

Personal names and power: Binary personal naming system of the Baatombu people in Nigeria and Republic of Benin

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Personal names and power: Binary personal naming system of the Baatombu people in Nigeria and Republic of Benin

Abstract: The paper explores the unique personal naming system of the Baatombu people. The Baatombu, an indigenous group located in Nigeria and Republic of Benin, have developed a binary naming system that categorizes names into two distinct categories, A or B. This paper aims to understand the cultural and social significance of this naming system within the Baatombu community. Through an in-depth analysis of interviews and field observations, the author uncovers the underlying principles and factors that determine whether a name falls under category A or B. The paper also examines the implications and symbolism embedded in these

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binary categories and how they contribute to the cultural identity and social structure of the Baatombu people. This study sheds light on the intricate relationship between personal names, cultural practices, and social dynamics, offering insights into the Baatombu's unique perspective on personal identity and community cohesion.

Keywords: Onomastics and power, African naming system and identity, Baatombu people in Nigeria and Republic of Benin.

Noms personnels et pouvoir: Le système binaire de dénomination personnelle du peuple Baatombu au Nigeria et en République du Bénin

Résumé : Cet article explore le système unique d'attribution de noms personnels du peuple Baatombu. Les Baatombu, un groupe indigène situé au Nigeria et en République du Bénin, ont développé un système de dénomination binaire qui classe les noms en deux catégories distinctes, A ou B. Cet article vise à comprendre la signification culturelle et sociale de ce système de dénomination au sein de la communauté Baatombu. Grâce à une analyse approfondie des entretiens et des observations sur le terrain, l'auteur découvre les principes et les facteurs sous-jacents qui déterminent si un nom appartient à la catégorie A ou B. L'article examine également les implications et le symbolisme de ces catégories binaires et la façon dont elles contribuent à l'identité culturelle et à la structure sociale du peuple Baatombu. Cette étude met en lumière la relation complexe entre les noms personnels, les pratiques culturelles et la dynamique sociale, offrant un aperçu de la perspective unique des Baatombu sur l'identité personnelle et la cohésion de la communauté.

Mots-clés : Onomastique et pouvoir, Système d'appellation et identité africaine, peuple Baatombu au Nigeria et en République du Bénin.

Personennamen und Macht: Das binäre Personennamensystem des Baatombu-Volkes in Nigeria und der Republik Benin

Zusammenfassung: Der Beitrag untersucht das einzigartige Personennamensystem des Baatombu-Volkes. Die Baatombu, eine indigene Gruppe in Nigeria und der Republik Benin, haben ein binäres Namenssystem entwickelt, das die Namen in zwei verschiedene Kategorien einteilt, A oder B. Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es, die kulturelle und soziale Bedeutung dieses Namenssystems innerhalb der Baatombu-Gemeinschaft zu verstehen. Durch eine eingehende Analyse von Interviews und Feldbeobachtungen deckt die Autorin die zugrundeliegenden Prinzipien und Faktoren auf, die bestimmen, ob ein Name in die Kategorie A oder B fällt. Die Arbeit untersucht auch die Implikationen und die Symbolik, die in diese binären Kategorien eingebettet sind, und wie sie zur kulturellen Identität und sozialen Struktur des Baatombu-Volkes beitragen. Die Studie beleuchtet die komplizierte Beziehung zwischen Personennamen, kulturellen Praktiken und sozialer Dynamik und bietet Einblicke in die einzigartige Perspektive der Baatombu auf persönliche Identität und Gemeinschaftszusammenhalt.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Onomastische und Macht, Afrikanisches Namenssystem und Identität, Baatombu-Volk in Nigeria und der Republik Benin.

1. Introduction

Personal names identify individuals, but they are not the individuals themselves. They serve as labels that match individuals in the right contexts. In African cultures, personal names are often used to communicate various shades of meanings and identities, and the Baatombu people are no exception. When Baatombu people name individuals, they consider aspects of their indigenous cultural knowledge and experiences.

This research paper uses ethnographic field reports conducted by the researcher in Baatonuland, located in Baruten LGA of Kwara State in Nigeria and northern Republic of Benin, between 2018, 2020, and 2021 to propose a theory for the personal names of the Baatombu people. Unlike previous studies, such as [Schottman \(2000\)](#), which focuses on describing the “*gɔɔbiru*” (or “inheritable title names”) of the people, and [Fakuade et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Williams \(2021\)](#), which emphasize the uses and grammatical structure of personal names of the people, respectively, this paper explains how the personal names of the Baatombu people portray the power structure in Baatombu society and why the identity and status of a Baatonum can be predicted by their Baatombu personal name. Other researchers, such as [Ojo & Bio \(2018\)](#) and [Adekunle \(1993\)](#), have also remarked about Baatombu personal names, albeit from a social historical perspective. None of these studies have presented the current subject in such a synchronous manner. Details of the aforementioned authors’ scholarly contributions to the personal names of the Baatombu people and how theirs differ from the current paper have been reviewed in section three of this paper.

This paper aims to show that Baatombu personal names index social class identity, genealogy, and power; and describes the class, genealogy, and power indexation in an anthroponymy framework. The paper investigates both the everyday names of the people it finds as belonging to three main elite groups and a fourth group which comprises ordinary Baatombu people. The paper organizes these names together into an anthroponymy template to illustrate vividly the class sensitivity, genealogy, and power relations of the people.

This paper posits that one could predict whether a Baatonum belongs to one of the at least three elite dynastic classes or the bottom commoner population by their personal name. Our field participants aver that Baatombu names could be even more informative, such as helping one to trace the identity of the bearer down to their village or family. The paper reveals why this is so, because of the deep-rooted class-consciousness of the people’s tradition and unique family and dynastic names. Thus, contrary to the Western ideology of taking a sarcastic stance at the famous question of William Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*, “what is in a name?”, this paper argues that there is something in a Baatombu personal name.

