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THE TOPONYMS AND THEIR MEANINGS AMONG THE BASA'A PEOPLE: TOWARDS A PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL AND ANCESTRAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

The meaning of toponyms among the Basa'a people helps demystify toponymy and as a result, highlights its interest and cultural value. As a science, toponymy is not an exclusivity observed only amidst African peoples even less among the Basa'a. Therefore, every place has its own name that makes the difference with other places around the world. Among the Basa'a people, toponymy give praises to the people as well as social events, ferocious or mild animals and so on. Here, the name of a village for example is more often than of one common ancestor, explaining the filiation relationship. The choice and attribution of toponyms stem from a school of wisdom that takes into account durability. From generation to generation, humans are supposed to safeguard these toponyms, understand their meaning as well as their socio-historical context of their origin. However, people from other communities failed in their duty when they got in contact with foreign languages and cultures and could no longer transmit and value the ancestral culture.

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of this article is to demystify mythical issues. Toponyms have a deep and particular meaning among the Basa'a people, which a foreigner cannot easily understand without explanation as depicted by the Baoulé proverb "a foreigner has big eyes but he can only see what he knows". As observed by Mbombok (the patriarch) Bata Mbem, for one to have an exact meaning of a toponym, "you first have to locate the site or the place, and then find out whose name was attributed to the site. Finally, the origin of that name tells more about its story. That will enable one to understand why and how the name has been attributed to the site". However, it must be admitted that breaking through this myth is a long-term work. Thus, if the research is limited to the contribution of a certain number of informants selected on the bases of their proximity to the site or their age, one might have fake or simply random answers since the clan, even less; all other people bordering the site far from know the origin of Place names. Meaning that the circumstances of attribution of a name to a place are far from being known by everyone and. For that, several reasons are taken into account to consolidate our questioning.

- Is everyone willing to know, why, and how a baptismal name has been given to a specific place with respect to another?
- Are the sources to which we are entrusted, entitled to give us the exact answer that would satisfy our quest?
- By trusting several informants at once for more confidence and possibility of getting more information, are

- we not taking a risk of falling into an inexplicable confusion that would result into nothing specific?
- Will all the informers contacted be open and honest to share with us just what they know and avoid going beyond? Will the zeal and the refusal of confining to their own level of knowledge not drive some informants to invent stories?
- Who should we really trust to have the right information? Is it a question of age, family background, gender, social rank, native or non-native, closeness or remoteness to the site in question, etc.?

Therefore, the large number of questions here creates uncertainty and disarray among researchers who are willing to enlighten the opinion on that issue.

The History of Toponymy Among the Basa'a People: Locatable somewhere around the cave of "Ngog Lituba", according to some witnesses, the Basa'a are indigenous Bantu peoples in Cameroon and for many others, the Basa'a are originated from Egypt and their migratory movements led them land at their current site for several centuries. They are composed of several lineages. Their dislocation was due not only to the migratory movements which are at the origin of the scattering of certain great lineages. That is why people could find other small groups in West Africa. But this scattering is also caused by the migrations and colonization. Toponyms are cultural symbols which include the thought speech, spoken word and praise names of the history of the peoples concerned. According to Theodore Mayi Matip "the speech thought before being addressed is already operating and constitutes

a great wonder." Mayi Matip further posits that one always finds several types of speech, the most important being thoughtful, sound spoken declaration or the myth. For many other bearers of ancestral wisdom in the Basa'a community, toponymy and naming of children (new-borns) have almost the same process that follows the three steps which (Mbombog) Kend Djon and François Nkon classify as the thought speech: this is comparable to the meditation that parents undertake to name his future child; firstly, they took into account his sex especially before the time of the popularization of medical imaging (ultrasound) which, nowadays, defines the sex of the child before birth. This whole sentence does not make sense, in addition it is incomplete. Secondly, the spoken or uttered word is the toponym attributed and known by all. It is the subject of distinction of that relief's feature compared to other similar or not and, lastly, the thoughtful speech, which is the context of attribution and the meaning of the concerned place name. These two elements are still not accessible to all, especially since we generally refer to the literal translation of the place name. This is the case of *Ngog-Lituba* "which literally means "pierced pebble" but considering the size of that rock, it cannot be called a pebble. Thus, this rock is still known by the name: the "mythical cave" regarding anything that constitutes its hidden face and gives rise to the beliefs of the Basa'a people who consider that place to be their final migratory stop.

