RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the significance of toponyms in the university linguistics curriculum: insights from Kibera in Kenya and Sabalibougou in Mali

Billian Khalayi Otundo[1] · Lamine Doumbia[2]

Abstract

Africa's linguistic diversity and cultural richness make it an ideal setting for incorporating case studies of toponyms (place names) into the university linguistics curriculum. By examining the toponyms of Kibera slum areas in Kenya and those of the people of Sabalibougou in Southern Mali, this article explores the various ways that toponyms can be used to enhance the understanding of African languages and cultures. Based on the premise that toponyms communicate knowledge about the natural world, peoples' experiences, indigenous and local languages, and history, the two case studies of this article highlight the following factors as reasons why toponyms should be studied and incorporated into the university's linguistics curricula: (i) They reveal the interplay between history, socio-political manifestations, and language; (ii) provide awareness of the role of geography on language, language contact, and language endangerment; (iii) facilitate the relationship between language and culture; and (iv) allow practising orthography, phonetic transcription, and morphosemantics of African languages. Hence, incorporating toponym case studies, like those provided in this study, into the linguistics curriculum can enable students to better comprehend and appreciate Africa's linguistic diversity and cultural richness, ultimately contributing to the decolonisation of education in Africa.

Keywords Toponyms · Endogenous knowledge · University education · Linguistics curriculum · Mali · Kenya

Introduction

Research on the decolonisation of knowledge and postcolonial curriculum development on the African continent has recently gained attention (e.g., Dodounou & Otundo, 2021; Doumbia, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Woolman, 2001). In a bid to decolonise knowledge, there is a crucial need for formal education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa to include endogenous knowledge in their curriculum. One of the hurdles toward achieving this is what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021, p. 5). terms the "practical ways of doing epistemological decolonisation," and in effect to adopt a decolonial approach to knowledge that deals with how to shape ecologies of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Thus, one practical way to decolonise knowledge is through the incorporation of endogenous toponyms into the curriculum. This is because toponymy provides a unique lens through which Africa's linguistic diversity and cultural richness can be examined.

In Kenya, for instance, most studies on toponymy have documented a single area or one language/dialect group with examples like Wanjiru and Matsubara (2017) who exclusively focused on three informal communities and addressed how toponyms portray the urban landscape, Anindo (2016) who examined the morphosemantics of 64 toponyms for the Lulogooni sublanguage of Luhyia, and Kibet and Mwangi (2016) who examined 56 toponyms in the Kipsigis dialect. Moreover, other studies of toponymy in the diverse Sub-Saharan countries have also taken a similar approach (e.g., Batoma, 2006; Letsoela, 2015; Mill, 1952; Raper, 1987; Thomas & Dale, 1953; Zwinoira, 1984), and relevance of toponymy in formal education systems has continued to be neglected. Based on the perspective that Sub-Saharan countries practice knowledge that favours the development of European thought and contexts (Dodounou & Otundo, 2021), more so in standardised education at the expense of

✉ Lamine Doumbia
  lamine.doumbia@uni-bayreuth.de

  Billian Khalayi Otundo
  billian.otundo@uni-bayreuth.de

[1] English Linguistics, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany

[2] Cluster of Excellence - Africa Multiple, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany

endogenous and local languages in Africa and their respective knowledges, a linguistics curriculum at the university, for instance, can incorporate case studies of toponyms to contribute to the decoloniality agenda and enable students to develop multiple ways of understanding their communities. Moreover, for:

> linguists specializing either in the historical or genealogical aspects of specific languages, or in the taxonomy of languages in general, toponyms contain a treasure of ancient language elements which allows them to under build their theories or test their hypotheses (Tichelaar, 2002, p. 2).

A practical way to achieve what Tichelaar (2002) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) propose could be, for instance, for students to examine how different languages in a shared space play a role in its naming, and what the naming reveals about the history and culture of the region as a way of decolonising knowledge. Crucially, toponymy is an interdisciplinary domain and questions of methodology in pedagogy must be considered. Daniels (1999), for instance, raises two basic interrelated questions in his examination of the usefulness of toponymy in a historical linguistics course designed for French degree students of English and states the degree of knowledge of the history and geography of the toponyms, and whether the data should be quantitative or qualitative as important aspects (Daniels, 1999). In this article, we utilise case studies of the toponyms of Kibera slum areas in Kenya and the people of Sabalibougou in Southern Mali to demonstrate the various ways in which the analysis of toponyms can enhance the understanding of African languages and cultures in a linguistics curriculum at the university. The empirical study of these areas offers an interesting focus on highly hybrid social and political situations. The data used for the two case studies (see details in "Methods" and "Toponymic case studies: Kibera and Sabalibougou") is two-fold: (i) One part stems from the side findings of existing thesis research (Doumbia, 2018) that explored the entanglement of different land tenure systems in Bamako and (ii) the other part draws aspects from existing literature (e.g., Parsons, 1997; Chrimes, 2011; Alderman & Inwood, 2013; Wilbers, 2014; Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2016, 2017; Marx et.al., 2019) that render the toponymy of Kibera a fascinating illustration.

Hence, to showcase the significance of incorporating toponym case studies into the linguistics curriculum at the university, this article is organised henceforth into four sections. In "Linguistic situation and cultural knowledge in the education systems in Kenya and Mali," a reflection on linguistic situations and cultural knowledge in formal educational contexts in Kenya and Mali is given. "Methods" is on methods, including the justification for using these case studies. In "Toponymic case studies: Kibera and Sabalibougou" the two

toponymic case studies are presented. After this, the findings with discussions on how the two case studies can be incorporated into the university linguistics curriculum, while highlighting four major areas and giving illustrations are presented in " Findings and discussion: Significance of toponyms in the university linguistics curriculum" The article then ends with a summary and some concluding remarks on the topic in question in "Summary and concluding remarks".