2. The land and people of Baatombu

Baatombu people are predominant in two West African countries – that is, Kwara State in Nigeria and northern Republic of Benin. According to [Ojo & Bio \(2018: 21\)](#), pockets of Baatombu people are also natives of Togo and other adjacent West African countries. According to [Schottman \(2000: 79\)](#), Baatombu people in Republic of Benin make up one-twelfth of the population and occupy almost the entire northern part of the country.

In Nigeria, the people are predominant in Baruten (Barutem) Local Government Area of Kwara State, north central, Nigeria, where they constitute over 90 percent of the population of the people living there. Most of the Baatombu people in Nigeria migrated from Parakou areas and Nikki dynasty in present day Republic of Benin.

The Baatombu people in Nigeria share boundary north of Baruten (Barutem) with Hausa-Fulani and Dendi people, west by Nikki kingdom in Republic of Benin, east by Kaiama and Moshi river – which is a tributary of River Niger, and south by Oyo empire (or the Yoruba people).

According to the 2006 Nigeria's census figure, the Baatombu people in Nigeria constitute a total population of 209,459 thousand people. These are spread in four administrative districts coming through the British colonial era. They include Ilesha district in the south with Ilesha as head, Gwanara district in the west with Gwanara as head, Okuta district in central with Okuta as head and Yashikira district in the north with Yashikira as head. Each of the districts is headed by a district chief called emir.

Baatombu people in Nigeria trace their origin and history through two major sources. The well-known one is the migration from Parakou and Nikki areas in Republic of Benin, where they spread out to Nigeria. From [Adekunle \(1993: 221\)](#), the migration to Nigeria may have occurred around 1754. Through focus group discussions, we learned that the migrations to Nigeria may have been caused by leadership tussles, a desire for adventure and independence, and to hunt and farm away from home.

The more famous and controversial origin of the Baatombu ruling class is the migration of one Kisra, a Persian revolutionary who feared Muslim persecution in Mecca and exiled himself from the middle east around the seventh century AD for Africa, crossed the Sahara desert and settled with his descendants, known as the Wassangari, in the defunct Borgu area – which today include Nikki kingdom in Republic of Benin and parts of Kwara, Niger, and Kebbi States in north central Nigeria (see [Ojo & Bio 2018: 3–4](#); [Adekunle 2008: 436](#); [Hussaini 2006: 25](#); [Akinwumi 1999: 216](#); [Adekunle 1993: 70–121](#); [Stewart 1980: 51](#)). [Stewart \(1980: 51\)](#) avers that the Kisra legend “vary in detail” according to the part of Borgu that tells the story. Meanwhile, [Hussaini \(2006: 25\)](#) believes that the Kisra stories are far from being the same. Today Kisra or his Wassangari descendants, who, according to [Adekunle \(2008: 436\)](#)

“became dynastic founders, thereby reconfiguring Baatombu politics and society, are regarded as the eponymous ancestors” of the Baatombu people.

Baatombu people are class conscious. According to [Ojo & Bio \(2018: 28\)](#), the main components of today Baatombu society are the Aboriginal Baatombu, known as the *Baatɔn Geebu* (or ‘the true Baatombu’), and the Wassangari, who came and integrated with the Aboriginal population. Below these two is the large commoner population. Political power is centralized and stratified first among the politically conscious Kisra’s Wassangari descendants and secondly among the Aboriginal clans. Meanwhile, the larger indigenous commoner population make up the third and fourth tiers – as would be discussed.

According to Baatombu oral tradition and culture, wherever the Wassangari princes and Aboriginal gentry had settled among the vast commoner population, the Wassangari princes first had taken over the leadership of the place from their hosts; and where their hosts had resisted, the invaders had often emerged victorious. In some cases, the hosts had voluntarily surrendered to the princes’ authority as custom demanded of the hosts. Baatombu oral history had it that there were also leadership conflicts and civil wars among the princes themselves and between the princes and other elite houses, such as the priesthood and courtiers houses.

Kisra’s legend and his Wassangari descendants, the Nikki areas to Nigeria migrations, and the people’s first contacts with Islam and Christianity around the sixteenth century AD (see [Fakuade et al. 2018: 134](#)) brought about Wassangari birth ranked names – as claimed by some natives –; Wassangari Sudanic warriors names, Islamic clerics and merchants names, Muslim names, and European Christian names – through Christian missionaries who exploited the Gando caste (the fourth tier or lowest of the Baatombu commoner population) and strict class system of the people to introduce Christian and European names to the population.

Through interviews and focus group discussion, we gathered that the Baatombu people called themselves or their ethnicity *Baatombu* (plural), and a member of the ethnicity is a *Baatonum* (singular). The suffix *-tombu* in the former is the plural form of the suffix *-tonum* in the latter. The people speak a Gur family Niger Congo language they also called *Baatonum*.

Our field participants report that the Baatombu people, their language, and land have been known by alternative names given to them by other ethnolinguistic groups who are their neighbours and the government of Nigeria (the names by the latter were as a result of graphological errors). For instance, the Yoruba people of Nigeria call both the Baatombu people and their language as *Bariba* or *Baruba*. These words, however, mean nothing in Baatonum, and are considered offensive by the people. The Hausa/Fulani people refer to the Baatombu people as *Borgawa* (derived from *Borgu*, the erstwhile region of the people predating British colonial era). Other alternative names, either referring to the people, their land, or language found in the literature are *Batonu*, *Batonum*, *Baruten*,

Bariba, and *Baruba*. In other situations, the words *Baatonum*, *Batonu* or *Baatonu* have each been used to refer to either the people, their language, or their land.

In this paper, we have decided to refer to the Baatombu people by their indigenous nomenclatures to preserve indigenous knowledge, and to show that the people use different words to refer to themselves, land, and language. In other words, *Baatombu* is how the people call themselves and their ethnicity, and *Baatonum* is how they call their language and a member of the ethnicity.

