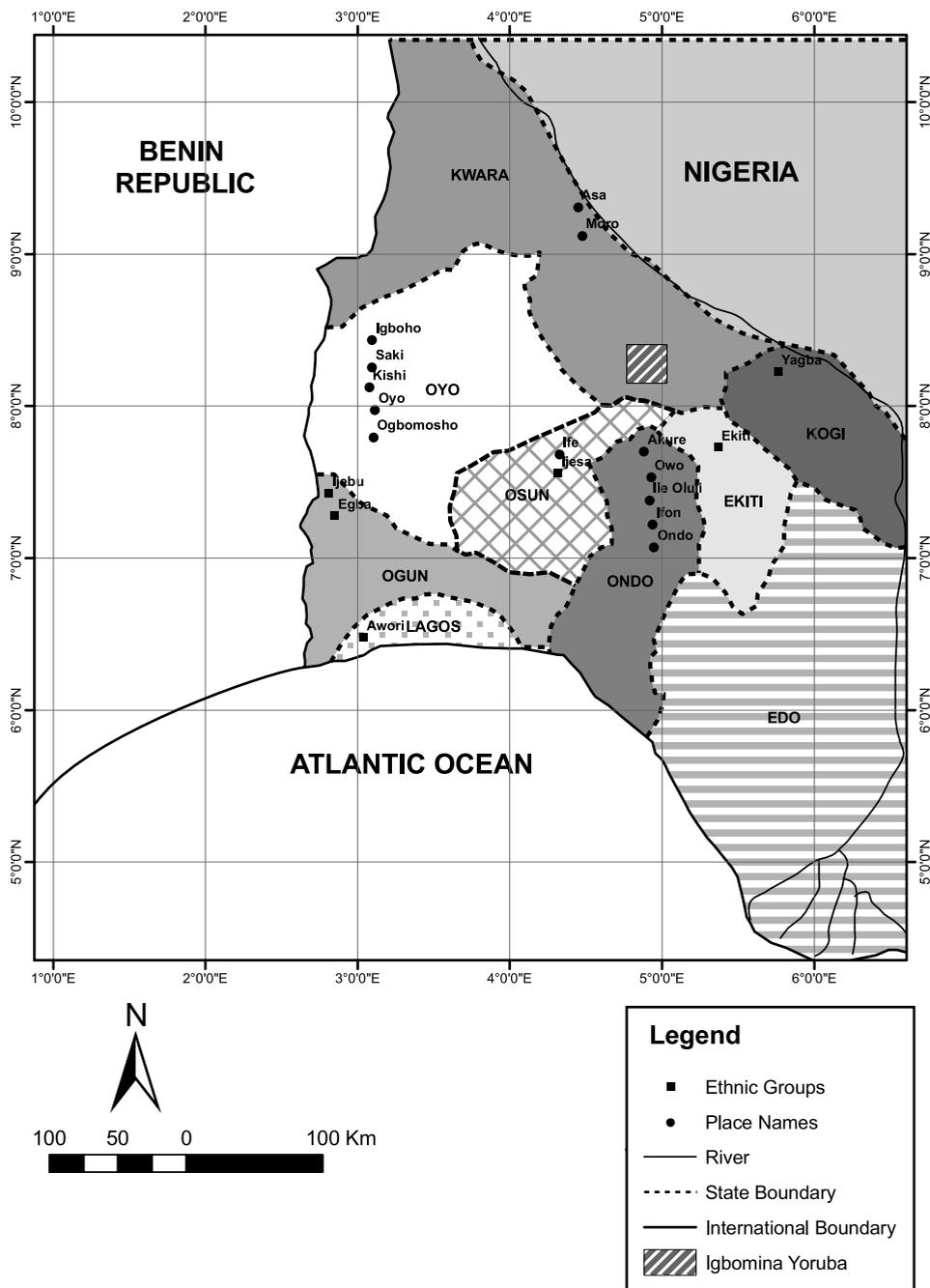
**Key Words:** Toponymy; Igbominaland; Badagry; Yorubaland; Culture History.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is borne out of recent archaeological investigations carried out among the Igbomina Yoruba speaking peoples of Kwara State and the Awori Ogu of the Badagry coastal area of southwestern Nigeria. Whilst the Igbomina are a subgroup of the Yoruba who occupy the north central axis of the Yoruba region, the Awori Ogu occupies the coastal southwestern axis. The other Yoruba sub-groups are: the Ekitis of Kwara State and the Yagba or 'okun' Yoruba to the northeast, the Igboho, Shaki, Kishi, Asa and Moro, among others, to the northwest; and, for example, Akure, Owo, Ile-Oluji and Ifon to the southeast. All these and others including Oyo, Ijebu, Ekiti, Egba, Ife, Ijesa, Ondo and Ogbomoso belong to the Yoruba speaking peoples of southwestern Nigeria (Fig. 1).