Linguistic situation and cultural knowledge in the education systems in Kenya and Mali

The linguistic situation and cultural knowledge in educational contexts in Kenya and Mali have been influenced by their colonial pasts. In Kenya, the introduction of European languages eroded indigenous languages and knowledges for the benefit of ex-colonial European languages because language constitutes the epitome of the imaginary — the expression of specific representations, worldviews, experiences, thoughts, ideas, and culture (Dodounou & Otundo, 2021). The medium of instruction at all levels of formal learning in Kenya is English, which has contributed to a dominating discourse on indigenous knowledge that is formulated in European thought. The Kenyan government has been reconstructing the country's formal curricula since independence to incorporate the diverse indigenous ways of knowing into the formal school system to help students develop a sense of self-worth grounded in their own authentic cultural systems of knowledge construction (Ominde Report, 1964). An examination of education reports indicates the Kenyan government's full recognition of the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge into the formal education system. This is by emphasising that one of the objectives of the education system should be to respect, foster, and develop the country's rich and varied cultures (Ndegwa Report, 1971; Ominde Report, 1964). However, the inclusion of all forms of endogenous knowledge, like toponymy case studies, in the Kenyan education system is far from reality.

Contrariwise, according to Diarra, the Malian educational context has been influenced by guidelines for the development of African school systems. Before colonisation, Mali had a well-structured education system that considered the social and economic realities of the country (Diarra, 2020, p. 49). Arabic was the language of instruction, and people used the Arabic alphabet to write and read in their mother tongues (Ajimi) as assessed also by Vydrine (1998). Malian languages and Arabic were gradually marginalised when French colonists arrived (Diarra, 2020; Gasse, 2008). As the French colonial administration imposed the French language and alphabet as the lingua franca in the education system, Malian languages and Arabic were considered less

suitable for the transmission of knowledge (Diarra, 2020; Gasse, 2008). Moreover, Mali has committed to promoting national languages through their use as a medium of instruction in basic schools since the 1962 reform of education. The process of implementation is slowly ongoing to the current day. In Mali, Muslim education and Christian missionary schools were teaching in local languages to restructure African families and convey the word of God. This situation led to the current Malian context, where the introduction of Malian national languages as a medium of instruction alongside French was one of the reasons to promote national languages. The current government of transition led by Colonel Assimi Goita is constitutionally declaring French as one of the languages of instruction. Moreover, all Malian languages should be lawfully declared as official languages. This political willingness reflects the ongoing discussion of Malian citizens.

The Kenyan and Malian educational contexts are examples of how colonialism and its aftermath have influenced the linguistic and cultural knowledge of these African nations. In Kenya, the colonial government's main purpose of education was for religious conversion, economic exploitation, and the assimilation of Kenyans into Eurocentric cultures. This situation robbed Kenyans of their cultural identity and sense of the past (Ominde Report, 1964; Woolman, 2001). The Kenyan government has recognised the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge into the formal education system, but more work needs to be done to incorporate all forms of endogenous knowledge. In contrast, Mali has committed to promoting national languages, particularly through their use as a medium of instruction in basic schools. For both countries, a curriculum that recognises both endogenous and statutory "modern" cultures could be the way to go because:

> A curriculum which divides "indigenous" knowledge from "modern" knowledge fails to teach students about the unique cultural patterns by which people develop and advance their social worlds and ignores the ways in which "modern" culture, beliefs and practices draw from folk and indigenous ways of life (Semali & Stambach, 1997, p. 4).

Unlike Semali and Stambach, we decide to use "endogenous" instead of "indigenous" as we see knowledge more as a process and a dynamic (Doumbia, 2021). Moreover, it has been noted that education in the broader Sub-Sahara does not emphasise African cultural heritage due to a lack of cultural knowledge dissemination through education (Nsamenang, 2009). Thus, it beckons for an educational system that recognises "African ways of knowing" such as endogenous toponymy as illustrated by the two case examples within this article. This is because education which does not incorporate a people's culture does not lead to the development of the people and the society (Amukowa & Ayuya, 2013), and for that matter, the curriculum ought to be adjusted to suit these needs. The education systems that Kenya and Mali have opted to adopt should at least be made relevant to particular contexts and incorporate, for instance, case studies of toponyms in the curriculum to contribute to this agenda.

Methods

Kibera and Sabalibougou case studies were purposively sampled because the toponym cases seemingly reveal striking similarities. Methodologically, there is a difference in the data selection. While one set was collected by one of the authors of this article (Doumbia, 2018), the other data stems from pre-existing literature (e.g., Parsons, 1997; Chrimes, 2011; de Smedt, 2011; Alderman & Inwood, 2013; Wilbers, 2014; Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2016 & 2017; Marx et.al., 2019). Importantly, Kibera and Sabalibougou demonstrate the strong resilience of local actors and ideas that shape social-political power towards decolonisation. The arguments of the case studies emphasise the relevance of local knowledge on the foundation, the (re)naming and the governance of these places (topos), where the founders, autochthonous, struggle for their right to the city (see also Hilgers, 2011), their recognition as citizens, and their participation in the governance. This is a hurdle to cross because Kibera and Sabalibougou both have the historical pejorative reputation of being "slums," and "illegal settlements." The two case studies likewise exhibit diversity and multiplicity on the African continent. For example, Sabalibougou is Muslim-dominated, while Kibera is Christian-dominated. Moreover, the reason for migrating in the case of Sabalibougou was to participate in agriculture as opposed to Kibera which was a settlement for soldiers during the First World War. In addition, the education system, including the makeup of the language of instruction of Kenya and Mali, varies. The two case studies of toponyms are used here to showcase the relevance of their inclusion in education in both countries, more so in the university linguistics curriculum. Subsequently, the findings of this study may be used to influence curricula in other Sub-Saharan countries and beyond.

