

Toponym and Evocation of Cultural Landscape Heritage: A Case of an African Community

Isa Bala Muhammad^{1*}, Abubakar Danladi Isah¹, Mohammed Bala Banki² and Ahmed Salawu¹

¹*Department of Architecture, School of Environmental Technology, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Nigeria*

²*Department of Urban and Regional Planning, School of Environmental Technology, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Nigeria*

ABSTRACT

The understanding of how places are named by indigenous people has practical applications in the diverse field of studies that deal with human behaviour. However, few studies exist on how cultural landscapes toponym are conceptualized, especially in non-Western landscapes such as Africa. An empirical study, which includes in-depth interviews with the local Nupe respondents in central Nigeria shows that toponym is tied to transactions that evoke identity, power, heritage, and sense of place. The study contributes to our understanding of indigenous people's interactions with the physical environment. This by extension evolves the cultural heritage and values of an African community. Most importantly is that the research demonstrated that toponym can be used to evoke the community's tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Culture, heritage, history, place-name, rural, sense of place, toponym

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E-mail addresses:

mib@futminna.edu.ng (Isa Bala Muhammad)

arcmuzaiifa@futminna.edu.ng (Abubakar Danladi Isah)

mohdbanki33@gmail.com (Mohammed Bala Banki)

salawuahmed74@gmail.com (Ahmed Salawu)

*Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

People conceptualize space by naming it with an underlying power of the ideology of place and history (Fuchs, 2015). Toponym refers to how the name of the place is derived. The root words originate from the Greek words *topos* and *onomia* which respectively

mean place and name (Henshaw, 2006). Toponym (the study of place names) is a branch of onomastic which deals with the scientific study of the origin history and use of proper names (Chiwanga & Mkiramweni, 2019). Understanding how places are named by indigenous people has practical applications in diverse fields of studies that deal with human behaviour such as law, communications, and navigation (Burenhult & Levinson, 2008). The importance of toponym saw the emergence of the field of study called geographic ontology or cultural geography that deals with how domains are conceptualised by a group of people and culture. The exploration of toponym by geographers has led to a better understanding of indigenous cultural landscapes transactions and characterisation. This is evident from the works of many scholars such as Levinson (2008) and McNiven (2011).

Similarly, toponym serves as a premise for understanding the cultural values of communities (Fuchs, 2015). This is because people-place transactions indicate how indigenous values are generated (Stephenson, 2007). Such values also include meanings that are embedded in the toponym by the native people (Mireku-Gyimah & Mensah, 2015). Languages, therefore, encode the varying views and experiences of the world by the indigenous people (Ingram et al., 2019). The way people view and name places are dependent upon the interactions with the environment and cultural factors. As such, landscape features associated with the location are sometimes

used to name some places. Place names in Africa are also found to be coined from the description of cultural practices that take place within a landscape (Ingram et al., 2019).

In Africa such as the Natta community in Tanzania, wildlife such as the name of birds are found to be used as a toponym. The naming of the landscape with avifauna shows the socio-cultural relationship that the people have with such particular birds (Chiwanga & Mkiramweni, 2019). Similarly, in a rural West African community of Ghana, the name of a tree was used by the local people to name the town. The bark of the tree was found to be of high medicinal value to the people and as such the name of the town was coined from the tree (Mireku-Gyimah & Mensah, 2015). The toponym is cultural artifacts which are usually encoded with social meaning (Heyd & Honkanen, 2015). The importance of toponym in African is such that names are tied to a belief system that believes that, names can affect the destiny of a particular person or the community, this is evident in the Igbo communities of Nigeria (Okagbue et al., 2017). If the essence of cultural landscape studies is towards people's values and history, then the toponym of a place offers a means of meeting such objectives. This is because toponym is laden with people's past and also present transactions (Fuchs, 2015).

In spite of the significance of toponym in people's history and landscapes, few studies shed light on how the landscape is conceptualised, classified, and represented in the native languages of the local people

(Mark et al., 2011). This situation is more critical in Africa and particularly among its minority ethnic groups (Kumar & Jain, 2013). Furthermore, the European anthropologists affirmed the rich cultural landscape heritage of African communities. For example, an anthropological work that focussed on the minority Nupe ethnic group of central Nigeria acknowledged its rich cultural heritage (Nadel, 1942). In addition, Muhammad and Said (2015) affirmed the enormous cultural heritage of the Nupe community that was yet to be explored. As such, this study explored the cultural landscape of a Nupe ethnic group in central Nigeria through toponym inscriptions. The main research question driving this study is: How does toponym determine landscape, historical, and cultural spectrums of minority ethnic groups?