The Igbomina speak the Igbomina dialect, variants of which include Igbomina Esa (Oke Ode and environs), Igbomina Ire or Ile Ire (Owa Onire and environs), Igbomina Esisa (Oro Ago and environs), Igbomina Iyangba (Omu-Aran and environs), Igbomina Isin (Isanlu-Isin and environs), Igbomina Erese (Igbaja and environs), Igbomina Ipo (Ajase-Ipo and environs), Eku-Mesan Oro (Oro and environs) and Esie (Esie and environs), (Aleru, 1993).

The Awori are mainly Yoruba speakers, but due to trans-national and inter-ethnic interactions, the majority of the Awori Yoruba of coastal southwestern Nigeria is bilingual, speaking the Yoruba and Ogu languages (previously erroneously referred to as Egun). Such Awori Yoruba peoples are found at Apa, Igbogbele, Iworo, among others. The Ogu are also bilingual, speaking both the Ogu and Yoruba languages and they are found across coastal south western Nigeria, Benin Republic, Togo and Ghana.



**Fig. 1.** Southwestern Nigeria showing Yorubaland.  
 Note: Adapted from Aribidesi, 2001.

From current historical, anthropological and archaeological evidence available, both the entire northern Yorubaland and the Badagry areas occupy very significant positions in the study of the culture history of the Yoruba people. Indeed, we now have significant evidence to suggest that the two areas have been populated at least from the Late Stone Age (Oyelaran, 1991; Aleru, 1998; Alabi, 2000, 2002). With regard to the more recent historical experiences of the Yoruba peoples, some scholars have suggested that the northern part of the region served as the dispersal point for many groups now located to the south consequent upon the fall of the Old Oyo Empire. Some scholars (for example, Obayemi, 1983) have also suggested that many groups now located to the south may have migrated from the area around the Niger-Benue confluence. On the other hand, the Badagry area is important historically because it is one of the first places to have had contact with the outside world. It is, in fact, commonly referred to as the gateway to Christianity in Nigeria, for it was at Badagry town that Christianity was first preached in Nigeria in September 1842. Christmas was celebrated there on December 25 of that year (Wheno Aholu Menu Toyi I—the Akran of Badagry, 1994; Alabi, 1996). The first storied building in Nigeria was also built there in 1845. The town also served as an important terminus during the trans-Saharan trade and the notorious trans-Atlantic slave trade (Ogunremi et al., 1994).

During the conduct of archaeological investigations, which included collection of oral data, archaeological reconnaissance, detailed surveys and excavations in the two areas of Igbominaland and Badagry, the authors observed that toponymy, which is a veritable source of information has, most often than not, been relegated to the background in archaeological investigations, unlike other sources including oral tradition, archival and/or museum records, written records, and ethnography. This may partly be due to the fact that not much work has been done on this subject particularly in our area of study, namely culture history, and hence the seeming apathy towards it among researchers. Toponymy, however, contains valuable data important for cultural, historical and archaeological reconstructions, and hence, the impetus to carry out the study. The outcome of our study forms the focus of this paper.

## TOPONYMY: ITS MEANING AND FUNCTION

Onomastics is a branch of linguistics dealing with the study of names. These may be personal names, place names or object names. A name is a universal mode of identification (that is, for identifying persons and objects). To the African people, however, a name is simply not just a mode of identification; it constitutes an important aspect of the peoples' culture. It is the belief among many African groups that everything God creates has a name. Indeed, as Awolalu (1979: 36) observed, "to the West Africans nothing is said to exist until that thing is named." More importantly Awolalu (1979: 36) posited that place names form part of a peoples' vocabulary, which give valuable information of a particular kind. Among the Yoruba, apart from being a means of identification, names can also be used as a means by which a person or something is remembered. Hence in giving a

name the Yoruba often take into consideration the contemporary circumstances or events. Here are some examples:

