

# IVORIAN TRADITIONAL NICKNAMES: TYPOLOGY AND IDENTITY DECONSTRUCTION

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**ABSTRACTS:** This article examines the practices of identity (de)construction through nicknames in some Ivorian traditional societies. It is based on a sample of nicknames from three Ivorian languages: Baule, Bete and Malinke. The typology of the nicknames established on the ground of their semantic analysis includes three different categories. The first one embraces nicknames that refer to physical traits such as height, weight; completion, buttocks, breasts, physical force and disabilities. The second class covers nicknames with reference to cognitive or psychological traits such as psychological strength, bravery and courage. The third is in relation with phenomena, prestige and aspirations.

The pragmatic analysis of the meanings of the nicknames has shown that they display some identity traits such as ethnicity, gender and age. Moreover, it appears that the phenomenon of nickname change seems iconic to the process of evolution and maturation of personal identity. Double or treble nicknames function as complementary identifiers that expose different features of personal identity and trace different stages of personal identity at the diachronic level. The nicknames studied thus contribute to the description and deconstruction of individual identity.

**Key words:** Anthroponyms, Construction, Identity, Nicknames

**RESUME :** Cet article examine les pratiques de la (dé)construction de l'identité à travers les surnoms dans quelques sociétés traditionnelles ivoiriennes. Il se fonde sur un échantillon de surnoms issus de trois langues ivoiriennes : le baoulé, le bété et le malinké. La typologie de ces surnoms comprend trois différentes catégories. La première couvre les surnoms qui se rapportent aux traits physiques tels que le poids, la taille, le teint, les fesses, les seins, la force et les handicaps physiques. La deuxième classe inclut les surnoms liés aux traits cognitifs et psychologiques tels que la bravoure et le courage. Le troisième comprend les surnoms relatifs aux phénomènes physiques, aux aspirations et au prestige.

L'analyse pragmatique du sens des surnoms a montré qu'ils exposent des traits de l'identité personnelle tels que l'ethnie, le genre et l'âge. De plus, il apparaît que le phénomène

de changement de surnom semble iconique au processus d'évolution et de maturation de l'identité personnelle. Les surnoms double ou triple fonctionnent comme des identifiants complémentaires qui exposent différents éléments de l'identité personnelle et retracent différentes étapes de l'identité personnelle sur le plan diachronique. Les surnoms étudiés participent ainsi à la description et à la déconstruction de l'identité personnelle.

**Mots clés :** Anthroponymes, Construction, Identité, Surnom

## **Introduction**

The question of identity starts at the personal level when I speak of myself. It embraces individual traits such as gender, language, education, religious beliefs and other features such as physical and psychological traits. But it cannot be solved at that level only. Another important idea is the perception or representation of the neighbor or the community: What comes to their mind when they see an individual or hear his or her name? To which extent is someone similar or different from their community? Such questions suggest that otherness is important in the definition and construction of identity. Nicknames thus include different aspects: personal, social identity as well as otherness. They are generated in social interactions, in discourse. Hence, the importance of the linguistic dimension in the study of both identity and nicknames.

Côte d'Ivoire is a multilingual country, a melting pot. More than sixty different languages are spoken in the country including local and western languages. There are four major linguistic groups that represent the linguistic identity of the different ethnic groups: the Akan, the Gur, the Kru and the Malinke. These languages function as the banks and the vehicles of the Ivorian culture.

The present article is a theoretical onomastic study of Ivorian traditional nicknames addressing the following questions: What is the typology of Ivorian traditional nicknames? In which extent do they participate to the Deconstruction of personal identity? The method is a pragmatic analysis based on the contextual meanings of nicknames from three languages: Baule, Bete and Malinke. The first part focuses on the typology and the pragmatic values of Ivorian nicknames. The second addresses the issue of how nicknames intervene in the Deconstruction of personal identity.

### **1. The concept of identity**

Identity “refers to how people answer the question, “Who are you?” This question may be posed explicitly or implicitly, at a personal or a collective level, to others or to oneself” ( V.L.Vignoles, 2017, p 2 ). Therefore, the notion under study has two dimensions: personal or individual and group or social.

The concept of identity was already the focus of linguistic studies in antiquity. For Aristotle, the ethos, that is the name and its connotations, is more important than the pathos, what the speaker says in his or her speech. In Aristotle’s view, the name is an identity descriptor in the sense that it evokes a reputation, an image, a social status, a professional position and a personality that are firmly attached to it (D. C. Duma, 2012, p 151).

