

Tòkunbò: From Personal Name to Common Noun in the Context of Sustainable National Development

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Abstract

This paper takes a look at the word Tòkunbò which literally means 'arrives-from-over-the-sea', as an aspect of Indigenous Naming System within the context of Sustainable (Economic) National Development with the aim of accounting for the shift in its meaning in two different eras. It is observed that bearers of names such as Ọlátòkunbò 'wealth-arrives-from-over-the-sea' before 1980s are accorded with great respect as children of well-to-do-parents. It is also observed that the use of Tòkunbò for fairly used goods as from 1980s and its acceptability among the Yorùbá and non-Yorùbá in transacting business is a means of sustaining and salvaging the economy, thus, silently contributing to its national development programme in the resilience of the populace. We propose that the shift in meaning of Tòkunbò from a personal name 'returnees-from-over-the-sea' to a common noun meaning, 'imported fairly used item' is a child of necessity and argue that its latter status dignifies those items far better than àlòkù 'used and dumped'.



Introduction¹

First, it must be mentioned that one of the reasons behind this study is found in the words of Oduyoye (1971: 3) where he asserts that:

...personal and place names are some of the oldest elements in the Yorùbá language, and a study of them will reveal much about the past history of the language and the people.

In the light of this, we carry out a historical study of the word *Tòkumbò* ‘of an ocean-voyager’ (Abraham 1958: 640) to examine the emergence of the name in the early 20th century as a personal name when the Yorùbá began to sojourn into foreign land, especially across the sea and its use in the present day Nigeria as a common noun, putting its present status in the context of Sustainable National Development.

We like to trace the genesis of names having the phrase *Tòkumbò*² to the result of contact which Yorùbá people had with the white man during the colonial era. One indisputable fact is that some of the early sojourners travelled with their wives, whereby children born in ‘overseas’ countries are given names ending in *Tòkumbò*.³ This paper, therefore, is a chronological study of the word from the time it was an *àbísò* ‘christening name’ to the time it became a name which refers to ‘imported used articles’ and goes further to explain the need for economic sustainability. The paper is divided into five sections. Section 1 is the introduction while section 2 briefly examines the naming system among the Yorùbá. In section 3, the focus is on *Tòkumbò* as a personal name (3.1) and as a common noun (3.2). In section

4, the discussion is on the use of *Tòkunbò* in the context of Sustainable National Development and section 5 concludes the study.

The Indigenous Naming System among the Yorùbá

First and foremost, we have to restate the known fact about Yorùbá names and naming system, namely, that Yorùbá culture as it relates to names has great virtue in the sense that every name has some extant meaning. Ajiboye (2011) makes the claim that Yorùbá like many other Africa nations, Asia and even several Oceanic communities, are fond of giving names that reflect various forms of socio-cultural information. It has also been observed about Africa in general and Yorùbá in particular that one unique feature of Personal names among these societies is their elaborate linguistic structure, the semantic complexity and their reflection of African values (Èkúndayò 1977, Kimanyi 1978, Akínnásọ 1980, Adeoye 1982, Abiodun 1996, Orié 2002, Babalola and Alaba 2003).

Principally, Yorùbá names fall into four classes which are *àmúntòrunwá* (lit. brought from heaven) ‘born with a name’, *àbísọ* ‘christening name’, *oríkì* ‘cognomen/pet names’ and *orílẹ̀* ‘lineage’.⁴ In this paper, we examine *Tòkunbò*, one of Yorùbá *àbísọ* names. The discussion which follows will reveal full information about its past and present status.

Tòkunbò

This section bifurcates into two. In section 3.1, we discuss the word *Tòkunbò* as a personal name and in 3.2, we discuss the same word as a common noun in its contemporary use.