Overview of Toponyms meaning in the basa'a culture: Before attempting to explain what are the toponyms and the totemic name of the Basa'a, it is convenient to situate the Basa'a people in their space and history. The Basa'a people who form a unique tribe with a multitude of clans are part of the Bantu tradition and are located in the equatorial forest of Central Africa. The Basa'a are found in the Littoral and Centre regions of Cameroon and precisely in the Sanaga-Maritime and Nyong and Kellé Divisions where they occupy entirely the land and without sharing with another tribe. The Basa'a are also found in small groups in the Wouri, Nkam, and Nyong and Mfoumou Divisions. The Basa'a, like the rest of the Bantu, has a patriarchal organization which is considered as headless tribe or community because it is not based on an established chiefdom but on an association of a clan of ruling leaders. Everyone can take the lead according to the consent of their pairs and according to the nature of the problem to be solved. The guardians of this tradition are known as "*Ba Mbombok*" or patriarchs. They are actually very respected for their wisdom and the diligence with which their succession is organized from generation to generation, to ensure this delicate mission of leading the community. Compared with the traditional leaders who are administrative support staff, these keepers of the traditional wisdom (*Ba Mbombok*) are better recognized and more respected in the Basa'a community in their capacity and sacred relationship with the world of the ancestral spirits. If the origin of toponymy in the Basa'a community remains unclear, it is because of the time elapsed between the current keepers of the traditions and the contact with foreign languages and cultures. But the interest seems to have been intact with some exceptions due to the transmission of historical facts from one generation to another. Even more, this is mostly the consequence of their interpretation with embellishments that consist of cutting off or adding something sentimental in the real facts.

The Basa'a people in Cameroon are composed of three major groups or clans which are: "*Babimbi*, *Likol* or *Ñó-nlôn* and *Bikok*".

- The "*Babimbi*" derive from the name "*yimbi*" (the one who has remained stuck at the stump). The Babimbi did not undertake the crossing of the Sanaga River. Their natural site is located at the foot of the mythical cave of "*Ngog Lituba*" (open stone);
- The "*Likol*" still called "*Ñó-nlôn*". Meaning: the Northerners or those who are upstream. They are located in the Nyong and Kelé Division (rear bastion of the struggle for independence of Cameroon undertaken by the nationalist party UPC) as well as in the Mefou and Akono;

- The "*Bikok*" are located across the Sanaga River, between Babimbi and Likol. They are located in the same Division as Babimbi (Sanaga-Maritime).