As for the land, which is common in Nigeria's public space and documents as *Baruten* (the people would have preferred it spelled and pronounced *Barutem* – Hussaini 2015), we have used the term *Baatonuland* to identify the geographical area of the people encompassing Nigeria and Republic of Benin. After all, *Barutem* translates as 'Baatonuland' or the 'land of the Baatombu people' in English. We opted for the term *Baatonuland* instead of *Baruten* (*Barutem*) because the latter is often used to describe the area in Nigeria alone. Since this research encompasses the personal names of the people in the two West African countries, we have used *Baatonuland* as the ideal and also unifying nomenclature.

3. Theoretical framework and methodology

There is the challenge of a common framework for African anthroponymy. The best researchers have done is propose a framework modelled around political or temporal events on the continent. Ngubane & Thabethe (2013) and Saarelma-Maunumaa (2003) were inspired by the continent's colonial past to propose a tripartite and a four-tier typological framework respectively. Ngubane & Thabethe (2013) postulate a precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial typological framework. Saarelma-Maunumaa (2003) uses pre-colonialism, colonialism, post-colonialism and Renaissance in her temporal classificatory framework. Both Saarelma-Maunumaa (2003) and Ngubane & Thabethe (2013) based their studies on Namibian and South African anthroponyms respectively.

Both studies explain the terminologies for their framework loosely and literally, that names borne by Africans before the white man's annexation of the continent were "pre-colonialism" names. Those given to Africans during the white man's rule, names influenced by the white man's culture, were called "colonialism" names. "Post-colonialism" names were nativized foreign names, and "renaissance" names were names signifying the return to African native names.

Yet, a political or temporal classificatory framework of African names shows little of the metaphors deeply rooted in African names. There is need for an Afrocentric classificatory framework. We shall call the framework "anthropologically-based". That way, we have separated it from the political or temporal framework, which says less of the import of names to the African.

Unlike the political or temporal type, the anthropologically-based type

reveals the metaphors deeply rooted in the African name, echoing the value of a name to the African, because African names are often drawn from theophoric, cognitive, and social experiences of the people. Such a framework easily aligns with the indexicality or descriptive theory of names, which sees names as meaningful linguistic terms, rather than mere referential or causal expressions (Zabeeh 2012: 9–37).

Scholars may not have yet use the nomenclature “anthropologically-based framework” in the literature of African onomastics or devised an anthropological continental framework to describe personal names of the continent, there are studies across the continent on distinct cultures of Africa which shows the prospect of such a framework. Some examples are Ansu-Kyeremeh (2000: 21–22) for Bono culture; Ogie (2002: 6–28) for Edo; Ansa & Okon (2014: 85–89) for Efik; and Fakuade et al. (2019: 251–271) for Yoruba.

Each of the aforementioned cultures shows categories found among Baatombu personal names. But none in particular could be said to have captured the peculiar case of the Baatombu people. Thus, finding an anthropologically-based anthroponyms formula to ably describe the Baatombu people’s unique personal names and showing how this captures at a glance the onomastic power dynamics at play in Baatombu society are the main issues of this paper.

The author would like to acknowledge the groundwork of Schottman (2000: 79–106) on Baatombu anthroponymy. Schottman describes the concept of “gɔɔbiru” (or “inheritable title names”) as practiced by the Baatombu people. He observes that there are two types of gɔɔbiru institutions, and that when a Baatombu child is born into one of the Wassangari or Aboriginal aristocratic families, he or she acquires a gɔɔbiru name befitting of their family status and based on the bearer’s characteristics of birth (Schottman 2000: 79–106). Schottman also corroborates oral accounts obtained in the field that the bearer of a gɔɔbiru name, when they turn adults, are at liberty to continue with the name or abandon it for another name that befits their new status in the community (Schottman 2000: 79–80).

However, field accounts say that the bearer of a gɔɔbiru name would be identified by the name during festivals and other kinds of traditional ceremonies within the community – even if they go by a different name as adults. Our field sources affirm Schottman’s (2000: 79) position that the “gɔɔbiru” or “inherited title names” are of two types – kingly and commoner. our respondents say further that the fact that one of the institutions is commoner does not mean that same is non-elite. They say that the two terms are used to differentiate one from the other. In other words, the two institutions are considered elitist in Baatombu culture, that the kingly gɔɔbiru institution plans the title names for the little Wassangari princes and princesses of Baatombu; and the commoner gɔɔbiru plans the names for the children of the Aboriginal elite clan houses, priesthood clans, and palace advisers to the kings of Baatombu. We also learned that since the gɔɔbiru title names are inheritable, it is believed that the child would someday inherit the service of their parents to the king and the community.

As for the children of the rest of the mass of Baatombu people, the so-called third and fourth tiers, according to Baatombu culture, these do not enjoy such titular names. They are relegated to bear everyday names from the culture as befitting of their status in the Baatombu society. It was said that when a Baatombu child is born, the community already knows their status in the community. Thus, onomastics plays a major role in helping to create this awareness of class power.

Whereas [Schottman](#)'s work focuses on the *gòobiru* ("inherited title names") and describes their traditional characteristics, especially the kingly type, [Ojo & Bio \(2018: 9–10\)](#) identify three categories of Baatombu personal names – such as names in appreciation of idols and festivals, birth ranked names, and commemorative names. [Adekunle \(1993: 61–62\)](#), in his social historical dissertation of the Baatombu people, opines that the Baatombu anthroponymy system "follows strictly the order of birth and clearly reflects the patrilineal social system". He lists the birth ranked names and adds that Baatombu personal names serve as social "repositories of clan history". [Fakuade et al. \(2018: 148\)](#) identify lineage names, birth ranked names, circumstantial names, and idolatry names; and investigate the use of these names in and outside Baatombu society by the people.