- (i) A child born along the road is referred to as Abiona, while the one born when the father is away on a journey is Abidemi.
- (ii) A child born after twins is automatically named Idowu.
- (iii) A child who turns his or her face down at birth is known as Ajayi.
- (iv) A child born in the royal family bears 'Ade' as a prefix to his name and a child that is born in the family with other chieftaincy titles bears 'Oye', and so on as a prefix to their names.
- (v) Aina (female) or Ojo (male) is the name of the child who was born with the umbilical cord tied around the neck.
- (vi) A child whose leg emerged first during birth is named Ige.
- (vii) Oke is the child that was born with the afterbirth sac.
- (viii) Bejide is a child born during a rain.
- (ix) Babatunde is a male child born after the demise of the paternal grandfather.
- (x) Yejide or Iyabode or Yetunde or Yewande is a female child born after the demise of the paternal grandmother.
- (xi) Omolaja is a child born when the father and the mother were not in good terms.
- (xii) Ilori is a child conceived before the mother resumed menstruation.
- (xiii) Okanlawon is a single male or female child amidst only female or male children respectively.

Broadly applied, toponymy encompasses names of inhabited places, countries, natural features such as mountains, rivers, and even the stars and planets, and man-made features, such as roads and buildings. In a more restricted sense it may refer only to towns, villages and other inhabited places. Names of areas, roads, city squares, and streets are often precipitated by incidences, thus providing background information about the political, economic and social relations through which a thorough study of a people's culture and history could be carried out. Awolalu (1979) went on to state that names of persons, towns, cities and villages reveal the true circumstances surrounding their birth, the type of life they will live, their future and character. Names thus convey sentiments or truth, or faith in a deity, belief in and about divinities and super-sensible world, assurance and hopes of man and belief in the hereafter (Awolalu, 1979). Indeed Ekwall (1959: xxix) emphasized that toponymy or place names "form part of a people's vocabulary, which gives valuable information of a particular kind."

In a similar vein Maduibuike (1976) stated that names are an important tool for recovering peoples' social habits and customs, their hopes and aspirations. Hence a man's name is an unquantifiable possession that survives after death. He went further to state that names identified people, organisation, countries, towns, cities and even villages. Hence no man exists without a name, the name lives after he is gone, and through it, the memory of his life is rekindled.

More significant are names of towns, cities and villages, because, according to Momin (1989: 44), such names "help throw light on a number of geographical,

historical, religious and other aspects of the town's life as well as on the various natural resources which attracted men to settle and how the settlement started." To Momin (1989), every name a person and/or town, city or village bears evolved out of the people's needs, desires, hopes and aspirations, and which provide an insight into such people's personal life style.

From the foregoing therefore one can say that names in Africa are thus imbued with valuable information, which can provide background knowledge for historical reconstruction. Indeed studies of names, whether of places or phenomena, have revealed information about the history of settlements, topographical settings of towns, and social, religious and economic activities of the past. As aptly put by Momin (1989), they are like warp and weft of a loom which is interwoven with the cultural heritage of a people. Toponymy as a source for historical reconstructions can thus pave the way for a proper understanding of (i) the topography of settlements as well as historical personages whose contribution to the establishment, development, and stability of such settlements is enormous, (ii) the location and distribution of various interest groups living in the settlements as well as other notable historical areas. It can rightly be stated that, if the toponymy of a town or community is properly explored and processed in terms of analysis and interpretation, all developmental activities of such a town can be succinctly ascertained, thereby enhancing the cultural and historical reconstruction of such a town or community.

It is against this background knowledge that we situate the study of place names in Igbominaland and Badagry coastal area.

## METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The study and data collection were carried out in two communities:

- (i) For the Igbominaland, we studied twenty-five villages belonging to two Igbomina Sub-groups—Isin and Ile Ire Igbomina sub-groups (Fig. 2). These included twelve villages in Isin land and thirteen villages in Ile Ire land.
- (ii) For the Badagry area, we studied thirteen settlements belonging to the Awori Yoruba and the Ogu (Fig. 3).