The Basa'a are unanimous about their genealogy or their belonging to only one ancestor. They are all the sons of "*Mban*". The word "*Basa'a*" has its origin from a singular "*Nsa'a*" meaning retribution, sharing; who gives or shares. Quarrels between Mban's sons over the sharing of a hunted snake have given the people the name "*Basa'a*", which means "*the kidnapers*", "*the hiders*" and "*the redistributors*". Cultural affinities between Basa'a and Biso'o/Bakoko are very close and complex. Some researchers have tried to explain all that, through several scientific disciplines (Ethnology, Anthropology, Sociology, Oral Sources, etc.). Thus, in 1947, Father Caret wrote: Basa'a and Biso'o (Biso'o / Bakoko) were probably two neighbouring tribes and allies living somewhere around or beyond Tibati and were repressed back to thirteen or fifteen generations by the Foulbe invasions. They crossed the Sanaga together and settled in the Sanaga-Maritime and in the Ocean where one finds the main point of the Baso'o migrations along the Ntem and the border of Guinea. They probably have common ancestors, but far enough since their languages are very different, the Baso'o is very close to Ewondo than Basa'a and is the transitional language between the two tribes. But it is very evident, as it may be remarked, that all these tribes have the same origin, though it must go back quite far; evaluate what thirteen generations can represent. In any case they were already differentiated when settling in the Southern Cameroons. One adopts the transcription "*Basa'a*" for the designation of the people in sub-Saharan Africa and its branch of Cameroon by the name "*Basa'a*". The Basa'a people have been scattered for several centuries, resulting in the formation of several shelters in sub-Saharan Africa. The Basa'a may be found in Liberia, Nigeria and Cameroon. While in Togo people speak of "*Bassar*", "*Bassari*" in Senegal and "*Bisa*" in Burkina Faso. All these peoples might have a common origin. We cannot conclude on this hypothesis at the current stage of our research. Several researchers have attempted to understand who are the Basa'a people? But the fact remains that it is impossible to deny the complexity as Pierre Oum Ndigi, an Egyptologist or Georges Ngango. All their theses are based on the origin of the totemic name Basa'a. One seems to forget another path that can prove fruitful. Indeed in their liturgical language that is the Biso'o/Bakoko, the Basa'a of Cameroon are almost not designated by this term, but rather by the expression "*Mbènè*". And the Beti call them "*Mvele*", a parallel term to Mbènè. Why do the Biso'o/Bakoko and Beti respectively call their neighbours by the expressions Mbènè and Mvele and not by Basa'a? Is there any explanation for that? This is why the Basa'a remain a remarkable identity of African society in general and Cameroon in particular.

The use of toponyms among the basa'a people: It should be noted that, the toponymy is far from being a specificity of the Bantu peoples among which we find the Basa'a. It is even less the prerogative of Cameroonians or Africans for it concerns the whole world even though there are differences and exceptions on many levels. What do we mean by toponyms and toponymy? The toponym is the place name. On the other hand, toponymy is a sociolinguistic or historical study of the origin and meaning of place names. It can still be defined as the set of place names of a region or a country, in a language or common languages of a specific place. In the Bantu tradition, among which the Basa'a peoples are found, toponymy dates back to immemorial times. Because some place names have been given for several centuries or even millennia today. African traditions have been for a long time oral, there is a real problem of reliability in their different methods of transmission especially from father to son. That why a series was asked of clarification questions to understand the focus of this study in the context and time of related data especially information collected in the field orally:

- Has the meaning of the place-names studied here been transmitted accurately from generation to generation by

the various wisdom keepers in the Basa'a community? If so, why and how would the information collected differ from one informant to another?

- Have the heirs always been in better condition (mind openness) to receive the teaching passed on to them?
- Have all the knowledge held been really passed on by previous generations? Was there any influence from the neighbouring or foreign languages and cultures, or even any break between the different generations in terms of transmission and interpretation of ancestral knowledge?
- To whom was this socio-cultural knowledge transmitted? What were the criteria of selection (age, sex, place, social background, etc.)?
- In case of sudden death, what was the mode of continuity put in place? Has it been maintained without breaking? If not, what was the solution to reconstruct the story?

It is known in Africa that an old sage death is compared to a library that burns. Finding exact answers to all these questions is difficult but not impossible. However, our fear is based on the lack of living witnesses to the story. For all those who are likely to inform the researcher on the very question cannot really go back to the origins of these facts with accuracy since they are heirs of a story from several generations so considered as already broken. For this purpose, it becomes difficult, if not impossible and quite random to speak of their origin and to put the facts in their historical context. But the socio-cultural and historical interest can still keep its flavour. If one sticks to the testimony of Samuel Iloga for whom,

From time immemorial, there has never existed any school or any training centre for toponymy in the Basa'a community. The toponyms known here and there are names derived from the remarkable events of the past. Examples: 1. "Mbok Kanda" literally means the partition of the people. It is the memorable place located near the Sanaga Bridge at Mbebe where there was a partition between the different great clans of the Basa'a people: Babimbi (those remained at the strain), Likol (in the North), and Bikok (in the South). ; 2. "Likwel li Pada" (place where a Priest fell) it is a very rough and slippery slope where the Catholic faithful accompanying a white priest in his pastoral tour witnessed for the first time the fall of a white man. That means the toponyms in the Basa'a people cultures derive from the daily life events which have positively or negatively stamped the community. It also has the significance of the evolution of time and facts.

