

STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN WEST AFRICAN COUNTRIES

F. O. AKINYEMI

Chair, UNGEGN Africa West Division
bakin_yem@yahoo.com

Abstract

Countries in West Africa (WA) are mainly categorized into two, that is, Anglophone and Francophone, and such compartmentalization of the region is a relict of colonization. WA countries consist of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Senegal. The need to know and interact with our immediate environment or landscape spurs man to name geographical features and places. The need for unambiguous identification and location of geographical entities and places is obvious, such as for use by emergency service organisations in the protection of life and property. In a multilingual region like WA, instances (occasions) such as places having more than one name and names having the same spelling but different pronunciation and meaning do arise. Such situations would lead to misunderstanding and confusion. To forestall any confusion, geographical names in WA ought to be standardized as it is being done worldwide. In furtherance of the goal to standardize all geographical names in West Africa, an attempt was made to establish the Africa West Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). The progress achieved so far as well as the challenges facing confronting the Africa West Division is discussed in this paper.

Introduction

Countries in West Africa (WA) are mainly categorized into two, that is, Anglophone and Francophone, with such compartmentalization of the region being a relict of colonization. Influence of this compartmentalization on relationships between countries is quite visible as ties fostered along colonial lines are much stronger than proximity ties. Anglophone WA countries are Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia. Francophone WA countries are Togo, Benin, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali and Niger, while Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde were formerly under the Portuguese and Spanish respectively. Liberia has not been ruled by a foreign power, but has English as its official language.

Figure 1 shows the official languages spoken in each WA country. West Africa is a multilingual region having hundreds of traditional languages being spoken in the different countries, aside from the official languages spoken.

Of these languages, a few like *Fulani*, *Hausa*, *Yoruba* are spoken across different countries (see Table 1) Hausa is spoken in Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad.

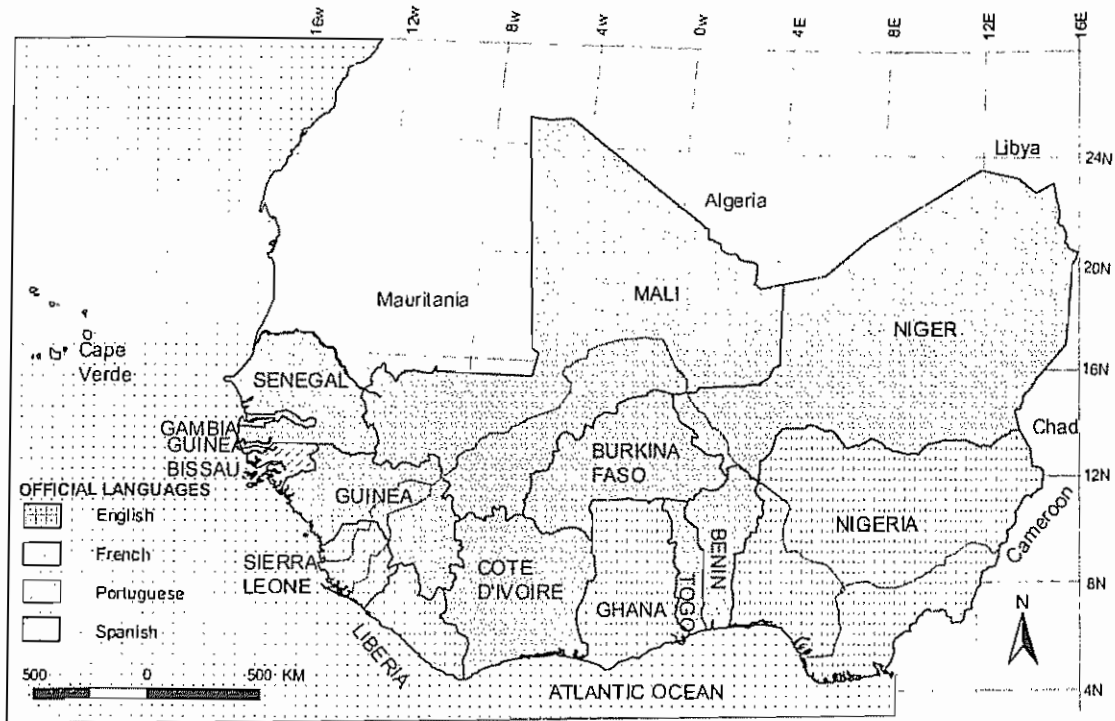


Figure 1: shows the official languages spoken in each WA country

Table 1: Some traditional languages occurring in more than one West African Country