The choice of these two communities was predicated on information from oral tradition which tends to see these communities as either among the oldest in the study areas or those having important historical antecedents. Information was collected from a broad spectrum of society, including priests of deities, traditional and political leaders, farmers and artisans. The names were classified under various activities (Table 1) and inferences derived from them. In Table (1a) are names of various types of settlements—hilltop and forested settlements. Other names carry political connotations Table (1b). Table (1c) and (1d) includes economic and personal names suggestive of the major occupations as at the time the settlements were supposed to have been founded. Table (1e), (1f) and (1g) are names which carry meanings relating to the historical foundations of some settlements, religion and leisure.

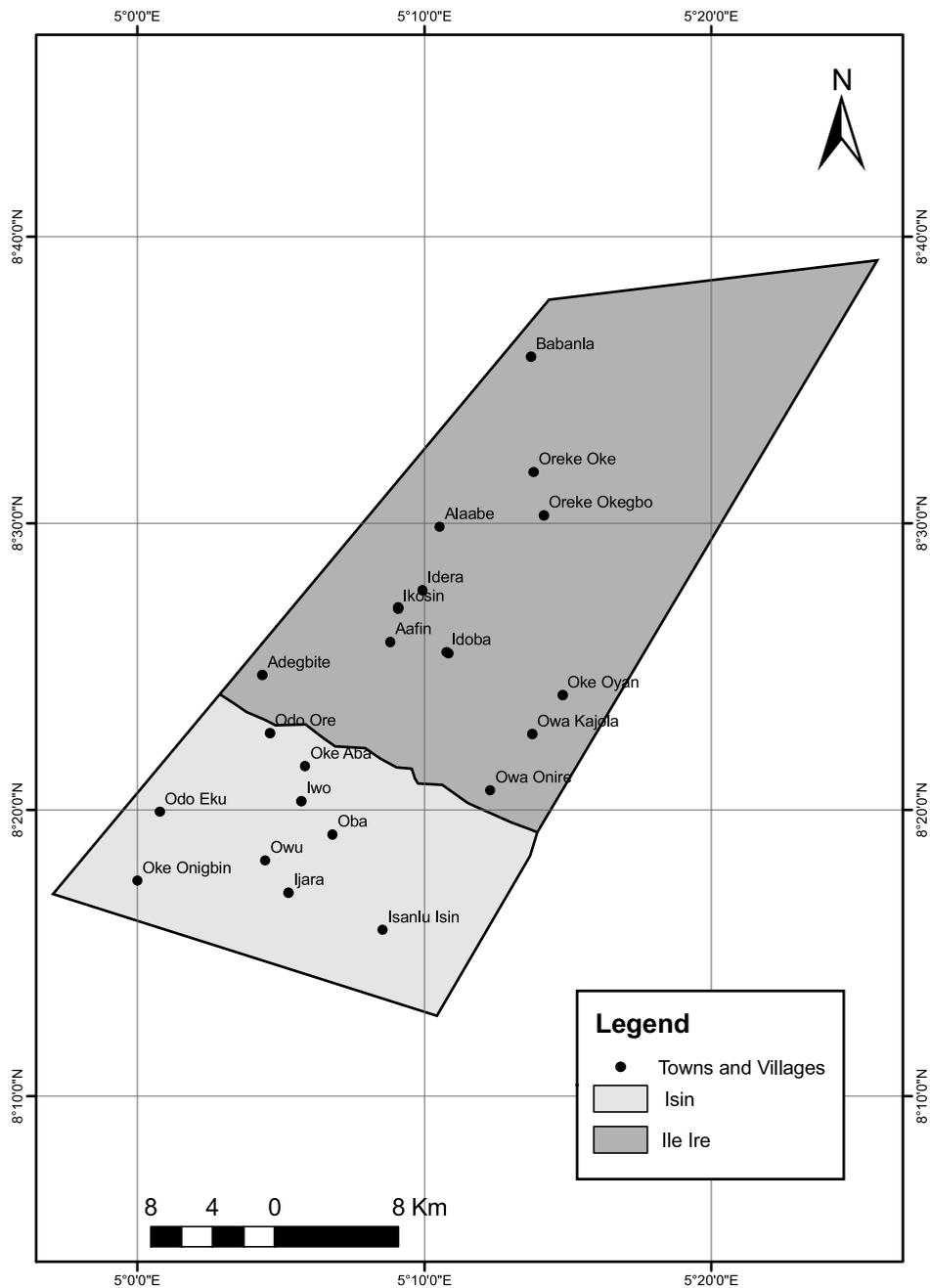


Fig. 2. Igbominaland showing the study area.

