

Toponyms: Neglected wallflower or pot of plenty

Ronald P. Schaefer*

Abstract. Threats of imminent extinction motivate language documentation; they also allow place name neglect. This paper examines settlement names within Africa’s Edoid group. Village nomenclature converges on a restricted range of conventions; however, interethnic contact has led to non-Edoid toponyms for three villages. Two derive from the trade language Hausa. A third links to Igbo blacksmiths supporting rainforest penetration with iron tools, as is evident in cognate vocabulary. Iron use most naturally follows a pastoral era outside the rainforest, which number prefixes on herd-animal nouns support. Toponymic studies thus remind us of the benefit accrued when documentation looks beyond “the single ancestral code.”

Keywords. toponyms; place names; Edoid, West Africa

1. Introduction. The threat of imminent extinction has motivated language documentation studies but also allowed for neglect of place names. Indeed, recent linguistic study has emphasized toponyms as fixed in space (Sims Williams 2006) and relics from deep historical time. Too easily they become, like other highly specialized terms, neglected wallflowers of fieldwork (Evans 2010). The stability and persistence of place names are amply illustrated for many areas of the world (Burenhult and Levinson 2008, Senft 200, Nash 2013). But these recent and stimulating findings have tended to ignore sub-Saharan Africa, especially its many languages (Heine and Nurse 2000) and vigorous multilingualism (Vigouroux and Mufwene 2008). A case in point concerns the Benin Kingdom of precolonial West Africa’s forest zone (Ryder 1969, Connah 1975) and its Edoid languages.

The Edoid languages are spoken in south-central Nigeria. From them emerged the Benin Kingdom of pre-colonial West Africa (Bradbury 1957, 1973). Our understanding of this kingdom derives in large measure from oral history (Egharevba 1934), the highly stylized bronze casting and ivory carving of the 14th through 17th centuries (Crowder and Abdullahi 1979, Ben Amos 1980) and archaeological investigation of its capital, Benin City, where earthen embankments and palace grounds have been uncovered (Connah 1975, Darling 1998). These assessments point to the Kingdom’s patrilineal, hereditary kingship and centralized palace government (Ogbomo 1997). Their nearest neighbors are the Yoruba to the west and the Igbo to the east.

For this paper I investigate village names within one dialect cluster of North Central Edoid (Elugbe 1989). This cluster consists of Emai-Ora-Iuleha, shown in bold in the following figure.

* Data incorporated in this paper derive from research sponsored by the National Science Foundation, (BNS #9011338 and SBR #9409552), the Department of State (College and University Affiliations Program grant ASJY 1333), the National Endowment for the Humanities (PD-50004-06) and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Each afforded collaboration with Professor Francis Egbokhare of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. We thank these agencies for their support, while not extending to them any responsibility for data interpretation. Author: Ronald P. Schaefer, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (rschae@siue.edu).