Tòkunbò as a Personal Name

The emergence of *Tòkunbò* as a name probably dates back to the middle of the 19th century when the Yorùbá began to sojourn into foreign lands, especially across the sea. This is as a result of the contact they had with the white man during and after colonialism. Some of the Yorùbá travellers to London and later to other parts of Europe and North America went with their families. Children born in such places are named for example, *Ọlátòkunbò* ‘wealth-arrives-from-over-the-sea’. One significant thing about this is that bearers of such names are accorded great respect and are perceived as children who come from a well-to-do and privileged family.⁵ Examples of names under discussion are given in (1).

- | | | |
|-----|-----------------------------------|--|
| (1) | a. <i>Ọmótòkunbò</i> | ‘child-arrives-from-over sea’ |
| | b. <i>Adétòkunbò</i> | ‘crown-arrives-from-over sea’ |
| | c. <i>Ọlátòkunbò</i> | ‘wealth-arrives-from-over sea’ |
| | d. <i>Oyèètòkunbò</i> | ‘chieftaincy-arrives-from-over sea’ |
| | f. <i>Ìjítòkunbò</i> ⁶ | ‘one that wakes up and arrive from sea’ |
| | e. <i>Ọmótòkunwá</i> ⁷ | ‘child who has come from (over) the ocean’ |

This perception of the nomenclatures and their bearers went on up to the early 80s, in the Yorùbá land. Let us consider first, the morphology of these names which either end in *tòkunbò* or certain *tòkunbò*. As all the examples in (1) show, *tòkunbò* is a truncated form of a sentential name which has lost its first two syllables that constitute its subject through a legitimate



phonological process of *deletion* or through the syntactic process of *subject ellipsis*. It should be mentioned that the application of this phonological rule is done in consonance with semantic consideration. Note that, it is possible to delete the first two syllables to give *Tòkunbò*. Also, one can delete the first syllable which consists of only the vowel to have:

- (2) a. Mótòkunbò
- b. Dètòkunbò
- c. Látòkunbò
- d. Yèètòkunbò
- e. Mótòkunwá
- f. Jìtòkunbò

As they are, the derivations in (2) retain their meanings as users of the names can answer to them when so called. The unexpected is to delete only the second syllable (CV) as shown in the ill-formed examples in (3).

- (3) a. **Qtòkunbò*
- b. **Aétòkunbò*
- c. **Atòkunbò*
- d. **Oétòkunbò*
- e. **Qtòkunwá*
- f. **Ìtòkunbò*

The point being made is that Yorùbá does not delete segment, syllable or word at random; it takes into consideration the semantic implication of the deleted entity.⁸ This does not

exclude Yorùbá names as illustrated above. This much explains words with *Tòkunbò* as a Yorùbá personal name and its morphology. We now turn to the shift from *Tòkunbò* as a personal name to a common noun.

Tòkunbò as a common noun in contemporary Yorùbá

However, from 1980s upwards when the economic recess hit Nigeria, the economic situation at least for the middle and low classes left no option than to live a low level life of either buying inferior or imported fairly used goods; with the latter being referred to as *Tòkunbò*.

Yusuff (2008: 129) defines *Tòkunbò* in its contemporary use as ‘imported fairly used’ and he describes it as ‘an engineered word which depicts any item that looks almost new or functions well’. We want to understand the use of the term ‘engineered word’ to mean a word used to describe a set of items that are fairly used not being derived in the real morphological sense. Abraham’s definition of *Tòkunbò* ‘of an ocean-voyager’ can still be applied in the present use as ‘those goods that arrive-from-over-the-sea with second hand value’. They include but are not limited to what we have in (4):

