

HISTORICAL INFERENCES TO BE DRAWN FROM HAUSA NAMES OF PLANTS

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Vocabulary of the language has not been sufficiently explored as a source material for historical studies. On the basis of presence or absence of some names in a given language it is possible to draw conclusions concerning the social and economic life as well as the important events in the history of the community in which the language is spoken.

Hausa names of plants provide us with rich material for such an analysis¹. As was said before, their importance for historical studies has not been demonstrated yet. It must also be admitted, however, that they are not a reliable source for investigations which try to establish the territory of the community in a given historical period. The boundaries between the zones where particular plants occur are not as clearly marked as the boundaries dividing societies. The areas where particular plants grow tend to change. This also means that people may cultivate new plants or vegetables without necessarily creating new words to refer to them. On the other hand, original names for plants unknown in the region may exist in the language². So it may be concluded that particular names are invalid for historical studies but some regularities or specific representations of given plants seem to be meaningful.

¹Cf. J.M. Dalziel, *A Hausa Botanical Vocabulary*, London 1916; H. Vischer, *Vocabulary of Nigerian Names of Trees, Shrubs and Herbs*, Lagos 1936.

²E.g. the typically Slavonic name 'pochrzyn' in Polish denoting 'yam' which is unfamiliar to Polish people.

This paper contains the results of an analysis of Hausa names of plants based on linguistic criteria with special emphasis on statistical and distributional features of such names in the Hausa language. It is an internal analysis of about 300 Hausa names of plants attested in Abraham's dictionary (Abraham, 1962)⁹. Special attention is paid to compound names with regard to the basic element of them, e.g. bābā 'indigo' which produces compounds such as bābam fādamā, bāban takō, bāban tālakī, bāban tāmu used as names of various types of plants. Their importance for the present analysis results from the general principles concerning compound words in a language, especially the following ones:

a. the more frequent a word is, the greater number of compounds it produces (Altman, 1988:105),

b. the older a word is, the greater number of compounds it produces (Altman, 1988:106).

The analysis of data was also based on the following assumptions:

1. Names which have many synonyms (also in dialectal variation) probably denote plants widespread within the territory inhabited by the society, e.g. gā, ī, gujIyā, birIjī used for groundnuts, gāntāmau, ajingiri, gānjīgāgā, gānjī, kārāzā for old cassava.

2. Names which identify not only plants as a whole but also denote the details of those plants (leaves, kernels, pods, etc.) have probably been used a great deal, e.g. kwārā 'shea-nuts', tābō 'rip shea-fruit which has fallen' which are the examples of such names combined with the name kadanyā 'a shea-tree'.

3. The set of compound names based on one name may suggest that this name is an old one in the language and the plant which it denotes belongs to the natural environment existing at that time when the name was created.

⁹The lexical material was first established on the basis of field research carried out in northern Nigeria in 1985.

Historical data that may be found by analysing names of plants reflect the traditional culture of the society, the dependence of people upon their natural environment and the evidence of the fact that the community has inhabited a given area for a long time.

The main aim of this presentation is to discuss the names of plants which are supposed to be the oldest ones in Hausa vocabulary and, in this way, to arrive at a hypothetical description of traditional geographical environment of Hausa society.

On the basis of the criteria adopted to the analysis special attention should be paid to the following names of plants⁴:

- adūwā 'desert date-tree'
- bābā 'indigo'
- dabīnò 'date palm'
- dīnyā '*Vitex Cienkowski*' (the tree)
- dōrawā 'locustbean-tree'
- giginyā 'deleb-palm'
- gaudē '*Gardenia erubescens*' (the shrub)
- gōrubā 'dum-palm'
- kafanyā 'shea-tree'
- kūkā 'baobab-tree'

As for the plants, there are palms to be distinguished among them. They were included into the list because of various names for different types of palms, such as adūwā (pl. adūwōyI) 'desert date-tree', dabīnò (l. dābīnai) 'date palm', giginyā (pl. giginyōyI = giginyū) 'deleb palm', gōrubā (pl. gōrūbai = gōrubōbI) 'dum-palm, kwā-kwā 'oil palm'. These are usually generic names but they may also designate fruit of these palms. What is typical for this group of plants is that particular parts or features of these plants may be denoted by separate words, e.g.:

⁴The Hausa names presented here are only to mark the reference to a given type of plant but not to reflect the oldest forms in the language.

kabā (pl. kabōbI) 'young dum-palm'
kari 'frond of gōrubā or giginyā'
tantālibò 'kernel of gōrubā-fruit (= Sk. gūntsū)'
zārbā 'spring of dates'
nōnò 'cluster of dates'
bardē 'the first dates of the season'
kililI 'pollen of male date palm'
gāzarI 'fibrous vein in centre of frond of giginyā'
bambāmi 'upper part of giginyā'
kwangI 'lower part of giginyā'
dābāgirā 'flowers and leaves of young desert-date palm'

It is a well-known fact that palms have always played a significant role in biological as well as in social life of people in Northern Africa. They were grown in oases in the desert for their fruit but were also adored as divines. It seems that the richness and variety in vocabulary denoting palms confirms the close geographical and cultural contact of Hausa culture with that region.

Some of the names analysed (and their compounds) may suggest a special use of palms as clothing (e.g. sāmārin adūwā to name ragged clothes), things for every-day purposes (e.g. hāngūqū 'chips of adūwā used as soap') or to mark high social status of the owner (e.g. ḍan gōrubā 'absolute sārautā of Kano, lit. 'son of gōrubā').