Quintilian shares this view as he argues that what people know about the speaker before he or she delivers his or her speech has more power than what he or she says. Today, this view is the background philosophy in advertising where icons are used in ads. The image of popular people is thus exploited, given that what they say is given credit owing to their name and the prestigious image that goes with it in the community or the country.

The opposite view of this philosophy presents the ethos as essentially related to discourse. For Mainguenu (1993, p138), the ethos is in relation with the speech exercise. In this framework, the person in the extralinguistic world does not matter. On the contrary, the image that emerges from his or her discourse only makes really sense.

Nicknames are created in social connections and used in discourse. They enter the lexical bank of the community, when they are frequently used only. However, as any linguistic items, there are four types of conditions for using them including situational or contextual, semantic, semio-linguistic competences as well as the pertinence principle. For example, the use of nickname is pertinent under some conditions and in specific contexts. The criterion of age and social status is important too, given that the use of nicknames is linked to a solidary relation or to the belonging to a common social class or network.

## **2. Naming logic and Ivorian identity**

Proper nouns or names are provided at birth. In some Ivorian tribes like the Malinke, there is a naming ceremony where the parents of the new born or some influential members of the community provide the child with a name. The name thus becomes one of the most important aspects of the individual identity. Language, ethnicity, gender and religion are the other major

traits of personal identity. If some identity markers such as ethnicity and gender are normally unchangeable, others like religion and names can change over time.

Religious preferences can change when an individual adopts new beliefs or faith. Like religion, names can change too. For example, the change from Cassius Clay to Mohamed Ali speaks volumes in this issue. There are similar cases of name change with some African leaders: Francis N’Krumah has been replaced with Kwame Nkrumah, François Tombalbaye with N’Garta Tombalbaye (M. K. Kamara, 2001, p 5).

Many Ivorian traditional names are transparent. They trace elements of personal identity such as the origin, ethnicity, religion, gender. Their transparency can sometimes show identity markers such as profession, date of birth or the rank in the family. For example, names such as N’da or Zadi normally refer to male twins. N’da refers to a male from the Akan ethnicity, whereas Zadi belongs to the Kru group.

In the Ivorian context, names are markers of a programme of life or a mission on the part of the parents or the community of the individual that bears it (M. K. Kamara, 2001, p 7). Names include anthroponyms, hypocoristic and nicknames. So, when somebody says his or her name, he or she provides a summary of his or her identity.

The Ivorian Naming Act states that any individual must have a patronymic name plus one or more forenames<sup>1</sup>. But, generally, the structure of full names is twofold. One is the structure: Family name+forename. The forename can include a name from one’s village or tradition followed by one or more French or Western names. That structure is used mainly in the Akan, Gur and Kru ethnical groups. In this respect, full names are structured like the following: Konan Kouassi Gregoire or Blé Sery Arnaud. Konan and Blé are family names, Kouassi Grégoire and Séry Arnaud are the forenames in these examples.

The second one is that of Malinke people. The structure of Malinke names is: family name plus a forename. The structure can be simple like Koné Seydou for example. The practice in the field indicates that in all Ivorian communities, nicknames sometimes derive from physical or cognitive elements well known in the environment.

### **3. Typology of Ivorian traditional nicknames**

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Ivorian Act n°64-373 of October 1964 amended by law n°83-793 of August 1983, each person must have one patronymic name and one or more forenames.

The Nickname is defined as ‘an informal name for someone, different from the formal name registered at the Civil Registration Office’. (C. Liao, 2006, p 69). The Ivorian nicknames under study can be categorized into three major groups. The first one includes nicknames that derive from physical traits of humans, the second one from psychological ones and the third one is connected to various entities such as phenomena, prestige and aspirations.

### **3.1. Nicknames that refer to physical traits**

Human physical traits sometimes inspire Ivorians in the shaping of both community-given and self-given nicknames.

#### **3.1.1. Nicknames in relation with physical building and complexion**

A crossroad at Riviera 2, in the municipality of Cocody (Abidjan) is called *Carrefour Gorille* (Gorilla Crossroad). This peculiar name of place is in relation with a man who works there. That man is described as a human with the physical building and complexion of a gorilla. Therefore the local inhabitants refer to him as the gorilla.

