The Toponymic Inscription Problematic in Urban Sub-Saharan Africa: From Colonial to Postcolonial Times

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Abstract

We examine a variety of problems relating to toponymic inscription processes in urban sub-Saharan Africa. The objective is to promote understanding of: the origins, evolution, nature, extent and social implications of these problems in an era of globalization; the vocabularies of built space; and the navigation techniques of inhabitants of supposedly nondescript built space in this region. We employed primary data based on in situ experiences and secondary data from published and unpublished documents. We found that the region's toponymic inscription problem, its built space, and urban vocabularies are deeply embedded in its European colonial legacy. Furthermore, we found that urban residents in this region have devised functional means to navigate their seemingly nondescript space. These revelations promise to fill some historiographic gaps in the literature on toponymic inscription in Africa in particular and urban history and planning in general.

Keywords

Toponymic inscriptions, (post)colonial planning cultures, urban sub-Saharan Africa, British and French legacies, (un)ambiguous addresses, named/nameless streets

Introduction

> [T]he linguist Pière Alexander noticed that on the official map of Cameroun made before independence a certain 'Ambababoum' is shown as an important village on the road from Yaoundé to Bafia. However, it does not exist and has never existed within living memory. (Baesjou, 1988: 1)

Rather than relating to any reality, the above quotation is a colonialist fictional toponymic construct of a rural, not urban, environment. Risking criticism for exposing the colonized spatiality in

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sub-Saharan Africa to ridicule, we use this quotation as an opening for discussing the reverse. Our interest is not in existing names for non-existing places, but in non-existing names for existing places. In short, we are interested in the problem of toponymic ambiguity in urban sub-Saharan Africa.

Toponymic inscription, that is, street- and place-naming, as well as physical addressing systems, are critical components of an effective and efficient urban management system.[1] It is central to the orderly, systematic and semiotic construction of the city. By designating locations and pronouncing certain thoroughfares as distinct urban units, it also conflates urban space and the symbolic realm of cultural signification (Azaryahu, 2009: 460). In this paper both the informative and symbolic dimensions of toponymic inscription are analyzed in light of three interrelated spatial problems in contemporary Africa. The first is the failure by municipal authorities to prioritize toponymic inscription. Municipal authorities in sub-Saharan Africa have seldom prioritized the need to identify places, produce meaningful maps, codify streets or generate comprehensible and unambiguous addressing systems for their cities (Njoh, 2010).

The second concerns the colonial roots or origins of the problem of toponymic ambiguity in Africa. Particularly, we discuss generic and specific names in the colonial urban vocabularies of both French and British regimes – the main colonizing powers on the continent. In the process, we expose the dualistic nature of the relevant nomenclature in the colonial period. Here, we hasten to note that street- and place-naming was a consequence of residential segregation on a hierarchicalized racial basis (Bigon, 2012). The third concerns power struggles in built space. These problems were particularly critical during the colonial period. We use this period as a point of departure for a more intense focus on the toponymic inscription problems, their nuances and complexities in the postcolonial era.

The literature: An overview

Despite its indisputable importance in urban management, toponymic inscription has been accorded only scant attention in the relevant literature. Njoh (2010: 427–428) has expressed dismay at the tendency to ignore this problem. He contends that with the exception of a few (e.g. Agyeman, 2006; Bawumia, 2012; Coetzee and Cooper, 2007; Farvacque-Vitkovic et al., 2005), most analysts have ignored this area of study. Consequently, several gaps remain in knowledge of its implications for socioeconomic development in Africa.

It is surprising that few scholars have devoted attention to the language of colonial urbanism in a systematic way. Also, there has been no attempt to compile a lexical dictionary of generic terms, commensurate imageries, and their meaning in the context of (post)colonial urbanism on Africa. The only work, albeit not on Africa, that approximates what we have in mind here is Anthony King's study on British India (1976). King was innovative and unique in his ability to anatomize the relationship between culture and spatial/physical form. As far as we are aware, King's work was the first book-length study dedicated to this aspect of urbanism.

A number of studies have examined how colonial authorities supplanted place-names in the colonies with names from their own sociocultural lexicon (see e.g. Bassett, 1994). A careful read of such place-naming practices can be very revelatory. It invariably highlights the important role of place-naming in the production of racialized landscapes (cf., Rose-Redwood et al., 2010: 457). The literature on colonial urbanism in North Africa contains rich accounts of French efforts in employing toponymy to disparage the living spaces of 'racial others'. Thus, as the few studies focusing on urbanism in this region show, nomenclature such as *villes europèenes* and *villes nouvelles* were used in reference to European districts in contrast to native districts, which were known as *villes des indigènes* and *bidonvilles'*(Abu-Lughod, 1980; Çelik, 1997; Hamadeh, 1992; Rabinow,

1989; Wright, 1991). However, there is no book-length study on French colonial urbanism in the region that is equivalent to King's on British colonial India.