Toponymic case studies: Kibera and Sabalibougou

Case 1: Kibera — the oldest and largest slum area of Nairobi

This section presents selected aspects from the literature (e.g., Parsons, 1997; Chrimes, 2011; de Smedt, 2011; Alderman &

Inwood, 2013; Wilbers, 2014; Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2016 & 2017; Marx et.al., 2019) on the toponymic history and development of Kibera. This case study offers more than just linguistic information, and also demonstrates "the potential for names to be used as disguises for social and political injustices" (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2016, p. 19). In Wanjiru and Matsubara (2017), the naming of the Kibera area in Kenya dates to 1911 during the First World War when Sudanese Nubians in Kenya were taken as soldiers for the British King's African Rifles (KAR). These soldiers were later settled informally by the British government on approximately 550 acres or 2.2 km² (de Smedt, 2011), and the area was initially dubbed the "KAR shambas" in 1912 and later became known as "Kibra," a Nubian word meaning "jungle," "a bushy place," "a forest," or "empty" (Wanjiru and Matsubara (2017). The settlers in this area were mainly survivors and widows of the Nubians who fought for the British KAR (Parsons, 1997; Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2017) and the villages in this area had Nubian names indicating how the Nubians left their cultural stamp and exercised control over the area (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2016, 2017). For instance, Sarabagara ("a place for grazing cows" in Kinubi, the language of the Nubians) was the original name for Sarang'ombe ("a place for grazing cows" in the Kiswahili language), and the word Sarang'ombe is a mix of Nubian and Kiswahili words (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2017).

Thus, toponyms in this area have changed over time (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2017), with other examples like, Galalima formerly known as Gala Halima or "Hill of Halima," and Toi was a term used to describe a big field, while Makina was formerly known as Makan, which means "house" in Kinubi. On the other hand, Lindi was used to refer to a large hole because of the place where it is located, which is a form of a valley, while Lain Saba was initially called Lain Shabaan, which meant rifle range area in Kinubi and served as a military training facility (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2017). There were also three villages called Kambis (the Kiswahili word for camp) in the settlement, and they were named Lendu, Alur, and Muru, which is how the Nubians set up their towns as was customary in the barracks (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2017).

However, despite the names given to the settlements to prove their control over the area, the Nubians were denied citizenship and the opportunity to own land, possibly because of their ties to the British (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2016, p. 19). According to Chrimes (2011), the Nubians were only recognised as a legitimate community in Kenya in 2009, during the national census. Despite this acknowledgement, "the recognition of Nubians as one of the communities in Kenya did not reflect the actual treatment they received from the government, pertaining to basic rights of citizenship and land ownership" (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2016, p. 19). In spite of this, according to the Nubian Council of Elders (NCE;

pers. comm., 7 September 2015) as cited in Wanjiru and Matsubara (2016, p. 19), the land occupied by estates surrounding Kibera, notably the Kibera Government Housing Scheme, belonged to the Nubians and was lawfully awarded to them by the British government for their service in the KAR. However, the Nubians were later dispossessed without recompense by the post-colonial government and other private enterprises, and it was during this period that the name Kibra was changed to Kibera (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2017).

In post-colonial Kibera, naming and renaming within the area are intricately tied to politics and the shifting ethnic[1] makeup of the community (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2017). Due to the ethnic diversity in this area in the 1900s, the name Kibera slowly changed back to Kibra from Kibera, and this is how the settlement is currently known (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2017, p. 30). The Nubian community, however, did not have this shift as they had never stopped to refer to the place as Kibra (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2017, p. 30). Politics also played a role in naming, for example, Tom Mboya street following the assassination of Tom Mboya, an influential politician from the Luo community (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2017). In a bid to be more inclusive of the Nubians, ten street names were proposed by The Kibera Government Housing Scheme (CCN, 1971): Ihura Road, Toi Road, Kambui Road, Sara-ngombe Road, Chief Sulleman Road, Lemule Road, Apollo Road, Kambi Muru Road, Lain Shaba Road, and Adhola Marongo Road (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2016, p. 19). This designation suggests that the government took into account the place names given by the Nubian minority group and its leaders who were the original residents of the region; however, there were also related socio-political intentions behind this decision (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2016). Further, Alderman and Inwood (2013) also mention that the naming of places can serve as a forum for debating minority groups' cultural, political, and legal rights.

Although Wilbers (2014) states that presently many of Kenya's 42 official ethnic groups are represented in Kibera, the makeup is not representative of Kenya and figures are yet to be confirmed. However, Luo (17%), Luhya (11%), and Kamba (8%) are the majority, and the Nubians are only a small fraction (Marx et. al., 2019), while the Kisii have also been mentioned among the majority (de Smidt, 2011). Additionally, a "slang language based on English and Kiswahili called Sheng is also widely used in urban areas, especially among younger generations" (Wilbers, 2014, p. 13). Moreover, the villages of Kibera have since developed to thirteen with diverse names ranging from names of political

---

[1] Controversially, ethnic identities are a subset of identity categories in which eligibility for membership is determined by attributes associated with or believed to be associated with descent. (Chandra, 2006, p. 397).

leaders to Kiswahili and Kinubi names: Kisumu Ndogo, Kianda, Soweto West, Raila, Gatwekera, Makina, Kambi Muru, Kichinjio, Mashimoni, Lindi, Silanga, Laini Saba, and Soweto East (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2016). Despite the diversity of names and ethnic groups in Kibera, since the 2007/2008 post-election violence, there has been a national emphasis on downplaying the importance of ethnic origin to prevent further conflict, especially in urban areas (Wilbers, 2014). This has rendered the promotion of the use of English or Kiswahili outside of the home (Wilbers, 2014). Importantly, other terms like *micro-nations* (Maathai, 2009) and *speech communities* (Fishman, 1972) have been proposed instead of "ethnicity" that will not only alleviate further conflict but also foster the importance of indigenous culture and everyday language of such groups (Maathai, 2009). In spite of these, there continue to be ethnic, political, and land conflicts (e.g., Elfversson & Höglund, 2018) which are intricately connected in Kibera and such similarities are also found in the case of Sabalibougou shown in the proceeding section.