In the same vein, many Ivorian nicknames derive from the physical attributes of the individuals that bear them. In the Malinke ethnic group, for example, nicknames such as: / fāta gbε / (Fanta fair complexion) or / kone ba / (Kone the big or fat) in relation with physical traits are used to identify people with more precision. Other nicknames of the same kind are:

Bete (krou group)

/gogi lepe /

Gogi red

Gogi, the red,

Baule

/ au ble /

Ahou black

Ahou with black complexion

In the examples of nicknames above, the complexion, a physical trait is used to add some important precision to the identity of the people they refer to. Other physical aspects such as the height and the weight are used too.

### **3.1.2. Nicknames in connection with the height**

The height of people is used in the creation of nicknames meant to better identify them. In many cases, physical traits are mostly used in community-given nicknames that function as identity complements.

Malinke

/ berte jã /

Berte tall

Berte the tall

Bete

/ degəi ktɔe/

Degehi short

The short Degehi

### **3.1.3. Nicknames based on the weight**

The weight is generally used in the formation of mate or pair-given nicknames within a group. Given that much weight is not always appreciated, nicknames involving the weight are rarely self-chosen. Moreover, the people these nicknames are supposed to identify have the tendency to reject them.

Baule

/ fasie dā /

Fasie fat

Fasie the fat (one)

### **3.1.4. Nicknames in relation with buttocks**

Buttocks, particularly those of women are sometimes used as nicknames especially when they are under or over normal proportions. Small buttocks as well as big ones are used as identity markers. There are even some popular expressions or words in the Ivorian society that describe big buttocks: / mutu/, /tassa ba/ (big bowl), / bobara ba/ big buttocks.

Even if the tendency of appreciation seems to favour big buttocks, small buttocks are sometimes praised or promoted. Consequently, Claire Bailly, a well-known artist in the country, has chosen / bobara fitini / (small buttocks) as her nickname. Therefore, she is regarded as the icon of that particular body part in the Ivorian show business.

### **3.1. 5. Nicknames in connected to the breasts**

In Côte d'Ivoire, big breasts are called /papaj/, papaye (pawpaw) or /lolo/. Breasts are natural attributes for females. So, when Ivorians use them to identity a female, they simply imply the big ones. Some ladies are called Miss Lolo to indicate how much the nature has been generous with them in that physical aspect.

### **3.1. 6. Nicknames in relation with physical force or power**

People, especially males are sometimes identified with reference to their physical strength or building. Muscular men are given nicknames that evokes their strength or power. For example, in bete, some zoonyms are associated to humans as nicknames. Nicknames such as /gbi/, panther and /gwε/, gorilla are used for people with particular strength and building.

These nicknames can be self-given when their bearer wants to express his or her power or show how much dangerous he or she is. The nicknames thus function as a protection measure used to prevent the members of his or her group or people from other gangs from betraying or attacking him or her. A man in the village of Ourégbabré in the region of Soubré is called / dākɪnɪ/ that means "tell your mother before you come". In other words, "get ready because a fight can take place anytime." This reminds his mates that any misconduct with him can lead to a boxing match.

### **3.1.7. Nicknames in connection with a disability**

As any physical trait, a physical handicap can be used to identify somebody. A typical example of this, is the famous song / adama anatɔ<sup>2</sup>/ ( Adama the disabled). The song exposes a situation where a disabled man is identified through his handicap. As the song is popular, the tendency to call disabled people /anatɔ/ has spread all over the country.

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<sup>2</sup> The song *Adama Natoh* by the Zouglou band 100 façons is available on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KP4xiUD2EAs>

Another example is that of a certain man in Zergbeu (Soubré) is called /toto/ Toto. The nickname means tasteless in relation with his incapacity to satisfy a woman.

### **3.2. Nicknames related to psychological or cognitive traits**

Nicknames can be based on what is thought to be the essential psychological traits of an individual. They can be either self-given or pair-given.

#### **3.2. 1. Nicknames connected to psychological or mental strength**

People can provide a nickname to somebody focusing on what they think the essential psychological trait of the person is. Names of beings or nouns that denote particular psychological strength or power are sometimes used.

Bete

/kosu kata/

Fire brand

Firebrand

baule

/katatʃe/

Iron man

Malinke

/abu nɛgɛ/

Abou iron

Abou iron man

/katatʃe/ is a hypocoristic name for strong people. The other nicknames, /kosu kata/ and /abu nɛgɛ/, are some linguistic creations in the form of noun phrases.