As an area of intellectual focus, toponymy has experienced a few changes in the recent past. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is its evolution from an esoteric field largely concerned with etymology and taxonomy to one interested in the political economy of place-naming (Rose-Redwood, et al., 2010). Within this evolving framework, place- and street-names are recognized as products of cultural, social and political struggles over spatial and cognate toponymic practices (Rose-Redwood, et al., 2010). However, the manner in which these struggles are resolved and the resultant place- or street-name constitute a function of several factors, including the historical, sociocultural, geographical and political contexts. Thus, knowledge of the implications of toponymic inscription is best fostered by contextualizing the variables of interest. By examining the toponymic inscription problematic in sub-Saharan Africa, we go beyond 'simply reflecting the impress of the state or elite ideologies', if we may borrow the words of Garth Myers on Zanzibar (1996: 237). This examination promises to unearth the impact of toponyms on spatial policies and everyday practices – be they of the 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' variety. We draw on specific examples from selected cities throughout sub-Saharan Africa, but particularly Cameroon and Senegal where we conducted field work, for illustrative purposes.

Urban vocabularies, toponymic inscription and implications

[C]learing his throat to overcome his nerves, he began by criticizing the countries of Europe, who dazzled us with the sun of independence, when in fact we're still dependent on them, since we still have avenues named after General de Gaulle and General Leclerc and President Coti and President Pompidou, but in Europe there are no avenues named after Sese Seko, or Idi Amin Dada, or Jean-Bedel Bokassa or any of the other fine men known personally to him, and valued for their loyalty, humanity, and respect of the rights of man. (Mabanckou, 2010: 14–15)

The above words were once uttered by the Cameroonian-born writer Alain Mabanckou. The words highlight, though in an ironic way, the inherent tension between African states and their former European *métropoles* in postcolonial times. The words also draw attention to a more worrisome problem. This problem arises from the tendency to adopt appellations from Eurocentric lexicons as place- and street-names in sub-Saharan Africa. A fundamental feature of modern political culture, the utilization of street names for commemorative purposes is also a powerful mechanism for the legitimation of the sociopolitical order (Azaryahu, 1996: 311). While content-related aspects of the very names are not our main concern, we remark that unambiguous addresses of the genre indicated by Mabanckou are relatively rare in Africa. Where they exist, their origin can be traced to the colonial era.

Postcolonial authorities have rarely considered the task of developing a precise address and property identification system a priority. A precise and useful address is one that includes unambiguous details on the permanent or temporary location of a person, event, place or thing (Njoh, 2010). Addresses of this genre are rare in Africa.

However, we would be remiss if we failed to mention recent developments that have included, if only peripheral, attention from politico–administrative authorities in the region. The deputy minister of local government in Ghana may well be a trailblazer in this regard. In 2009, he publicly acknowledged the toponymic inscription problematic in his country. In doing so, he characterized the country's residential addressing system as haphazard, thereby rendering any town difficult to navigate, especially for visitors (Daily Graphic, 2009, para. 3). The deputy minister's sentiments were echoed two years later by his fellow countryman/administrator, Mahamudu Bawumia.

According to Bawumia, a well-designed system of street, place and property identification is a prerequisite for the transformation of Ghana's economy into a modern and globally competitive one (Bawumia, 2012). Such a system, Bawumia insisted, is necessary to facilitate the navigation of built space, thereby facilitating commercial and related activities.

Perhaps most importantly, precise and unambiguous addresses are necessary for the proper functioning of modern navigation-facilitating gadgets that depend on the Geographic Positioning System (GPS). The need for precise street, place and property identification systems has been amplified in recent years by the globalization phenomenon. Globalization has resulted in rapidly integrating all regions, including Africa. Africa can neither develop nor derive any benefits from the globalization process without redressing its toponymic inscription problem (Anson, 2007; UN-DESA, 2008).

Location specificity entailing precise and unambiguous physical addressing systems is increasingly assuming greater importance in the developed world. Here, urban management, particularly when it involves service delivery and the dispensation of cognate duties, has been vastly improved by location-specific information and communication devices. Conversely, urban management functioning is gravely compromised by the inability of these devices to function in sub-Saharan Africa. The region is replete with cities characterized by nondescript spatial structures. A paramount feature of these cities is that they contain numberless buildings, nameless streets or streets that bear names that are not signposted (Njoh, 2003).

The consequences of toponymic ambiguity in Africa can also be appreciated at the microeconomic level. In this regard, for instance, urban residents are typically unable to derive any benefits offered by the global economic system. This system is growing increasingly digitized. Throughout the developed world, a variety of goods and services can now be ordered and paid for online through smartphones from the comfort of one's home. In Africa on the contrary, online transactions remain a luxury in a few cases, and non-existent in most. Yet, unambiguous toponymic inscription systems augur much more than economic benefits for users of built space. Such a system can facilitate social interaction as it simplifies the task of navigating such space, hence the process of interacting with old friends and creating new ones.