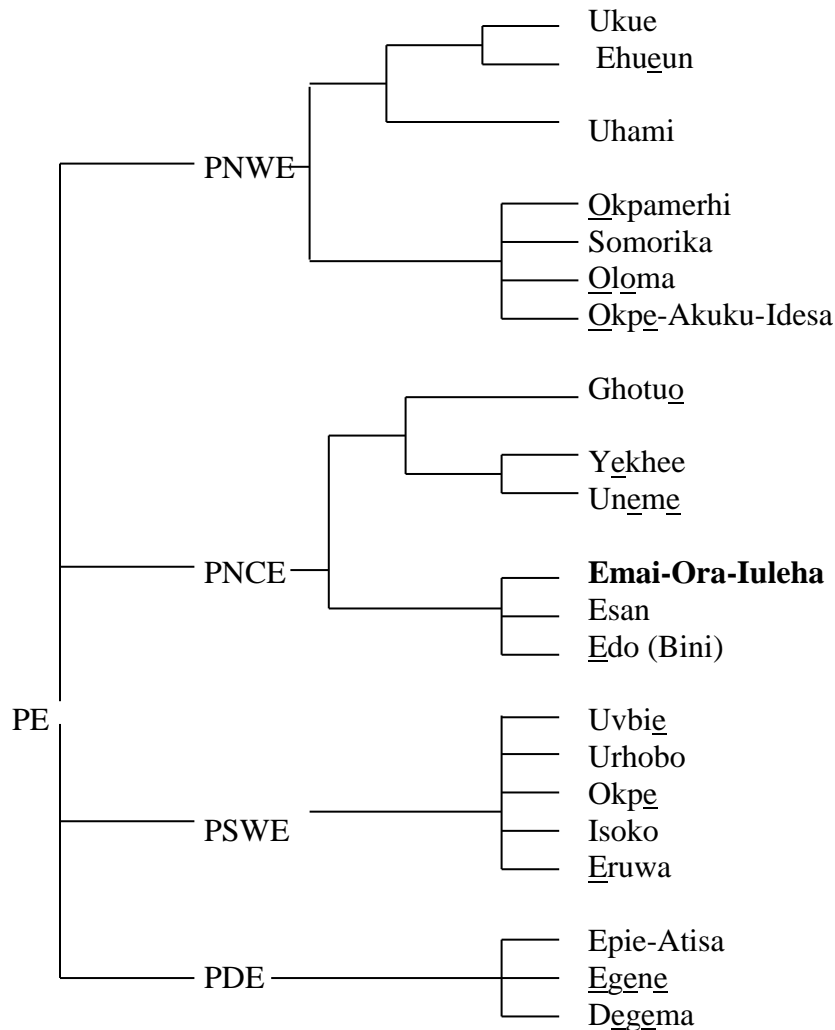


Figure 1. Edoid family tree according to Elugbe (1989), where PE=Proto Edoid, PDE=Proto Delta Edoid, PSWE=Proto Southwestern Edoid, PNCE=Proto Northcentral Edoid and PNWE=Proto Northwestern Edoid.

The three clan cluster consisting of Emai-Ora-Iuleha (EOI) occupies some twenty two villages: 10 Emai, 6 Ora and 6 Iuleha. The names for these villages are indicated below under their respective clan heading. Overall, village nomenclature converges on a restricted range of naming conventions. However, interethnic contact in this endangerment hotspot (Romaine 1973, Nettle and Romaine 2000) has led to some non-Edoid toponyms. It is these outlier village names that invite us to revisit their fit.

EMAI

- Afuze*
- Eteye*
- Evbiame*
- Ogute*
- Ojavun*
- Okpokhunmi*
- Ovbionwu*
- Uahunmi*
- Evbiame-New-Site*
- Ojavun-New-Site*

ORA

- Evbiobe / Sabongida-Ora*
- Eme*
- Ohonmora*
- Oke*
- Ovbiokhuani*
- Oke-New-Site*

IULEHA

- Auma / Uzebba*
- Arokpa*
- Avbiosi*
- Eruele*
- Okpoje*
- Ubezi*

Before proceeding further, we should take note of where in Nigeria these three Edoid clans are located. In the south-central region, they occupy geographic areas in the transition zone where rain forest and savanna intermix.