Case 2: Sabalibougou — from the periphery to the inner city of Bamako

Sabalibougou is a place where one can observe the processes of land conflicts and the mimicry and hybridisation of different systems by focussing on the actors. Sabalibougou is the neighbourhood with the highest population density in municipal district V of Bamako, the capital city of Mali. It started out as a spontaneous neighbourhood and suddenly became a large village on the outskirts of Bamako and is on the right bank of the Niger River. It is known as one of the most populated and poorest neighbourhoods in the commune. The origin of Sabalibougou dates to 1956. It was founded by Hamidou Dembélé who gave the first axe blow to Sabalibougou. "Giving the first blow of the axe means "clearing the land to settle." This is custom; as we shall see in Sabalibougou, it confers a certain customary prerogative, hence the notion of territorial and politico-religious control, which refers to sovereignty exercised over a territory controlled, ritually, by a chief of the land, the doyen, and representative of the lineage holding this function (Lavigne Delville et al., 2000, p. 17).

These territories generally extend beyond the areas where the populations live or work: they cover a small region whose various human settlements (villages, neighbourhoods, hamlets) are linked together by historical and political relationships. This is a form of power which, depending on the case, may or may not be superimposed on the control of men (political chieftaincy), and may be based on the principle of autochthony, ancestral settlement, and principle of conquest. A principle of autochthony refers to the recognition (or claim) of the first occupation of a place.

Autochthony is often associated with a form of exclusive territorial control, which is reflected in the politico-religious hold of the descendants of the first occupants of the place, of which the "chief of the land" is the dean and representative. The autonomous villages that surround the founding village or mother village are "settled villages." Historically, they were authorised to settle by the founding village during a politico-ritual foundation act that consists of entrusting the village to the good care of the local genies (with whom the natives concluded the original pact), and above all, of endowing the "settled village" with a piece of a bush to clear. In customary terms, this founding endowment confers specialised control, which translates into the holding of permanent use rights. This is what Mahmoud Karamoko Bamba, a resource person interviewed in Bamanankan during the ethnographic field research in 2013 (Doumbia, 2018), distinguishes between *Dugukolotigi* (mother village or founding village or even autochthonous) and *Sotigi* (settled village or allochthonous).

In the same fieldwork in 2013 (Doumbia, 2018), Hamidou Dembélé was approached for testimony on the creation of Sabalibougou. The toponym Sabalibougou was not the original one of the sites. This naming was the result of a long interactive social process between the inhabitants. In the interview with the chief of Sabalibougou in 2014 (Doumbia, 2018), it is said that Sabalibougou was created in 1956 by Zanga Dembélé and his younger brother Hamidou Dembélé who came from the village of Zébala near Koutiala (southern Mali). They were looking for work in Bamako, preferably a field to cultivate and to live in. Then, they came across Zoumana Diakité who was the village/quartier chief of Baco Djikoroni. Commonly called Zoubleni, he advised the two Dembélé brothers to go to Kalaban Koro to Bakary Traoré, the former village chief, to ask for a piece of land for agricultural use. Traoré of Kalaban Koro made the very first axe cut on the right bank of the Niger in Bamako. Consequently, he remains the legitimate landlord of the area. He, therefore, authorised the Dembélé brothers to cultivate to the east of the Baco Djicoroni district. This corresponds to Sabalibougou today.

Over time, various social groups settled there to cultivate the land in the same area, for example, the Mossi. Like the Dembélé founders, the other occupying farmers also built hamlets to live in and stay near their fields. In doing so, they protected themselves from criminal attacks by commuting between the field and the house. When the hamlets reached the number of 38, that means 38 families/households, the inhabitants gave the name "Heremakono" to their site. Hɛrɛmakɔnɔ is the correct spelling in Bamanankan, and it is a composite of hɛrɛ meaning "peace" and "prosperity"

and makɔnɔ meaning "waiting." Hamidou Dembélé, who was more powerful than his older brother, and a labourer by profession, was mainly responsible for the development of the site, he told me. He explained that he cleared the place of the current market, built the first mosque and a toilet, brought Imam Lassine Bakayoko from Dravela (a neighbourhood on the left bank), and built a youth centre.

The cohabitation between the founders of Dembélé and the Mossi who came at the time from Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) was quickly broken up. The Mossi were led by Seydou Traoré. Because of the organisation of the Mossi[2] hamlet (Mossibougou), many people testify to having known this site for a long time under the toponym of "Mossibougou" and not a part of "Heremakono." Mossi Seydou, posing as the master of the site, took advantage of the long absences of Hamidou Dembélé to give lots for housing in the cleared area reserved for the market. (This area is now inhabited; it is situated between the market and the Sabalibougou cemetery). Then, the cohabitation deteriorated because of a chieftaincy conflict. Seydou Traoré, known as Mossi Seydou, helped fellows in the area and had the ambition to become the chief of the district.

Opposed to this ambition, Hamidou Dembélé was summoned to the police station of the fourth district and to the territorial brigade of Bamako-Coura, where he was held in detention for twelve days. On his release, Hamidou Dembélé, the founder, was proposed as a neighbourhood chief. Hamidou Dembélé did not accept the position; he in turn proposed Issa Keïta, who was also older than Seydou Traoré. Seydou Traoré became Issa Keïta's first advisor. A position that he refused to occupy. The conflict continued until the arrival of Sekou Ly, mayor of Bamako in the Second Republic of Mali, of which Moussa Traoré was president. Sékou Ly and his delegation approached the people of the site in conflict saying "Sabali, sabali, sabali" (tolerance, tolerance, tolerance). The mayor of Bamako, to smooth things over, suggested that they call the site Sabalibougou, the hamlet of peace/tolerance, so that it would be taken into account in the state's urban development projects, with Issa Keïta as the customary chief of the district. Following this, the rehabilitation and subdivision of the Sabalibougou neighbourhood were undertaken.

---

[2] Moore, sing. Moaaga. in the singular as well as in the plural often — wrongly — called Mossi.

Their habitat in central and northern Burkina Faso is the Moogo (Stamm, 1994).