Like the modern spatial structures with which they are associated, the signposting of street- and place-names in sub-Saharan Africa is a colonial legacy. It is therefore paradoxical to associate the problem of nondescript spatial structures in the region with colonialism. Yet this is indeed the case. During the colonial era, urban Africa reposed on a dual platform. Within the framework of this dualistic urban system, colonial towns were divided into two main districts (Bigon, 2009; Njoh, 1999, 2007). One district, the Native District (or *la ville des indigenes*), was exclusively for members of the native population. The other, the European District (or *la ville des europèenes*), was, as the name suggests, an exclusive European enclave. While several 'in-between' spaces were existent, we hasten to note that, in general, the native districts covered a much larger geographic area than their European counterparts throughout sub-Saharan Africa. However, the native districts were disproportionately underserved, if at all, when it came to basic service/infrastructure provisioning.

Colonial authorities were determined to establish European spatial and environmental standards in the colonies. However, they were significantly constrained by their shoestring budgets. This severely limited the extent to which they could transform their wishes into real and implementable policies. In the spatial development arena, this meant a substantial scaling down of the orbit of certain policies. In the case of toponymic inscription, the orbit was limited to the European districts. Thus, while streets and places were christened and their names signposted in these districts, no commensurate initiatives were undertaken in the native districts. Over time, the native areas, complete with their nondescript structures expanded to usurp the European districts. Thus,

Figure 1. Clearly written, conspicuously posted and well-positioned street signs at an intersection in the formal area of Akwa, the erstwhile colonial district, of Douala, Cameroon. (Photo: Ambe Njoh).

toponymic ambiguity in urban sub-Saharan Africa can be seen as rooted in the colonial policies that encouraged the growth of native districts in urban areas.

It is important to appreciate the basis and raison d'etre for selecting street- and place-names in colonial sub-Saharan Africa. For colonial authorities, the opportunity to christen a place or street in sub-Saharan Africa was often considered an occasion to embellish the power of their native countries in a foreign land. In some cases, they viewed this as an opportunity to immortalize their own names or the name of a deceased comrade or hero. In any case, they were oblivious to the interests of those who constituted the overwhelming majority of inhabitants in the colonized territories. This lends credence to Brenda Yeoh's assertion that more often than not the toponymic inscription tradition sought to express the power of the 'namer' over the object being named (see Yeoh, 1992). Our observation of colonial sub-Saharan Africa is in line with Yeoh's characterization of British colonial Singapore. Here, as in colonial sub-Saharan Africa, place- and street-names were drawn from a Eurocentric spatial and environmental design lexicon. Ignoring the interests of indigenes of the colonized territories, street- and place-names as well as the built space of which they are a part reflect the European vision of what a human settlement should be in terms of its form and function. In terms of their functioning, colonial built space and commensurate features were designed to benefit members of the expatriate population. In line with the thinking that emerged in concert with the Age of Enlightenment, the establishment of a network of official street names introduced a sense of order into what was otherwise nondescript space. In contrast – and the very existence of a contrast played a vital role in the formation of colonial imageries – the spatial structure of the indigenous districts was nondescript.

The dualistic urban structure that was created by colonial authorities is not only of historical significance. Rather, it has far-reaching implications for contemporary development efforts. After all, this is the structure that colonial authorities bequeathed to their indigenous heirs. Thus, it follows that it is the structure comprising the nucleus around which contemporary urban growth has

been occurring throughout the continent. With the demise of colonialism and the concomitant departure of the Europeans, one would have expected an end to the dualistic urban structure. This was certainly not the case. Instead, no sooner had the Europeans departed than they were replaced by elite members of the emerging bureaucracy. Accordingly, what used to be a dual urban structure characterized by a European and a native district became one containing an exclusive enclave for the socioeconomic elite and a district for the rest of society.

With considerable success, the indigenous leadership has jealously guarded the privileged enclaves of their European predecessors. Currently and generally speaking, these enclaves, complete with carefully written and conspicuously posted street- and place-names, exist as islands of spatial orderliness in an ocean of spatial chaos.[2] Figure 1, a photograph of a major intersection in Cameroon's commercial city, Douala, vividly captures this situation. Yet it would be an exaggeration if not sheer fabrication to say that complete spatial order is the order of the day in any part of urban sub-Saharan Africa. This is because even in the most ideal situations one finds streets that go by two or more names (Njoh, 2010). Usually, one of these names, the more popular one, is the one known to the urban residents while the other, the less popular one, appears in official records.

Toponymic inscription in British and French colonial sub-Saharan Africa

> It was a gardened city. A great number of the inhabitants spent their lives on the gardens, and the fountains and parks… around that city, just like all the cities we know, like Johannesburg for instance, grew up a shadow poverty and beastliness. A shanty town. Around that marvelous ordered city, another one of hungry and dirty and short-lived people. And one day the people of the outer city overran the inner one, and destroyed it (Lessing, 1972: 151).