What these studies all have in common is that they acknowledged the availability of a social and cultural order to personal naming among the Baatombu people and attempted to interpret this order using different terminologies and typologies. For [Schottman](#), it was the *gòobiru* social order that was fascinating. However, a focus on such names alone does little justice to other types of elite personal names and lower commoners personal names. One would be right to say [Schottman](#)'s thesis was more elitist thus incomprehensive in its attempt at showing the link between personal names and power in Baatombu society.

[Adekunle](#)'s statement that Baatombu personal names follow "strictly the order of birth and clearly reflects the patrilineal social system" is also arguable. Order of birth (or birth ranked) names in Baatombu culture are matrilineal and are often affixed to other name categories to distinguish between two individuals or genders bearing identical names (e.g., Woru-Mora vs. Sabi-Mora or Yon-Ganni vs. Woru-Ganni respectively (see [Williams 2021: 15–16](#)), there are other classes of indigenous names borne by the people. Yet we agree with his thesis that Baatombu names are mnemonics of family histories. [Ojo & Bio \(2018: 9–10\)](#) and [Fakuade et al. \(2018: 148\)](#) were able to group Baatombu names together into types. But their approach, like the others, did not account for the binary power structure personal names exemplify among the Baatombu people.

This paper uses survey method through qualitative sources via direct interviews and focus group discussions conducted by the researcher in Nigeria and Republic of Benin between 2018 and 2021 (except for 2019 and early 2020 when the researcher stayed back to observe COVID-19 protocols) – in addition to written sources about Baatombu history and culture, such as [Ojo & Bio \(2018\)](#), [Hussaini \(2003, 2006, 2015\)](#), and [Adekunle \(1993, 2008\)](#), etc. – to

present its arguments. In addition to collecting names from the natives and school registers, some of the published works contain a list of Baatombu personal names which the author also sampled. These are g̃õbiru birth ranked and circumstantial names from Schottman (2000), birth ranked and missionary names from Fakuade et al. (2018), and Wassangari clan and other names from Hussaini (2003, 2006) and Williams (2021: 14–26).

The people interviewed or spoken to for this research were local historians, princes, kings of Baatombu royal monarchy, the priesthood, and commoners, so to say. Apart from the priesthood where a female priestess of the Sambani cult was interviewed at Gbeguru village in Republic of Benin, respondents were mostly adult males. This is as the people are mostly Muslims and it is normal for a male researcher to desire observing the Islamic tradition of limiting contact with the opposite gender – as not speaking with women would not have in any way affected the issues discussed in this paper. The adult male respondents were carefully selected on the recommendation of other informed adult male denizens. They were between 35 years old and above and residents in the culture.

We held focus group discussion/interview at Komiquea and the king's palace at Parakou in Republic of Benin. We met with Baatombu academics at University Ilorin, Nigeria to discuss the subject and then travelled to Baruten (Barutem) to meet with the kings and elders of several communities including the Aboriginal towns of Kenu 1 and 2 and the Wassangari towns of Gberebereru and Yashikiru among others, and held discussions with Baatombu famous historian and author Alhaji Lafia Hussaini, himself a Wassangari descendant by his first-name, at his residence in Shia. Alhaji Hussaini guided the researcher to Republic of Benin for the field work there, and also was the interpreter. Interviews and focus group discussions were often held in the palace of the head of a community – or at the residence/office of (a) participant(s). Denizens often converge in the palace or public place to listen to the discussions. There were over a dozen interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Nigeria and Republic of Benin. Interviews were one-on-one and group discussions ranged from three to as much as ten participants and lasted for at least an hour per day for several days.

Focus group discussions/interviews were semi-structured, qualitative, as well as open ended. Respondents were at liberty to express themselves and dictated the order in which the questions follow one another. The technique puts participants little above the researcher, who led them from behind, ensuring that they remained within the planned scope of the discussion. The sessions were held in English, or Baatonum and English where an interpreter was needed.

The qualitative data was tested on randomly selected Baatombu people in different locations and personal observations were also conducted in the communities, to sharpen the theoretical strength of the arguments raised in this paper, whether or not they are still valid in contemporary Baatombu society. For instance, we discovered through one of our experiments that a person bearing a Christian name or a European name is most likely a Baatombu commoner of

the lowest or fourth tier. Or that a person bearing a name like *Deeru*, *Kaano*, or *Yenu* among others is a Baatombu female and most likely a member of the Aboriginal elite clan; and a name such as *Meyemi*, *KomiLafia*, and *Woore* (female) among others identifies the bearer as likely a member of the Kenubu elite clan, etc. The results of the experiments show that the people were still status or class-conscious and personal names are one of the media they use to show this.

4. Data presentation and discussion

4.1. A binary inventory of Baatombu personal names

We have stated that the Baatombu people are historically class-conscious. This is evidenced in the anthropological naming system in Figure 1 below. Some names are Close (set A) and others are Open (set B). Close names identify the politically powerful Wassangari and Aboriginal elite, such as the monarchy, palace courtiers, and priesthood; whereas Open names are borne by the non-elite, such as the mass of the people.

As previously reported from Baatombu social historical works, such as [Stewart \(1980\)](#), [Akinwumi \(1999\)](#), and [Ojo & Bio \(2018\)](#), bearers of Kingly names (Wassangari dynastic founders) were descendants of a lineage of kings linked to the Kisra legend and the Nikki monarchy. The Aboriginal elite branch comprises of names of palace chiefs, courtiers, priests, and advisers to the monarchy. These enjoy special privileges in the kingdom, such as being part of the king's council. Some of them were the offspring of the earliest Kenubu clan migrants to Nigeria from Republic of Benin or the first elite Beninese-Nigerian aborigines before they abdicated political authority to the Wassangari princes of Nikki monarchy in Nigeria. [Adekunle \(2008: 436\)](#) opines that the original Aboriginal monarchy of Nikki kingdom had abdicated political authority to the first Wassangari warriors, who were migrants from Sudan and other parts of Africa. He says that the Aboriginal elite and the Wassangari migrants joined their families together via marriages. The Wassangari also have an Islamic missionary branch who were the first Islamic clerics to enter Baatonuland from Senegal, Mali (e.g., Mane, Toure, and Turuwere names), and Niger.