The Importance of toponymy among the basa'a people: Toponymy among the Basa'a people is of multidimensional importance. It can be interpreted geographically, historically or socio-culturally. This recognized value does not only enable to highlight the points of difference that would exist between the similar elements of a relief but also concerns the cultural areas and the geographical spaces that are neighbouring or distant to each other. This is much more noticeable with the lineage names of families and villages. For the division, within the community, comes from marriage and the nomenclature as well as from the predecessors: ancestors, great-grandparents, grandparents and parents.

Geographically: Geographically speaking, the most prominent relief elements in Basa'a are the rivers, the large coasts and the large spaces: families and lineages (villages). Thus, some of these toponyms were given by the first occupants. This is the case of relief elements: rivers, coasts, etc. In terms of large spaces dividing lineages, families, and subfamilies, these names have generally been given by middle generations that claim to be of the offspring of one or other ancestor. Most often, these names with a condescending relationship begin with initials such as "Ndog", "Log" or "song". Among the Basa'a people, "Ndog" refers to the offspring of an unmarried girl in her parents' compound. These children, mostly boys born before marriage, could not be recognized by their father. For children constituted the greatest inheritance that a family had, especially for those parents having exclusively female descent, their grandchildren became their heirs and it was the grandfather or uncles who had the right to give them a name.

Many of these births were encouraged by the girl's father's family. In some circumstances, the two families (paternal and maternal) interred into an arrangement to get back the first son of the union by the mother's family in order to bridge the existing gap. These are the lineages that are known today as "Ndog". "Log" refers to the descent of a son of the family whilst "Song" refers to those who remained at the stump or on the lands of their parents regardless of whether they are the children of the son or the daughter.

Socio-culturally: The toponymy means name of place from Greek (tópos), place and (ónoma), name. Toponymy is a branch of the onomastic which studies the toponyms and a n t h r o p o n o m y which is the study of names of people. It is one of the two main branches of onomastic study of proper nouns known as a branch of linguistics.

- Toponymy is not an exact science as topography which is a related science. It is only devoted to linguistics. It is not a historical or geographical study but it can be useful to these subjects. Like monuments, works of art or a language, names of places, witnesses of forgotten languages, belong to the collective memory and deserve to be preserved.
- In addition to studying the names of inhabited places (villages, hamlets) or non-inhabited places, toponymy also studies names related to relief (oronyms), r i v e r s (hydronyms), roads (odonyms or hodonyms) as well as in restricted issues, such as habitat names, for example (microtoponyms).

It is impossible to know precisely from what date the Man attributed names to the places around him. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that rivers and mountains have been given a name first. It turns out that most place names of that time corresponded to the geographical or natural characteristics of the place, as in the case of Tenochtitlan (the legend of the foundation of a city combines the toponym and the sacred, as we can still observe it on the arms of Mexico) or Ostia, from the Latin " Ostia" (river mouth). There are also references to the sacred, as in the case of (Babylon Akkadian Babil, Gate of God), sometimes themselves in connection with the geography of the place, as in the case of "Cuzco" (Quechua, Qusquwanka, the owl rock). Those references are found in the practice of toponymy in the Basa'a community. Example: when the Basa'a speak of Ndog or Log, that is to say people of but with a difference on the ancestral origin.