The above words belong to a renowned novelist from segregated Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia). They suggest that toponymic constructs in that country were a consequence of both actual and conceptual spatial divisions. Conceptual spatial divisions determined actual spatial divisions, and vice versa. Zimbabwe was not unique in this regard. Rather, such divisions and contradictions constituted a ubiquitous feature of colonial Africa as a whole. We focus more intensely on the urban centres as opposed to peripheries in order to expose their binary and imaginative character as well as related associations and inherent ironies. Our empirical referents are the territories that came under the colonial orbit of Britain and France, the dominant colonial powers in the region.

An Anglophone glimpse

Embracing an anthropological qualitative insight, the generic language of colonial urbanism has been analyzed in some detail by Anthony King (1976). This insight served as a tool for understanding the sociospatial organization of the British colonial culture. By dwelling on key notions such as the 'cantonment', 'hill station', 'mall', and 'bungalow–compound complex', King illuminated the reliable connections between classifying terminological systems and the colonial space, conceived as a social, cultural, behavioural and perceptual space (King, 1976). However, when trying to move away from the colonial urban 'heart'/'centre' towards its colonized 'fringe'/'periphery', an equivalent account is lacking from King's study, especially from the indigenous point of view.

Another prominent account of indisputable historiographic value that sheds light on colonial urban space and toponymy is the 1922 work of Lord Frederick Lugard.[3] However, Lugard's work not only lacks critical perspective, but it also fails to include indigenous urban forms or

the perceptions of indigenous people of their settlements. In his comprehensive account, Lugard actually sought to establish the British colonial vision regarding political doctrines and economies, including the structure and terminologies of the colonial urban forms.

British colonial urbanism was mainly characterized by racial spatial segregation. The resultant spatial structure segregated Europeans from Africans by creating separate residential areas for the expatriate minority on elevated terrain. Officially, this racially segregated spatial structure was designed to promote public health. Public health as a pretext for racially segregated spatial structures throughout Africa was actually codified by planning law. For instance, Lugard's Township Ordinance of 1917 contained a health provision whose functioning, it was claimed, depended on racial spatial segregation. The concept of township as defined by the ordinance meant an area outside of the native administration and jurisdiction. This enclave was separately governed and reserved for Europeans and non-Europeans. The township was further sub-divided into smaller residential units, and served like the hub as opposed to the periphery of human settlements (Home, 1983; Lugard, 1922: 150–152; 1968: 163).

The notion of township as contained in Lugard's work is different from what obtained in apartheid South Africa. Paradoxically, the relevant literature seems to have ignored the essence of clarifying the distinction between the two. In apartheid South Africa the term 'township' usually referred to urban areas that were built on the periphery of towns and cities. These enclaves were usually set aside for non-whites. The apartheid policy of segregation was afforded legal cover by the Group Areas Act of 1950. Apart from the fact that the non-white areas were poorly equipped, they were sometimes turgid with large informal settlements (Mabin, 1992: 415). Moreover, in the local parlance, the term 'township' connotes 'suburb'.

An essential physical component of the Lugardian township was the 'greenbelt' or 'sanitary cordon'. This was typically an open space of at least 440 yards that served to separate European from African residential areas (Lugard, 1922: 148–149). The 440-yard minimum distance was based on the belief that such a distance was too great for malaria-causing mosquitoes to traverse. The aim, according to Lugard, was to create a distance that offered no 'resting-places' for mosquitoes (Home, 1997). Yet, not only was this stipulation arbitrary, it was inaccurate. The arbitrary nature of Lugard's prescription is borne out by the fact that one of Lugard's contemporaries, Professor WJ Simpson, renowned for his expertise in tropical medicine, had recommended a greenbelt of 300 yards between European and native residential areas in British East Africa in 1914 (see Simpson, 1915). Also, there is the fact that, some 15 or so years later, planners working on the Haifa Bay project in the 1930s documented the flight range of mosquitoes to be about 3 kilometres (Home, 1997: 148). Of course, it is clear that mosquitoes could actually be carried by the wind much farther.

One striking irony in the Lugardian scheme was the conspicuous absence from urban development plans of the indigenous town. Yet, rather early during the colonial era indigenous towns throughout sub-Saharan Africa had expanded and were encroaching upon the radial 'centre' of the colonial administrative, business and residential hub. Its peripheral position was not only in quantitative or physical terms. Rather, it had also to do with general neglect on the part of the colonial authorities. Particularly, as mentioned earlier, the towns were generally underserved by, or denied, basic infrastructure, services and amenities. There was also a problem of conceptual neglect as well. Failure to include such towns on colonial city maps constitutes a manifestation of this problem.[4] Thus, within the colonial mindset, the 'indigenous urbanite' was not conceptually an integral part of the 'city'. To the extent that this is true, it is safe to conclude, especially in the case of sub-Saharan Africa, that the 'other' (part of the) 'city' was also an object apart from the world. The *ville réelle*, in contrast to the *ville officielle*, was essentially marginalized and peripheralized. Representing the 'otherness' that stood in binary opposition to 'our' civilized spatial model, the

African indigenous town was considered – if we may borrow Achille Mbembe's words – 'the intractable, the mute, the abject, a failed and incomplete example of something else' (Mbembe, 2001: 1–4).