#### **3.2.2. Nicknames recalling bravery acts or courage**

On the base of real or pretended bravery, some people are provided with nicknames that evoke the idea of courage.

/brav tʃɛ/

Brave man

Brave man

/wudi de mama/

Man from Mama

The Man from Mama

In the examples above the adjective *brave* and the possessive *of* are borrowed from French. /Brav tʃɛ/ is the nickname of the president Alassane Ouattara and /wudi de mama/, the courageous, brave man from Mama is the one of former president Laurent Gbagbo. Both nicknames have a hypocoristic use.

### 3.2.3. Nicknames related to phenomena

Phenomena such as thunder, water, the sun and even death are used as nicknames. The person that bears the nicknames is regarded as sharing the power or the attributes of these natural forces.

/nzue ba/

Water son

Small stream

/nzue ba/ is the nickname of former president Henri Konan Bedie. It functions as a hypocoristic name.

### 3.2.4. Nicknames as sickness or death preventers

In the Akan and Krou traditions when a baby gets ill regularly. It is given names that are supposed to prevent him or her from dying. These kinds of nicknames transcribe the local traditional beliefs in the curative or preventive power of words.

Bete

/glu kri nt/

Grave in you rush

You rush for grave.

The sentence above is used as nicknames for people who are frequently ill. These sorts of nicknames are supposed to help sick people recover or prevent them from dying.

### **3.3. Nicknames related to needs such as aspiration, prestige or power**

Some Ivorian traditional nicknames are provided as a vehicle of personal or community needs.

#### **3.3.1. Nicknames expressing the need of prestige**

Names of famous people: artists, players, Heads of States are used as nicknames particularly when they are associated with power or prestige. In Côte d'Ivoire, names such as Pele, Pokou, and recently Drogba, Obama are used as nicknames. They sometimes render some personal aspirations.

#### **3.3.2. Nicknames that render aspirations**

Some parents or community influencers give some nicknames in relation with the job they wish a child to take in the future.

/Zergbe gɔmana/

Zergbeu governor

The governor from zergbeu

The child who is given this nickname is expected by his community to become a governor. The nickname has obviously been shaped to encourage or boost him.

All in all, Ivorian nicknaming portrays physical, psychological traits as well as, prestige, aspiration, personal or community beliefs. They thus, expose the different features that compose personal identities. In other terms, they (De)construct personal identity.

## **4. Nicknames and identity Deconstruction**

The concept of Deconstruction or Deconstructivism in the sense of this article, is taken from J. Derida (1967). Deconstruction is "an approach to building design which attempts to view the architecture in bits and pieces. The basic elements of architecture are dismantled." (H.S.Al-Mamori, 2011, p151). So, Deconstruction is a presentation of the pieces that compose a building. It focuses on the tiny features of the architecture. The typology of Ivorian nicknames has shown the portray of the particular traits of their bearers. Features of the physical body or the psychology of individuals are used in the formation their nicknames. That

is a first level of deconstruction. However, the Deconstruction process appears at another level. Nicknames deconstructs personal identity when they expose inherent features of identity such as gender and age for example.

#### **4.1. Nicknames and gender or age**

Gender or age is used as an essential seme in the creation of nicknames. In community-given nicknames those that indicate gender or age are adopted when the community think they match with the essential traits of the individual.

Malinke

/abu kɔɔ/

Abou old

Abou, the elder

Bete

/Seie kɔɔ/

Sehie old

Sehie, the elder

Other examples of nicknames that indicate age are formed with the morphemes /kã/ small or young in Baule, /tɬket/ small or young in Bete and /fitini/ small or young in Malinke.

/abu kɔɔ/, the elder Abou is thus opposed to /abu fitini /, the younger Abou and /Seie kɔɔ/, the elder Sehie to /Seie tɬket / the younger Sehie, on the age continuum.

In some contexts, when a nickname does not accord with its bearer's new identity, it is replaced with another.

#### **4.2. Change of nicknames and identity change**

The change of nicknames appears as an attempt to present or describe identity with more accuracy. It can be the result of identity dynamism or a simple change of personal identity perception or representation. In E. Erickson's theory of identity construction, a major step in the process of identity formation consists in an introspection exercise. E.Erickson puts: 'The

individual [...] reflects on a cumulating summary of past life but also an ongoing construction created as the basis for future meaningful adult life.” (S. J. Dowling, 2011, p4).