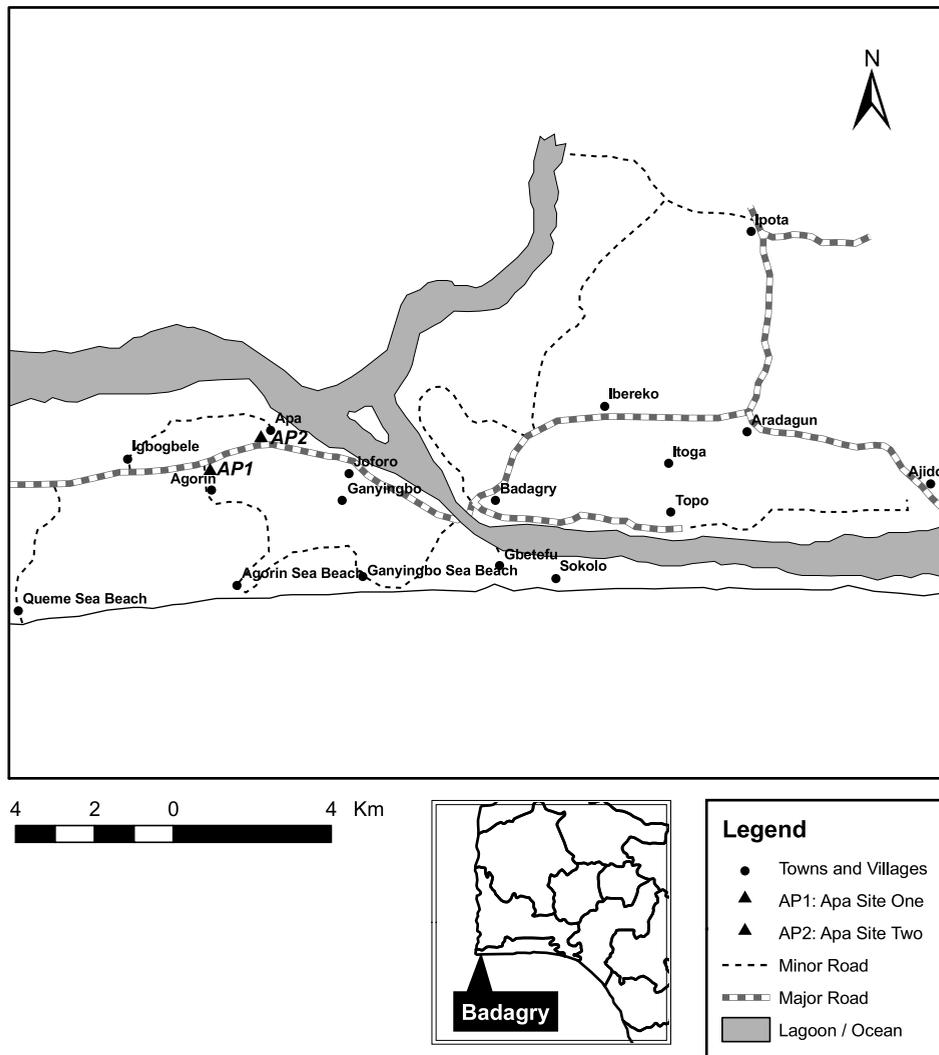


Fig. 3. Parts of the Badagry Coastal area.

RESULTS

From a proper scrutiny of these names the authors noted that names of towns and villages often carry, apart from geographical or topographical connotations, information about settlement location, habitations, and environments.

Names such as *Òkè Onigbiń* “Hill of snails” (Table 1c) tend to provide information valuable for palaeoenvironmental reconstruction. *Òkè Onigbiń* is presently located in a Guinea savanna region. The implication of abundant presence of snails at the time of settlement may thus indicate a wetter climatic condition and more forested vegetation than what obtains today.