The Priesthood elite branch of names was reserved for the lineage of Aboriginal priests. These were healers, soothsayers, and idolaters. The Courtiers elite branch were Aboriginal palace chiefs who excelled in activities such as blacksmithing, music, and hunting. According to Baatombu culture, these names and titles were hereditary, hence it was a thing of joy for parents to bestow such names and titles to their children. As for the mass of the people, they compensate with birth ranked and circumstantial names, according to the culture. Birth ranked names too were either open or closed types. Circumstantial names were either taboo or connoting blessedness. A bearer of a taboo name, according to the

culture, was a half-caste – likewise their heirs. A blessed name commemorates an event, a notable individual, or the supernatural.

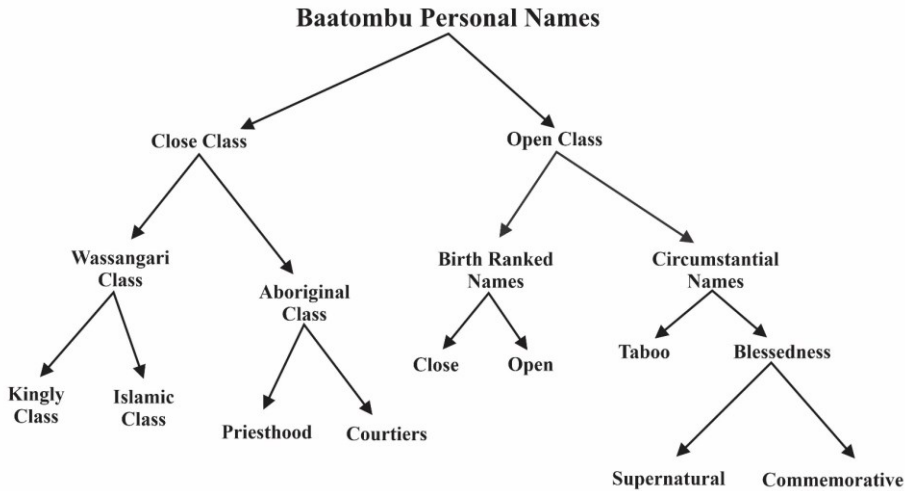


Figure 1: A binary inventory of Baatombu personal names

Given the low prestige attached to open birth ranked and circumstantial names, random tests conducted in the field show that it was rare for a prince, princess, high- or low-born to take pride in them within the community, even though every Baatombu child traditionally got a naturally selected birth ranked name as a *gòobiru* or a member of the culture. We observe that the elite would rather bear Arabic (sounding) names and Baatombu names that reveal their high social status in the community than bear a birth ranked or a *gòobiru* name. We find that the erstwhile tradition of the people of appending a birth ranked name to a clan name (e.g., *Woru-Mora*, *Bio-Gberu*, *Sabi-Yeruma*, etc.) was also fading away. Otherwise such permutations of names were used to show the bearer's status in the society vis-à-vis their matrilineal birth rank, and to distinguish between people of the same elite houses. We discover that, the elite would rather take off the birth ranked appendages from the name, leaving only the root, which is the house or clan name. However, we notice some form of cultural onomastic renaissance outside the immediate Baatombu community, including among Baatombu public figures who did not have a dignified Baatombu surname, that they identified and used birth ranked names mostly as middle names as a medium of identification with their ethnicity. The culturally elite Baatombu, who had an elite surname already, may not have need for this, since the surname already indexed both their social status and their ethnicity.

We find that a Baatonum was most likely to go by these names, for example (surname first and first/middle name last): *Abdullahi*, *Abdulhamid*; *Adamu*, *Jamilah Bake*; and *Alhasan*, *Abubakar Sabi*. Similar examples are

Yaru, Muhammad Amin; Kperogi, Farouq; and David, Esther Bona (see [Fakuade et al. 2018: 150–152](#)). We observe that of all these persons, *Yaru* and *Kperogi* were most likely of elite social status. *David Esther* was most likely of the Aboriginal commoner population. But we could not clearly index the social status of persons with Arabic surnames and first names, until we had asked them to tell us their native or family name. This leads to another observation we had testing our data in the field and that was: Arabic names appeared to conceal the social identity of Baatombu people to outsiders, and also equalized and levelled up Baatombu people regardless of social status. We think from this finding that it was the Baatombu of the Aboriginal commoner class that were the most beneficiary of this onomastic leveler via Arabic names. [Fakuade et al. \(2018: 141–146\)](#) find that desire for economic opportunities, religious beliefs, and perception that Baatombu names were idolatry were the cause of the surge in Arabic names across all social strata of Baatombu society. Meanwhile, [Ojo & Bio \(2018: 10\)](#) blame the practice on globalization.

4.2. Illustration of the binary inventory

4.2.1. Close class (set A)

Field reports indicate that these are royal genealogical names, that there are three main types namely, Wassangari class ([Tables 1, 2, 3, and 5](#)), Aboriginal people elite class ([Table 4](#)), and Islamic missionary class. A Wassangari name identifies the bearer as a prince or princess of Baatombu and a descendant of the Wassangari dynastic founders. According to [Adekunle \(2008: 436\)](#) and [Ojo & Bio \(2018: 18\)](#), the earliest Wassangari were strangers who were handed over leadership of Baatombu society by the Aboriginal clans. They integrated with the Aboriginal people and also brought in wives from neighbouring tribes, especially Fulani. The authors reveal that the Wassangari have lost their original language to their host, but a few of their names survived in addition to the ones brought in by the foreign women. [Hussaini \(2003: 14\)](#) puts it more succinctly that, “the Wassangari (the ruling class) originated [from] among the Bariba”.