- | | | |
|--------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (4) a. | <i>Okò ọ Tòkunbò</i> | <i>Tòkunbò</i> ‘vehicle’ |
| b. | <i>Èyà ara Tòkunbò</i> | <i>Tòkunbò</i> ‘parts’ |
| c. | <i>Fóònù un Tòkunbò</i> | <i>Tòkunbò</i> ‘phone’ |
| d. | <i>Fírìjì i Tòkunbò</i> | <i>Tòkunbò</i> ‘fridge’ |
| e. | <i>Áyònú un Tòkunbò</i> | <i>Tòkunbò</i> ‘iron’ |
| f. | <i>Tẹlífìṣàṅ an Tòkunbò</i> | <i>Tòkunbò</i> ‘television’ |
| g. | <i>Kònpútà a Tòkunbò</i> | <i>Tòkunbò</i> ‘computer’ |



- h. *Pínrintà a Tòkunbò* ‘Tòkunbò printer
- i. *Kòkò ìṣeunṣeun Tòkunbò* ‘Tòkunbò cooking pot’⁹
- j. *Ága a Tòkunbò* ‘Tòkunbò chair’¹⁰

We can say without any fear of contradiction that each of these examples, if broken down in parts, can be uncountable as it may have up to a hundred sub-items under it. Take for example (4b) which can be any spare part of a car, motorcycle, bicycle, machine, etc. Car parts can also be tyre, plug, mirror, battery, windscreen, headlamp, etc. which, depending on the brand of the car, can also lead to having sub-groups of items. As one can see in (4), the phrase where *tòkunbò* appears can be analysed as a *genitive of modification* (cf. Ajiboye 2005), and when the modified noun is elided what we are left with is the modifier *tòkunbò*.

What is interesting in all of these is that the prestige accorded the name *tòkunbò* in the past is directly carried to its current application to fairly used goods which are imported to Nigeria, just as a child born outside the shore of Nigeria is accorded a high prestige. Rather than referring to those second hand goods as *àlòkù* (*à-lò-kù*) (Nom + use + remain), a word which best describes them, the Yorùbá adopt the highly prestigious name *Tòkunbò* for two reasons. First, those goods come to Nigeria the way the children born outside come to the country with prestige. Second, such goods are patronised by a large percentage of the populace and they are affordable to them. *Tòkunbò* items are accorded such high prestige to the extent that sellers of goods (e.g. shoes, bags, clothes) and motor mechanics who require motor parts (plugs, tyres) recommend

such items instead of new ones, claiming that they are more durable! It is not surprising that Àjùwòn (2014: 2) summarises the thinking of an average Nigerian about these second hand goods when he says ‘...Nigerians were made to accept that all indigenous products are inferior to those produced in the West or outside the country...’

What remains to be discussed is the place of these Tòkunbò items in a Sustainable (Economic) National Development scheme.

Tòkunbò in Sustainable National Development

As earlier mentioned, from 1981 onwards, it has become clear to the Nigeria masses that the political and economic ship of the nation was heading toward the rocks. Indeed, in a letter which Late Chief Obafemi Awolowo wrote in 1982 to the President, Alhaji Sheu Shagari, he warned the President about “the precarious nature of the Nigeria economy whose collapse was imminent with catastrophic consequences, unless Alhaji Shagari as the anchorman rose up to the situation.”¹¹ He was labelled a prophet of doom by members of the ruling National Party of Nigeria. However, like a true prophet of God, his prediction came to pass and the rest is now history. The military took over power in December 1983 because of the political and economic woes facing the nation referred to in the excerpt from Awolowo’s letter above; and the military quickly moved into action. Remarkable in this direction was the change of the Nigerian currency so as to prevent those who had looted the treasury from escaping with the stolen money. Unfortunately, that regime did not last long as another military junta under the



leadership of General Ibrahim Babangida came to power mid 1985. His tenure marked the beginning of a very long term of hardship in which Nigeria has been, partly because of the introduction of the Austerity Measure and Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) by the Babangida's administration. With these measures in place, no-one was left in doubt that the nation was already in a mess economically. By 1987, the foreign exchange rate stood at ₦4 to \$1 US compared to ₦1 to \$1 it was in 1980.¹² During this period, the price of almost all commodities had gone up by 200%. As of 1981, a civil servant who obtained a car loan of ₦4,500 could buy a brand new Peugeot 504 salon car. However, by 1985, the same amount could no longer buy a new Volkswagen car! The business circle (especially the importers) seized the opportunity to shift its focus from importing newly produced goods which were no longer affordable to an average Nigerian, to fairly used items. How do we premise this within the concept of 'Sustainable National Development'? We turn to what Sustainable National Development is all about.