Toponym Link with Heritage and Sense of Place

Cultural heritage includes the ways of living in communities that get passed on from one generation to another (Rössler, 2006). These ways include cultural practices, objects, artistic expressions, and values of the community. As such, cultural heritage is a composition of both tangible and intangible forms (Gullino & Larcher, 2012). The tangible forms of heritage are expressed in human activities such as buildings, roads, bridges. The intangible landscape heritage is on the other hand reflected in the practices related to matters such as cuisines, religious ceremonies performing arts, values, traditional skills, and oral history (Kamel, 2011). Beneath the intangibility

of some cultural heritage values is their connection with historical transactions. This is because in such performance, places of transactions are named and the cultural values associated with such names become geographically represented (Conedera et al., 2007). United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) director general aptly implored that cultural heritage belonged to all and therefore must be preserved by all (Bokova, 2015).

Place names are also linked to cultural heritage in that place names and their domestication contribute to people's sense of place, identity, and nationalism. The naming of places is an important means for the promotion of identity as well as understanding the history and social construct of spaces (Alderman, 2008; Vainikka, 2012). Place names are of significant philosophical importance in Africa because names have the power of constructing the personality and trajectory of the community. Names give a useful guide in understanding the sociocultural behaviour among some ethnic groups (Bisilki, 2018). However, the arrival of Europeans in the 15th century for trade, mining, and other activities especially in West Africa had influenced the naming of places such that in the documentation of places, the native names were changed and sometimes misspelled. Consequently, the documented names became official and thus relegating the native names to the background (Mireku-Gyimah & Mensah, 2015). A good example of these changes in toponym is found in South Africa where

some of the colonised towns and territories were named after the place names of the colonisers' motherland. This led to the loss of the indigenous toponym (Khoury, 2017).

Landscape character is that which makes a place unique, this includes the physical components such as geology, landforms, vegetation, and anthropogenic components of people's transactions (Atik et al., 2015). Thus, people-place transactions contribute to the creation of a cultural landscape's character whose names are based on the concept of the world views of the indigenous people. It was noted by Fuchs (2015), that most landscape character and values were assessed based on the metrics developed in Europe and that is inadequate to cover all indigenous landscape characters. As such, Alderman (2008), and Butler and Åkerskog (2014), opined that region and culture should determine how its landscape is classified.

Accordingly, toponym has been found useful in the understanding of the indigenous landscape character as well as the meaning and values indigenous people ascribe to their environment (Butler & Åkerskog, 2014). This suggests that in the determination of cultural landscape character, the understanding of place names of indigenous people is an important factor (Van Eetvelde & Antrop, 2009). Moreover, place names are considered as one of the most important markers of people's transactions with the landscape (Shoval, 2013) and can be used to understand the historic character of the landscape's topography, vegetation, and regional identity (Alderman & Inwood, 2013).

Study Area (Doko Community)

The Nupe people are located centrally in Nigeria. Their settlements are established near the River Niger and River Kaduna (see Figure 1). Thus, their landscape is made up of both the river community and also that of the upland. These two forms of the landscape also constitute the classification of the Nupe ethnic group's professions of practice which are crop farming and fishing.

The study community, Doko belongs to one of the 12 Nupe historical towns (Nadel, 1942; Yahaya, 2003). The cultural landscape transactions of the community cover the upland and the floodplains. The upland is mainly for the cultivation of grains such as corn, sorghum, and bulrush millet while the flood plains are for the cultivation of rice. The community is surrounded by an outcrop of hills from the southwestern side down to the northeastern side. As such the community is placed in a valley with an undulating terrain (Figure 2).

The indigenous people of the Doko community speak Nupe and are also referred to as the Nupe people. The Nupe language is classified as belonging to the West Benue-Congo sub-group of languages called Nupoid (Blench, 2010). Its textual use was documented in the past by expatriate scholars, Christian missionaries, and Muslim men of letters in a period that spans about 300 years. However, its use in literary works dwindled when the mission of the expatriates and religious groups ended. The proximity of the Nupeland in central Nigeria saw the adoption of the Hausa language of the North and the Yoruba of Southern Nigeria. This adoption

of other languages further strengthens the need to have academic documentation of the toponymical character of the cultural landscape of the Nupe community.