Inferences from some of these names also suggest that the earliest settlements

**Table 1.** Classification of names and meanings

Name	Meaning
(a) Geographical:	
Òrìòkè	Hilltop
Owá Orìòkè	Hilltop settlement of Owa
Òkè Oyan	Hilltop settlement of Oyan
Òkegbó	Forested hilltop settlement (Oreke)
Òkè Òréké	Hilltop settlement of Oreke
Ìgbólé	Forest settlement (Isanlu-Isin)
Àjagbó	Forest settlement (Isanlu, Ijara, Iji)
Igbóadé	Forest settlement (Pamo)
Òbagbó	Forest settlement (Oba)
Èran	Ancient pond
Àpá	The other side or the name of a tree
(b) Political:	
Owá	Chieftaincy title
Ààfin	Palace
Ilé Ñlá (Òbà-Isin)	Big ward
Òkè Àgò	Beyond the camp
Ilé léhin	The house behind
Obi Oke Dajo (Òbà-Isin)	Ward where justice is meted out
Ilé Oyè	Chieftaincy house
Ilé Oba	House of the ruler
(c) Economic:	
Igbó Oguń	Forest of iron
Owódé	Wealth has come
Òfàrò	Arrow of Oro (Oro-Ago)
Àlè óró	Bank of Oro (cactus) River
Ejímògún	Forest of iron
Ilé Iré	Land of profit
Owá Oniiré	Come and profit
Odó Ide	Bronze mortar (Idoba)
Òkè Onigbiń	Hill of snails
Okè Agbàròkò	Hill of <i>iroko</i> ( <i>Milicia excelsa</i> Syn. <i>Chlorophora excelsa</i> )
Igbó Eéru	Forest of ash
Ìdí Sawo	Base of <i>awo</i> seeds
Oyálà	One who lends money
Àgbadagrèmè	Agbada's farm
(d) Personal Names:	
Amodemòye (Pamo)	Hunter who reasons
Abógúnriń (Babańlá)	Champion of God of iron
Olókonígèrègèrèoná	Farmer with farm on a slope
Okońihinókolóhuń	Farm everywhere
Odòlárínoko	River within the farm
Okotóniyún	Farm with beads

## (e) Historical:

Ò bá	It landed
Pàmò	He hid or killed the leopard
Babańlá	Ancestor
Obińrin	Woman
Aláábè	We are safe here
Ìdí Òpópó	Beginning of the path
Isin	Escort
Ìkòsìń	Shooting of arrow
Gberèfù (Agbìlefù)	Sprouted out of the ground
Àfikú	Only death could kill us here
Igbogbélé	Bush of permanent settlement

## (f) Religious:

Ojúbo erè	Place of worship of <i>ere</i> (mud) deity (Oba Isin)
Òkúta-Àgbà	Stone of <i>agba</i> believed to have been brought from Ile Ife
Egúngún Eléwe	Female masquerade
Èsù	Deity of the devil
Ògún	God of iron
Òkò	Deity of a hill
Ìta	Deity of a powerful warrior
Sàngotèdó	Founded by the god of thunder
Agbaláta	Place where <i>olota</i> is worshipped

## (g) Leisure/relative peace:

Àjì(dò)	A game like that of <i>ayo</i>
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in Igbominaland would have been located in the lowlands. This is premised on the fact that we cannot seek to explain the frequency of hilltop settlements among the Igbomina or any group of people for that matter as the norm for a people who had no other alternative. Rather as testified by toponymic studies (Table 1c), the mainly agrarian Igbomina society would tend to site their settlements in locations that afforded them ample opportunities for carrying out their vocations. Such opportunities (especially for an agrarian society) tend to be more realised in lowlands where land and reserves for fallow are plentiful. And indeed one of the historical realities of hilltop dwelling is that they occurred only during periods of political emergencies such as armed invasion and raids which of course were seasonal as testified to by oral traditions. We therefore see hilltop dwelling among the Igbomina as a response to political crises, rather than being the norm. This point is corroborated by evidence of forest dwelling (Table 1c), which also as was the case for hilltops, offered protection against recalcitrant neighbours. This picture is further corroborated by evidence from the *Igbogbélé* in the Badagry area. Due to raids from Dahomean soldiers, the people moved to a place called *Àfikú*, meaning “only death could kill us here.” It was from here they then moved to their more forested present site. Also, Rowlands (1972) citing another author, claimed that the Diola of Sierra Leone chose their habitations close to the forest where they could have access to the forest for refuge. Whether on the hill or in the

forest, people would still have tended their farms on the lowland, as opportunities for such are not available on the rocky and rugged terrains characteristic of hill ranges in Igbominaland.