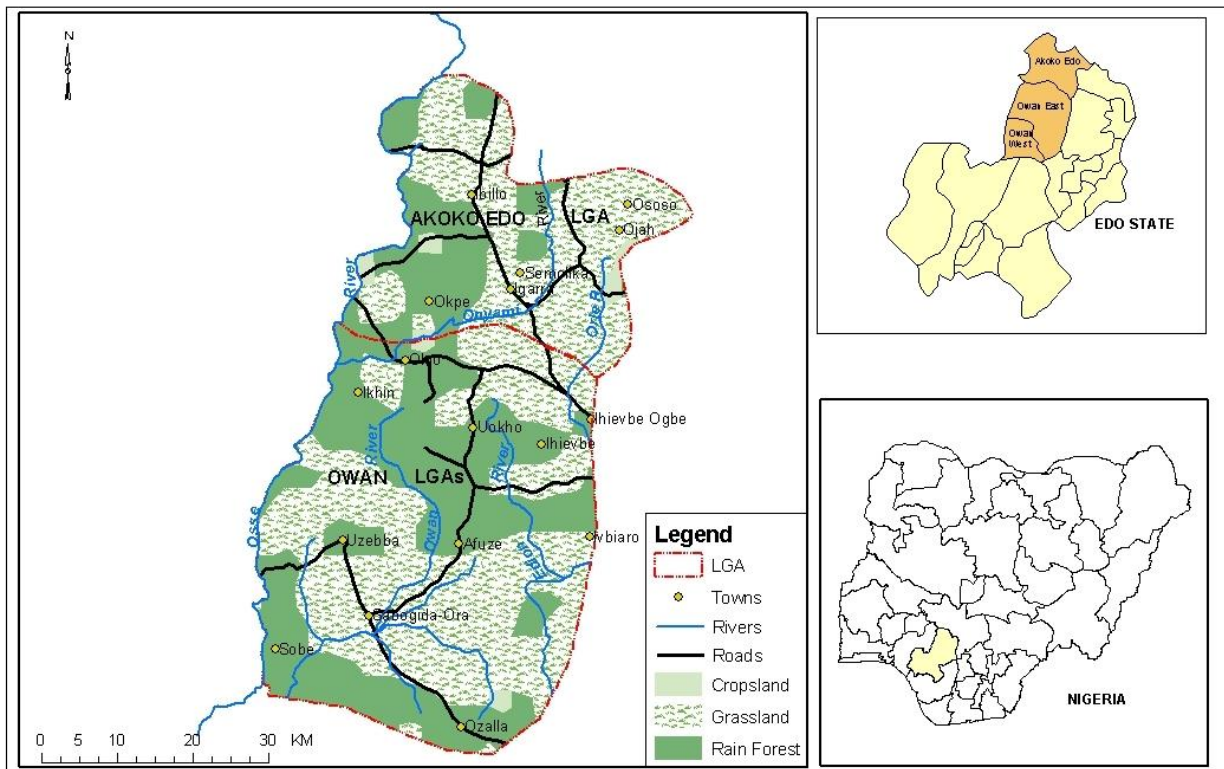


Figure 2. Map of EOI key administrative villages (Afuze, Sabongida-Ora and Uzebba) in their transition zone context of grassland and rainforest vegetation.

2. Analysis of village names

Village names across EOI clans exploit five morpho-semantic design principles. Their constituents (often phonologically diminished) reflect five source classes:

kin terms	bilingual + binomial	other
landscape terms	personal name	

Class one names are morphologically anchored to kin-related terms:

<i>afen</i> -/a- ‘family’	<i>evbi/ivbi/avbi/ovbi</i> - ‘offspring of’
<i>eye</i> ‘grandchild’	<i>era</i> ‘father’
<i>oje</i> ‘chief’	
Emai: <i>Afuze</i> <i>Evbiame</i> <i>Ovbionwu</i> <i>Ojavun</i> <i>Eteye</i>	
Ora: <i>Evbiobe</i>	<i>Ovbiokhuani</i>
Iuleha: <i>Auma</i> <i>Avbiosi</i> <i>Eruele</i> <i>Okpoje</i> .	

Class two names are morphologically anchored to landscape / spatial terms:

<i>okhunmi</i> ‘sky, top, elevated, up ahead’	<i>uanhan</i> ‘opening, clearing’
<i>ohunmi</i> ‘sky, top, elevated, up ahead’	<i>oke</i> ‘hill, cliff’
Emai: <i>Okpokhunmi</i>	
Ora: <i>Ohonmora</i>	<i>Oke</i>
Iuleha: <i>Uahunmi</i>	

Class three names are morphologically bilingual and binomial, i.e. split-names. Each employs an Edoid name in construction with English phrase *New-Site*.

Emai: <i>Evbiame-New-Site</i> <i>Ojavun-New-Site</i>
Ora: <i>Oke-New-Site</i>

Class four names are morphologically monomorphemic, person’s name, bi-morphemic with name and modifier, or are unknown.

Ora: <i>Eme</i>
Iuleha: <i>Arokpa</i> <i>Ubezi</i>

Class five (“other”) names are of non-indigenous origin.

<i>Uzebba</i>	<i>Sabongida</i>	<i>Ogute</i>
---------------	------------------	--------------

Two of these reflect a double-naming strategy assigned to senior villages.

Uzebba is a non-Edoid name assigned to Iuleha’s *Auma*.

Sabongida-Ora is non-Edoid linked to Ora’s *Evbiobe*.

The source for these names is Hausa, spoken north of the EOI savanna/rainforest transition zone and the Niger-Benue confluence. Hausa has been employed extensively in commercial trade reaching EOI during at least the 19th century (Bradbury 1957). Although these names reflect relatively recent contact, they have super ceded the aboriginal ones in utility, as roadway signposts attest.

A third “other” name is Emai’s *Ogute*. Its source is Igbo, which, farther east toward the Niger River, abuts Edoid but not EOI. As a family name, *Ogute* is tied by elders to Igbo

blacksmiths. Since cognates for iron artifacts also occur, e.g. *ópìà* ‘cutlass,’ it is likely that for centuries Igbo smiths provided tools necessary for maize and yam farming and, indeed, rainforest penetration.