Historical implications are also possible if we analyse names of various types of acacia as well as of baobab trees. Dōrowā (= dōrawā, Sk. dōrūwā) 'locust-bean tree' has partial semantic reflexes in such names as gārdā 'young pods of locust-bean tree', kalwā 'seeds of locust-bean tree', bēnā 'dōrawā producing only poor fruit', tūtū 'locust-bean blossom', sābadā 'young dōrowā-pods'. Such names as bōlōlō 'drink made from dōrawā pods', dāddawā 'black cakes made from fermented seeds' suggest using this tree for preparing food. The name dōrawā itself must be very old, which is shown by phonetic variability of the word as well as by the compounds based on it which name other trees, such as dōrowān tsuntsū (lit. 'locust-bean tree of birds') and dōrowān Turāwā (lit. 'locust-bean tree of Europeans').

Similar observations could be made while analysing the name gābārŭwa = bāqārŭwa, other names of acacia-like trees and the names of various types of mimosa (*Acacia arabica*).

As for baobab (kŭkǎ), for many centuries it has been an integral part of Hausa inland scenery. It is reflected in such names as gātsIkǎ 'young baobab or dwarf baobab', kwamē (kwamān kŭkǎ) 'baobab fruit'. Use of baobab leaves and seeds for preparing food is confirmed by such names as cūsā 'cake of kŭkǎ leaves', dūnkŭ = gārin kŭkǎ 'baobab flour' (Kt. 'pounded baobab seeds') and mIyǎ 'soup which contains baobab leaves'.

All the remarks mentioned above suggest that the traditional culture of Hausa society was settled in geographical environment typical for dry savannah zone⁵.

On the basis of the criteria adopted here the other group of names of plants may be distinguished. They are also of frequent use and great significance in the language but closer semantic analysis of their compounds and synonyms do not allow to apply to them such deep historical connotation.

The name gŭrŭ serves as an example. It is the only one for naming kolanut and has the semantically related counterparts such as marsǎ 'the largest kolas', gŭrIyǎ 'the largest and best kolanuts', daushē 'previous year's kolanuts after new crop is available', fākānI '2000 kolanuts' - they all name only fruit (not plant) which were used in trade as well as in ceremonial payment but did not use to be grown in Hausa country. They were brought from elsewhere, as it is shown by names such as dam Bādŭm (lit. 'son of Ibadan'), dan Agēgē (lit. 'son of Agege') or Gwānjǎ kusa (lit. 'near to Gold Coast') which is a generic name for plants used as substitute for kolanuts, ābidŭ 'a type of kolanut' which is a name borrowed from Yoruba. The names denoting kolanuts reflect the traditional Hausa culture but do not inform about their geographical environment.

⁵The linguistically reconstructable list of words for plant names in West Chadic languages contains also names of several acacia species, baobab and palm trees which are found mainly in dry areas (cf. R.G.Schuh, *The Hausa Language and its Nearest Relatives*, Harsunan Nijeriya, 12, 1982, p.11).

The other names of plants which can not be included into the old Hausa vocabulary are those which refer to various types of lime trees. Lime trees are now familiar to Hausa people, found over a large area, but their presence in geographical environment is not richly and significantly attested in the language. This fact has also its historical implications. At first it should be mentioned that only generic names referring to such plants were noted. They were mostly compounds based on the word lēmō (such as lēmō māi zākī 'orange', lēmōn tsāmī 'grapefruit', lēmam Masār 'citron'). This word has its reflexes in many other languages (e.g. Ar. līmah) and refer to the plant which is native to Asia, brought to Europe and Africa after the time of crusades of Middle Ages. In Hausaland it may not be cultivated for a long time and therefore the rich vocabulary referring to them was not created.

Typically tropical trees, such as kanyā 'ebony tree' as well as madāci 'mahogany tree' exist only as generic names. They occur in epithets and occasional phraseologisms and it implies special meaning and use of trees that they denote.

There is also interesting historical information in many other words but these would have to be analyzed separately. Among them are borrowings, e.g. tūmātīr (Eng.) 'tomato', gwaibā (Eng.) 'guava', āyābā (Yor.?) 'banana', ālbāsā (Ar.) 'onion', alayyāfō (Ar.) 'spinach', etc. They probably refer to designates which are not native to Hausa and therefore will not be included in this analysis. The other ones, of Hausa origin, are based on phrases which also have a separate meaning of their own and may indicate employing the plant for a purpose, e.g. rāi dōre (lit. 'lasting long life') used as a cure for fever, cī zākī (lit. 'eat something sweet') 'a tree with sweet berries' as well as the names which refer to the place where the plant (or its fruit) comes from, e.g. dam Bādūm (lit. 'son of Ibadan') for type of Nigerian colanut or gyādar Gwārī (= Bāqwārī), lit. 'groundnut from Gwari'.

The vegetables and cereal are not richly represented in Hausa vocabulary when we discuss the sets of semantically related items. Only rōgō 'cassava' and dāwā 'guinea-corn' have their semantic counterparts in other names or phrases, such as bākin

rākumī (lit. 'mouth of the camel') 'type of guinea-corn' or jà
gūgā (lit. 'draw the bucket') 'new cassava' and some others.

The examples presented here are the most important for the criteria adopted to the analysis. They concern only one language and hence are not valid to draw genuine historical conclusions. What comes from this analysis as an implication of historical nature is a close relation of Hausa language data to what is characteristic to the community which has inhabited a desert or savannah region for a long time. The words denoting plants typical for that area are supposed to be the oldest ones in the Hausa language.

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