Language/Culture	Countries in which language is spoken
Fulani	Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Gambia, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Nigeria
Peul	Nigeria, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Niger, Benin, Senegal
Yoruba	Nigeria, Benin, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire
Tukolor	Gambia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Mauritania and Mali
Hausa	Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso
Malinke	Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Gambia
Madinka	Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Guinea
Mande	Burkina Faso, Mali, Sierra Leone
Wolof	Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania
Mossi	Burkina Faso, Ghana
Gourma	Burkina Faso, Togo
Fongbe	Benin, Togo
Susu	Sierra Leone, Guinea
Aja gbe	Togo, Benin
Dan	Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire
Tamachek	Niger, Mali

Yoruba is spoken extensively in southwestern Nigeria and along the West African coast in parts of Benin, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Ghana. Other languages occur only within given localities. The multiplicity of languages can be better appreciated by using Nigeria as an illustration. Nigeria conservatively has over 400 traditional languages. Taking just one of these, Yoruba for an example, there exist about 300 dialects of the Yoruba language

The multilingual nature of WA has consequences on geographical names in the region. Using Nigerian examples, instances abound of the following in WA:

- A place having more than one name (e.g *Lagos, Eko*);
- Place names are duplicated, even in the same localities (*Ikoyi* in Lagos, *Ikoyi* in *Ile-Ife*, *Ikoyi* near *Ikire*, *Ikoyi* in *Akure*, *Ikoyi* north of *Ogbomoso*, *Ikoyi-Ile* near *Iwo*);
- Place names having the same spelling but different pronunciation and meaning (*Arigidi* in *Ekiti*, *Arigidi* in *Akoko*);
- Place names having variant spellings;

In *Yoruba* speaking parts, names like *Mokola*, *Ajgunle*, *Pako*, *Surulere* are commonly occurring names. Seeing that such situations could lead to misunderstanding and confusion, geographical names in WA ought to be standardised as is being done worldwide. Still prominent among the purposes for the collection of geographical names in most WA countries is the use of place names on maps, especially on topographic map series. Most countries have not gone beyond the collection of place names for the preparation of mapping gazetteers. Names contained in such map gazetteers are limited in their collection to only those names that would appear on maps of certain scales. Therefore there is the possibility of non-inclusion of many important names; places with historic importance, for example, could be omitted from such gazetteers if they fail to fall within the scope of the map to be produced.

It is important to standardise geographical names for the purpose of affirming a country's cultural/historical heritage and national identity. It is also necessary for the purposes of trade and commerce, transportation, communication, regional and environmental planning, science and technology, successful conduct of elections and censuses, provision of social services, tourism, disaster management, search and rescue operations, etc. (SAGNC, 2002).

Establishing the Africa West Division

Africa West Division (AWD) is one of the many linguistic and geographical divisions supporting the work of UNGEGN. Other divisions operating within Africa include Africa Central Division, Africa East Division, Africa South Division and the Arabic Division. The AWD is meant to provide a closer interface to WA nations to help develop procedures and mechanisms for standardization in response to national needs. It is to develop programs of training and particularly to assist countries that have not developed systems for the maintenance of consistent place names

In furtherance of the effort at standardizing geographical names in WA, a formal attempt at establishing the AWD was made at the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) held in Berlin, Germany in 2002. Prior to the conference some countries in WA have had representations in earlier conferences. At the Eighth Conference only Nigeria, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire had a participant each with the Nigerian and Guinean participating as trainees of the Toponymy course organised by the Dutch- and German-speaking Division of UNGEGN. At a meeting of all participants from WA held at the Berlin conference, the Nigerian and Guinean were chosen as the Chair and Secretary of the AWD respectively.

Status of Geographical Names Standardization in West Africa

The first assignment embarked upon by the AWD was to know the status quo of geographical names standardization in countries of the region. Having compiled the addresses of authorities likely handling names in the different WA countries, letters were sent out both in French and English. Further discussion in this section will be limited to Nigeria for which there is first hand information presently.

The collection, storage and dissemination of geographical names in Nigeria have since been handled by the Federal Surveys Department (Nigerian National Mapping Organisation) after the colonial era in 1960. Names are solely collected for the main purpose of topographic mapping at different scales. The local government authorities handle the naming of features under their jurisdiction like streets, parks, cemeteries etc.