Its vociferous silence is noticeable in the colonial documentation, and if a reference or description was given to this seemingly constant and ultimate periphery, it was usually negative. In British Zanzibar, the British architect and town planner Henry Vaughan Lanchester suggested, in the 1920s, a blueprint for a layout of what he called the 'hutting grounds to the east' (Myers and Muhajir, forthcoming). This area was segregated from new European suburbs. At about the same time authorities were also launching sporadic attacks on the 'hutting' phenomenon in British colonial Lagos. And, in the discourse of toponymic inscription, Lagos gained notoriety in colonial circles for the many, albeit pejorative, names by which it was known. Some referred to it as 'a rubbish heap' (Wren, 1924: 10); 'a rabbit warren of shanties and rickety wooden "upstairs", awash with mud and garbage' (Leith-Ross, 1983: 85) and so on. In 1946, a report by the Lagos Town Planning Commission characterized the outlook of indigenous Yoruba cities as 'disgraceful', concluding that even Lagos, which had grown increasingly cosmopolitan, 'remains a Yoruba village with a village mentality' (Anon, 1946: 17). However, the generic terms 'slums' and 'squatter settlements', problematic and relational in themselves, dominated the colonial planning vocabulary especially after the Second World War.

A Francophone glimpse

A remarkable attribute of contemporary toponymic inscriptions in urban 'centres' as opposed to 'peripheries' in French colonial urbanism is their striking similarities to their British counterparts. This revelation is surprising considering the overt differences in colonial doctrines and administrative organization between both regimes in sub-Saharan Africa. The idea of a sociospatial and racial division through residential segregation prevailed in the French-speaking territories (including Belgian Congo). However, unlike the English-speaking colonies (including South Africa), racial residential segregation was enforced rather informally. Within this framework the urban 'centre' was the only part that was considered the 'real' and 'civilized' city. It was meant for the white population, while the urban 'periphery' was designated as the non-European zone.

In the French colonial cities such as Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), Brazzaville (Congo, PRC), Kayes (French Sudan, present-day Mali), and Dakar (Senegal), the neighbourhood of the expatriate population was called *Plateau*. The 'Plateaux' prototypes were designated and configured as the European administrative and residential district. Originally implying higher ground, this term, a key notion in the French colonial urban discourse, represented the ideals and the elitist dimension of the French presence in West Africa. Geographically, the Plateau as a preferred zone that was intended for the expatriate population was associated with public health considerations and with the tradition of military camps of the European colonial powers. These camps, especially overseas, were generally placed at a distance from the local population, as the cases of the British 'cantonment' (and 'Hill Station') in India or Sierra Leone show (Goerg, 1997; King, 1976). In the French case, topography was employed to symbolize the unequal distribution of sociopolitical power between the Europeans and the locals. The symbolic meaning of *Plateau* was particularly conspicuous in Niamey (Niger), where the European quarter that was so-named was in fact not at all established on higher ground. In Kayes, a few structures and the presence of only a small number of military and civilian French servicemen was enough to justify this name.[5] Subsequent to the demise of colonialism, these previously exclusive European enclaves became privileged urban spaces for the indigenous socioeconomic and politico–administrative elite.

Figure 2. A house at the corner of Street No. 5 and No. 8 in Dakar's Médina. The resident signposted it by hand, indicating his occupation (Photo: Liora Bigon).

In the French colonial urban discourse, the Plateau was often regarded as the 'European city' (*ville europèenne*) or 'white city' (*ville blanche*). Its African counterpart was branded the 'African city' (*ville africaine*), 'indigenous village' (*village indigène*), 'village of the blacks' (*village des noirs*), or 'indigenous quarter/neighbourhood' (*quartier indigène*). In North Africa it was also called the 'new city' (*ville nouvelle*), in order to distinguish it from the 'old city', or the 'traditional city', of the indigenous population.[6] The Plateau was also occasionally referred to as 'urban zone' (*zone urbaine*), while its African counterpart was called 'semi-urban zone' (*zone semi-urbaine*). In many places the European part of the city was called the 'residential zone' (*zone résidentielle*), even where it did not actually serve residential purposes. This contrasted with the 'African quarters/neighborhoods' (*quartiers africains*) (Winters, 1982: 141). In some cases the term *cité* was used in reference to the African district. This is quite ironic because it bears medieval connotations in French, as opposed to the term *ville* (city) (Topalov, 2012).