A more complete analysis of EOI village names can be found in Appendix 1.

3. Prehistory proposals. Analysis of the morpho-semantic properties of EOI village names suggests at least a three-stage history of contact.

I	EOI ~ Igbo	iron tools for agriculture, rainforest penetration
II	EOI ~ Hausa	trade goods
III	EOI ~ English	colonial administration

Additional linguistic evidence amplifies these stages along two dimensions. Nominal inflection suggests an even earlier stage of prehistory for EOI and loan words bolster the nature of contact with Igbo, a non-Edoid neighbor.

I	EOI	predominantly pastoral lifestyle in savana zone
II	EOI	migration to current rainforest area
III	EOI ~ Igbo	adapt agricultural lifestyle using iron tools
IV	EOI ~ Hausa	expanded trade goods from Northern Nigeria
V	EOI ~ English	colonial administration

4. Coding of grammatical number. Coding of grammatical number is asymmetric relative to economic lifestyle, as suggested by data from Emai. There are 11 remnant noun classes with contrasting singular/ plural nominal prefixes. Few if any lexemes strongly associated with agriculture exhibit a number prefix. Neither staples of the Emai diet nor tools for farming show prefixes.

FARMING

émà ‘yam’
ókà ‘maize’
èhúé ‘boiled yam’
ópìà ‘cutlass’
ègúé ‘hoe’
àhò ‘large bladed hoe’

HERDING

émèlá, ímèlá ‘cow’
óghòóghò, íghòóghò ‘female sheep’
éwè, éwè ‘goat’
áwà, éwà ‘dog’
óhìà, éhìà ‘hoof’
óbò, ábò ‘foreleg / hand’

Inflectional coding of grammatical number favors nominals articulating a pastoral and herding past incompatible with forest zone existence (Smith 1992).

5. Lexical evidence of contact. Shared lexical items further strengthen the nature of contact in EOI prehistory. Lexemes shared with Igbo populations have a distinct semantic character: iron tools, farming, animals, rainforest illness and social order.

	Emai	Igbo
Iron Tools:	<i>ópìà</i> ‘cutlass’ <i>àgógó</i> ‘gong’ <i>àgádà</i> ‘sword’ <i>àbà</i> ‘u-shaped iron pin’ <i>ègúé</i> ‘hoe’	<i>ópíá</i> ‘cutlass’ <i>ágógó</i> ‘gong’ <i>ágádá</i> ‘sword’ <i>ábá</i> ‘u-shaped iron pin’ <i>égú</i> ‘hoe’
Farming:	<i>úgbó</i> ‘virgin forest’ <i>ókà</i> ‘maize’	<i>úgbó</i> ‘farm’ <i>ókà</i> ‘maize’

Animals:	<i>òké</i> ‘male, bull’ <i>òlógbò</i> ‘domesticated cat’	<i>óké</i> ‘male, bull’ <i>ólógbó</i> ‘domesticated cat’
Illness:	<i>ìbà</i> ‘malaria’ <i>ófì</i> ‘yaws disease’	<i>ìbà</i> ‘malaria’ <i>ófì</i> ‘yaws disease’
Kin / Social:	<i>ébò</i> ‘family relations’ <i>éghó</i> ‘money’	<i>ébó</i> ‘clan, kindred’ <i>éghó</i> ‘money’

6. Conclusion. I conclude that EOI village names combine with other linguistic data (shared vocabulary and alternating grammatical number prefixes) to favor a five-stage prehistory for EOI and Edoid: herders outside the rainforest followed by rainforest penetration as farmers with iron tools and then British colonial occupation. Most importantly, though, EOI toponymic studies not only remove a wallflower but also identify the benefit of undertaking documentation beyond “the single ancestral code” (Childs, Good and Mitchell 2014).