The confusions created by the use of the same toponyms at different places: It often happens that the same toponym is given to several places at once. When it is often the case, we have to resort to the origins of each other to verify their belonging to the same condescending; migratory movements have allowed their establishment in a place, the observation of cultural practices especially incestuous among them, etc. The use of the same toponym in two or more places confuses the person who uses them as a point of reference, especially if they are new to the area. Therefore, the toponyms instead of being of use, it becomes a confusing element. This situation is more evident when the elements are found within the same community.

Epistemology and toponymists: The creator of the French toponymy was Auguste Longnon whose teaching on the names of places in his country at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes and the College de France was published in 1920. But in Africa, there is no particular school for that specific issue. It is just a transmission of ancestral wisdom from generation to generation that runs the risk of being unreliable because of the gap in time between the origin of the name and its current use. Early toponymy research in the modern era began almost simultaneously in France and Great Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century. At this time, it is preferred to establish topographic dictionaries (gazetteers in English). These dictionaries have made it easier for linguists to access ancient forms of place names. That is to say, the

forms attested in charters, cartulary and lodges over the centuries and which the research in libraries required long hours. Research on toponymy has largely focused on the etymology of place names; in this context, it has been possible to establish a fairly linear evolution in the West-European toponymy. Indeed, there is an Indo-European or preceltic substrate in European toponyms; it is generally related to all unexplained toponymic etymologies.

Standardization of toponyms in the world: With the exponential growth of international relations in the mid-twentieth century and the growing importance of toponymy worldwide, the United Nations put in place a United Nations Group of Experts on Geography Names (GENUNG) in 1959. This group established as a first mission the need for each State to acquire a national toponymic authority. A French division of this group was set up in 1998; In fact, it is important that the governments of the Francophone and Francophile States wishing to see their toponymic authorities enjoy the benefits of the work of the French-speaking Division and take part in the work of GENUNG, which comprises 22 different divisions. The GENUNG also includes several working groups including: country names, exonyms, toponymic databases, advertising and financing, Romanisation, and toponymy training courses. It is perhaps the support of this organization with the contribution of in-depth research in various specialties that toponymy in the Basa'a community will regain its nobility on all aspects.

Issues of toponyms in the Basa'a and world culture: Toponymy, in our time, has become in many corners of the world an ideological battleground. Very often, that is being qualified as "toponymic purification." For "Toponymic Purifiers", we must first clear and decontaminate the toponymy in order to remove from the field of memory anything that could go against the definition they give today to these toponyms. The names of places have always been controversial; it is indeed obvious that toponymy has an eminently political dimension, especially since its institution is set by a political actor. In addition, the name of the place is itself an issue in that its choice brings into play different potentially conflicting actors, projects, conceptions and representations. This is verified through the creation of the administrative districts whose names of the places chosen to shelter them must be stripped of all relations with the national heroes of the struggles for independence. Native village for instance, should not at any time decide whether to appoint the authorities responsible for decentralized services or for the redistribution of investment projects. The alternation of political regimes and dominations often influences toponyms, which a government can rename in its own way. During the Antiquity, some examples can be listed even before Christ, especially the case of Rachiotes, renamed Alexandria by Alexander the Great in a desire to display his power. Many other cities founded by the King of Macedonia have been named after him, such as Alexandria Eskhate, today Khodjent in Tajikistan. As example of a famous city is Istanbul, previously Constantinople after Byzantium. Examples of princely toponyms are legion throughout history, and often reflect the historical realities of their time; Thus, the city of St. Petersburg, which was called Petrograd from 1914 to 1924 by the surge of Slav nationalism, then Leningrad at the death of Lenin, to find his original name in 1991, after the collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the demise of the USSR. Many other examples can be evoked: among them, Prince Edward Island in Canada, named in honour of Prince Edward-August of Kent, son of George III of the United Kingdom or Queen Maud Land, Norwegian claim in Antarctica. Among the Basa'a, this practice remains linked to the nationalist party UPC and its back-flaps in the area. The great explorations and the colonization movements (creators of princely toponymy) have been great suppliers of place names which are accepted and consecrated today. For the first time, we can evoke for example the lands named in honour of navigators. For the latter, the examples of Lake Victorian Johannesburg, or of New Guinea or in New Caledonia are illustrative. These names may be subject to identity and ethnic tensions as they often evoke Western domination, and the violence that conquests may have aroused, for example in South Africa