In Nigeria, there is yet to be a national names authority. However, with Nigeria's participation in as many as five UNCSGN, there are efforts underway to establish a national names authority. Geographical names are to be seen as a fundamental dataset of the National Geospatial Data Infrastructure (NGDI). Presently, the draft of the Nigerian National Policy on Geospatial Information prepared by a National Committee inaugurated by the Hon. Minister of Science and Technology is awaiting approval by the Federal Executive Council. Once this is approved, a work group on geographical names will have to be set up to work out modalities and give recommendations that would eventually lead to setting up a statutory body to be responsible for standardizing geographical names in Nigeria.

Associating Geographical Names with other Programmes in West Africa

There are many programmes in WA to which the standardization of geographical names can be associated for the effort to progress better and further. The need to affirm each country's national identity and cultural/historical heritages seems the most important area. WA as a

region is a beehive of cultures and houses many cultural heritages like the *Igbo-Ukwu* and Benin culture. Other programmes are trade and commerce as well as tourism. The collection and preservation of place and feature names as well as their variants overtime is crucial. This is because these names retain much of our culture, memory and heritage. Place names are often an important contributor to historical information (Parker, 2001)

Some Bottlenecks Evident in the West African Region

There are many bottlenecks to grapple with in the WA region. Although these bottlenecks are general problems to all sectors, they may have direct negative impact on the handling of geographical names, particularly, its standardization. These are as follows:

- **Very poor communication system**

Telephones were non-existent in many settlements across WA until the advent of the mobile phone, which is a phenomenon of this new millennium. Until recently, when letters are sent by post from an Anglophone WA country (say, Nigeria) to a neighbouring Francophone WA country (say, Niger), a typical scenario would be for the letter to first get to France before arriving in Niger. Thus, the letter would take a longer time than usual to get delivered, although the two countries are neighbours sharing a common boundary.

- **The languages**

The official languages adopted in each WA country are those languages of the erstwhile colonialists, which have both their advantages and disadvantages. It is advantageous to adopt the language of the erstwhile colonialist as the official language of the country because that is the only language spoken across the board by the educated ones in the country. Each WA country is linguistically heterogeneous, thus making this singular experience of colonisation the only unifying factor for all the different tribes and diversities of languages co-existing in each country. One of the disadvantages of these adopted foreign languages as official

languages in WA countries is the imposition of a foreign culture on the country. It puts an undue pressure on the country to maintain its ties with its erstwhile colonial powers. The educational systems, institutions and lifestyle in different WA countries reflect these foreign cultures. This situation has not been helpful in hastening the process of integration, an effort that is very necessary in order to achieve standardized geographical names in WA countries

- **Ripping apart of a single tribe among West African countries**

As earlier pointed out, the same language may be spoken in an average of five countries thereby cutting the same tribe across international boundaries between WA countries. Moreover, individual identity and filial relationships are ultimately sought and established along tribal lines, thus tribal identity and loyalty often take pre-eminence over national loyalty. Good examples are the Yoruba and Hausa languages, which are spoken both within and between some WA countries (see Table 1). This makes socio-cultural integration of WA imperative and success at this will aid the understanding of the use of geographical names in WA and consequently its standardization.

Conclusion

As at today no significant stride has been achieved as regards the standardization of geographical names in West Africa. The overall effort can be enhanced by the creation of necessary awareness from the government down to the people. Such awareness can be in form of training of manpower to handle geographical names. A naming system for WA can be worked out which should take into cognizance the operations of the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS). Working of the AWD with the ECOWAS is very essential as ECOWAS is the regional body managing the wider system to which all the WA countries belong.

The need to standardize geographical names in WA is quite obvious and it is a challenging effort. The process calls for policy measures that will first of all lead to the creation of statutory naming authorities in each country. This would provide the institutional framework needed to support the standardization effort.

References

Parker, J (2001) The Benefits of Geographical Names to a Spatial Data Infrastructure and to a Nation. Int Conference on Spatial Information for Sustainable Development, Nairobi, Kenya, 2-5 October, 2001, pp TSI 3, 1-12

SAGNC (South African Geographical Names Council, 2002): Handbook on Geographical Names. Dept of Arts, Culture, science and Technology, Pretoria 0001, South Africa.