Through the usage of this terminology, the narrative of the colonizer, his urban practices, values and building standards were promoted as the ultimate and absolute ones. The 'periphery' of the colonized was crystallized as an antagonist, considered only partly urbanized or as an essentially rural sphere in relation to the white area. Official toponymic inscriptions such as street names were almost exclusively identified with the Plateaux. In early colonial Dakar, for instance, these consisted of commemorative names reflecting the imagery of the French sector alone (Faure, 1914: 148–154). If nothing else, this served to alienate the indigenous population from the city centre. Outside of Dakar's Plateau only the two streets that linked it to the surrounding area bore any official and signposted names. The names in this particular case are noteworthy for one reason. They were outside the norm of French colonial toponymic practices because they commemorated Africans. However, those so commemorated were two Senegalese leaders who had cooperated with the French regime during their territorial conquest initiatives. The Médina, a neighbouring quarter spartanly planned by the colonial administration in the 1910s to house the Dakarois, comprised numbered street names, which were not clearly signposted (Figure 2). Moreover, Dakar's Médina and certain areas of its Plateau were referred to by another informal set of names that

resulted from a 'bottom-up' naming process. These names were used by the autochthones (Bigon, 2008).

Similar to their British counterparts, colonial authorities in Dakar also conceptually and administratively excluded indigenous areas from the municipal borders. Also, as was the case in the British colonies, French colonial authorities sought to eliminate huts from urban areas and their vicinities. Here, authorities tolerated nothing but buildings of permanent (read, Eurocentric) materials or what they referred to as *les maisons en dur*. Perishable materials, or anything that was not considered as *en dur* (including mud, cloth, straw, cardboard, tarred carton and lattice-work) were considered illegal in the colonial urban centres. Outside their unofficial borders, in what gradually became *villages* (or *quartiers*) *indigènes*, regulations were less strict, and non-permanent building materials were allowed (Seck, 1970: 133).[7] By establishing two sets of laws for different regions sharing the same urban space, the development of the whole of the municipal area seemed unnecessary. However, despite all the efforts on the part of the colonial authorities, the straw-hut-landscape never entirely disappeared from these colonial towns. Considered as 'organic', 'spontaneous' and 'random', these sometimes improvised, but nevertheless contextually relevant structures, became the ultimate image of these towns (Loti, 1923: 8; Wittlesey, 1941: 629, 631).

By the period of decolonization the ever-growing gap between the European 'beautiful quarters' (*beaux quartiers*) and the African sprawl at the urban fringes (*bidonvilles*) became stark (Crépin, 1993: 69–82). The term 'bidonville', that is, a 'shanty town' or 'slum', referred to the temporary building materials that were used for traditional construction. The term is derived literally from the French *bidon*, meaning 'tin can'. It was originally associated with the empty oil containers that were abundant, and served as roofing material, especially in North Africa during the Second World War (Abu-Lughod, 1980: 330). This derogatory French term is also used nowadays for corrugated iron roofing sheets that are bought as an original product in use in sub-Saharan Africa today.

In place of the greenbelt employed by British colonial authorities, the French used the *cordon sanitaire.* Here, the purpose was to separate European from African districts. In the French colonial urban lexicon, the *cordon sanitaire* also goes under other appellations, including *zone interdite* or *zone non edificandi.* In practice, these zones actually assumed a variety of forms, such as a stadium (as in Dakar, Senegal), public parks (as in Rabat, Morocco), a dry creek (e.g. Niamey, Niger), lagoons (as in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire), river channels (as in Brazzaville, Congo, PRC) or some other geological barrier (as was the case in Moroccan cities such as Fez, Marrakesh, and Meknes). This dualistic racial, literal and physical structure only began to fall into disuse around 1945. Since the demise of colonialism, many such parochial terminologies have been replaced by global and more technical ones, as part of a general ideological change.

Postcolonial toponymic ambiguity: The case of Cameroon

In major cities and towns throughout the continent, the dualistic urban centres created by colonial authorities have evolved. This evolution has not helped the toponymic inscription problematic. While street signage exists in some gated communities and very few other zones, the nondescript areas have now grown, proliferated and usurped the small planned districts or the formerly European enclaves. Thus, privileged urban spaces complete with well-aligned, named, and conspicuously signed streets are now an exceeding rarity throughout the region. Yet it is difficult to miss the stark contrast between these privileged spaces and the 'unplanned' areas engulfing them. To the visitor, these areas appear 'nondescript', 'chaotic', and 'disorderly'. The residents of these cities see things differently. For them, getting around is never the problem a visitor may imagine. The resident sees names for streets and places where the visitor sees none. These names are engraved in the residents' shared mental imageries of their cities. The keyword here is 'shared', for

it is only because these imageries are shared that a taxi- or cab driver is able to know with certitude his passengers' destinations. Also, were these imageries not of the shared variety, it would be difficult to describe venues for business transactions or other social interaction. Yet, the importance of formalized toponyms cannot be discounted. At the same time, it is difficult to trivialize the sociopsychological implications of names commemorating non-Africans on African soil. These implications go beyond the more simplistic colonizer–colonized power relations.