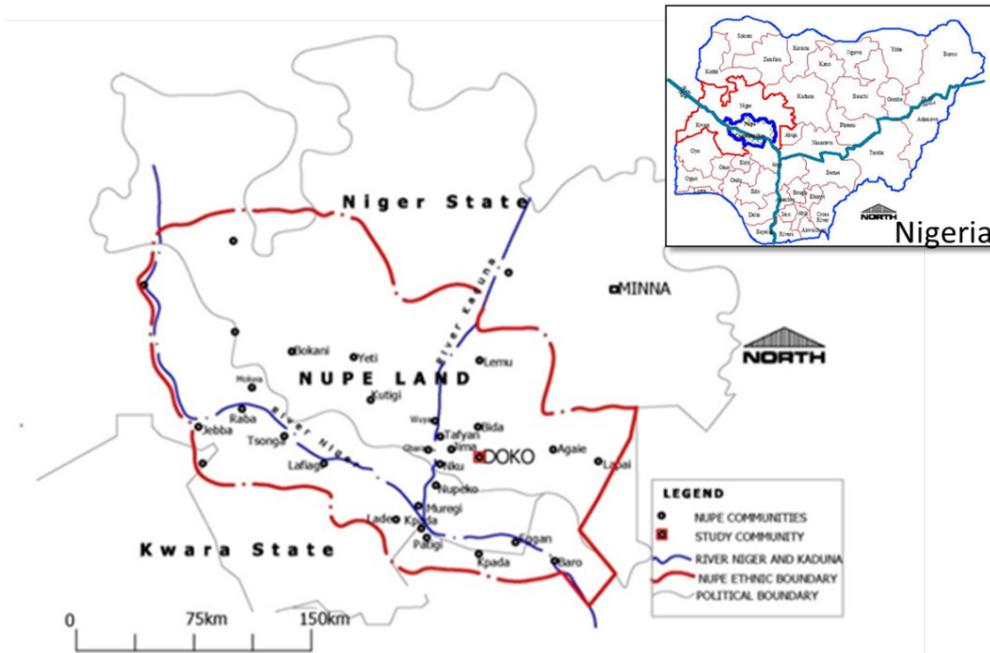


Figure 1. Nupe settlements along river Niger and Kaduna (Muhammad, 2017)



Figure 2. The community and its surrounding hill landscape, source (Muhammad, 2017)

RESEARCH METHOD

An exploratory case study approach was employed to obtain data on the cultural landscape transactions of the Doko community. Firstly, a reconnaissance survey of the landscape features of the community was conducted with the assistance of some elderly members of the community. This included the survey of natural landscape features such as the hill, drainages, and man-made landmark features such as the communication mast that was found conspicuously positioned on the community hill.

The toponym is formulated through indigenous speech through which places and spaces are locally identified (Aksholakova, 2014). As such, for the studied community, Nupe language was used by the researchers for the solicitation of information. This is because, the voice of the participants is important towards the understanding of their cultural transactions (Wheeler, 2014). Moreover, the full dimensions of indigenous place names are only possible through the use of the context of traditional use (Aporta et al., 2014). Thus, in-depth interviews were conducted with local people. The interviews allowed for the elicitation about things that cannot directly be observed such as feelings and thoughts in the world of the Nupe community.

Furthermore, the interviews were mostly conducted with the heads of the compounds whose ages ranged from 45 to 75 years. The Doko community is made up of 52 established compounds as affirmed by (Muhammad, 2017). Each of these compounds is headed by the most senior

member of the extended family and they are referred to as *Ndamitso* (the family head). *Ndamitso* is the custodian of the family heritage and as such this made them the most appropriate for the elicitation of information about the toponym and the cultural heritage of the community.