At the Badagry area, the location of settlements was chosen for more defensive and survival reasons than any other. Oral traditions show that most of the settlements, especially the Egun ones, were founded by fleeing refugees during the Dahomey wars of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thus, as noted above, for instance, *Igbogbélé* people first settled by the ocean that they named *Áfikú*, meaning “only death could kill us here.” From there they moved to the present site after the wars, naming the settlement, *Igbogbélé* “bush of permanent settlement.” The people believed that there, they had finally reached a place where neither war nor raid could displace or dislodge them anymore. Furthermore, one version of the meaning of Badagry is *Agbadagiri*, that is, the booming or roaring of the gun. These guns were the British cannons fired in the area to enforce the abolition of the slave trade. Prior to this time, the people were not used to heavy guns. Thus the people named the settlement, *Agbadagiri*, later corrupted to Badagry. Another version of its meaning is that it was derived from *Agbadagreme*. The tradition has it that Badagry was a farm of *Agbada*, the first settler, and with time, it became known as *Agbadagreme*, that is, *Agbada*’s farm.

Settlement names also help to throw light on the circumstances leading to the establishment of settlements (Table 1e). Names such as *Ò bá* “it landed” tend to relate to the time of the beginnings and hence the autochthonous claims of origin of some Igbomina groups including *Òbá-Isin*. Also, the name *Gberèfù Agbìlefù* was derived from *Agbìlefù* “sprouted out of the ground.” According to oral traditions, the origin of the early settlers on the ocean coast is unclear. Thus it is claimed that the people sprouted out of the ground, *Agbìlefù*, and later called *Gberèfù*. This, as the case with *Òbá-Isin*, points to the great antiquity of the area and its probable autochthony. The name *Apá* is said to have been derived of two origins: the first is that when the people reached the old site a few meters from the present one, they realised how far away they were from the Badagry creek, and said, “let us move over to the other side (*e je ka sun si apa oun*).” The second is that when they reached the site, they settled under a big tree known as *apa*, giving rise to the name *Apá*. Whichever is the case, both point to the circumstances leading to the origin of its settlement. The name, *Babañlá* “big father,” was given to the first settler of this settlement because of the security he provided for the people. The name, *Alàábé*, derived from an Ekiti expression *Ala ni be* “we are safe here” suggests a period of political crises referred to in oral tradition with people seeking safety and refuge here and there. The same went for *Igbogbélé*, mentioned earlier. The name, *Alàábé*, corroborates the testimonies of oral tradition and written accounts with regard to population displacements in Yorubaland, as some of the settlers may have been people from Ekitiland as indicated by the Ekiti expression. More importantly, names tend to corroborate oral traditional accounts of hilltop and some forest settlements in Igbominaland. These were founded during a period or periods of political turbulence and insecurity due mostly to the Nupe military incursions into Igbominaland as well as the Yoruba civil wars. They may indeed refer to the coming immigrants who usurped

political powers from the indigenous peoples. From available sources these turbulent episodes can be dated to the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, respectively (Law, 1977).

Other names point to the economic activities engaged in by people in the past (Table 1c and 1d). Such activities include farming, hunting, iron working, weaving and dyeing and possibly bronze casting and bead making. All of these are mostly reflected in names (including nicknames and/or cognomen) given to early rulers (Table 1d). It is also noted that iron working would more than other industries appear to be reflected in the toponymy. Indeed there is evidence for iron working in more than two-thirds of the Igbomina settlements studied. On the basis of this information and in conjunction with oral tradition, ethnography and archaeological reconnaissance surveys (Aleru, 1993), we note that most of the iron working sites are located on hill slopes or on top of low-lying hills, although there is substantial evidence of iron working in the lowlands as well. The evidence on the hill slopes is much better preserved than those on the lowlands. In a few locations, evidence of bronze casting was indicated. At Idoba, the name *Odó Ide* “bronze mortar,” an important bronze casting apparatus, suggests an ancient bronze casting industry.