To be sure, some of the colonial commemorative street names were re-commemorated after independence, though their colonial name is actually still preferred by the urban inhabitants.[8] This has created another barrage of problems of their own, not least of which is the phenomenon of streets or places going by multiple names. In South Africa, the problem of multiple names per street in some cases has been engendered by the country's defunct apartheid system (Coetzee and Cooper, 2007). Although this system resulted in streets and places with multiple names, it was an effort on the part of the post-apartheid government to purge the country's built environment of 'politically incorrect names'. This problem is not unique to South Africa. Rather, it is a ubiquitous feature of the urban landscape throughout the region. Typically, a street or place would go by two names. The one is often official while the other is often unofficial but more popular.

Our fieldwork in Cameroon provides further support for this assertion. In town after town we noticed streets with multiple names whether signposted or not. In the country's national capital, Yaoundé, a major street such as Avenue John Ngu Foncha is more popularly known as Nkom Nkana. In the same city, the street shown on the official urban plan and signposted as Rue 1.750 is known by locals as Nouvelle Route Bastos. In Douala, the country's chief commercial city, a major street was officially changed from Rue Njoh Njoh to Rue Soppo Priso in the 1990s. However, locals continue to refer to it by its former name despite the fact that the street signpost and official records have, since the 1990s, referred to it as Rue Soppo Priso. In some older parts of Douala the toponymic inscription problem is borne of sheer neglect. For instance, in New Bell, which was established by German colonial authorities as a residential district for native-foreigners, the street signs are faded and barely visible. The metal posts bearing them appear to have taken more than their own share of abuse. In almost every case, the post is twisted and either lying on, or barely sustained at an irregular angle to, the ground.

In Limbé, one of the country's oldest cities along the Atlantic Ocean, the toponymic problematic is of a different genre. Based on Eurocentric accounts, Limbé was founded in 1858 by Alfred Saker, a British Baptist missionary. The town was named Victoria in honour of Queen Victoria of England. The town went under that name from its founding to 1982. In fact, despite its colonial roots, some Anglophone Cameroonians of the older generation prefer to refer to the town as Victoria. This bolsters the assertion that place names create and maintain emotional attachments to places (Rose-Redwood, 2010). Despite the town's neatly configured orthogonal street pattern, few streets have signposted names (Figure 3). Yet, from a 'bottom-up' perspective, there is hardly any nameless street throughout the city.

Some 16 kilometres from Limbé on the way to Douala, is a major junction town with an estimated population of 70,000 known as Mutengene. This town's morphology and fabric are particularly interesting for their toponymic implications. The town boasts neither a neatly configured street pattern nor paved streets. The buildings bear barely visible hand-scribbled letters and numbers (see Figure 4). These have been inscribed by the local electrical power provider for billing record-keeping purposes. Mutengene is a veritable testament to our earlier observation that where a visitor may see chaos and disorder the locals see an unmistakably well-defined space. It has six major streets – Buea Road, Tiko Road and Limbé Road (all highways), and Electric Line Buea Road, Electric Line Tiko Road and Electric Line Limbé Road – and several minor streets, none of which is signposted.

Figure 3. A panorama of the orthogonal street layout of Limbé. Notice the absence of any official street signage (Photo: Liora Bigon).

Anyone used to an unambiguous built space is likely to ponder how one ever navigates the nondescript built space characteristic of urban centres in Cameroon and other African countries. In such places, knowledge of the popular as opposed to the official name of streets and places is necessary. In Yaoundé, for instance, an individual wishing to travel by taxicab from one part of the city to the street officially known as Avenue John Ngu Foncha would do well to tell the cab driver to take him/her to Nkom Nkana (between la Société Nationale des Eaux du Cameroun (SNEC) and Carrefour Madagascar) in Tsinga. Here, as implied above, the cab driver is likely unaware that Avenue John Ngu Foncha is the official name of rue Nkom Nkana. Yet the problem is not only about streets going by multiple names. In some cases the problem is with multiple streets going by one name. The case of Ndamukong Street is illustrative (Njoh, 2010). A main paved street and several minor streets on both sides of this street in Bamenda, Cameroon's third largest city, are known as Ndamukong Street.

Cameroon's toponymic inscription problem is not limited to the absence of street/place names. Rather, it possesses a linguistic dimension. The country is officially bilingual, with French and English – a legacy of its colonial heritage – as its official languages. However, the country's bilingual status is largely in theory as most official business is conducted solely in French. Similarly, signs throughout the Francophone zone (i.e. four-fifths) of the country are solely in French. In addition, highway signs throughout most of the country, including the Anglophone zone, are also solely in French. This renders the navigation of built space difficult for most of the country's population, especially Anglophones without knowledge of written French.