The idea of 'Sustainable National Development', which was a global phenomenon started in 1987 but became more pronounced in 2010 at Rio summits where world leaders met to discuss some of the most common pressing needs in areas of environment, economy, and social issues'. According to Herman (2002:2), "Sustainability is a way of asserting the value of longevity and intergenerational justice, while recognizing mortality and finitude".

Fortunately too, the Nigerian masses who were already feeling the heat did not miss the opportunity. No wonder, the Yorùbá say *Eni tí kò jòba, yòò sáà jẹ̀bà*. ‘A person who does not take a chieftaincy title will be able to afford taking èbà ‘starchy paste’, meaning ‘If the people could not afford new products, they would make do with fairly used ones’!

From the ongoing, the word *Tòkumbò* as used in the context of ‘Sustainable National Development’ is narrowed down to an aspect of the Nigerian economy. It is not a kind of policy put in place by government to improve the growth of the global economy. Thus, whereas, the sustainable national development in the literature was initiated by government under the United Nations Organization (UNO) and its sub-organizations¹³, the use of fairly used items in Sustainable National Development is adopted by the people of Nigeria themselves, first of Yorùbá origin, to label those essential things that will meet their needs as *Tòkumbò*.¹⁴ A systemic change that is needed on how to make the fairly used goods elegant requires no serious revolution. Its advantage is that it readily creates lifestyles and consumption patterns for the middle class in Nigeria. These are the masses who have been struggling to cope with the economic crisis caused by the ruling elite that have enough to buy brand new cars, television, furniture, etc. In other words, we consider “Sustainable National Development” in the context of this paper as a self-styled type aimed at meeting the yearning of the people who are worst hit by the economic woes of Nigeria. The point being made here is the sharp contrast between the privileged few in the past who named their children



Tòkunbò and now, a large percentage of disappearing middle class who use ‘*Tòkunbò* goods’. What do we call this: “Retrogression” or “Progress”?

From the ongoing, it is easy to see the link between the linguistic creativity shown in the coinage and use of *tòkunbò* and the creativity needed to sustain national development. We need to explain further, the concepts of *tòkunbò* ‘fairly used’ and *àlòkù* ‘used and dumped’. Fairly used articles have grades (e.g. vehicles have grade A, B, etc.) which determine their value and price. The selling point of fairly used cars for example, is that they are considered to be more durable than *àlòkù* cars. Hence, people buy not only because of the name, *tòkunbò*, but also, because the articles serve them.¹⁵

Although, we do not have statistics to prove that *tòkunbò* articles sell more than *àlòkù*, but our interaction with sellers and users of these articles shows that customers are lured into buying the former because of the claim that they are even better than new ones. We should also state that both *tòkunbò* and *àlòkù* are more or less two sides of the same coin in the sense that both sets of items are second-hand used materials. The difference lies in the fact that one is used outside the shores of Nigeria before being imported, the other is within. However, the *tòkunbò* nomenclature has worked like magic in the mind of the users to meet their needs.