Findings and discussion: significance of toponyms in the university linguistics curriculum

Interplay between history, socio-political manifestations, and language

In Kenya, ethnicity and politics "are dangerously intertwined" (Wilbers, 2014, p. 14), and the naming and renaming of places within the area are intricately tied to history, politics, and the shifting ethnic makeup of the community. An example such as Nyayo high rise estate in Kibera is a landmark housing project of former president Daniel arap Moi, whose slogan was "Nyayo," the Kiswahili word for "footsteps," in reference to his intention to follow the path of Kenyatta, his predecessor (Huchzermeyer, 2011, p. 141). The Raila village was also named after the presidential aspirant Raila Amollo Odinga which led to the 2007/2008 postelection violence, and Tom Mboya Street also after a prominent politician from the Luo community. Such naming, after political leaders, could demonstrate the difficulties of ethnic representation (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2016) and power struggles. Other examples are Soweto East and Soweto West after the Soweto revolt in South Africa, showing the influence of global events on local toponyms. Just like Soweto, Kibera and Sabalibougou both have the historical pejorative reputation of being "slums," and "illegal settlements," and are inhabited mostly by illiterate masses. Moreover, the embeddedness of endogenous perceptions is acting against the politics of alienation of the modern State. The modern state, on the one hand, marginalises the founders and the name-givers of the area by politicising their identities.

The renaming and subdivision of the villages, as well as the naming of streets in post-colonial Kibera, reflected and support research on political and ethnic tensions, and the history of the inhabitants (e.g., de Smedt, 2011). Kearns and Berg (2002) state that the system of naming streets establishes the relative prominence of persons, institutions, and events within a certain set of values, and when these names change, the values in the system fade away and new ones are introduced. The history of the Nubian inhabitants is reflected in the naming and renaming of the toponyms in Kibera. They were denied citizenship and the opportunity to land ownership similar to the inhabitants of Sabalibougou who also raise the question of citizenship and the vicissitude of allochthony and autochthony until the renaming of the toponym. The socio-political organisation is further evidenced by Mossi's hierarchised society in Mali which was clearly helpful in legitimising the settlement of Heremakono, of which Seydou Traoré was the chief. The case study of Sabalibougou reveals the entanglement of different social-cultural processes of cohabitation, migration, settlement,

and linguistic diversity. Heremakono and Mossibougou are manifestly two different names that merged and formed Sabalibougou in time and space (See also Boré et al., 2003). Heremakono is the village founded by the Dembélé migrants and Mossibougou by the Mossi from Burkina Faso.

Awareness of the role of geography on language, language contact, and language endangerment

The analysis of toponyms emphasises the significance of studying language contact, change, and endangerment by providing a window into how different languages have interacted in a region. For example, the villages in the area were named in Kinubi and had significant meanings linked to the Nubians' geographical conditions. A case in point is the name for the original name Sarabagara, meaning "a place for grazing cows" in Kinubi. The name "Kibera" in Kinubi depicts the geographical conditions of "jungle" or "bushy place." However, after the influx of other ethnic groups, there was the impact of language contact and contestation between the speech communities, and this influenced the toponymy. For instance, the renaming of Kibra to Kibera and then back to Kibra and the renaming from Sarabagara to Sarang'ombe, which is a mix of Kinubi and Kiswahili languages. Other examples are the village Kisumu Ndogo which means "small Kisumu," named after the geographical origin of the Luo community; Kianda meaning "valley" in Gikuyu language; Mashimoni meaning "quarry holes" in Kiswahili; Silanga meaning "water pond"; and Lindi meaning "hole" in both Kinubi; they also reveal geographical conditions (Wanjiru & Matsubara, 2016). This is a clear depiction of the struggle for Kinubi to thrive in this linguistic situation, more so since Kinubi has been assessed as an endangered language (Lee, 2018). Its presence, albeit sparse, in Kibera can be used to analyse endangered languages as has been studied for instance by Zhu et. al. (2018) on how the distributions of ethnic groups and languages can be revealed by the Sinification of ethnic toponyms of endangered Manchu languages in Northeast China.

In Mali, Mossibougou is a mixture of the languages Mooré and Bamanakan. Mossi is the person that speaks Mooré and is the founder of the Mossi Kingdom from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries in West Africa. Mossi Seydou's family name is Ouedraogo. However, the equivalent of this name in the Bamana context is Tarawele because Ouedraogo and Tarawele have the same ancestor, Tiramakan. Despite the difference in language, people share the same patronyms and similar cultures. These findings support Raper's (1987) study done in South-West Africa/Namibia on how linguistically hybrid toponyms as well as proximate geographical features provide evidence of language contact. Geographical depictions are also evidenced. For example, Baco Djicoroni the neighbouring and host area

of Sabalibougou (see the ethnography above) is composed of two words: Baco or Bako means "the right riverbank." Djicoroni called Para Djicoroni meaning "on the left riverbank." The river is the Niger, and Para refers to the military camp. The two Djikoroni, separated by the river, have the same chieftaincies.

Facilitating the relationship between language and culture

Case studies of toponyms can reveal pertinent information about a region's cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions. The Kinubi names, for example, reveal the cultural stamp and control over the area by the Nubians. These names had significant meanings linked to their history and cultural traditions. "Sarabagara," for instance, means "cows" showing that Nubians were cattle farmers, and "Galalima" was formerly "Gala Halima" or "Hill of Halima," which was the name of a person, possibly a clan head in Nubian culture. Place names can reflect the history, values, and beliefs of a community, and changes in place names can reflect shifts in power, migration patterns, and cultural influences. Toponyms in Mali are mostly results and memories of socio-cultural processes. For instance, Djicoroni or Jikoroni mean small old water in remembrance of the place of consumption of the *millet beer* (see also Bertrand, 2001), as a cultural practice. Through valuing the language and culture, the tenants claim the official recognition of Nko by the respective governments. Such language issues, among other knowledges, ought to be included in the formal curricula of both countries.