An open-ended interview was conducted with the respondents and all the interviews were recorded with the aid of a tape recorder. The interviews lasted between 25 minutes to 42 minutes. An average of 3 interviews were carried out each day and the whole interviews were concluded on the fifth day because a saturation point was reached after 15 respondents were interviewed. The point of saturation was attained when it was found that most of the toponym and the history have been articulated and the continuation of the interviews was not necessarily going to yield additional valuable information on the subject matter (Miles et al., 2013). It is to be noted that the questions were focused on the history and naming of the compounds as well as places within the community. Probing questions to each interviewee was used to elicit confirmation or otherwise of the stories shared by other interviewees. The content analysis of the transcribed interviews showed that the stories of the interviewees corroborated one another and so are considered to be credible.

Data Analysis

The generation of indigenous landscape typology was developed from the clustering of field notes, interviews, and photographs. These were then transcribed into text and thereafter, a thematic analysis was carried

out on the data which involved the use of computer software QSR Nvivo10 for speed and accuracy (Yonghong et al., 2012).

The outcome of the thematic analysis was the creation of nodes for each place name identified in the transcripts. Thereupon, the place names were then sorted out into categories based on a series of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 2006). This was to ensure that each category of the toponym was well defined and was also different from other categories. Consequently, the output of the analysis was tabulated for comprehension and inferences based on the accounts of the respondents (Matthews, 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The output of the toponym in the cultural landscape of the Doko community is given

in Table 1. The output of the thematic analysis showed 5 main themes (categories of toponym). They are toponym derived from leadership title, landscape features, and historic transaction, profession, and the function of a place. It should be noted that the names of compounds and landscape features are considered as places. Streets in the cultural landscape of the Doko community unlike what is obtainable in urban areas are not specifically given names. Rather the local people identified most of the streets by qualifying them with the nearest compound’s names. As such the discussion on the toponymical character of the community has the street names exempted because including them will be a repetition of some of the compound names.

Table 1

The toponym of places within the community

	Local naming	Meaning	Category
1	Emindatsowa	A military title given in the rank of warriors	Leadership
2	Emi Ndawodi Sako	Ndawodi Sako's compound	Leadership
3	Emi Nnagudu	Nnagudu's compound	Leadership
4	Emi Bakpagi Yakotsu	Bakpagi Yakotsu’s compound	Leadership
5	<i>Emi Majin</i>	Majin’s compound	Leadership
6	<i>Emi Michael Legbo</i>	Micheal legbo's compound	Leadership
7	<i>Emi Namana</i>	Namana's compound	Leadership
8	<i>Emidazhi</i>	Dazhi (Title of the village leadership)	Leadership
9	<i>Emindashaba</i>	Name of the deputy village head	Leadership
10	<i>Emindazhitsu</i>	The father of the village (king)'s compound	Leadership
11	<i>Emitsu Saba</i>	The deputy chief's compound	Leadership
12	<i>Emitsudzuko</i>	Leadership market	Leadership

Table 1 (Continued)

	Local naming	Meaning	Category
13	<i>Manfu</i>	Imam's compound	Leadership
14	<i>Defiafu</i>	Defia' compound	Leadership
15	<i>Takogbodo</i>	Named after gbodo	Leadership
16	<i>Edoni</i>	Near the stream	Landscape Character
17	<i>Ejegi</i>	Name of a small stream	Landscape Character
18	<i>Ewongi</i>	A large depression of landscape	Landscape Character
19	<i>Kpatanko</i>	The river bank	Landscape Character
20	<i>Pati Bokugi</i>	The white hill	Landscape Character
21	<i>Takogi</i>	Down into the valley	Landscape Character
22	<i>Eyeshi Ekobitcha</i>	An old saying on the landscape	Landscape Character
23	<i>Kpachinifugi</i>	<i>kpachi (Terminalia Schiperina) Tree</i>	Landscape Character
24	<i>Dogo Namba</i>	<i>Dogo (Schizachyrium exile) grass,</i> Plant	Landscape Character
25	<i>Edzuta</i>	<i>Edzu, Voandzeia Subterranea</i> Babara beans	Landscape Character
26	<i>EmiLangba</i>	<i>Langba (Gardenia ternifolia)</i> compound	Landscape Character
27	<i>Kuchitagi/Tifi</i> <i>Majigbe</i>	<i>kuchi</i> the <i>Ceiba pentandra</i> tree compound	Landscape Character
28	<i>Mugorota</i>	Mungoro (<i>Mangefera indica</i>) Mango tree	Landscape Character
29	<i>Dadofugi</i>	A name of village in lavun LGA	Historical Transaction
30	<i>Dende</i>	<i>Be demi de</i> (surprise and sudden)	Historical Transaction
31	<i>Eguko</i>	A place of convergence for ritual	Historical Transaction
32	<i>Emi Woro</i>	New compound	Historical Transaction
33	<i>Emi Kutiko</i>	Named after a type of idol worship	Historical Transaction
34	<i>Konufu</i>	Named after a type of idol worship	Historical Transaction
35	<i>Kpakafu</i>	Named after a type of idol worship	Historical Transaction
36	<i>Emi Bashayi</i>	Tea seller/ snuff	Profession
37	<i>Emi Jiya Taba</i>	The Jiya cigarette seller's house	Profession
38	<i>Emitsu Dzan</i>	The drummer's house	Profession
39	<i>Tswata</i>	Blacksmiths workshop	Profession
40	<i>Egbangi</i>	Congregation space	Function of place
41	<i>Dzuko</i>	Market	Function of place