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that there was a shift in the meaning and use of *Tòkunbò* from personal name to a common noun which refers to fairly used articles, tracing the shift to the



maladministration of both the civilian and the military. It argued that the two meanings, however, converge in the sense that the prestige remains, as *Tòkunbò* in its latter status dignifies those items far better than being called *àlòkù* ‘used and dumped’, which would have been the appropriate word to describe them. Unlike the application of Sustainable National Development in the global realm where ‘the concept remains too amorphous to be clearly defined, and hence implemented’ (Drexhage and Murphy 2010:2), the use of *Tòkunbò* as a lexical item to label all second hand goods that are imported to Nigeria is appropriate and it adequately tackles the socio-psychological problem that most Nigerians would have been subjected to had it been that *àlòkù* has been adopted. It is argued here that the use of *Tòkunbò* for fairly used goods and its acceptability among the Yorùbá and non-Yorùbá in transacting business across race and tribe in Nigeria is a means of sustaining and salvaging the economy, thus, silently contributing to its national development programme sharing the resilience of the populace.

End Notes

¹ I thank Professor Olúgbóyèga Àlàbá, Abísóyè Èlèshin, Yusuf Fádáííró, Alimot Èlèshin and the audience at the 2014 Annual Conference of the Yoruba Studies Association of Nigeria held at the University of Ilorin, for their useful observations, comments and suggestions. However, any error therein is completely that of the author.

² Sir Adétòkunbò Adémólá, a prominent Chief Justice of the Federation of Nigeria was one of the first Yorùbá to be named Adétòkunbò. He was born on February 1st, 1906 to the late Oba Ládàpò Adémólá II, the Aláké of Ègbá land.



³ In most cases, such names are shortened to *Tòkunbò*.

⁴ Readers are referred to Adeoye (1982) for examples of each of these name types.

⁵ In addition to the case of Sir Adetokunbo, who came from a royal family which itself is ‘a home of honour’, in the researcher’s country home, a street was named “Tokunbo” after a man who travelled to Gabon and brought fortunes to the village.

⁶ According to Babalola and Alaba (2003), *Ìjì* is a divinity of the hill.

⁷ *Ti-okùn-wá* ‘come from (over) the ocean’, the full form of which is *Omótòkunwá* ‘child or someone who has come from (over) across the ocean’.

⁸ Today, Yorùbá youths are beginning to deviate from the semantic effect of applying deletion rule (or any phonological rule for that matter) in forming acronyms from Yorùbá names. For example, it is common to have *Tòkunbò* shortened to *Toks* which is in deviance of form and meaning. This is a kind of slang found among youths.

⁹ Indeed, someone told the researcher that, today, there is ‘Tòkunbò wife’! A Tòkunbò wife is a woman who remarried after a first failed marriage, to another man. Such a woman is considered as fairly used.

¹⁰ Note that in the context in which *Tòkunbò* appears in these examples, the word functions as a modifier. However, this is not crucial to our discussion here. Our only concern is its socio-economic status.

¹¹ *Nigerian Tribune*, August 17, 1982, p. 12-13.

¹² The exchange rate at that time was supposedly and unbelievably high such that a famous Ewì exponent, Chief *Ọláńrẹ̀wájú Adẹ̀pòjù* rendered the following excerpt in his 1987 album titled *Níbo Là ń Lọ*:

Ayé ti wá bàjẹ̀ poo ‘Things have gone terribly bad’

Náírà méréń ọ̀tọ̀tọ̀ ‘For four naira!’

Ká máa fí ra dọ̀lára kan èèbó ‘To buy just one US dollar!’

È gbọ ná ‘You listen’

Şówóo wa ti ya yẹ̀yẹ̀ tó báun ní ‘Has our currency so much devalued to that extent?’

Since then, the Nigerian currency has been getting weaker and weaker and today \$1 is exchanged for about ₦195!

¹³ See Herman (2002)



¹⁴ Cf. Euphemism *kan àkàndùn* ‘slightly sour or sour-sweet’ as a literary term used to ameliorate the factual *kan/korò* ‘sour’. *Tòkunbò* goods can at best be termed half a loaf that is better than no bread at all.

¹⁵ It is to be noted that if there were *tòkunbò* vehicles, some people would still patronise second-hand cars, looking carefully to ensure they bought good ones among them. They do so because the price of such items is relatively cheaper than the *tòkunbò* ones.

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