Practicing orthography, phonetic transcription, and morphosemantics of African languages

The study of toponyms provides an opportunity for students to practise phonetic transcription and morphosemantics. *Phonetic transcription and othography* can be practised by students by transcribing the toponyms mentioned in the text, such as Ng'ombe (/ˈŋɔ.ᵐbɛ/), and Kambi (/kám.bíː/), at the same time learning the semantics of the African languages. Semantics, which is concerned with reference and meaning, has been employed throughout this work by indicating the meaning of words, more so the toponyms in various languages like Kinubi, Kiswahili, Bamanakan, and Gikuyu. There is also much usefulness in toponyms with regard to *orthography*. Nko, an endogenous alphabet system literally, means "I say" in the Mande languages.[3] The

---

[3] Nko was invented in 1949 by a marabout named Souleymane Kante born in 1922 in Sumankoï near Kankan in Guinea Conakry. His father was a Quranic schoolmaster Karamoko whose family was distantly related to Segou in Mali. The young Souleymane Kante studied the Quran and then went to the Ivory Coast. There, he came across

mande language is the most spoken in Mali. Bamanankan is a dialect of the large mande language. Thus, students can not only learn the anthropology and history of writing systems but also learn the orthography of different languages and dialects accurately. In Bamanakan, for example, Koulikoro is written as Kulukɔrɔ and means "near or under the hill or mountain," Yirimadjo as Yilimalɔ/Yilimajɔ meaning "to calm down or rest," Faladje as Faraɛ which means "a white valley," and white refers to the colour of the clay in contrast to the red soil, and Bamako is written as Bamakɔ. This alphabet is extendable to family names, and when the words are written differently, they will be pronounced differently, consequently, the meaning will be lost. Hence, it is pertinent for students to learn such details because phonetic and orthographic deformations and incorrectness disorient the new generation of native speakers.

Morphosemantic analysis[4] can also be practised by examining the meanings of the toponyms and their constituent parts. Two examples[5] are briefly given here for analysis:

Example (1):

"Ng'ombe" (Kiswahili noun)
Kiswahili is a Bantu language; thus the noun class marker is "N" (Class 9).
"-gombe" is the root of the noun. There are no suffixes attached to the root in this case.
When "n" is added, there is assimilation to "ng."

Example (2):

"Sarang'ombe" (Kinubi-Kiswahili noun):
"Sara" is the addition to the Kiswahili noun "ng'ombe."

Remember that this toponym emerged due to language contact as a case of codemixing.
"sarabagara" (meaning "a place for grazing cows" in Kinubi) and "ng'ombe" (Kiswahili word for "cow").
"-bagara" means "cow in Kinubi.

In Example (1), the word "Ng'ombe" is a single noun form that refers to "a cow" or "cattle" in Kiswahili, and in Example (2), "Sarang'ombe" means "a place for grazing cows." Examples (1) and (2) have merely been used as illustrations of how toponyms can be incorporated into the linguistics curriculum at the university and details of the morphosemantics of Kiswahili and Kinubi are beyond the crux of this article. By analysing such morphemes, students can learn how words are constructed and how meaning is conveyed in the various languages of the toponyms. This has, for instance, been evidenced in Anindo (2016) for the morphosemantics of Lulogooli toponyms in Kenya.

Crucially, the balance between the introduction of Malian national languages as the medium of instruction and French is far from being adjusted. Because of using French as an official language, people tend to promote French and even pronounce and write typical endogenous place names like French people do because they do not understand or cannot pronounce them properly. The same applies to the Kenyan context with the use of English. In the linguistics curriculum at the university level in Kenya and Mali, the need for African languages and endogenous ways of knowing does not receive the attention that it deserves. In Kenyan universities, for instance, matters concerning African languages only feature prominently in curricula that offer Kiswahili, which are at times accompanied by scant courses termed "other African languages," as if an afterthought. This renders students who do not take up Kiswahili as a major at a great disadvantage. One practical way of introducing such knowledge into the linguistics curriculum is by incorporating toponym case studies in various courses within the curriculum to demonstrate "epistemological decolonisation" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021, p. 5), equipping students with adequate analytical skills in the study of language and providing comprehension of the role of language in African societies.

The findings of this study, thus, showcase the relevance and application of toponymy in the linguistics curriculum and ensuing suggestions may be integrated into general and applied linguistics, among other creative and practical ways. Using a multidisciplinary approach, case studies of African toponymy can be utilised as a part of illustrative instruction material for analysis in *morphology*, *phonology*, and *semantics*, which are usually taught right from the university entry level. *Sociolinguistics*, *language and culture*, *language and identity*, and *historical linguistics*, as core linguistics courses, can greatly benefit from our featured cases, Kibera and Sabalibougou and other toponym cases. Students can be

---

exposed to concepts such as attrition, maintenance, extinction, endangerment, death, and revival of African languages, among a myriad of other knowledges. Moreover, students may be asked to carry out fieldwork on African toponyms in their communities to demonstrate understanding and application of *linguistic research methods* at the advanced levels, which includes data collection methods like participant observation and interviews that expose them to African *language(s) in context* as well as the practice of *translation and interpretation.* These among others are practical ways of synergistically contributing to decolonising education in Africa.

Summary and concluding remarks

This study set out to explore how case studies of toponyms can be incorporated into the university linguistics curriculum while utilising Kibera and Sabalibougou as examples. The findings and discussion reveal that case studies of toponyms are crucial components for inclusion in the linguistics curriculum at the university for these major reasons: (i) They reveal the interplay between history, socio-political manifestations and language, (ii) provide awareness of the role of geography on language, language contact, and language endangerment, (iii) facilitate the relationship between language and culture, and (iv) allow practising orthography, phonetic transcription, and morphosemantics of African languages. Therefore, case studies, such as the ones in this article, are significant in the linguistics curriculum at the university because they provide students with a deeper multidisciplinary approach to understanding Africa's linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as contributing generously to the knowledge of "information on the history of settlement and land reclamation, the economic activities of the original settlers, and political developments" (Tichelaar, 2002, p. 2). At the same time, the inclusion of such case studies in the university linguistics curriculum is one practical way "of doing epistemological decolonisation" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021, p. 5). Moreover, the embeddedness of African knowledge, culture, and civilisation into the curriculum requires the proper study of the toponyms and their history and societies. Case studies of toponymy can and do create opportunities for engaging with and responding to the decisions of those in power, remembering and forgetting events and people in history, and rearticulating values in pursuit of both political and nationalistic interests (Adebanwi, 2012). More so, embedding toponym case studies in the university linguistics curriculum contributes to synergising with interfaces such as sociology, politics, history, and geography among others in decolonising education in Africa.