Toponym, Functioning to Portray Leadership Roles in the Community

The leadership system in the Nupe community is such that all the compounds are represented in the village council by each of the compound heads. In the Doko community, the oldest male family member is always bestowed with the leadership of the compound and he is thus the custodian of the family values and its well-being and is referred to as *Ndamitso*. Each *Ndamitso* represents a compound that is made up of several households of one ancestral genealogy in the village council.

The analysis in Table 1, shows that 37 percent of the toponymic character of the community is derived from leadership titles. This is not surprising because each compound's title of leadership is hereditary and therefore transferred amongst the members of the family from one generation to another. To further support this assertion is the quotation from a 60-year-old respondent:

“Our great grandfather who established this compound is called Gbodo and therefore the compound was named *Emindagbodo*, while his title at the village council is *Ndagbodo*”.

From the quotation, the toponym for the compound and the title of leadership evolved from the founding father of the compound. Evidently, the ancestral lineage as well as the leadership role of the compound is reflected in the place name. For instance, an inference from the anecdote above shows that *Emindagbodo* means the compound of *Gbodo* while *Ndagbodo* means the head of the *Gbodo* family. This showcases the

name of the compound tied to leadership roles in the community's transactions. It is also an indication of toponym linked to both the tangible and intangible values of the community (Gullino & Larcher, 2012). The tangible form of the toponym is represented in the physical compounds while the intangible is represented in the values members of the community attribute to the names of their compounds. Several examples of this abound in the community. Accordingly, another respondent aged 63 asserts as follows:

“Our compound is called *Eminndashaba*, because our family always produced the deputy village head of this community”

Eminndashaba means the compound of the *Shaba* which literary means deputy. The compound has therefore continued to hold the position of the deputy village head. On the whole, toponym provides and also instils in the local people a sense of continuity from previous generations, their identity, and sense of place. Most important is that the place names are linked to the heritage of the leadership roles of each compound in the community.

Toponym and Depiction of Landscape Features

In the cultural landscape of the Doko community, toponyms associated with landscape features constitute 32 percent of place names (See Table 1). The names were derived from either the topography or landscape features such as plants and water bodies. The compounds that have landscape toponymic names derived from plants are

kpachinifugi, dogonaba, edzuta, emilangba, kuchitagi, and mungorota. These compound names are all derived from the names of plants which are *kpachi* (*Terminalia schiperina*), *dogo* (*Schizachyrium exile*), *Edzu* (*Voandzeia subterranea*), *kuchi* (*Ceiba pentandra*), and *mungoro* (*Mangeferia indica*). Notably, this category of toponyms emerged from the names of plants found in the locations where these compounds were historically established. In like manner, O'Connor and Kroefges (2008) asserted that the extent to which physical landscape character was reflected in the naming of places was dependent on the culture of the people. The foregoing narrative, therefore, connotes that, the landscape character of the Nupe community is highly reflected in the naming of places.