Bead making is also implied by the personal names of one of the early rulers at Oke Aba, i.e. *Okotóniyín*, (Table 1d). This name refers to the owner of a farm where beads were found. Some other communities are well noted for weaving and dyeing industries. This is well documented at Oba-Isin in the presence of huge ash mounds and a host of shallow pits surrounding the mounds. The praise incantation for the name of the Oloba (King of Oba) below testifies to the important role weaving and dyeing industries played in the lives of Oba people:

Oloba Abala  
 A b’eti aso gbe bi awo  
 A bi sokoto gb’ede bi enia  
 A bi sokoto k’osu mefa nile alaro  
 Alaro ko gbodo re’so  
 Sokoto ko gbodo sonu.

Translated, it reads:

King of Oba  
 The owner of the dye  
 The edge of his cloth is as stiff as leather  
 His trouser can speak like a human being  
 His trouser was in the dyer’s place for six months.  
 The dyer must not dye clothes, and the king’s  
 Trouser must not be lost.

Names suggestive of leisure and probably periods of relative safety exist in the study areas (Table 1g). For instance, *Àjídò*, one of the Ogu settlements, is said to have been derived from *Àjì*, a game similar to the Yoruba *Ayo*. According to traditions, when the people migrated to the site, they played the game then

known as *Àjì*, and it was from this that the name *Àjìdò* was derived (cf. Lawal, 1994). This is suggestive of leisure and relative peace, as people cannot play games during periods of upheavals and unrest.

Ancient co-operative or credit institutions are also known to have existed among the people of the study areas. The most popular is the *Oyálá* (Table 1c) where a person lent out money to borrowers. The money so borrowed could be repaid either in cash or in kind. Payment in kind included labour on the creditor's farm to the tune of the amount borrowed. This labour could either be that of the borrower himself or another person, usually a relative such as a son or daughter, or a slave, nominated by the borrower.

Ancient marketing centres (for example, *Igbó Ejimògún* in Ikosin) are known to have served several villages in the distant past. Not only did they serve as business transaction centres, but the locations for political rallies and congresses. Hence *Igbó Ejimògún* was both a market centre for Ile Ire towns and villages as well as a point where political matters affecting the communities were discussed and strategies adopted. This might have included war or governance strategies.

Names suggestive of religious places of worship (Table 1f) and religious practices are also supportive of claims of autochthony of origin. For example, *Ojúbo eré* in Oba is indicative of the place where the founder of the settlement was believed to have emerged, and hence the spot is still venerated today. In other situations such names tend to suggest the origins of deities. For instance, *Òkúta-Àgbà* "stone of Àgbà—i.e. the big stone" in Isanlu-Isin venerated every year all over Isinland with pomp and pageantry is believed to have been brought there from Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yorubas. This also connotes a link (whether political or spiritual) with Ile-Ife. The *Egúngún eléwe* (Table 1f), a form of ancestral worship only common among the Igbomina Yoruba is believed to have been a female masquerade, although now the participants are mainly men. This may have derived from the people's belief that it was a peaceful and enjoyable masquerade unlike some other masculine masquerades where participants chased the people about with sticks. It is believed that men usurped the masquerade from women. This could be seen in a gender role concept among the Igbomina, which assigns to women activities that are less rigorous and full of enjoyment.

Through the worship of *Èsù* (Table 1f), the people bring to bear their understanding of the cosmos. *Èsù* is the deity of the devil believed to be once second in command to God. According to the people's belief (reflected in his praise name), *Èsù* is the controller of man's affairs on earth, an authority given to him by God. He is believed to be capable of effecting evil and good; hence he is worshipped annually to appease him.

Hill worship is also popular among the people (Table 1f). Some historical personages are deified and worshipped because of the people's belief in their powers, i.e. *Ìta* (Table 1f).

## CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is evident that toponymic studies do indeed provide

valuable data from which the various aspects of a people's culture history can be reconstructed. They can also be used to provide a relatively chronological ordering of events. It is important to note, however, that most of the information provided is in the nature of hints. It would therefore require complementary historical data (including oral tradition, ethnographic and archaeological information) to corroborate, or otherwise, the hints contained in these names before they could be accepted to indicate authentic historical facts. Lastly, we hereby posit that the use of toponymy as a source of information for academic or any other research for that matter, especially as it relates to our study area of culture history, is not restricted to the discipline of archaeology alone. Scholars and researchers in other disciplines including agriculture, medicine (human and animal), botany, chemistry and zoology, stand to benefit from a proper study of names.

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