The case studies also show the means for peoples' resilience against permanent neo-colonial influences. For instance, changes in the toponymy of Kibera and

Sabalibougou reveal that people still hold a strong tie with their places (topos). Studying this phenomenon, whether in linguistics or other disciplines, is fascinating and requires the epistemological rupture with colonial knowledge and the curriculum, as explored in this article. This will enable countries to receive a bird's eye view of the holistic valuable perception of cultural knowledge production in their education systems. The Government of Kenya (GoK) (2010), for instance, states that indigenous cultures in Kenya should be protected from cultural loss, and the Kenya Institute of Education (2002) indicates cultural heritage as one of the goals of education. Despite these, Kenya's curriculum does not rigorously incorporate inigenous/endogenous cultures to nurture cultural competence in learners at all levels of education.

Consequently, a lack of cultural (re)education in both Kenya and Mali will lead to the loss of the cultural heritage and identity of its citizens because endogenous and local knowledge is a process of learning and sharing social life, histories, identities, economic, and political practices unique to each cultural group as illustrated by the two case studies, Kibera and Sabalibougou. Notably, Bowers (1993) emphasises that the loss of African communal ways of knowing should be a concern of every African. Accordingly, it is crucial to continue the conversation on the importance of enhancing African endogenous knowledges, languages, cultures, and communities within Kenya's and Mali's education systems to promote cultural preservation and social change. Only a proper and well-structured curriculum at all levels of education can resolve this crisis, and this ultimately requires investment and a strong political will for both countries.

Declarations

Ethics approval This paper has utilised data through a literature review and side findings of the co-author's PhD project which was completed in 2017 with ethical approval.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

References

Adebanwi, W. (2012). Glocal naming and shaming: Toponymic (inter)national relations on Lagos and New York's Streets. *African Affairs, 111*(445), 640–661.

Alderman, D., & Inwood, J. (2013). Landscapes of memory and socially just futures. In N. Johnson, R. Schein, & J. Winders (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to cultural geography* (pp. 186–197). John Wiley & Sons.

Amselle, J.-L. (1996). Le N'Ko au Mali. *Cahiers D'études Africaines, 36*(144), 823–826. https://doi.org/10.3406/cea.1996.1870

Amukowa, W., & Ayuya, C. (2013). The 21st Century educated African person and the loss of Africans' educational identity: Towards an Afro Education Model. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 1*. https://doi.org/10.5901/ajis.2013.v2n1p269

Anindo, C. (2016). A morphosemantic study of toponyms: Lulogooli place names [University of Nairobi]. In *University of Nairobi* (Vol. 147). http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/handle/11295/97320

Batoma, A. (2006). African ethnonyms and toponyms: An annotated bibliography. *Electronic Journal of Africana Bibliography*, 10.

Bertrand, M. (2001). Dynamiques urbaines, composition toponymique: Le cas de Bamako (Mali). In Rivière d'Arc, H. (Ed.), *Nommer les nouveaux territoires urbains.* Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme. https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editionsmsh.1450

Boré, A., Jaffré, Y. & Touré, Y. (2003). Bamako: La santé communautaire, et le centre de Sabalibougou. Dans: Yannick Jaffré éd., *Une médecine inhospitalière: Les difficiles relations entre soignants et soignés dans cinq capitales d'Afrique de l'Ouest* (pp. 429–447). Paris: Karthala. https://doi.org/10.3917/kart.jaffr.2003.01.0429

Bowers, C. A. (1993). *Education, cultural myths, and the ecological crisis: Toward deep changes*. Kivaki.

Chandra, K. (2006). What is ethnic identify and does it matter? *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci., 9*(1), 397–424. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.9.062404.170715

Chrimes, S. (2011). Counting as citizens: Recognition of the Nubians in the 2009 Kenyan census. *Ethnopolitics, 10*(2), 205–218.

City Council of Nairobi (CCN) (1971). Minutes of the naming subcommittee meeting: Naming of new roads -Kibera Government Housing Estate. 30th March 1971.

Daniels, H. (1999). A time and a place: Toponymy in the teaching of historical linguistics. *Bulletin Des Anglicistes Médiévistes, 55*, 1–36.

de Smedt, J. (2011). *The Nubis of Kibera: A social history of the Nubians and Kibera slums*. PhD Thesis, Faculty of the Humanities, Leiden University.

Diarra, A. (2020). Le curriculum bilingue dans l'enseignement fondamental au Mali: État des lieux de sa mise en œuvre. *Linguistique*. Université Grenoble Alpes.

Dodounou, T., & Otundo, B. K. (2021). "Borrowed" languages in Africa: A reflection on the reader-writer imaginary. In I. Turner, E. Tadesse, & A. Brahima (Eds.), *Decolonization in higher education in Africa: Perspectives from hybrid knowledge production* (pp. 177–192). Routledge.

Doumbia, L. (2018). *Une sécurisation foncière urbaine dans l'impasse, exemple de Bamako (Mali)*. Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.

Doumbia, L. (2021). Decolonisation of knowledge on land governance. In I. Turner, E. Tadesse, & A. Brahima (Eds.), *Decolonization in higher education in Africa: Perspectives from hybrid knowledge production* (pp. 213–229). Routledge.

Elfversson, E., & Höglund, K. (2018). Home of last resort: Urban land conflict and the Nubians in Kibera. *Kenya. Urban Studies, 55*(8), 1749–1765. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017698416

Fishman, J. (1972). *The sociology of language: An interdisciplinary social science approach to language in society*. Newbury House Publishers.