An Aboriginal elite class name ([Table 4](#)) identified the indigenous royal Baatombu people before the Wassangari took over. Today, the latter are palace chiefs and advisers to the Wassangari princes. Aboriginal people held official positions in the king’s council, each according to the area of historical expertise of his or her lineage, such as farming, sculpting, battle, healing, or wisdom. Aboriginal names as well as their responsibilities were inheritable. These are the holders of the elite title names that [Schottman \(2000: 79\)](#) refers to as commoner *gɔɔbiru* names, whereas the Wassangari receive kingly *gɔɔbiru* names. The rest of the mass of Baatombu people, apart from the Wassangari and members of the Aboriginal clans, are excluded from bearing *gɔɔbiru* title names. [Idris \(1973: 144\)](#) explains that while the Aboriginal people were more

concerned about securing the land, the Wassangari were interested in assuming political authority of the area.

Tables 1, 2, 3, and 5 present and describe different classes of Wassangari personal names (set A) adapted from Hussaini (2003: 93; 2015: 68–69) and field records. It appears that each Wassangari name has both the Baatombu and Arabic equivalents. It seems that some of the cross linguistic alternatives are becoming extinct. Aboriginal names (set B) follow in Table 4. Note that most Baatombu personal names have lost their semantic sense, hence the emphasis here is on their symbolic sense.

4.2.1.1. Wassangari Class

a) Kingly dynastic founders names

The names in Table 1 below are common to all Wassangari clans or houses in Baatombu society. Those in Table 2 are peculiar to one of the Wassangari groups:

Table 1: Wassangari kingly names common to all Baatombu ruling dynasties/clans

Wassangari kingly names	Baatombu alternatives	Arabic alternatives	Symbolic meaning	Gender
<i>Yaru</i>	<i>Kotonkumu</i> <i>Bauna</i>	–	‘Buffalo’	Male
<i>Sime</i>	<i>Kada</i>	<i>Ismaila</i>	‘Crocodile’	Male
<i>Saka</i>	<i>Burama</i>	<i>Ibrahim</i>	‘Thorn’	Male
<i>Gunu</i>	<i>Maasu</i>	<i>Muazu</i>	‘Lion’	Male
<i>Koto</i>	<i>Buru</i>	–	‘Hyena’	Male
<i>Kora</i>	<i>Babangurubi</i>	–	‘River Niger’	Male
<i>Lafia</i>	–	<i>Ishiaka</i>	‘Heron’	Male
<i>Mora</i>	<i>Gurubaru</i>	<i>Dauda</i>	‘A shrub’	Male
<i>Sero</i>	<i>Gide</i>	<i>Saidu</i>	‘Hippopotamus’	Male
<i>Bagiri</i>	<i>Dotabu</i>	<i>Abubakar</i>	–	Male
<i>Tamu</i>	<i>Gada</i>	–	‘Leopard’	Male
<i>Yinre</i>	<i>Kore</i>	–	–	Female
<i>Gandigi</i>	<i>Solo</i>	–	–	Female
<i>Kpaayero</i>	<i>Gomba</i>	–	–	Female
<i>Yaki</i>	<i>Suwa</i>	–	–	Female
<i>Barekegi</i>	–	–	–	Female
<i>Gaiya</i>	<i>Taba</i>	–	–	Female
<i>Manu</i>	<i>Yare</i>	–	–	Female

The other set of Wassangari names (Table 3) are dubbed on the person during Gaani festival by a Yon Koogi (‘mother of blades’). According to Schottman (2000) and Hussaini (2015: 67), Yon Koogi is a classificatory title for the sister of the king of Nikki kingdom. They say that she could name the young Baatombu prince or princess by their skin colour (light- dark- brown-skinned), the clan/house name (*Yaru*, *Yaari*, *Lafia*, *Koora/Kora*), or after a notable

ancestor of the applicant's family (*Sime, Bagiri, Saka*), who must have themselves been named by a Yon Koogi. Interviews and focus group discussions cite Baatombu tradition, that the baptism of a Yon Koogi name was carefully planned, that no two persons alive bore the same Yon Koogi name – which explains why there are alternate names for each type. Participants say that a young Baatombu noble was not obliged to bear the names formally, except during traditional ceremonies and rites, where it was customary that the young or adult noble abandoned the adult name temporarily for their Yon Koogi name during the ceremony. According to [Hussaini \(2003: 93; 2015: 68\)](#), a Yon Koogi name is initiatory as well as symbolic, that the little Wassangari prince or princess, if they would hold future Wassangari office, would have undergone the traditional initiation rites and must have received a Yon Koogi name.

Table 2: Wassangari kingly names peculiar to the Morayara dynasty/clan

Wassangari kingly names	Gender	Wassangari kingly names	Gender
<i>Bio Weene</i>	Male	<i>Neugi</i>	Female
<i>Asaburu</i>	Male	<i>Yonbio</i>	Female
<i>Bio Waare</i>	Male	<i>Bonabiu</i>	Female
<i>Ayogi</i>	Male	<i>Anigi</i>	Female
<i>Tooru</i>	Male	<i>Yoonweegi</i>	Female
<i>Daba</i>	Male	<i>Bonaweegi</i>	Female
<i>Abi</i>	Male	<i>Bakebio</i>	Female
<i>Waagi</i>	Male	–	–
<i>Garaagi</i>	Male	–	–