References

- Ben-Amos, Paula. 1980. *The art of Benin*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Bradbury, Ray. 1957. *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-speaking peoples of south-western Nigeria*. London: International African Institute.
- Burenhult, Niclas & Steven Levinson. 2008. Language and landscape: A cross-linguistic perspective. *Language Sciences* 30. 135-150.
- Childs, Tucker, Jeff Good & Alice Mitchell. 2014. Beyond the ancestral code: Towards a model for sociolinguistic language documentation. *Language Documentation and Conservation* 8. 168-191.
- Connah, Graham. 1975. *The archaeology of Benin: Excavations and other researches in and around Benin City, Nigeria*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crowder, Michael & Guda Abdullahi. 1979. *Nigeria: An introduction to its history*. London: Longman.
- Darling, Patrick. 1998. A legacy of earth - ancient Benin and Ishan, Southern Nigeria. In Kit Wesler (ed.), *Historical archaeology in Nigeria*. 143-198. Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Egharevba, Jacob. 1968. *A short history of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Elugbe, Ben. 1989. *Comparative Edoid: Phonology and lexicon*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Evans, Nicholas. 2010. *Dying words: Endangered languages and what they have to tell us*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Heine, Bernd & Derek Nurse. (eds.) 2000. *African languages: An introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hough, Carole. 2016. Settlement names. In Carole Hough (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of names and naming*. 87-103. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nash, Joshua. 2013. *Insular toponymies*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Nettle, Daniel & Suzanne Romaine. 2000. *Vanishing voices: The extinction of the world’s languages*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ogbomo, Onaiwu. 1997. *When men and women mattered*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.
- Ryder, Allan. 1969. *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897*. London: Longman.
- Romaine, Suzanne. 1993. Review of Endangered Languages. *Linguistics* 31 (2). 401-405.

- Senft, Gunter. 2008. Landscape terms and place names in the Trobriand - the Kaile'una subset. *Language Sciences* 30. 340-361.
- Sims Williams, Patrick. 2006. *Ancient Celtic place names in Europe and Asia Minor*. Oxford: Publications of the Philological Society.
- Smith, Andrew B. 1992. *Pastoralism in Africa: Origins and development ecology*. London: Hurst and Company.
- Vigouroux, Cécile B. & Salikoko Mufwene. (eds.) 2008. *Globalization and language vitality: Perspectives from Africa*. New York: Continuum.
- Widlok, Thomas. 2008. Landscape unbounded: Space, place and orientation in ≠Akhoe Hai//om and beyond. *Language Sciences* 30. 362-380.
- Williamson, Kay & Roger Blench. 2000. 'Niger Congo'. In Bernd Heine & Derek Nurse (eds.), *African languages: An introduction*. 11-42. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Yai, Olabiyi. 1984. African ethnonyms and toponyms: Reflections on decolonialization. In *African ethnonyms and toponyms*. 39-50. Paris: UNESCO.

APPENDIX 1: Emai-Ora-Iuleha village name derivations

Emai

Afuze	<i>áfè̀n-úzá'</i> family-axe 'family of the axe'	Ojavun	<i>ójè-àvùn</i> chief-grassland 'chief of grassland'
Eteye	<i>é-tèè-èyè</i> (Bini) pref-adorn-grandchild 'ones who adorn grandchild'	Okpokhunmi	<i>ó-kpè̀n-òkhùnmi</i> prefix-be.next.to-sky/top 'elevated place, high ground'
Evbiame	<i>évbì-àmè̀</i> offspring-water 'offspring of water' (nymphs)	Ovbionwu	<i>óvbì-ònwú</i> offspring-Onwu 'offspring of onwu'
Uahunmi	<i>ùànhán-úmèé</i> (<i>úmèé > ùmi</i>) opening-camwood 'opening/ clearing for camwood'		
Evbiame-New Site		Ojavun-New Site	
Ogute	<i>ógùté</i> (Igbo family name)		

Ora

Eme	<i>èmè</i> Eme 'Eme' (name)
Ohonmora	<i>òhònmi-óra</i> sky/top-ora 'top, elevated area of Ora'
Oke	<i>òkè</i> cliff/hill 'Oke'
Evbiobe	<i>évbì-óbè</i> offspring-adventurous.one 'offspring of adventurous/mischievous one'
Ovbiokhuani	<i>óvbì-ókhùàni</i> offspring-trap.setter 'offspring of trap setter'

Oke-New-Site *òkè*
Sabongida-Ora *Sabongida* (Hausa)

Iuleha

Arokpa *árè òkpá*
Are one
'Are one' (name)

Avbiosi *ávbi-ósì*
offspring-osi
'offspring of Osi'

Eruele *érá-úèlè*
father-Uele
'father of Uele'

Okpuje *ó-kpèn-òjè*
pref-be.next.to-chief
'place next to chief'

Ubezi *ùbézì*
Ubezi
'Ubezi' (name)

Auma *á-úmà*
family-uma
'family of Uma'

Uzebba *Uzebba* (Hausa)