Gasse, S. (2008). *L'éducation non formelle : quel avenir ? Regard sur le Mali*. Thèse de Doctorat de Sciences de l'éducation, Université de Rouen. http://shs-app.univ-rouen.fr/civiic/memoires_theses/textes/Gasse_These.pdf.

Government of Kenya (GoK) (2010). The Constitution of Kenya 2010. Government Printers.

Hilgers, M. (2011). L'autochtonie comme capital Appartenance et citoyenneté dans l'Afrique urbaine. *Social Anthropology, 19*(2), 143–158.

Huchzermeyer M. (2011). *Cities with 'slums'. From informal settlement eradication to a right to the city in Africa*. UCT Press.

Kearns, R., & Berg, L. (2002). Proclaiming place: Towards a geography of place name pronunciation. *Social and Cultural Geography, 3*(3), 283–302.

Kenya Institute of Education. (2002). *Secondary School Education Syllabus Volume One Subjects: English, Kiswahili, Physical Education, Arabic, French and German*. Kenya Institute of Education.

Kibet, K. R., & Mwangi, P. W. (2016). A morpho-semantic study of Kipsigis toponyms (Issue April) [Kenyatta University]. https://ir-library.ku.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/123456789/8098/Amorpho-semantic studyofKipsigist0ponyms.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y

Lavigne Delville, P., Bouju, J., & Le Roy, É. (2000). *Prendre en compte les enjeux fonciers dans une démarche d'aménagement. Stratégies foncières et bas-fonds au Sahel*. Ed. Du GRET (Etudes et travaux).

Le Roy, É. (1999). Le jeu des lois. Une anthropologie "dynamique" du Droit. Avec des consignes et des conseils au "jeune joueur juriste". *Droit et Société*, 44, 361–363. http://www.persee.fr/doc/dreso_0769-3362_2000_num_44_1_1764_t1_0361_0000

Lee, N. H. (2018). Contact languages around the world and their levels of endangerment. *Lang. Doc. Conserv.* 12, 53–79. http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/ldc.

Letsoela, M. P. (2015). A semantic analysis of Sesotho place names: Evidence from bus stop names. *International Journal of English Language and Translation Studies, 3*(1), 1–8.

Maathai, W. M. (2009). *The challenge for Africa.* Pantheon.

Marx, B., Stoker, T. M., & Suri, T. (2019). There is no free house: Ethnic patronage and property rights in a Kenyan slum. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 11*(4), 36–70. https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20160484

Mill, H. F. (1952). Derivations of some Teso place-names: A symposium of the Mill Hill Fathers. *Uganda Journal, 16*, 168–172.

Ndegwa Report (1971). *Report of the Commission of Enquiry*. Government Printers.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2021). Planetary decolonisation and ecologies of knowledges. In I. Turner, E. Tadesse, & A. Brahima (Eds.), *Decolonization in higher education in Africa: Perspectives from hybrid knowledge production* (pp. xv). Routledge.

Nsamenang, A. B. (2009). Conceptualizing development assessment within Africa's cultural settings. In E. L. Grigorenko (Ed.),

Multicultural psychoeducational assessment (pp. 95–131). Hamilton Printing.

Ominde Report (1964). *The Kenya Education Commission report 1964*. Nairobi: Government. Retrieved February 3, 2022, from https://kenyacradle.com/ominde-commission/

Parsons, T. (1997). "Kibra is our blood": The Sudanese military legacy in Nairobi's Kibera location, 1902–1968. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies, 30*(1), 87–122. https://doi.org/10.2307/221547

Raper, P. E. (1987). Language contact as reflected in toponyms in South-West Africa/Namibia. *Names, 35*(1), 59–63.

Semali, L., & Stambach, A. (1997). Cultural identity in an African context: Indigenous education and curriculum in East Africa. *Folklore Forum, 28*(1), 3–27.

Stamm, V. (1994). Anbausysteme und Bodenrecht in Burkina Faso. *Africa Spectrum,* 29(3), 247–264. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40174537

Thomas, H. B., & Dale, I. R. (1953). Uganda place names: Some European eponyms. *Uganda Journal, 17*(2), 101–123.

Tichelaar, T. (2002). Toponymy and language (pp. 1–17). Paper presented August 12–23, 2002 at the DGSD-UNGEGN toponymy course in Enschede /Frankfurt am Main, The Netherlands/Germany.

Vydrine, V. (1998). Sur l'écriture mandingue et mandé en caractères arabes (mandinka, bambara, soussou, mogofin). *Mandenkan 33*, 87.

Wanjiru, M. W., & Matsubara, K. (2016). Street toponymy and the decolonisation of the urban landscape in post-colonial Nairobi. *Journal of Cultural Geography, 34*(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2016.1203518

Wanjiru, M. W., & Matsubara, K. (2017). Slum toponymy in Nairobi, Kenya: A case study analysis of Kibera, Mathare and Mukuru. *Urban and Regional Planning Review (URPR), 4*, 21–44. https://doi.org/10.14398/urpr.4.2

Wilbers, C. H. J., (2014). *Identifying barriers to effective private schooling for the marginalized*: *A case study on language practices and education quality in low-cost private community schools in Kibera, Nairobi*. Masters dissertation: University of Oslo.

Woolman, D. C. (2001). Educational reconstruction and post-colonial curriculum development: A comparative study of four African countries. *International Education Journal, 2*(95), 27–46.

Zhu Z., Zhang, H., Zhao, J., Guo, X., Zhang, Z., Ding, Y., & Xiong, T. (2018). Using toponyms to analyze the endangered Manchu language in Northeast China. *Sustainability*, 10 (563). https://doi.org/10.3390/su10020563

Zwinoira, R. T. (1984). Some toponyms and ethnonyms of Swaziland. *African Ethnonyms and Toponyms: Report and Papers of the Meeting of Experts*, 23–38. UNESCO.