Thanks to this reflection, the individual assesses his or her personality, figures out his or her strengths and weaknesses. Nicknames can be created in this process as traces of the image of the individual in his or her own eyes or in the eyes of the community. Nicknames thus, reveal the different traits that compose the representation of one’s identity. So, the change of nickname happens in the evolution of the personal identity and is connected to the features of time or evolution.

The young/old duality in the examples supra must be regarded as two complementary elements in the evolution or maturation of human identity. The nickname /fitini/ (young) can be replaced with /kɔrɔ/, old; /tɔkeɪ/young, with kɔdɔ/ old or elder, etc. In contrast with the nickname change phenomenon, there are many occurrences of double or treble nicknames.

#### **4.3. Double or treble nicknames and the complexity of identity**

Identity has both synchronic and diachronic dimensions (H. Baldung, 2017, p 2). As identity ‘tracers’, nicknames can render these two dimensions. Therefore, a change of nickname can imply a change of individual or social identity.

In some particular circumstances, nicknames can be multiplied. Therefore, an individual can have two or more nicknames. Each of them can have its own context or be associated to a given group for internal use. As nicknames are created in different contexts to fulfil some precise needs, double or treble nicknames refer to different traits of the person. The soccer player Didier Drogba, has three different popular nicknames used in Côte d’Ivoire:

/tito/

Tito,

Friend, comrade

/dajuzoko/

dayouzoko

Brother poor

Poor brother

/gbagba dɛ/

Gbagbadɛ

Strike strike lightning or thunder

The striking lightning

Each of these nicknames refers to a particular idea, trait or situation. /tito/ means comrade or friend. It embraces the sense of youth too. It is a hypocoristic nickname that refers to a solidarity relation. As for /dajuzoko/ dayouzoko, it renders the idea of comradeship. The idea of brotherhood is expressed too. Drogba is thus presented as the brother, the son of the country.

/gbagba dɛ/ Gbagbadɛ evokes the idea of force and power. It presents him with the power of lightning or thunder, that is, a constant danger for the adversary during competitions. The three nicknames trace the evolution of a boy, a comrade /tito/, who becomes a /gbagba dɛ/, a powerful striker, later.

It appears that double or treble nicknames show different aspects of identity that a name or a single nickname cannot describe accurately. Moreover, they give deeper insight of the personal identity focusing on the diachronic aspect of identity formation.

#### **4.4. Nicknames as identity complement**

In communities where many people have identical names (homonyms), there is a need for another linguistic item for distinction and precision. As the proper noun (that is common to many people) does not fulfil its identification purpose anymore, it needs to be completed with nickname(s). Physical traits function at this level in the completion of nominal identity. For example, nicknames such as /fãta gbɛ/, Fanta with fair complexion and /abɛ zɔ/, Abe with fair complexion are respectively used in Malinke and bete.

#### **4.5. Nicknames as name replacers**

Names are given at or after birth to identify individuals. However, they can lose this function in daily interactions in favor of nicknames. Some people introduce themselves with self-given nicknames instead of their names. In some Ivorian Christian communities, people have the tendency to delete their names, particularly when the latter are in relation with paganism. For example, /kplɔ/, (fetish or juju) is the name of a family in Cocody. This name is associated to

two opposite attitudes on the part of its bearers. Mister Kprohi, the man always replaces his name with Albertini, his nickname. He certainly wishes to avoid the notion of paganism it evokes. His wife, who is not a speaker of the language, proudly uses the family name to introduce herself.

In the frame of this work, it has been shown that nicknames present features of identity that cannot be revealed with mere names. In other terms, they expose the tiny pieces of individual identity in a precise way. Nicknames expose various features of individual identity.

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown three main types of nicknames in the Ivorian traditional society. The first one includes all nicknames in connection with the physical aspects of the person. Traits such as the height, the weight, the complexion, the buttocks, the breasts, disabilities and the physical strength of the person described are used as key elements of personal identity. The second type comprises psychological or cognitive features like mental force, bravery. The third one is connected qualities such as courage and needs like aspiration and prestige.

Ivorian nicknames are transparent. They expose the tiny features of personal identity. In some cases, they replace names and display the new elements acquired in the evolution of personal identity over time. In others, they are multiplied to expose the continuation or maturation of individual identity. In double or treble nicknames, each refers to one or more particular traits of identity.

Natural traits such as gender and age are sometimes displayed in the meaning of nicknames. The continuum young and old is used with nicknames in Baule, Bete and Malinke. It traces the movement of identity over time in the process of identity shift or maturation.

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