Table 3: Wassangari Yon Koogi names

Male	Female	Gloss
<i>Yaaru/Yaru</i> <i>Lafia</i> <i>Koora/kora</i>	<i>Gandigi</i> <i>Yaki</i> ('clear/neat') <i>Kpaayero</i>	'Light skinned'
<i>Bagiri/Bakiri</i> (Abubakar) <i>Moora/Mora</i>	<i>Yiiri</i>	'Dark skinned'
<i>Sero</i> <i>Saka</i> <i>Sime</i>	<i>Berekegii</i> <i>Due</i> <i>Manu</i>	'Brown skinned'
<i>Tassigi</i>	<i>Kpalome</i>	'Mixed complexion'

b) Islamic missionary class

An Islamic class name identifies the bearer as a descendant of one of the three groups of Islamic missionaries who helped propagated Islam in Baatonuland around the sixteenth century AD ([Fakuade et al. 2018: 141](#)). Apparently, this group were part of the second batch of foreigners to migrate into Baatonuland. They were of three sets. Each set was identified with a nomenclature linked to their respective leaders, which eventually became a personal name. The three

names (*Mane*, *Toure*, and *Taruwere*) are very popular in Baatonuland. According to the Islamic religious power structure in Baatonuland, the first of the three Islamic clans to settle in a place automatically takes precedence over Islamic religious rites in that place, while the others deputize. The names are often borne by males, and they are as follows:

- *Mane* ‘an Islamic clan name’;
- *Toure* ‘an Islamic clan name’;
- *Taruwere* ‘an Islamic clan name’.

4.2.1.2. Aboriginal class

Table 4. Personal names of Aboriginal Baatombu clans including Kenubu Clan

Aboriginal Baatombu elite clan names	Gender	Aboriginal Kenubu clan names	Gender
<i>Tamba</i>	Male	<i>Oyonu</i>	Male
<i>Doko</i>	Male	<i>Ayara</i>	Male
<i>Toku</i>	Male	<i>KomiLafia</i>	Male
<i>Gawe</i>	Male	<i>Sokobasi</i>	Male
<i>Mansa</i>	Male	<i>Sinaworu</i>	Male
<i>Buara</i>	Male	<i>Yirugi</i>	Male
<i>Birsɔ</i>	Male	<i>Sinabio</i>	Male
<i>Baatia</i>	Male	<i>Meiyemi</i>	Male
<i>Worudeke</i>	Male	<i>Mafara</i>	Male
<i>Gbeeru</i>	Male	<i>Kenken</i>	
<i>Tooru</i>	Male	<i>Nangi</i>	Female
<i>Daki</i>	Male	<i>Wɔɔre</i>	Female
<i>Baku</i>	Male	<i>Samanse</i>	Female
<i>Deeru</i>	Female	<i>Bara</i>	Female
<i>Kaano</i>	Female	<i>Mangu</i>	Female
<i>Itɔɔ</i>	Female	–	–
<i>Tanson</i>	Female	–	–
<i>Kpaare</i>	Female	–	–
<i>Yenu</i>	Female	–	–
<i>Sebegi</i>	Female	–	–

a) Priesthood

- *KomiLafia* ‘a Kenu priesthood name’;
- *Marafa* ‘a Kenu priesthood name’;
- *Kenken* ‘a Kenu priesthood name’;
- *Mako-Gbassi* ‘a Kenu priesthood name’.

b) Courtiers

- *Seko* ‘a blacksmiths lineage name’;
- *Mako* ‘a drummers lineage name’;
- *Bare* ‘a chieftaincy lineage name’;
- *Sesi* ‘a chieftaincy lineage name’;

- *Kane* ‘a chieftaincy lineage name’;
- *Wanro* ‘a chieftaincy lineage name’.

4.2.2. Open class (set B)

The origin of these names, according to Baatombu oral tradition, is unclear. One Baatombu legend claims they were derived from the names of the legendary Kisra’s three sons. Stevens Jr. (1975: 188) avers that “Kisra’s three sons reached Illo, where they crossed the Niger River” into Baatonuland. Another version of the legend opines that the names were as old as the Baatombu culture itself. Proponents of this theory, according to field reports, claim that Kisra had only three sons compared to the eight names in question, but that the three or eight names were unrelated whatsoever to the Arabic language. They hold the opinion that the Baatombu people may have given Kisra’s male sons the Baatombu names, rather than the other way round that the names originated from or were influenced by Kisra’s three sons.

Birth ranked names, according to Baatombu culture, are matrilineal. This implies that where a man has two or more wives, his children were likely to bear the same birth ranked names through their respective mothers. We observe that open birth ranked names could be borne by any Baatombu person, regardless of their status. However, the Baatombu of the Wassangari or Aboriginal clans would prefer their respective clan names to these names. Birth ranked names are also gender sensitive. They could stand alone as individual names. They could also be affixed to other name types to create new names (e.g., Table 5 below). This we have captured using the schema:

$$\langle X \pm Y \rangle$$

where X, the generic name part, is a birth ranked name up to the fifth or sixth child; and Y, the specific name part, is a name type other than X or a birth ranked name. The rule for using birth ranked names to create new names does not apply beyond the sixth child (as presented in examples “a” below). This is because birth ranked names from the seventh child upwards already have what could be considered a specific name part, i.e., forms like **Woru-meereGanni* or **Bona-meereGaani*, etc. are unacceptable. But *Woru-Ganni* and *Bona-Gaani* are acceptable.

4.2.2.1. Birth ranked names

a) Open

Male	Gloss	Female
<i>Woru</i>	‘1st child’	<i>Yoon</i>
<i>Sabi</i>	‘2nd child’	<i>Bona</i>
<i>Bio</i>	‘3rd child’	<i>Bake</i>
<i>Boni</i>	‘4th child’	<i>Buyo/Tango</i>
<i>Sani</i>	‘5th child’	<i>Daado</i>
<i>Tori</i>	‘6th child’	<i>Beru</i>