In all fairness to authorities in Cameroon, they have taken some steps to ameliorate the country's toponymic problematic. The earliest recorded initiative in this regard includes the 1971 Circular establishing the street/place-naming criteria throughout the country. The Circular effectively charged municipal authorities with the task of christening places and streets (Njoh, 2010; Farvacque-Vitkovic et al., 2005). A second initiative in this regard concerned the designation of a

Figure 4. An example of the signage system of Mutengene, as inscribed in white chalk by authorities of Société Nationale de l'Electricité du Cameroun (SONEL), the quasi-national electricity corporation in Cameroon (Photo: Liora Bigon).

special governmental agency in charge of toponymic inscription in the nation's urban centres. The 1990s witnessed the entry of international development agencies in the country's toponymic inscription arena. Noteworthy in this connection was the World Bank's targeting of physical addressing and property identification problems as part of its broader country-specific development programme of 1992 (Njoh, 2010).[9]

Conclusion

We have scrutinized a variety of problems related to toponymic inscriptions in present-day urban Africa in terms of their nature and extent in an era of globalization. By tracing the direct relation of some of these problems to the British and French colonial legacies and their dualistic urban legacies, we have shown that urban space throughout Africa is a product of the continent's rich but complex history.

In spite of the overt difference between the two dominant colonizing powers in terms of administration, ideologies and political doctrines, as well as their different linguistic backgrounds, the British and French toponymic systems shared similar semantic motifs regarding colonial urban

space. These motifs reflected an imaginative process of 'othering' and 'peripherializing' the colonized populations and their settlement perceptions and organization.

Presently, it is the formerly colonial 'periphery', that is, the constantly growing informal part of the city, that is home to a cross-section of the population, including members of the middle class. In contrast to the privileged space of the elite, this part of the city is typically nondescript – replete with named but 'sign-less' streets. Many areas in this part of the city have street lights that are hardly lit, signs that are more often leaning at awkward angles to the ground than vertically erect. In the midst of what a stranger may consider chaos and disorder, people appear to be going about their business with facility. Yet the need for an unambiguous system of street/place and property identification in this era of globalization cannot be overstated.

Funding

Notes

1. While the practical meaning of the concept urban management is generally agreed upon by urbanists, its definition remains controversial (Mattingly, 1994; Stern, 1993). As a branch of study, toponyms – from the Greek word *topos* (i.e. 'place') and *onomia* (i.e. 'name') – has interrogated street- and place-names for several reasons, but particularly as 'signifiers of wider social trends' (Yeoh, 1996: 298).
2. We are aware of the fact that postcolonial urban mapping gradually incorporates toponyms of quarters beyond the European residential zones, central business districts and the African quarters that were planned by the colonizers in their proximity (such as Poto-Poto in Brazzaville, Cocody in Abidjan, New Bell in Douala and Dakar's Médina). These were traditionally mapped by the colonizers by the 1930s. Yet still, because of the fact that slum and squatter settlements can reach to 80 per cent of the total urban areas under question, only the names of the main roads are normally indicated in current mapping.
3. Lugard was the first High Commissioner of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria (1900–1906), Governor of Hong Kong (1907–1912), and Governor General of colonial Northern and Southern Nigeria (1912–1919).
4. See, for instance, relevant maps from the 1910s of Nigerian cities: National Archives of Nigeria (Ibadan): SCO 26, 14623, Classification of townships under the Township Ordinance, 1917; The British Archives (London): CO 1047/659, Plan of the Town of Forcados, Southern Nigeria, 1910; Rhodes House (Oxford): Papers about the removal of the capital of the Northern Province, 1914–16. MSS. Brit. Emp. S. 99, 1: 1914–16.
5. Royal Commonwealth Society Collection, Cambridge UK, CASE A59, *Senegambie-Niger reports: Reports to the Governor General from local officials*, Vol. 4 (5 Vols): Cercle de Kayes.
6. For the difference between the North African 'old city' (*casbah, médina*) and the 'traditional city' in relation to the European 'new city' see Hamadeh, 1992.
7. See also: Archives Nationales du Sénégal, Dakar, NS H22, l'Hygiène à Dakar, 1919–1920 (in: Rapport sur l'hygiène à Dakar de 1899–1920, pp.354–355).
8. We noticed that regarding Avenue Roume in Dakar (after one of the early governors-general of French West Africa), in popular use instead of Avenue Senghor (after the first Senegalese president upon independence). Alternatively, 'Coco Bar' is popularly preferred on 'Carrington Crescent' in central Lagos.
9. For similar reforms in Conakry's toponymic inscription introduced by the World Bank see Goerg, 2012.

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