where we sought to obliterate the stigma of apartheid by removing names too evocative of this old regime. In the same way, many former colonies have changed their names once their independence has been acquired (Upper Volta became Burkina Faso or Rhodesia becoming Zimbabwe. Although some modifications are welcomed by the population in general, there is a number of cases where the will of the people does not match with that of the political leaders, especially in the framework of the controversy over the retroponymisation of Tshwane in Pretoria, or Bombay in Mumbai.

These cases are almost absent in the Basa'a community. At present, two contradictory tendencies exist at times in toponymy; on the one hand, the desire to make the toponym readable and attractive, for example the Côtes-du-Nord, because of the negative perception of their designation was renamed Côtes-d'Armor, and also Châlons-en-Champagne, formerly Chalons-sur-Marne). On the other hand, there is a decolonization of toponyms, particularly in South Africa, where there are many examples since the end of the apartheid regime; an example is the parallel toponymisation of Port Elizabeth in Nelson Mandela Bay. On the other hand, globalization and minority language protection movements lead to a generalization of plurilingual toponymic indications, especially on major communication routes; offensive names are also endangered. In micro-toponymy, we have been able to rename places suggestive of pain or national shame (the "*Njok masi*"). The removal of odonyms evoking personalities deemed controversial, such as men of power who fought the Maquis. This must be an extraordinary example to be followed by the Basa'a in rewriting their history with place names where there is a necessity because of the negative meaning of these names. The political use of toponymy is carried out on all scales, whether to symbolically mark a territory, to trivialize and de-historicize it, or to justify a spatial creation. Companies doing with Bilingual traffic signs can also be subject to manipulations with a political or even communitarian aim. The economic and political stakes of the tourism sector also motivates poetic and aesthetic toponymy based on more or less certified historical references. Another example, we can estimate that this toponymy doubles the political impact of the inertia of the architecture when this one has a sufficiently political connotation. Formerly, certain villages or groups were recognized by the activity practiced by its populations, example "*Huuu*" (country of craftsmen or manufacturers).

Natural and anthropised backgrounds: The plans or the oral tradition have preserved many names of places, formerly enabling the identification of the drains, embankments, ponds, peaks, caves, etc. Anthroponomy is often associated with toponymic names describing the nature of the soil, landscape, flora, etc. The toponym can evoke events or ancient customs (road for hanged people) and places of memories "*Njok*". "*Njok masi*" or hard labour in Basa'a country reminds the sad time of the construction of the rail by the local populations forced by a German colonel. It was a new system of slavery set up to punish the recalcitrant natives who could not pay their taxes, or who had opposed the administration through the chiefs who were their local representatives. Those chiefs were actually the ones having the power to send the rebels to "*Njok masi*". But this practice had become a means of revenge to get rid of some people who had large properties or who had beautiful women causing the lust of the chiefs.

Conclusion

The study of toponyms and their meaning among the Basa'a people towards a preservation of cultural and ancestral heritage was important not only for the but for the tribe scientific community because the topic global and concerns the whole world. Toponymy as science has history, importance, epistemology and standards which permit to conduct a number of researches in social sciences and guide other sciences as topography in the localisation. That why places (mountains, rivers, villages, towns, countries, etc.) carry and particular names which differentiate them one another. Though, toponyms have to identify very precisely and localized geographical

place, it has not been arbitrarily attributed by man, but for the sake of describing the landscape and evoking the activities that the inhabitants carry out. In addition, it is impossible to list, from the current names, the original place names as Jean-Pierre Pélissier and Claude Motte, Historical Geo-nomenclature of inhabited places.

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