A compound's head, aged 72 gave an account of how the name of his compound came to be in the following quotation:

“When our forefather came down to this place, he built his hut under the shade of langba (*Gardenia ternifolia*), other settlers began to refer to him as Ndalangba which means, the man whose hut is under langba tree”

In this narration, it becomes clear the establishment of the compound under a particular species of tree, *Gardenia ternifolia* for instance provided the early settlers the name for the compound. *Gardenia ternifolia* happens to be a rare species within the landscape of Nupeland (Burkill, 1994). As such, *Gardenia ternifolia* became a landmark amongst other tree species and invariably a form of identity (Conedera et

al., 2007). Similarly, *Terminalia schiperina*, and *Ceiba pentandra*, which are also used as toponyms are also not amongst the common indigenous trees within the community landscape (Muhammad & Said, 2014). In view of this, the inhabitants were able to use the rare species of trees as a form of identity and place name.

Correspondingly, the landscape character and its natural features are also used as toponyms- They are *Edoni*, (stream) *Ejegi* (small stream), *ewongi* (a large depression) *kpatanko* (river bank) and *patibokungi* (the white hill). In this category, the landscape characters are what informed the naming of places. It is worthy to mention that the landscape features used as place names were based on the initial settlement on the hill before migration down to the plains. This scenario is further explained by the same respondent as follows:

“I was told that when our compound was first established on the hill-side, it was near an outcrop of rock which was brighter than others and it was called patibokungi, the white hill. Our compound still bears the name patibokungi”

It can be deduced that the migration down to the plains did not change the name of this specific compound. The names are still linked to the historic landscape character of the first settlement. Accordingly, this gives an understanding of the time depth cultural landscape transactions of the Nupe people (Rippon, 2012). Similarly, the people's transactions showcased place name as a descriptor of indigenous plants

and geographic features of the landscape (O'Connor & Kroefges, 2008). Furthermore, it also affords the family members a link to the first settlement which can be traced back to the hill settlement. This suggests that the physical landscape character of people may change, but the place name could serve as a link to the historical landscape character and heritage.

Toponym, Depicting Historic Transactions

People's transactions with the landscape over time create cultural meanings and values which thus becomes part of the community's history. In the cultural landscape of the Doko community, historic transactions have been used in the naming of places. It is found that the deity worshipped by the forefathers before the embrace of Islam was used in the naming of *konufu*, *emikutiko*, and *kpakafu*. This is explained by the respondent aged 75 in the following quotation:

"I grew up to see idols being worshipped and each compound has its own type of idol. The konufu people's idol was called Konu, the kpakafu household was called kpaka while the emikutiko people's idol was called kutiko"

Each of these compounds had the character of their idols different from each other and as such these three compounds still maintain the names associated with the idols worshipped by their founding fathers. Even though the present-day scenario shows that there is no much existence of idol worship due to the embrace of Islam and Christianity, the names of these compounds

are still maintained. This is attributed to the fact that in the history of the community, the three compounds were considered to have the most powerful idols when compared to the other compounds in the community. The respondent R1 explains further:

"In those days, the community gathered for ceremonial performances in the names of these idols and this includes the drinking of local beer, and also performances by the masquerades, it used to be very interesting"

Historically, most of the compounds in the community had some form of cultural transactions with the idols which were mostly carried out by family members. However, the households of *konufu*, *kpakafu*, and *emikutiko* performed their annual rituals in the presence of the whole community. This, thus contributed to the popularity of these idols over the others. As such the names of the idols became a form of identity for the three households. It is to be noted that most of the religious practices of the aforementioned compounds have changed, however, the link to the past practice is still intangibly represented in the name of the compounds

CONCLUSION

The current study set out to explore the conceptual character of toponym in the cultural landscape of a sub-Saharan Africa Nupe community in Nigeria. Based on the findings of this study, the role of toponym in understanding cultural landscapes of indigenous people comes in many

ways. Firstly, toponym can be tied to the portrayal of power and leadership roles of the occupants of a place. In this context also is that the toponym is linked to the unique historical leadership roles of each compound in the community. Secondly, toponym can be tied to the landscape's physical character. It is such that place names are found to be a descriptor of indigenous plants and geographic features. Thirdly, toponym can be linked to the unique historical transactions of the community which saw features and places named based on what uniquely transpired at a particular time in the history of the community. And fourthly, the toponym character is found to portray the profession of the occupants of certain places. The significant finding of this study shows that the four typologies of place names, (leadership positions, landscape character, historic transactions, and professions) evoked the identity and history of the community. In addition, the toponym character of the Nupe people have shown that it is not limited to identity and history, but also a portrayal of a sense of place and power. This implies that toponym (place names) can evoke both tangible and intangible cultural heritage of communities.

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