<i>Woru-meere</i>	'7th child'	<i>Yoon-meere</i>
<i>Sabi-meere</i>	'8th child'	<i>Bona-meere</i>

b) Close

There are closed birth ranked names for males and females of two Wassangari generations, according to the culture. We shall call these generational or temporal birth ranked names. The two generations are known in the culture as *Kpai* and *Wure*. According to Wassangari Baatombu tradition, parents and their children belong to different generations, but grandparents and their grandchildren belong to the same generation, likewise great-grand-parents and their great-grand-children. People of the same generation are regarded as equals or playmates. Grandparents are playmates of their grandchildren, and great-grand-children are equals of their great-grand parents. We observe that this traditional arrangement and significance appear to extend outside the Wassangari circles to the entire Baatombu society. Because grandparents and great-grand parents agree to seeing themselves as cultural equals or playmates of grandchildren and great-grandchildren across families and extended family lines. Generational names, according to the culture, do not exceed beyond the third child, because subsequent children follow the natural birth ranked names. Generational birth ranked names are also gender sensitive, and they are in this order: *Woru-Bokq/Woru*, *Sabi-Guro/Sabi*, and *Biq-Geo* for the first (or *Kpai*) male generation; and *Biq-Woru/Biq*, *Sabi-Buuru/Sabi*, and *Daabu* for the second (or *Wure*) male generation. First and second female generation names are *Bona-Wiru* vs. *Yon-Wure/Kina*, and *Bona-Wure/Bona-Dege* respectively.

Table 5: Generational birth ranked personal names for Wassangari nobles

Birth Rank	Male		Female	
	Kpai generation	Wure generation	Kpai generation	Wure generation
1st child	<i>Woru-Bokq/Woru</i>	<i>Biq-Woru/Biq</i>	<i>Dabu</i>	<i>Yon-Wure/Kina</i>
2nd child	<i>Sabi-Guro/Sabi</i>	<i>Sabi-Buuru/Sabi</i>	<i>Bona-Wiru</i>	<i>Bona-Wure/ Bona-Dege</i>
3rd child	<i>Biq-Geo</i>	<i>Biq-Geo</i>		

4.2.2.2. Circumstantial

These names refer to negative (taboo) or positive (blessed) circumstances at the birth of a Baatombu child. According to Baatombu culture, positive names connote blessedness, whereas negative ones are taboo or cursed. Field participants say that people born in/with unusual conditions were given taboo names, reflecting the negative circumstances of their birth. They report further that such people could face expulsion from the community. They reveal that people affected were denied official naming rituals, and were condemned to the *Gando* caste. Participants state further that regardless of the status of their

parents, a *Gando* had no claims or privileges whatsoever, that they were treated as slaves, abandoned, or left to die. But should the child survived infancy, they were given out to be raised by a foster non-native parents, such as Fulani settlers, and later Christian missionaries. Participants agree that this aspect of the Baatombu culture is no longer practiced today and the names are no longer in vogue. Conversely, participants express concern that such people were still being stigmatized, and that the descendants of former *Gando* people were also conscious of their historical circumstances of birth.

a) Taboo

- *Wani* ‘A child born prematurely’;
- *Toko Bora* (old.Adj.-friend.N) ‘The old person’s friend: A child born of unusually old parents’;
- *Suaku* ‘A child conceived before the mother began to menstruate’;
- *Sika*, ‘twin’, ‘A twin: A child who is a twin’ (the name is added to the birth rank name of the child, e.g., *Woru-Sika*, *Bona-Sika*, etc.);
- *Bansu* ‘ruin’, ‘A child whose mother died giving birth, or whose father is no longer alive at the time he or she was born’.

b) Blessedness

Supernatural

According to Baatombu culture, these names honour idols, notable traditional ceremonies, and the flora and fauna of the place where a person was born. It is believed that the name helps to stop a malevolent spirit from tormenting the bearer and/or their family. Examples of these names are:

- *Yakasu* ‘bush’, ‘A child born in the bush/farm’;
- *Swaa* ‘road’, ‘A child born during a road trip’;
- *Kuroboko* ‘a hill’, ‘A child born at the hill’;
- *Kpera* ‘a deity’, ‘A child linked to the deity’;
- *Daraku* ‘a stream’, ‘A child born at the stream’;
- *Gaani* ‘a festival’, ‘Born during the month of the festival’.

Commemorative

According to Baatombu culture, these are names that the bearer inherited from notable guests and personalities. Examples are:

- *Mora-n-kuro* (Mrankuro)
Mora-POSS-wife
‘Mora’s wife’
- *Bake-n-duro* (Bakenduro)
Bake-POSS-husband
‘Bake’s husband’

- *Nen-boro-wa* (Nenborowa)
 3SG-friend-my.DET.POSS
 ‘He is my friend’ (e.g., when a king visits or incidentally meets a newly born male child).

5. Conclusion

This paper presents a case for a binary anthroponymy among the Baatombu people in Nigeria and Republic of Benin and shows how their binary personal naming system is influenced by the power and genealogical structure in their society. It argues that the Baatombu personal naming system is based on social status, with names for the elite and names for the commoners of the society. It believes that the Kisra legend, the Wassangari Sudanic warriors, and the Islamic missionary sects further enriched the people’s personal naming system. These groups collectively became the leaders of Baatonuland and created a set of exclusive and privileged personal names for their descendants.

The paper also explains that the Baatombu people’s strong culture of exclusion solidified the hold of the Wassangari and their personal names on the culture. The Wassangari used the existing power structure in the society to keep their identity alive and intact. The paper shows how this worked in the administration of Baatonuland, with the Wassangari, the Aboriginal clans, and the Kenubu clans working together, to keep this unique naming system active.

The paper maintains that the Wassangari, the Aboriginal clans, and the Kenubu clans make up the elite ruling class and are in set A of the binary name tree. The other branch of the tree comprises the set B personal names, which are the personal names borne by the rest of the population of the people, chosen based on the social and natural circumstances of the bearer’s birth, such as the flora and fauna of Baatonuland, traditional beliefs of the people, and the natural birth order of the Baatombu culture.

Overall, the paper argues for the nexus between onomastics and power in this African society, showing how power is structured in the society; and how personal names of the Baatombu people serve as mnemonics to the bearer, their family and genealogy, and the measure of authority they hold in the Baatombu society.

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